

Biography: Tressie Bowman

By Lucy Shull Stevens and Gil Alford

The lady many of us have come to love and know as Tressie Bowman was born 16 January 1899 in Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas. She was the daughter of Leander Lemuel and Mary Pamela (White) Nash. Leander, called Lec, was born 12 November 1859 in Limestone County, Alabama. Mary was born 12 May 1866 in Aurora, Kane County, Illinois. So Tressie began her life with an attraction for both the north and the south.

By the time she was nine years old the family had moved to Texarkana, Arkansas, where her mother died in March 1908. At that time Tressie had two sisters living: Mary, about 19 years old, and Frankie, about seven. Tressie's father was a railroad man and was gone from home much of the time. Mary did most of the housework and took care of her younger sisters, but in 1910, at age 21, Mary died. Mr. Nash tried to get live-in help but finally gave up and placed Tressie and Frankie in a Catholic convent, Sacred Heart Academy. Neither of the girls were of the Catholic faith; however, their father came home and took them to the Methodist Church as often as he could.

Later Tressie's father married a widow, Josephine (Sheppard) Myers, the daughter of Senator Sheppard from Arkansas. Josephine had her own children, including a set of twins. She owned a small store in Doddridge, or Fouke, Arkansas, and Tressie and all the children had to help in the store. The lady next door had the telephone exchange in her home, and she offered to teach Tressie how to run the switchboard. She later became a telephone operator.

Tressie remembers one of the most thrilling moments of her life as the time she heard news of the Armistice in

World War I. She opened all the keys on her switchboard and rang everyone on the exchange so they could hear it from New York. She could hear all kinds of praise and thanksgiving from the mothers of sons who were "over there" and she could hardly see for the tears in her eyes.

While she was working the switchboard, Tressie "met" James Matthew Shull. He was born 24 June 1884 in Sabine Parish, Louisiana, the son of William Levi and Lucy (Maines) Shull.



"Matt" was a bookkeeper for a lumber company which was served by the switchboard. They seemed to fall in love with each other's voices, and although Matt had told her he had only one leg, their "relationship" continued. They finally met in person and were married three months later on 14 Dec 1918 in Texarkana.

After the birth of their daughter Lucy (AAFA DAR Project Officer Lucy Shull Stevens), the family moved to Louisiana where Matt worked in the

court house in Minden and was Clerk of Court in Coushatta. Matt went to Jacksonville, Florida, about 1924-25 when the "boom" started. Tressie, her father (who had divorced Josephine), and Lucy followed by train. From there the family returned to Coushatta, Louisiana, where Matt started his own Abstract and Title Company. He later co-owned another similar company in Many, Sabine Parish, Louisiana, which he still had an interest in when he died on 20 November 1934 in Caddo Parish, Louisiana. He is buried in the Bayou Scie Methodist Church Cemetery near Zwolle, Sabine Parish, Louisiana.

Before he died, however, the family lived in several other towns in north Louisiana—wherever there was an oil boom. During that period Tressie signed on with the Fuller Brush Company and as the only female salesperson led all the salesmen in the six parish area. It was said that she could talk the tail off a donkey and sell it back to him.

Matt died 20 November 1934, after a lingering illness following a stroke. After his death, Tressie and daughter Lucy moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, where Tressie took a job as a practical nurse. In 1935, her sister Frankie's husband was able to get her a job with the American Cotton Co-op Exchange in New Orleans where they lived for a year and a half. When that job played out, they returned to Minden, Louisiana, and Tressie worked in various jobs in and around Shreveport. From there she moved to Dallas, Texas, where she worked for the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), a government agency established by President Hoover in the early 1930's to aid businesses and home owners with loans.

By that time Lucy had finished high school and business school. When she joined her mother in Dallas in 1939 she

took a Federal Civil Service exam and began to work for the Federal Reserve. In 1941, Lucy received an appointment in Washington D. C. with the government. She moved there and lived with her aunt Frankie and her husband. Lucy met her future husband, Bob Stevens, on her first day of work at the Veterans Administration.

Nine months after their marriage, Tressie could stand it no longer—she moved to Washington to be near her daughter and her new husband. Since Bob went into service just six months after the marriage, Tressie lived for a while with Lucy. Later, she got an apartment in Washington and lived alone. Tressie worked for the RFC in both Dallas and Washington D. C. When the RFC closed, she went to work for the National Naval Medical Center as a library assistant. She retired in 1962. Tressie joined the National Genealogical Society and at one time served as their treasurer and councilor.

Tressie loved to dance, and those who are old enough will remember all the dances held for the servicemen during World War II at the USO, where Tressie did volunteer work. She met Lewis Orlando Bowman, Sr. at a government dance, and they were married 17 June 1949 in Washington D.C.

Lewis was born in 1904 in Hambleton, West Virginia, and died in 1976 in Bethesda, Maryland. Lewis also liked to dance and they both liked to travel, so they traveled extensively and danced frequently. Lewis was a sail maker and leather worker at the Naval Gun Factory. Needless to say the couple made many genealogy research trips and attended several reunions.

From birth Tressie had an Alford connection. Her mother, Mary Pamela White, was the granddaughter of Pamela Sikes. From there she traces her ancestors back through five additional generations of Sikes to Increase Sikes, Sr. who married Abigail

Fowler in 1670. Abigail was the daughter of Joanna Alford Fowler. Joanna was the sister of Benedict Alford and Alexander Alvord, both progenitors of notable New England branches of the family. Tressie is able to trace her Alfords back to the mid-1500's in England.

Tressie's first husband gave her another Alford connection. Matthew Shull's great grandmother was Lucy Alford Maines of Sabine Parish, Louisiana, daughter of Jacob Alford. Jacob, who moved from North Carolina, with a short stay in Georgia, to Louisiana in the very early 1800's, was the progenitor of most of the Sabine Parish Alfords, the Washington and Tangipahoa Parish Alfords, and many of the Alfords of Pike and Walthall Counties in Mississippi.

In July 1970 Tressie published her first issue of the *ALFORD FAMILY BULLETIN*. The stated purpose of her bulletin was to prove the ancestry of Jacob Alford and to learn the connections between the New Kent County, Virginia, Alfords and those of New England. That first issue was a 15 page document with page one being a letter explaining and introducing the publication. The other 14 pages were packed with census data, probate record indexes, abstracts of wills, information from pension applications, deed abstracts and indexes, marriage lists, and a family chart on Jacob Alford and the data applied to a myriad of states. She continued to publish these bulletins, at the rate of about two annually, usually in July and December until the fall of 1979 when she published her final issue. There was a hiatus from December 1971 until July 1976 and some years she managed only one issue. In 1977 she experienced a fire in the basement of her building and lost some of her records. She had cataract surgery in the fall of 1979 and was scheduled for an implant. That, together with other surgery and illness in 1978, and the ever increasing postal rates, nearly ended the bulletin. In 1971

the subscription was \$2 per year, and when she stopped in 1979 the price had increased to \$7. Never did she publish an issue that was not packed with interesting and useful information on Alfords.

While most of her data came from her own personal research, Tressie depended on input from readers for some of her bulletins, and there are names mentioned in the bulletins who are members of the Alford American Family Association today. Some of those noted are Lucille Mehrkam, Rod Bush, Alberta (Arletta) Skillen, Robert S. Barrows, D. L. Alford, Rose Alford Shelton, and Margaret Windham.

Tressie Bowman was the first person to undertake a project which addressed all Alfords in all geographic areas and in all branches of the family. Other important works such as Colonel Harlee's *KINFOLKS* and Hugh Edwin Alford's *IN SEARCH OF MY ALFORD ANCESTORS* limit themselves to a small part of the family.

Over the years Tressie researched and collected information on Alfords by the thousands. Data was meticulously entered on individual records—3 x 5 inch slips called pea slips. She also prepared family group records on each family she found. Copies of all of these have been made available to AAFA either by Mrs. Bowman or through her daughter, Lucy Shull Stevens, an AAFA member and the Association DAR project officer. The family group records are available to members from the AAFA library.

As long as Alford descendants engage in research on their family history, Mrs. Bowman will be remembered. They may not use her bulletins or even see her name, but all will be indebted to her for the work she did in pioneering research on Alford family history. As an expression of appreciation for her work, she was the first person to receive a lifetime honorary AAFA membership.