

Tony Gentry Story

Source: Putnam Countian, TN: 9 April 1985: In 1923, he did what lots of 16-year-olds dream of but never do—he ran away from his home in Putnam County and joined the circus.

Tony Gentry is 78 now and lives near Hollywood with a friend, a 50-year-old ex-actor who co-starred in several “Tarzan” movies with Johnny Weismuller and Maureen O’Sullivan.



IN RETIREMENT — Cheetah, now 50, has retired from the movies with his trainer, Tony Gentry, 78, who left his home in Putnam County and found a place for himself in Hollywood and the movies — training chimpanzees. (Los Angeles Times Photo By Mary Frampton)

The friend’s name is Cheetah. Gentry trained him and lots of other chimpanzees since leaving Tennessee 62 years ago.

Gentry was interviewed recently by Paul Dean, of the Los Angeles Times, at his small ranch near Hollywood.

After leaving home, Gentry worked for a decade with Frank (Bring ‘Em Back Alive) Buck, famed for his animal collecting expeditions in far-off lands.

Gentry learned his craft and then went to Hollywood as an animal trainer. His first film work was with Fatty Arbuckle. His last film was “Dr. Dolittle.”

In his days he trained more chimpanzees than Lassie has pups. Two were rocketed into outer space by Nassau for the Mercury program.

Now he lives out his twilight years with Cheetah, one of several chimps that carried that name.

“We traveled a lot of roads together, and y’know, out of about 50 chimps I trained to perform in the movies, there have been only three, maybe four, that were really special,” he said.

There was Jiggs, who became the first Cheetah, serving several Tarzan masters (Herman Brix, Johnny Weismuller, Buster Crabbe). He died and is buried in the Hollywood Pet Cemetery.

And there was Jiggs II, who was in several more Tarzan films, and who went to the Baltimore Zoo when Gentry went off to World War Two. He may have died there or been resold Gentry doesn’t know.

During the 1950’s, Gentry said there was no time to become attached to the hundreds of chimps he bought and trained for NASA.

In the early days of the rocket program, chimps were used first rather than risking human lives.

Two of Gentry’s trainees have the distinction of being the first to orbit the earth in the Mercury capsule, making the trip before the first human, Alan Sheppard.

After Jiggs I and II, Gentry bought Cheetah.

“I bought him from a dealer when they closed down the old Santa Monica pier. Lemme see, when was that? Late ‘30’s sometime. Maybe 1938. Anyway, he was two or three years old then.”

The present Cheetah appeared in more than 20 Tarzan movies; plus four movie serials and the Ron Ely television series in the late 60’s.

Cheetah is the oldest survivor of the role. Today he spends a lot of time out back of Gentry's house in the old trailer that once was his mobile dressing room.

He snoozes a lot, munches four square meals a day, and, on hot days, is allowed one bottle of beer. On cold nights, Gentry tucks him away with a shot of brandy.

Gentry's house is crammed with the keepings from long-gone yesterdays-plaques, trophies, framed photos of Cheetah with Weismuller.

Referring to his hairy friend, Gentry said, "the old man and I are retired now, but we're having a lot of fun. And you know, he's got a personality that won't quit. He makes me laugh when Don Knotts can't make me laugh."

Chimpanzees live as long as humans, and Cheetah might outlive Gentry. What then for Cheetah?

"A zoo? Universal studios? I'm afraid of those things. What if they got tired of him and sent him out for medical experiments? No sir, not my Cheetah."

Gentry's will calls for Cheetah to be put to sleep upon his trainer's death and for him to be buried near Jigg I in Hollywood's Pet Cemetery.

They take a drive each Sunday. Cheetah likes to wave at the kids.

"We go over to Lake Sherwood and play around the trees, and Cheetah remembers."

He remembers that many Tarzan movies were filmed there, said Gentry.

"He seems to be saying, 'Hey, Weismuller and I were here. I know this place,'" said Gentry.

"And he'll be off, swinging through the trees and remembering the good old day..."

Source: Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 16 April 1995: The newspaper this week ran an article on Tony Gentry, who ran away from his home near Baxter in 1923 at the age of 16 to join the circus and later found his way to Hollywood and the movies.

Today, Gentry is retired and lives near Hollywood with one of Johnny Weismuller and Maureen O'Sullivan's co-stars from the "Tarzan" movies. Gentry's roommate is Cheetah, the chimp who nearly stole the show from Weismuller on more than one occasion.

After Gentry left home and traveled with the circus, he later worked for Frank "Bring 'Em Back Alive" Buck, the world famous animal collector and trainer. He later took what he learned from Buck and went to Hollywood where he trained animals for numerous films.

His last movie assignment was on the set of "Dr. Doolittle."

*See George Henry Gentry family sheet and Gentry files at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>

Norma (Maddux) Fisher Gentry Obt.

b. 25 November 1885, Putnam Co., TN – d. 28 February 1966, md Solon Gentry, b. 5 December 1886, TN – d. 23 May 1955, s/o Robert Byrd Gentry (1863-1944) & Mary Lowe (1867-1887).

*See Solon Gentry Obt.

Funeral services for Mrs. Norma Maddux Gentry, 80, will be held Wednesday from the first Methodist Church in Cookeville with the Rev. Phillip Ritter officiating. The house is 2L00.

Mrs. Gentry died at the home of her daughter, Mr. John Pointer on Rt. 3, Monday. She was a native of Putnam County, the daughter of the late Silas F. and Josephine Wallace Maddux, and was the widow of Solon Gentry.

In addition to Mrs. Pointer, other survivors include 3 daughters, Mrs. Bruce Taylor, Columbus, OH, Mrs. George Reed, Bainbridge, MD, Mrs. Harry Lea, Lebanon, 4 sons, Tony Gentry, 1000 Oaks, CA, Solon Gentry, Johnson Coty, Glen Gentry, Clarksville, William Gentry, Old Hickory; 1 brother, George Maddux, Baxter; 18 grandchildren, and 7 great grandchildren.

Burial will be in Cookeville City Cemetery.

Hooper & Huddleston Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

Citizen, Cookeville: Tuesday, 1 March 1966, pg. 6.

Solon Gentry Obt.

b. 5 December 1886, TN – d. 23 May 1955, md Norma (Maddux) Fisher Gentry, b. 25 November 1885, TN – d. 28 February 1966, d/o Silas Foster “Sil” Maddux (1864-1942) & Josephine “Josie” Wallace (1866-1948). Solon Gentry was the s/o Robert Byrd Gentry (1863-1944) & Mary Lowe (1867-1887). Robert Byrd Gentry md 1st Mary Lowe, md 2nd Ruth Frances Ensor.

*See Norma (Maddux) Fisher Gentry Obt.

Funeral services for Solon Gentry, 68, were scheduled to be held at the First Methodist Church this afternoon. The Rev. Bruce Strother was to officiate and burial is to be at Cookeville City Cemetery.

Mr. Gentry died unexpectedly of a heart attack at his home Monday morning.

He retired in 1952 as Ticket Agent for Trailways bus line, a position he held for 12 years, he was with the Post Office 20 years, part of which he was Assistant Postmaster.

A native of Putnam County, son of Robert Byrd and Mary Lowe Gentry, he was a member of the Methodist Church. Whitson Funeral Home is in charge of arrangements.

Survivors include his wife, Mrs. Norma Maddux Gentry; 4 sons, James Solon Gentry, Johnson City, Hop Gentry, 1000 Oaks, CA, Glenn Gentry, Clarksville, and W. M. Gentry, Old Hickory; 4 daughters, Mrs. John Pointer, Cookeville, Mrs. E. B. Taylor, Canadaiqua, NY, Mrs. George E. Reed, Norfolk, VA, and Mrs. Harry Lea, Jr., Lebanon, TN; 6 brothers, Dow and Paschel Gentry, both of Dallas, TX, Eugene and Hubert Gentry, Houston, TX, Howard Gentry, Little Rock AR., and R. B. Gentry, Corpus Christy, TX; 2 sisters, Mrs. Clay Venable, Lawton, OK, and Mrs. John Stuart, Dallas, TX.

Citizen, Cookeville: Wednesday, 25 May 1955.

Children of Solon Gentry & Norma (Maddux) Fisher are:

1. Harry Whitney Gentry, b. 6 Nov. 1909 – d. 4 Aug. 1938.
2. Norma Mildred Gentry, b. 23 Aug. 1911, Putnam Co., TN – d. 8 Dec. 2004, md on the 22nd of May 1931 to John Smith Pointer b. 23 Aug. 1911, Putnam Co., TN – d. 8 Dec. 2004, s/o Robert Pointer & Althea Smith. John S. & Norma M. Pointer are both buried in Cookeville City Cemetery, Putnam Co., TN.
3. George Pascall Gentry, b. 1 Mar. 1913 – d. 24 Apr. 1913, buried in the Maddux-Elrod Graveyard, Putnam Co., TN.
4. Mary Elizabeth Gentry, b. 11 Feb. 1914 md on the 29th of Aug. 1935 to E. Bruce Taylor. Children: Carol Ann, Dale Bruce & Nancy Clair Taylor.
5. James Solon Gentry, b. 3 Jan. 1916 – d. 1979 md on the 7th of Sept. 1940 to Anne Bryant. Children: Susan & John Scott Gentry.
6. Glenn Staley Gentry, b. 26 Dec. 1917 md on the 26th of Dec. 1942 to Janie Swift. Children Stephen G., Margaret & Peter Douglas Gentry.

7. Nancy Josephine Gentry, b. 10 Jun. 1920 - d. 5 Mar. 1921
8. Virginia Frances Gentry, b. 14 Jun. 1922 – d. 27 June 2002, Annapolis, MD, md George Edward Reed Sr.. Children: George Edward Reed Jr. & Genie Reed.
9. Len K. Gentry, b. 28 Feb. 1923- d. 13 Jul. 1923.
10. Pauline “Polly” Gentry, b. 8 Feb. 1924 – d. 19 Dec. 1991, md Harry Lea Jr., b. 4 Sept. 1924, Wilson Co., TN – d. 20 Apr. 2004, Wilson County Cemetery, TN. Children: Linda & Beverly Gentry.
11. William Mack Gentry, b. 5 Apr. 1925 – d. 22 Aug. 2008, Duluth, GA, md Ethel Frances Allen, b. 4 Dec. 1927 – d. 15 May 2005, d/o W. Harry Allen. Children: Mary Kathryn Gentry, b. 19 Jul. 1948 md on the 13th of June 1970 to Hilliard Rhodes Jordan; Harry Allen Gentry, b. 18 Jan. 1961 md on the 17th of Nov. 1985 to Kathy Jones; & William Mack “Billy” Gentry Jr., b. 10 May 1964. Children of Hilliard R. & Mary Kathryn Jordan are: Allison Lee Jordan, b. 15 Apr. 1975 & Emily Craig Jordan, b. 28 Mar. 1978. Children of Harry & Kathy Gentry are: Darby Kathryn Gentry, b. 28 May 1993, GA & Jared Gatlin Gentry, b. 1 Jun. 1995, GA. Child of William M. “Billy” Gentry is: Kathryn Hannah Gentry.
12. **Tony Gentry** – d. 1993, **md Jacqueline** and they lived in Hollywood, CA. Tony Gentry was a professional animal trainer who owned a number of apes, at first together with his wife Jacqueline and later on his own. The Gentrys appear to have separated before Jiggs died, as Jacqueline alone is cited as his owner in the accounts of the animal's death. Two of the Gentry chimps in addition to Jiggs have also been associated with the Cheetah role.
*See Tony Gentry Story.

*See George Henry Maddux family sheet and Gentry files at:
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