

Jessie Hawkins and Jenna Welch: Love, Loss and Laughter

By Rachel Murphree

Laura Bush's father, Harold Welch, enjoyed telling how he met his future mother-in-law in Canutillo, Texas. Jesse Hawkins was laying bricks with mortar she had mixed herself and Harold thought, "I am marrying into a family whose women can do anything!"

Jessie Hawkins helped her husband build houses on Nuway Drive and run their businesses. Jessie was one in a line of women who learned to survive tragedy, longing and hard times with grace, dignity and laughter and passed this legacy on to their daughters. They were self-sufficient women who enjoyed gardening, artistic creation, reading and children, although they often weren't blessed to have the large families they so desired.

Jessie Laura Sherrard came from a large family on a farm in Arkansas so remote her granddaughter Laura Bush wrote in her memoir *Spoken from the Heart* that "no one bothered to paint the houses; they simply left the wood to gray, swell, and shrink under the cycle of rain and sun." Having lost her only son, Jessie's mother was pregnant at 42 with her seventh daughter when her husband took a shotgun out to the field and committed suicide. Jessie's widowed mother had to raise her many daughters singlehandedly, changing the farm into a dairy so as not to have to plow and plant the land. She was a strong woman who triumphed when faced with adversity.

Jessie was only nine years old when her father killed himself, and at that early age she drove the dairy truck to help support the family. It was a hard scrabble life. She learned the circumstances of her father's death only as an adult. As Laura Bush wrote, "You might talk about the wind and the weather, but troubles you swallowed deep down inside." She was writing of her own mother, Jenna Hawkins Welch, but dealing with tragedy was a legacy passed down through the generations.

Hal and Jessie Hawkins and their only daughter Jenna moved from Arkansas to East Texas to Canutillo in 1927 for Hal's health. He was one of many WWI soldiers whose lungs were damaged from being gassed in the war and who believed the dry air out west would be a miracle cure.

Hal and Jessie bought seven acres along Highway 80 (Doniphan Drive) between Canutillo and Anthony. They started a lumberyard and built a tourist court next door for friends to run. When their friends gave up on the business, Jessie and Hal Hawkins took it over. The Nuway Auto Court was the only one between El Paso and Las Cruces which in those days was a very long stretch of desert.

Tourist, or motor, courts were a new phenomenon. This was during the Great Depression when the dry winds and endless drought created the Dust Bowl in the once fruitful Midwest, and so many family farms were lost. People from Oklahoma and other states packed up their belongings to head out west in search of a better life. The tourist court was a cluster of tiny one-room buildings surrounding a single bathroom shared by all. It was quite primitive but strategically placed right off Highway 80, the main road to California

before I-10 was built in the 1950s Eisenhower era. The Hawkins family also ran a small store to provide staples for travelers.

After a while, her father saved up enough money for the couple to build a small subdivision on Nuway Drive, including the house in which they eventually lived. The auto court and lumberyard

was available to take her into El Paso, she went to and graduated from El Paso High School.

Jenna remembered going on special trains to far away towns such as Abilene to watch the football teams compete. Her parents couldn't come as chaperones because they had their businesses to run, but other parents came. On weekends she would stay in town with her friend Mary Liz and go to picture shows at the Plaza and the Ellanay theaters.

Jenna attended the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy (now UTEP) for two years and studied journalism. She was so nervous to ask her father for the \$25 semester tuition that she waited until the last possible day in 1939. As Laura Bush wrote, "It was a bleak seven years into the Great Depression, and twenty five dollars was a significant sum. There were women who took jobs making sandwiches in soup kitchens just so they could be guaranteed one meal a day. Education was a luxury." Welch didn't ask her father for further help with her college fees.

Jenna couldn't afford the bus to ride the 14 miles into town, so she lived with a family in El Paso and took care of their daughter in exchange for room and board. Once she chaperoned the child from New York all the way to Aruba on an oil tanker, an exciting adventure for a girl from a small farming community. Somehow, she managed to gather the money needed for her train fare to New York. She was brave and self-reliant and knew how to make her own way.

With the U.S. involved in World War II, Jenna decided to leave school to earn a living. The number of women working outside the home increased during the war as women were needed in the work force to do the jobs men had been doing previously. She was hired by the Popular department store downtown to work in its advertising department. Welch said, "It was a wonderful education. It was the biggest department store in the area. In fact, the wife of the president of Mexico would send up there for clothes."

It was there that a co-worker pointed out a friend on the street, "Oh look, there's Hal." Jenna looked out the window to see Harold Welch for the first time, the man who would become her husband. He too had left college, working as a loan officer and then district manager for Universal CITI Credit in El Paso, supporting his widowed mother.

At that time, ladies and gentlemen would dress in their finery and pay the six cents to walk across the bridge to dine and dance in elegant Juárez. The first club at the base of the bridge was the Tivoli nightclub, with exotic shows and dance floor with orchestra. Jenna and Hal had Boquilla black bass for dinner there, and the next morning, the gossip column of the newspaper published the comment that Jenna Hawkins had been seen dancing with a handsome stranger at the Tivoli.

Hal volunteered to go to war. While he was on leave, the two continued dating. They were married at a chapel on Fort Bliss in January 1944, and shortly after, Hal was shipped off to Europe with the 555th Battalion as a master gunner.



Jenna Welch, right, and her lifelong friend Mary Liz Bowhay recall their years spent in El Paso. (Photo courtesy of El Paso Community College)

have been torn down since, but Nuway Drive remains. In an *El Paso Inc.* interview, Jenna Welch said of that time, "I'm sure my parents just held on by their fingertips in those days. But I guess they didn't take time to feel sorry for themselves. If they did, I wasn't aware of it."

Hitchhikers often came through, stopping at the auto court for a quick shower. Her father frequently gave them baloney and cheese sandwiches. When freight trains came by, Jenna and her good friend Mary Elizabeth Bowhay would count how many men were riding on the boxcars.

Jenna remembers her childhood fondly, despite hard times. Because she was an only child, she eagerly played with the children of the neighborhood and children whose families were traveling through. They hiked to the sand hills and foothills of the mountains or down to the river, looking for arrowheads. Welch remembers when the channels were built to keep the Rio Grande from flooding, and the earth-moving equipment looked like a huge dinosaur that the kids would play on. She remembers the wonderful smell of freshly cut alfalfa spreading all over the valley, and that the cantaloupes grown in the Upper Valley were even better than Pecos cantaloupes.

Jenna's favorite subjects were English and reading. She went to school at the tiny Lone Star Elementary, which ended at grade seven, as did all elementary schools in Texas, and that was as far as most children in Canutillo went. She stayed out of school for a year or so, and when a bus

continued on page 10

Welch continued from page 3

While they were separated, the two wrote letters, Hal confessing that he would like to have a baby boy when he returned.

Jenna continued her job at the Popular and lived with her lifelong friend Mary Liz, whose husband was also at war. Jenna's rent payment enabled Mary Liz to keep her house with their two children instead of moving back home with her parents. Every night after dinner, they would write letters to their husbands. For fun one day they snapped pictures of each other in a bubble bath in a claw foot tub. Hal held on to his the entire two years he was away.

When he returned, Hal found a coworker had become district manager at his firm, so he chose to move to Midland. Laura wrote her mother learned how to fight the Midland wind and dust. The area was completely different from the farm valley she grew up in with its cantaloupe and smells of freshly cut alfalfa. Laura was born a little more than nine months later.

Jenna Welch was an only child because her mother had lost two other babies who were "born too soon," although it just wasn't talked about. She deeply missed having siblings. Laura Bush wrote, "When I was growing up, [my mother] would say with a wink in her quick, witty west Texas way that she would have been 'insulted' if her parents had had more children." Perhaps Jenna framed her feelings in the situation for her daughter because she herself lost three babies, born too soon, and both mother and daughter keenly felt the loss of these children.

Laura Bush's memoir begins with a chapter on the birth and death at three days old of her brother, John Edward, and how difficult it was for her parents. The remote, tiny medical clinic in Midland, Texas, of the 1940s did not have any of today's inventions and processes such as incubators or drip lines that enable premature infants to live. He was buried in an unmarked grave with other premature babies who didn't live. Jenna had a very difficult pregnancy carrying Laura and would go on to lose a daughter named Sarah Elizabeth when Laura was eight and another boy when Laura was 13.

These deaths and the subsequent lack of other children in the house had a central importance in the Welch family, even though Laura never saw her mother mourn. Laura wrote, "Now at ninety, when she cannot recall someone she met the day before, she remembers those babies. She sits in her green chair in her plain Midland living room and says, 'We would have had two boys and two girls if they had all lived. It would have been quite a family, wouldn't it? I sure wish one of those little boys could have lived at least, because my husband wanted a boy so bad.'"

As an only child, Laura spent a great deal of time with her parents, especially her mother, who introduced her to literature at an early age and read *Little Women* to her at age seven. Jenna loved books on nature and the Southwest and she read constantly to Laura, borrowing their books from the Midland Library. Laura wrote, "And she read to me, her voice weaving its spells of character, plot and place, until I too yearned to decipher the fine black letters printed on the page."

Like her mother, Jenna was handy around the house, more so than her husband who could design house plans and supervise workers as a developer in later life, but didn't do the manual work. She painted, reupholstered chairs and replaced countertops. She cooked three full meals every



A framed photograph of Jenna Welch and her daughter Laura Bush is in the library named for them. (Photo courtesy of the Jenna Welch-Laura Bush Community Library, El Paso Community College, Northwest Campus)

day and filled the house with laughter, dispelling the potential sadness and loneliness caused by living far from family in what Georgia O'Keeffe described as the "terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness" of the Texas plains. Laura wrote of her parents even in their later years, "They were happy. No sadness unraveled their happiness."

As a self-taught naturalist, studying wildflowers and birds, Jenna taught her daughter to appreciate and enjoy nature. Because Midland is in a migratory path, the opportunities for bird watching were abundant. She became a member of the Audubon Society and was active in the protest against DDT in the 1960s because it was weakening egg shells and endangering bird species. Jenna passed on her skills and passions to her only child, engaging her in the natural world and the intellectual and creative world of literature.

Jenna encouraged Laura to be self-reliant and make do. Her mother would pack a "solo picnic" for Laura to take to the empty lot on their street that functioned as a park. Their wide circle of friends who were also transplanted to that harsh region of the state eventually came to feel like family for Laura. Still, she keenly felt the loss of siblings on trips especially, for her parents had each other and she was in the back seat alone. She taught her dolls to read and write because she had no siblings to teach. As early as six years old, Laura would travel on the train by herself from Midland to Canutillo to stay with her "Grammee" and "Papa" (Jessie and Hal Hawkins). Some of her best memories occurred in El Paso and cause her to love this region to this day.

Grammee was unlike any other grandmother or mother that Laura knew. They all wore dresses and aprons. Jessie wore pants, big hats and long sleeves to protect her arms from the sun. Laura wrote in her memoir, "Grammee was a collector too, her house and garden an artful arrangement

of what man and nature left behind." She grew pomegranates, desert plants and a wide swath of daffodils.

The bulbs that started the garden came from her mother's farm in Arkansas. When Jenna and Hal moved to Midland, Jessie dug up bulbs for her daughter to transplant at her new house. The young family moved a lot in the early years, and Jenna would dig them up each move and replant them. When Laura married, Jenna continued the tradition, "appearing on [her] doorstep with one hundred bulbs, the offspring of that long-fallow Arkansas yard, four generations removed."

These long summer weeks that Laura spent with her grandmother in the magical valley surrounding El Paso had a tremendous impact on her. There was a bond between the two women, at opposite ends of their lives, possibly made all the more special by the losses Jessie suffered in having an only daughter and granddaughter. Jessie sewed beautiful matching dresses for Laura and her dolls, sending the clothes on the mail trains to Midland throughout the year. When Laura visited, she made doll furniture with her grandmother and fell asleep holding her hand in the warm summer night.

Like her mother before her, Laura would play with the kids traveling through the auto court and those who lived in the neighborhood, enjoying the wildness of the desert they didn't have in their suburban neighborhood in Midland.

While neither Jenna nor Hal Welch finished college, they valued education, and sending their daughter to college was a priority. Choosing a professional career as a Southern woman was relatively new, but because of her upbringing, Laura became a teacher and librarian, working with disadvantaged minority children.

Children came late to Laura and George Bush. In fact, they were starting the adoption process when Laura became pregnant at age 34. The pregnancy was difficult and carefully monitored because of the family history of miscarriages, and twin daughters Barbara and Jenna were born prematurely at Baylor Hospital in Dallas where they could receive neonatal care. As they grew and the family moved away from Midland, the twins would visit their grandparents one at a time so that each would know the pleasures of being an only grandchild, and at home, an only child.

Jenna taught Laura to love reading and libraries, and her work with children has given her a great sense of accomplishment. She has been able to work with education and children both as the First Lady of Texas and of the nation. That is why the city/college partnership library at EPCC's Northwest Campus, located in Canutillo, Texas, has honored this mother-daughter team by renaming it the Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library. The pair has visited several times, sharing their love of reading and education in various events.

Jessie Hawkins and Jenna Welch overcame loss and tragedy to create lives filled with laughter and learning and passed that on to Laura Bush. It is a matriarchal legacy of self-reliance and determination that has no doubt been passed on to Laura's daughters. 