



Friends of the Warren Ferris Cemetery

December 12, 2022

Dean Keller - Been Around a Long, Long Time

We are thrilled to have new information on one of the persons known to be buried in the Ferris Cemetery. The SMU archaeological study in 1986 indicated over 100 persons buried there, but we have only thirty or so names, and little is known about most of them. Now long-time Forest Hills residents Jacquelyn Keller and her brother Jack Keller, Jr. have given us interesting information on their ancestor Frederick M. Dean who is buried in the Warren Ferris Cemetery.

Frederick Dean (1810-1867) came to Texas toward the end of the Civil War, taking up land in Southeast Dallas County near William Beeman, not far from present Forest Hills. He met his wife, Elizabeth Brakebill Dean (1814-1884), while living in Monroe County, TN near Knoxville. Faced with a court case involving the burning of his brother-in-law's barn, Fred moved west to Nashville and then Memphis. Elizabeth, who was over 40 years old, had two children along the way, Mary Ann "Mollie" and Tennessee "Tennie". Two adult Dean offspring stayed in Tennessee; five Dean children moved to Texas with their parents. Fred died shortly after coming to Dallas County and was buried in nearby Ferris Cemetery. His widow Elizabeth lived another seventeen years and was buried in Cox Cemetery, west of White Rock Creek. Her daughter "Mollie" married Marc Patton, a farmer of Old Duck Creek (Garland); daughter "Tennie" married W.M. "Bud" McCommas, son of preacher Amos McCommas of East Dallas.

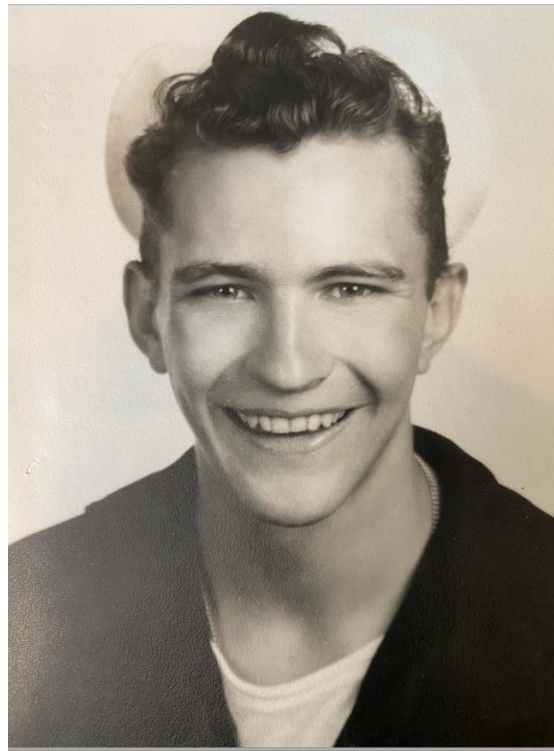
When Mary Ann "Mollie" Dean (1856-1928) married Marcus Perry "Marc" Patton (1854-1928) she was 23 and had a 4-year-old daughter, Willie Elizabeth "Lizzy" who was adopted by Marc Patton. The Pattons had eight more children. They were a prominent family in early Garland. Marc, Mollie, and their children are buried in Garland's Pioneer Cemetery.

Willie Elizabeth "Lizzy" Patton (1875-1951) married well. Zachary Lee "Bob" Simmons (1865 - 1928), a successful South Dallas farmer, was ten years older than Lizzy. On his farm near Lisbon, Bob grew cotton, grazed cows, and sold milk to a nearby dairy. He was thrifty and prospered. Lizzie died in the home which Bob purchased in University Park. Their oldest daughter, Lottie Faye Simmons (1894-1979), was born in Lisbon, TX. Lizzie enjoyed a long, interesting life. She is the grandmother of Jacquelyn and Jack Keller, Jr. Lottie married Ridgell Keller (1886-1985) who came from a family of lawmen in Kaufman County, TX.

The Keller family was well-known in Dallas. In the late 1800's, Ridgell's father Jacob "Jake" Keller owned the popular Coney Island Turf Club in downtown Dallas. Located in a two-story building on Main St., this saloon/pool hall/gambling parlor/restaurant was noted for its huge

Kansas City sirloin steaks. Ridgell Keller was an entrepreneur whose business interests included an athletic club, a garage, and the Mexican Village restaurant on East Grand Avenue. It was Ridgell who first bought property in Forest Hills. He purchased land at Forest Hills Blvd. and San Rafael Dr. and built a house in the early 1930's. Lottie died while residing at what became the Keller family compound on Garland Rd. at Lakeland Drive.

One of the sons of Lottie and Ridgell Keller was Ridgell Jackson "Jack" Keller (1928 - 2016). Jack Keller bore the family name Ridgell and the name of a family friend, Dr. Rueben Jackson, owner of the original Pig Stand restaurant. Jack Keller grew up knowing folks influential in the Dallas restaurant scene. He was a gambler from the age of 12, always figuring the odds in his quick mind and daring the bet. During World War II, Jack was in the Merchant Marines where he would bet on anything and usually won. He traveled Asia, Africa, and Europe, absorbing the culture of distant lands and collecting many interesting pieces of art. On his return to Dallas, in 1951, Jack Keller married Wilma Springer who was his wife and partner for 65 years.



Jack Keller in Merchant Marines - 1940's

Jack Keller's restaurant chain was born in 1950. The first Keller drive-in was on Samuel Blvd. across from Tenison Park. It was extremely successful - selling no-frills hamburgers and beer (as well as package beer) - since it was the last (or first) place to buy beer between Dallas and Shreveport. Jack and Wilma worked as a team to locate and purchase property for business expansion, establishing two additional drive-ins on Northwest Highway and Harry Hines Blvd. Keller's signature cheeseburger on a poppyseed bun, with onion rings and a cold beer - all for under \$3 - was a Dallas hit!



Jack and Wilma Keller - A Team!

Historically, early drive-ins restaurants hired male servers who came to be called “carhops” for their exuberant behavior; they eagerly ran out to the still moving car, jumped on the running board before the vehicle parked, installed the tray on the window, and took the order. During WWII, young women took over most of the jobs as carhops.

Keller’s, friendly female carhops served the customers as they sat in their cars. Each had carefully folded dollar bills between their fingers for making change. On a Saturday night in the summer, the NW Hwy. drive-in was packed with regular customers, families, and their dogs. Classic car clubs (sometimes as many as 200 cars) met in the back while bikers on flashy motorcycles gathered on the side. Jack was a hard worker who often sat in his car out on the lot to see how things were going. Consistency, quality, and a low price were the secret of his success, he often said - but admittedly the beer license didn’t hurt. Wilma and their four children, Sharon, Jacquelyn, Jon, and Jack Jr. all worked in the family business.

In 2013, shortly before Jack's death in 2016, Keller's was named #29 among Dallas's 50 best restaurants. Oprah Winfrey called the Keller burger one of the nation's best.

Jack had many friends - from pals of his youth to celebrities. He was a good listener, extremely social and genial, who took time to be a mentor for young people just starting in business. He was known as a "high roller" in Las Vegas where he introduced the halftime bet on football games. He knew Dallas and Vegas figures like Benny Binion, Herbert Noble, Joe Campesi, and hotel owner Steve Wynn.

The Keller family has deep roots in the Forest Hills neighborhood. Their ancestor Fredrick Dean and his family settled near White Rock Creek on their arrival in Dallas County. Starting with Ridgell Keller's purchase in the early 1930's, the Kellers have gravitated to Forest Hills. In the 1960's, Jack Keller purchased four houses and a vacant lot on Garland Rd. across from the DeGolyer estate, now the Dallas Arboretum. Some of the Keller family still live on that property. Jack started the Forest Hills Neighborhood Fourth of July parties which were held annually on the Keller property for 35 years before COVID struck. Many adults who attended the events remembered coming as children. The Kellers are so appreciated by folks in Forest Hills that the Homeowners Association named the circle at the intersection of Breezewood Dr. and Forest Hills Blvd. - Keller Circle!

Our informants, Jacquelyn Keller and Jack Keller Jr., now run the three Keller drive-in restaurants; on Northwest Hwy., on Harry Hines Blvd., and on Garland Rd. They vow that the secret burger recipe will not change, but they have introduced some new technology for delivering the burgers. Today the carhops carry iPads and you can pay with a credit card.

Jacquelyn and Jack, Jr. both live in Forest Hills. Their mother, Wilma, lives in the Keller compound as do other family members. Now, a fifth generation of Kellers, Jacquelyn's children, William and Juliette, live with Jacquelyn in her Forest Hills home and work in the business when they are not in school. The sign at the Northwest Hwy. Keller's saying, "Been around a long time" might well be applied to the Kellers' long association with the Forest Hills neighborhood.

By Susanne Starling, based on interviews with Jacquelyn Keller and Jack Keller, Jr. in May, 2022.

Permission granted for use by Friends of Warren Ferris Cemetery