

Our Hallowed Hill Heritage: Jessie L. Shank
by Don Casada, Friends of the Bryson City Cemetery



Miss Jess – from the [Stearns-Grueninger Collection, Hunter Library](#)

Miss Jess or Miss Jessie – is the title of respect and affection my father, Commodore Casada, and others used when addressing or referring to Jessie Lenore Shank.

Jessie was born October 14, 1873 in Miamisburg, Ohio, the first of four daughters of Jeremiah and Helen Caughey Shank. When she was nine years old, the family moved to northwest Tennessee, where her father became President of Consolidated Pump Works at Millington.

After finishing high school in Tennessee she attended Oberlin College in Ohio – the oldest co-educational liberal arts college in the U.S., graduating with a degree in Classical Studies from Oberlin in 1896; she also studied at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts for a year. College studies completed, she returned home and took a job in bookkeeping.

Jessie and her two youngest sisters (Nell and Marie) and their nephew, I.K. Stearns, came to Bryson City along with Jeremiah and Helen when he started the Bryson City

Pump Works (incorporated in December of 1903). She took a job as bookkeeper with the Bryson City Bank, which incorporated five months after the Pump Works. Those were heady times for a growing little town.

Miss Jess stayed with the bank for over two decades. During that time, she worked and formed business and personal friendships with notable town leaders Stanley Black, bank president, and Jack Coburn, a bank director.

Coburn was the most prolific individual dealer in timberlands in the area. Over 10,000 acres of land he and his wife Bland owned jointly are now part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Coburn entered into multiple timberland deals with the Shank sisters, but particularly Jessie. Coburn could “get his Irish up” when there was a need, but I suspect he was on his best behavior when around Miss Jess; it was her nature to bring out the best in folks.

Much of her timber land acquisition work was in the mid-teens, and was principally land in the greater Alarka Creek drainage and on feeders to the Oconaluftee. What led her to get involved in the timber business? Did she see it as a personal investment opportunity or was it with the Pumps Work business in mind? Neither Jeremiah personally nor the Pump Works as a corporation purchased timber lands. His only real estate purchases were of town lots for the business and one lot for a personal residence. So there’s a bit of a mystery here.

Whatever the case, Miss Jess was clearly an astute businesswoman. As an illustration, she paid \$1,125 for a pair of tracts totaling 180 acres in the Couches Creek section of Lufty in August 1915. She sold them for \$3,000 in 1920. That translates into a compounded appreciation rate of 24%.

During most of her tenure with the bank, she also served as Secretary-Treasurer of Bryson City Pump Works and its successor, Carolina Wood Turning, first with her father Jeremiah and then in support of her nephew, I.K. Stearns, who took over the helm of company president in the late 1920s. Upon I.K.’s sudden and unexpected death in 1942, Miss Jess, at age 69, stepped into the breach and served as company president.

On the heels of Pearl Harbor, the plant had transitioned into full time war production. It was work which continued throughout the war. Revamping processes, retooling, and retraining (or in this case, training new, unexperienced employees) had to be huge challenges. I.K. had overseen the beginnings of that, but sustaining and ensuring quality which was critical was under the management of Miss Jess. The plant manufactured a product known as “float lights” – turned and hollowed wood pieces into which phosphorous was inserted and capped. They were used primarily in naval rescue operations. The plant also manufactured ammunition cases.

Four years later, a complete course reversal took place with the end of war. The ramped up war time workload dissipated, and there was a consequent needed restoration of process configurations. But there were also people considerations – what to do with the employees who faithfully served during the war – and the veterans returning home?

These would have been daunting difficulties, though I suppose that the overall effort associated with the war had provided a revised national perspective on the definition of *difficult*. She had support of course, but Miss Jess, small in stature, proved larger than the task. In late 1946, a bit over a year after the war's end, Carolina Wood Turning announced a planned doubling of the plant size and a beginning to manufacture of furniture (maple originally, but other woods would also be used). It was furniture production which would become the company's mainstay product over the next four decades.

Just over a month after the announcement, Miss Jess died. But her final efforts paved a future for hundreds of workers.

Her contributions to community support were numerous, and included serving as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Swain County chapter of the American Red Cross. She was an active member and leader of the local American Association of University Women and in the Presbyterian Church.

A trio of testaments came after her death. All of the active pallbearers at her funeral service were men who had worked for the family business for decades, a testimony to the fact that her heart lay with the workers. During the funeral service, all town businesses closed their doors for two hours as a gesture of their admiration.

Most poignantly, her good works were revealed from beyond the grave in 1948, when her sisters Marie Shank and Nell Leatherwood, along with Nell's husband Thurman, following the express wishes of Miss Jess, donated four parcels of land she had acquired on what had been called both Pine Hill and Leatherwood Hill. She had specified an incentivizing condition to that donation. To receive the land donation, the community had to assemble the funds to construct a hospital on the property. In October of 1950, Swain County Hospital was dedicated and the hill which overlooks the town which Miss Jess loved has since been known as Hospital Hill.