

BIRNEY IMES III Editor and General Manager

# Ninety-three years enthusiastic

Ran into Larry Feeney at the Farmers' Market yesterday. Though waning, the market is still lively; about eight to 10 vendors were peddling their wares Saturday. Half of them were selling produce, mainly greens, but tomatoes and baked goods were available — a friend showed me an acorn squash she bought wondering what she would do with it.

For me the best thing about the market is the vibe. Friendly, democratic, healthy and enlightening, they all apply; it's hard not to be affected by the wholesomeness of it all. Saturday morning was glorious, the light bright, clear and cool, and people, like our backyard honey bees this time of year, seemed even more lively and friendly than usual.

Larry is a retired MUW art professor; he is one of the countless ways that school has enriched our community. Each one of us is a portal to many others; we each have a congregation of people we associate with and know to varying degrees. I don't know why I say that, other than to mention the recently departed Mary Alice Gibson, a woman Larry and I both appreciated and considered a friend.

If limited to one adjective in describing Mary Alice, my pick would be ebullient. The dictionary on my computer desktop defines the word as "cheerful and full of energy." Perfect for her. And, like the Farmers' Market, Mary Alice's zest was contagious.

Mary Alice was a contemporary of my father. She survived two husbands. I knew the second, Leonard, a retired postmaster of Crawford, whose personality starkly contrasted with his wife's. An introvert, Leonard was a painter whose art examined dark themes. Mary Alice knitted, sewed, crocheted (she was known to make small throw rugs using plastic grocery bags) and delighted in carrying on with her fellow humans.



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She loved local history and was full of stories about the characters of Lowndes and Noxubee counties. She was a avid letter writer and occasionally wrote whimsical remembrances for this newspaper.

Since her death on Sept. 17, I've wondered how best to adequately explain Mary Alice. If only I could find one of her letters. I dug through several folders with no luck, and then, this week while searching for something else, I found one.

The letter was written after her family had moved her from East Emerald Estates to Dugan Nursing Home in West Point.

March 4, 2006

Dear Birney,

For nearly three years I've had you on my list of great folks I wanted to write. Your nice letter of last week put you at the top. So here I go: I write (just like I talk) — forever.

March 23, 2006 (19 days later)

I forget what interrupted but I apologize for the delay. You wouldn't believe how busy they keep us over here in La-la land! And I promised to give a Rock and Roll concert this weekend, so I must practice a little or I won't be able to play "Rock of Ages" and "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," which is about par for the poor souls housed here.

March 29, 2006

My favorite country songs these days are "One Day at a Time, Sweet Jesus" and "Help Me Make it Through the Night" — Shows you how much music has been such a big part of my life. If you and Beth can ever make it over here, I will play for you. My theme song is "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." You ought to hear a 92-year-old thump that out!

Congratulations on becoming grandparents! (Mary Alice uses a

lot of exclamation points in her writing, just like she spoke.) It's much more exciting than having your own (She had five children.) And when you look at that precious little thing, you're seeing your stake in immortality. I used to tell Leonard that grandchildren are the raw data of your gene pool. He thought our pool needed some chlorine. They weren't his, of course.

Beq pardon for this disjointed epistle. It probably reflects my life at this point. They just told me that I have pneumonia for the second time since I came here, Nov. 11, 2004. I was always told that pneumonia was the old person's friend — it takes you on out without a lot of pain, time or inconvenience. Evidently, it doesn't work on me. I'm ready to go, but God is not ready for me. I do wonder every day what He's keeping me here for.

Tell Beth that I finished my pineapple rug just before I came over here. I still have a trunk full of wool that she's welcome to, if she wants it. It has been such a blessing to my life that I knit, crochet, tat, quilt, make toys, clothes, etc. I'm still at it. Made hats, scarves, purses, shawls and afghans since I've been here — something for nearly all of the staff. It keeps me busy enough that I don't have time to resent or feel sorry for myself for outliving my usefulness.

As one of the articles in your fine newspaper said, "Just because you're in pain, you don't have to be one!"

She then writes something about my larger family and closes: Your grandmother (Eunice) was one of my mother's best friends for so many years. So I'll always love you all and feel that I'm your good friend.

Mary Alice Gibson was on this earth for 93 richly lived years. As this letter suggests, she was funny, wise and generous to the end.

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