

## REMEMBERING THE DERRYBERRYS

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**COOKEVILLE** — Every town, even the small ones, deserve excellent music and art. Everett Derryberry was from the small town of Columbia, Tenn. As a youngster, he toured the countryside with his church, singing tenor on the revival circuit. He was the



smartest and most athletic student at the University of Tennessee. He won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford, where he sang with the Oxford Choral Society, and interrupted his studies for a voice scholarship at the Nashville Conservatory.

Joan Pitt-Rew Derryberry was from the small town of Torrington, Devonshire, in England. She played piano and painted equally well. She earned performance degrees from the Royal College and the Royal Academy of Music in London, joined the Oxford University Choral Society, taught piano at Oxford's Wychwood School, and performed Tchaikovsky's "1st Piano Concerto" with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

It was the Oxford Choral Society where the two intersected in 1929. They were rehearsing Weber's "Der Freishutz."

"I was standing onstage," she said, "and the door of the auditorium opened, and the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen in my whole life walked through, and I thought, 'I have to marry him.'"

She did. In 1933, they moved to Martin, Tenn., where Everett had been appointed chairman of the English Department on the UT campus there. In 1938, it was on to Kentucky and Murray State, situated in another small town, as chairman of the English Department. Murray had a comprehensive music program. That wasn't the case at Tennessee Tech in Cookeville, where the Derryberrys moved in 1940-1941 after Everett was appointed president. Band dominated the music program, which wasn't even a proper department yet — and while band was important, particularly to students who'd go on to teach music in high schools, it couldn't cover the classical repertoire. That took, at the least, a chamber ensemble, and in a perfect world, a symphony orchestra.

So that's what Joan Derryberry aimed for. Even from their perch as president and first lady of Tennessee Tech, it took awhile. In 1940, when the Derryberrys came to town, Tech had an enrollment of 956 students being taught by 31 faculty members on a campus



of only 12 buildings — and one of those was a barn. It was also the eve of World War II, when enrollment would drop to even lower numbers.

(Pictured: Tennessee Tech President Everett Derryberry and First Lady Joan Derryberry “on parade” in downtown Cookeville).

requirements had aligned. Tech's music program was elevated to department status. A promising musician in the first graduating class, James Wattenbarger, endeared himself to the Derryberrys, and after graduation, he came back to campus with 12 years of teaching experience and two more degrees under his belt.

Creating a symphony orchestra was going to take growth, it was going to take money, and it was going to take time. Between 1948 and 1963, those

In the meantime, the Derryberrys contented themselves with less-ambitious musical pursuits. Everett was preoccupied with keeping the college afloat during the war and then building a first-rate campus. Joan taught piano to undergraduates and found herself preoccupied with the tasks of being a first lady and mother. They both performed — she



at the piano, he singing — at daily assemblies and the occasional wedding or party.

(Pictured: An accomplished pianist, Joan Derryberry was asked to write a new school song in 1943, just two years after joining the Tech music faculty. The Tech Hymn was first performed at the 1943 commencement ceremony).

pianist again.”

“She never gave up the thought of concertizing here,” said Walter Derryberry, Joan and Everett's son. “She worked a little with the Concert Band, and she gave a recital here and there, but there was no way to be a concert

Then Wattenbarger came home to chair the Music Department and, with the enthusiastic support of the Derryberrys, founded the Tech Community Symphony Orchestra. None of them ever looked back.

It was 1963. The Derryberry children, Walter and June, had long since grown up. Joan had recently retired from the music faculty. Wattenbarger had the talent and energy to establish and maintain the symphony orchestra; only the budget eluded him. Joan, with the help of her new daughter-in-law, Alice, saw to that. By 1967, the Derryberrys had enlisted the aid of women in the community equally eager to keep classical music alive in Cookeville. They formed the Women's Symphony Guild, which raised enough money — through ticket sales, grants and contributions — to sustain the symphony orchestra for a number of years.

With the immediate future of the symphony orchestra secure, Joan found herself with the freedom to return to one of her first loves: painting. It turned out that this was yet another way she could engage with the community — and that role, as Tech's key liaison with Cookeville, had never been more important.

It was another time. The campus was small, young, did not yet occupy the seat of economic and social influence it does today. Tech was going to take some getting used to before Cookeville would come to embrace it.

"When we came here in 1940," said Walter, "it was town versus gown — not town and gown. Mother and Daddy broke that barrier."

But it didn't happen overnight. Joan immersed herself in the life of the community, joining the ladies' clubs, volunteering at her church, making friends, inviting them to functions at the president's home, building relationships with one group after another. More than anything, she came to be an instrumental member of the arts community — not only in Cookeville, but statewide.

In 1960, Joan was invited to join a steering committee charged with deciding whether Tennessee needed an agency or office devoted strictly to the arts. The answer, of course, was decidedly yes. The Tennessee Arts Commission was formed seven years later. Joan was a charter board member and its first secretary. "Art was so much a part of Mother's soul; she had to do it," said Walter. "She could only be a housewife and mother for so many hours a day; she had to have her music and art. It was in her DNA."

Joan befriended art professor Sally Crain-Jager in the early 1960s.

"Music at the university and in the community was her passion," said Crain-Jager. "We all recognized and respected her talent and training in both music and the visual arts. The strength of the department came about largely because of her support and emphasis on art as a major part of an education — along with the fact that she was a remarkable artist herself."

While Joan threw herself into the arts community, Everett found other ways to support the cultural life on campus, although he could never give the amount of time and energy Joan could — not with a rapidly growing multidisciplinary campus to watch over. It's

doubtful that he ever lost his enthusiasm for music; he would just have to channel it through the tasks expected of a president.

The idea of a performing arts center emerged in the late '60s. There was an obvious need. The administration shared space with the Music Department in Derryberry Hall. Music faculty weren't shy about pointing out the need for their own space; it wasn't uncommon for daily activities to be drowned out by the "1812 Overture." Year after year went by, however, before the center became a reality — and, in fact, it didn't happen during Everett's tenure. His successor, Arliss Roaden, broke ground on the site that would become the Bryan Fine Arts Building.

Everett retired in 1974. Enrollment had grown to 7,000, faculty had grown to 276, the physical plant had grown to 53 buildings — not counting Tech Village. He had 34 years to accomplish that, and he could only have done it in that climate, where there was a different approach to governance — on campus and off.

"When Everett walked into the halls of the state legislature, and said, 'I'm Everett Derryberry, and I want this, and I want that,' well, he got it," said Joane Kibbons, an early member of the Women's Symphony Guild and a close friend of Joan Derryberry's. "He had a marvelous personality, and he was so well-respected. I told him one time, 'There's only one person in this town smarter than you, and that's your wife.' He made TTU what it is today. I think everybody gives him credit for that." But Joan brought the arts to the community. She was a brilliant musician and artist. She could charm a bird off a tree. Everett got all the credit for building the university — and deservedly so. But she deserves the credit for what happened in town. Without Joan Derryberry, we wouldn't have a symphony orchestra today."

After retirement, the Derryberrys had some good years. Everett had more time for fishing. Joan had more time for painting and teaching her grandsons to play piano. Although they were the same age, Everett's health declined first. He attended the groundbreaking of one last building, the new library, in 1987 and died in 1991 at age 86. Joan lived another five years — long enough to see Tech's art gallery named in her honor, before passing away at age 91. She left behind just under 2,000 paintings and an arts environment that flourishes to this day. He left behind a campus of technological prowess that still embraces the arts. Between them, Joan and Everett Derryberry strengthened the connection between Tennessee Tech and Cookeville through the arts, because they believed that music and art are essential to every town, no matter its size.

\*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas at:  
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