

### CHAPTER 3: MARY VIRGINIA (JEAN) YOCUM



## **Boy Meets Girl**

Jack's major professor (Botany) at George Washington University was Dr. L. Edwin Yocum, a small, quiet, and intelligent man who looked like the very image of a college professor.

One year, the Botany Department moved into a new building and Jack was helping Dr. Yocum move his books, microscopes, and other laboratory equipment into the new and more spacious accommodations. Dr. Yocum's daughter, Jean, was also helping move the Petri dishes. Jack laid eyes on her and saw that she was beautiful to behold. Her dark brown hair was down to her shoulders. Her blue eyes sparkled when she talked. Later, during a taped conversation with this author in 1996, he would describe the moment: "Anyway, we were moving in and there was this gorgeous thing ... I don't know, moving Petri dishes or something. I don't know what she was doing. My gosh, what a gal! And so, on the second or third time I said, 'Hey, hey you, would you like to go to a play?' The National Theater was down the street. She said, 'Fine.' So, we went to dinner at one of the local hotels and then we went to the play. And that started the whole thing."

Jean tells a similar story in her unpublished autobiography, which was discovered by this author's sister in 2017. "That fall I changed my name forever from Mary Jean to Jean and went to college. Poppa's department had just moved to a new building and he had me come up to help wash the new glassware for the lab, and that's where I met Jack." Later, she continues, "One day after school started, I was walking down the stairs, and someone called my name. I turned around and this guy I barely recognized asked me out to dinner. I accepted all invitations and said "Yes". He took me to an elegant hotel, and we had a real, elegant, grown-up meal, and danced, and that was the first date with the guy I married." The two stories correspond fairly well except for a few details.

Jean's given name was Mary Virginia Yocum, but most everybody called her "Jean". She had dropped the use of the middle name "Virginia" in favor of "Jean" some time before starting college at GW and when she did start, she changed her name (unofficially) from "Mary Jean" to "Jean" seeking her own identity. She was the only child of Dr. L. Edwin and Mildred Hicks

Yocum. Jack and Jean liked the looks of one another immediately and Jean asked her father if they could invite Jack for dinner at their house. The big evening came, and Jack put on his best tie. The Yocum house was very conservatively adorned. Mildred Yocum was very polite, but a little bit nervous. Edwin dressed in his Sunday suit and sat at the head of the table. After the dinner was served and before anyone began to eat, Edwin said a short prayer. It was the same prayer he offered at every evening meal, "Dear heavenly Father, we thank Thee for this food, and we ask that thou wouldst bless it. Remember the poor and needy, Christ only save us, Amen." Jack thought the prayer was quaint.



Jack R. Harlan ca 1938

Edwin saw a great future in this serious young student with high ambitions and encouraged his daughter to pursue the relationship. Jack was definitely attracted to the strikingly beautiful daughter of his major professor. They began seeing each other. Jean's

mother and father wanted to protect their only child and they wanted the dating relationship to be done under strict supervision. Jack was invited again to the Yocum house and Jack invited Jean to his house.



Jean Yocum at the microscope at GW.

Mildred Hicks Yocum, Jean's mother, was the eldest daughter of William J. and Mary Hicks of Connellsville, Pennsylvania. William had been a bookkeeper at a mining company near Connellsville. Mildred had two sisters, Lillian and Susan; both were school teachers. Lillian had married a man named Jim Logins. Susan remained unmarried and lived with her mother. This she would do until her mother died. Soon after that she would marry Earl Ogelvee (Ogilvie). They would be married for only a few years before he, too, passed away.

A story that Jean later related to her children on many occasions was that when she was a little girl, she had a cat named “Cleopatra Alexander Beezer Catherine Nicodemus Christine Yocum”. She was affectionately called “Beezer”.

Dr. Harry V. Harlan was the complete opposite personality from Dr. L. Edwin Yocum. Harry was a warm, friendly, outgoing, cigar smoking, tobacco chewing, beer drinking man, full of witty comments and laughter: an outdoorsman with sunburned face; a world explorer. Edwin was diminutive, quiet, soft spoken, bookish, an indoorsman with whitewashed face, hiding behind thick glasses: the archetypal college professor.

Lawson Edwin Yocum had earned his PhD in Plant Physiology from Iowa State University in 1924. His PhD thesis was, *Translocation of Food Materials of Wheat Seedlings*. He also published *The Stomata and Transpiration of Oaks* in **Plant Physiology Magazine** in 1935 (10(4): page 795-801). This may have been significant. Whenever “L. Edwin Yocum” is searched on the Internet, this publication always comes up. He later published a book: **Plant Growth**; Jacques Cattell Press, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1945.

Jean’s mother, Mildred, was in many ways similar to Jack’s mother, except she was a little more nervous. Both were dedicated to the American protestant ideal of the wife: to be quietly submissive to her husband and to maintain a neat and tidy home. Both were quiet; but Gussie had been through so much more than Mildred, since she had married Harry V. Harlan, that Gussie had been elevated to a higher plane than Mildred - in both their minds.

Jack graduated from George Washington University in 1938 - with honors - and began moving in earnest to secure a graduate school to attend. The PhD was always one of his goals. There was no other way about it. His first choice was the University of Leningrad, studying under Nikolai Vavilov; however, a remarkable event occurred in his search for a graduate school. Again, Jack tells the story in his own words, from his book, *The Living Fields*, pages 52-53:

My father and Vavilov corresponded over the years. They had a crude but simple code. If Vavilov responded “My dear Dr. Harlan,” it meant that things were not going well; that gulag was ever at work. If he responded simply, “Dear Dr. Harlan,” things were at least more or less normal. I was so impressed by Vavilov that I took two years of Russian at the university in case I could go to Leningrad and study under him. As graduation was approaching and I was casting about for advanced study, my father wrote to Vavilov asking if this would be possible. The answer came back rather promptly:

*My dear Dr. Harlan,*

*What you said about Chinese barley is very interesting ...*

Since my father had said nothing about Chinese barley, the meaning was clear. The dark, malevolent cloud of Lysenko was looming on the horizon. I went to the University of California at Berkeley. (Note that Trofim Lysenko was a hack scientist in Russia who gained the ear of Stalin and sought to eliminate Vavilov by any means possible (See Peter Pringle’s book: “The Murder of Nikolai Vavilov”, 2008, HVH2).

Jack’s second choice for graduate school was U C at Berkeley. He would start his doctoral work there in the fall semester, 1938. Jean accompanied Jack on the family trip to Idaho that summer. They spent the summer hiking around the valley and the mountains. At the end of the summer Jack left from Aberdeen and went on to Berkeley to begin graduate school and Jean returned to DC with Harry and Gussie.

Jack and Jean were now engaged. We read the following from Jean’s unpublished biography, written in about 1978 from Champaign, Ill:

The next year (1938-39) I dated some, but always with the understanding that I was ‘sort of’ engaged, and nothing serious was likely to develop. I had asked Jack to marry me. The other day (in Champaign) I asked him what he would be doing now if I hadn’t asked him, and he said he’d probably have married someone else who asked him. That he was too shy to have asked anyone himself!

There might be some genes operating here because this author's first wife had to ask him for marriage. Also, this author's uncle Bill (Jack's brother) never married.

Jean was to graduate from GW in 1940. She, too, had taken up rifle as an extracurricular activity, besides her many other activities on campus. She won the national co-ed (woman's) rifle championship in the prone position in 1939. The following was copied from a Newspaper article about Jean:

From the Connellsville, Pennsylvania, Daily Courier. June 1, 1939:

*Dr. and Mrs. Edwin L. Yocum of Washington, D. C., announce he engagement of their daughter, Mary Jean Yocum, to Jack R. Harlan, Berkeley, Cal, son of Dr. and Mrs. Harlan of Washington, D.C. The wedding will be a summer event.*

*Miss Yocum, a student at George Washington University, Washington, was recently tapped for the mortar board in recognition of her services on the women's varsity rifle team, on the W.A.A. board as hockey manager and on the glee club. She is a member at the Sigma Kappa Sorority. In her freshman year she received the Beta Phi Alpha zoology award and in her sophomore year she received the mortarboard award for the outstanding sophomore woman. In addition, she recently captured the national collegiate rifle championship.*

*She is a granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. William J. Hicks of 112 Trace street. Her mother will be remembered as Miss Mildred Hicks of Connellsville.*

*Mr. Harlan was graduated from George Washington University, having been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He is a member of Sigma Xi and captained the men's championship rifle team last year.*

Edwin was glad that this relationship was developing. He saw in young Jack tremendous potential: intelligence and direction. Jack knew what he wanted to do, and he was going to do it. He was not braggadocious about it. He simply quietly knew what he wanted to do and knew how to get things done to get there. Mildred had mixed feelings. Mary Jean was her only child and she had wanted to give her a big church wedding, complete with the wedding gown, flowers and a kind word from the preacher. Edwin and Mildred were Methodists. Jack didn't

seem to have any religion, and this bothered Mildred. She had told Mary Jean, more than once, that whomever she did marry she was to bring her children to church. “I would like you to marry a Methodist man, but a Presbyterian or a Lutheran would do,” she had whispered in Mary Jean’s ear on several occasions. Mildred was a nervous and controlling person. Jean was looking forward to getting away from her constant oversight. Edwin looked over his morning paper through his wire-rimmed glasses and did not at all comprehend the theological war that was raging in his own household.

It turns out that Jean Yocum had an unusual talent: rifle. Follow the link below to a photo and description of Jean Harlan looking down the barrel of a 22-caliber rifle:

<http://www.shorpy.com/node/6315>. (Open in new window.)

### **Jack Harlan at U C Berkeley graduate school**

When Jack arrived in Berkeley to begin graduate school, he first stayed at the campus International House. He found that interesting, because there were people from all over the world; but he soon found an apartment off campus, which he shared with two roommates. He was taking courses and reading, lots of reading. The professors at Berkeley were challenging, but Jack was with them step by step.

### **Back to Jean Yocum’s Side**

Yocum is a German name. In the Kulp Cemetery, associated with the Kulp United Methodist Church of Roaring Creek, Catawissa Township, Columbia County, PA, (a most beautiful area, if there ever was one) there are a number of Yocum tomb stones, one of which is inscribed “Huldah Yocum”. Could there be a more German name? The Yocums were of Quaker stock, several generations back; at least that is the family legend. Lawson Edwin Yocum had grown up on a farm in that area with family scattered among the farms around about. He left the farm, went to school, earned his PhD at Iowa State University in 1924 and, after some rather grim years during the Great Depression, moved to Washington DC, upon securing the teaching and research position at George Washington University. Mildred’s



maiden name was Hicks. The Hicks's were of English descent and may have been somewhat Quakers, too, from the Connellsville, Pennsylvania area.

The Yocums and the Hicks's were both settled families. They had been in Pennsylvania for generations. They had deep roots in the Pennsylvania soil. By contract, the Harlans were a tumbling tumbleweed: always on the move, always pushing into new areas.

Jean traveled with Gussie and Jack to the Ranch near the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho for the summer of 1937. Let us let Jean tell what happened in her own words, from her unpublished autobiography:

Gussie (Jack's Mother) and I had a very good time in Idaho that summer. Doc (Jack's father) came up from Aberdeen on the weekend with a bunch of his cronies, sometimes people very high in the Department of Agriculture, and we went fishing. I don't know if he liked me; he was kind to everyone, but he didn't seem any kinder to me than to anyone else. He also had that way of sort of sadistic kidding that I've never understood. He gave away the biggest fish I caught all summer, but nevertheless it was joyous when he arrived. We sort of lived all through the rather dull week until the weekend when he showed up and the party began. He was very funny, very witty, very kind, and there was always a party wherever he was.

Mary Martini was another person you should know about. She was Doc's assistant, and I think wherever he was, she was. She was a brilliant, dynamic, sparkling, attractive, black-eyed Italian lady who helped make the party spirit. Gussie was plainer, not very dynamic, seldom sparkling and I assume surely must have suffered more or less by this contrast. Everyone was drawn to Mary Martini, while I didn't see much evidence of Gussie's having friends of her own – they usually seemed to be friends of Doc's. She had a good house and was an excellent cook and could always accept guests Doc might bring home from the office. She was Doc's domestic back-up force, always taking care of things and keeping things running so that Doc could function efficiently in his social milieu. Mary Martini smoothed things in his work, kept the records, I think helped with the writing, made it possible for him to be the great success he was in his other world. It was, I thought, a curious threesome. I was more naïve then than now and couldn't read

social situations as well. Perhaps it was no more than it appeared, but I always wondered how a man as attractive as Doc and a woman as attractive as Mary Martini could have as close an official relationship as they had without it ever developing into more. Particularly when Gussie was sort of relegated to keeping up the home, often left for months at a time, never seeming to be the center of his life. It would be helpful if Jack were to write his life, too, and we could get a clearer idea of the situation. Maybe I've read too many gothic novels! Someone who knew them very well, said that she was present when Doc came home from a months-long trip and he and Gussie shook hands! Someone else commented when she saw Jack and me holding hands how glad she was that we could be more openly affectionate. Gussie adored Doc, I have no questions about that – she lived for him, and when he died, she told me her life was over and from then on, she was merely “putting in the time”.

When time for the Jack and Jean wedding came, Edwin and Mildred traveled by train 2800 miles with Jean from DC to Berkeley. Jean and Jack were married on August 4, 1939. Jack had found a preacher and the ceremony was conducted at the preacher's house. We pick up Jean's narrative:

Well, Jack and I hadn't seen each other for nearly a year so my parents took me out to Berkeley, and Jack and I had a month to get reacquainted and see if we still wanted to marry. We did. We arranged with an Episcopal minister to do the ceremony, because I always wanted to be married by a guy in a long white dress. However, it didn't occur to us to mention to him that and he performed the ceremony in a business suit. I've never known if that was grounds for annulment or not. My folks were the only witnesses and afterward we went out for a bonafide Wedding Breakfast, with fresh strawberries and fried chicken.

The wedding ceremony disappointed Mildred, but what was she to do. She had raised her daughter to be a Methodist, but “young people just seem to do whatever they want to do these days”, she sighed to herself. Jack took Jean to Shaw's Ranch in the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho for their honeymoon. Mr. Shaw owned a square mile of ranch land at elevation over 7000 feet in the Idaho high country and leased other land nearby. He had read Harry Harlan's National Geographic article about Abyssinia and had contacted him to see if he could help him

with cold-tolerant barley. They became good friends and the Harlan family often stayed at the Shaw Ranch when they were in Idaho, while Harry tended his high elevation barley plots. Jean and Jack had a great time hiking in the Sawtooth Mountain foothills.

Again, Jean has her side of the story:

We soon left on a bus for our honeymoon, which was a pack trip into those high and cold Sawtooth Mountains. Jack was experienced in backpacking and had taken all possible measures to save weight. I got very tired of rice and salami. We had lots of fresh trout, and swam in a mountain lake and really had a marvelous time.

Jean continues:

I still had one year of school to do and our agreement was that the first year I wouldn't have to work, that we'd live on Jack's fellowship - \$80 per month. We had a pretty nice one-room with Murphy bed apartment which cost us \$35 per month, so there was very little for frivolities. No movies, no new clothes, very seldom eating out. But we managed. One problem was that I always had to review for a test, and Jack's way to review was to take a long walk before an exam. I can't remember how we resolved that, but I do remember taking lots of walks, often in a California fog.

Jean enrolled at U C Berkeley and over the next two years, with Jack's fellowship and some other income, the young Harlan couple was seen in San Francisco's China Town and at the nightclubs, listening and dancing to the Duke Ellington orchestra. Jack revealed to his son, Harry, later in life, that once or twice when they went to see Duke Ellington that they stayed for the second set and it was much different from the first set, meaning that the orchestra was getting back to its African roots and the music became a little more (shall we say) improvisational. Jean was fast making the transition from the sweet little daughter of a university professor to the rough and tumble life of Cowboy Jack Harlan. Jean finished up her Bachelor's degree in Zoology at Berkeley. Jean and Jack rode their bicycles to the 1941 Rose Bowl game in Pasadena, CA, a distance of 370 miles. Jack reported that there was rain the entire

trip. Jean would say many times that on the downhill part of the journey, “nothing passed us but a Greyhound Bus”. They saw a [landmark game](#) between Stanford and Nebraska, in which Stanford used the “T-formation” for the first time in college football history.

It was during the sojourn at Berkeley that Jean, and to a lesser extent, Jack picked up the cigarette smoking habit. Jack smoked cigarettes for a time, but later on he dropped them in favor of occasional cigars and pipes. Jean became completely addicted to cigarettes and this addiction became a lifelong burden on her, a pestilence and slow death that would not let her go. They both enjoyed the causal consumption of alcoholic beverages, a lifelong indulgence which began in the Berkeley days.

Jack started his graduate studies at Berkeley in Plant Pathology, “because they had a fellowship for me, but after a year with them, I decided I really couldn’t get excited about diseased tomatoes. I decided to change to genetics and studied under [George Ledyard Stebbins](#)”. Stebbins became one of the leaders in the American Genetics Revolution. Jack Harlan was Dr. Stebbins’ first graduate student to obtain a PhD degree under his tutelage.

G. Ledyard Stebbins was one of the most important architects of the American Genetics revolution. His thinking greatly influenced the work of Jack Harlan. Jack finished his PhD work under Dr. Stebbins, at Berkeley in the spring of 1942. His doctoral thesis was entitled: *A survey of the genetic variability in the Bromus carinatus complex. Bromus carinatus*, or California Brome, is today on the US List of Invasive Species and “is used for control of erosion and revegetation of damaged land, as well as a highly palatable forage for livestock; however, it has the capacity to become a noxious weed in agricultural settings.” See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bromus\\_carinatus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bromus_carinatus). This topic proved to be particularly important for the early development of the botanical prowess of Jack Harlan, in that Bromus has a habit of self-pollination and therefore has an almost endless number of varieties. Harlan’s thesis topic of “Surveying the genetic variability” of this particular species of plants taught him to spot minute details of a plant to determine to which variety it belonged.

When he finished his PhD work, the first job he took was with the Tela Railroad Company in Honduras as a research assistant. While Jack was in Honduras, Jean remained in the San Francisco area working in the shipyards, repairing ships as part of the war effort. She would await her knight in shining armor to take her back to his castle.

Meanwhile, Jean was having the time of her life in San Francisco. We read from her bio:

Finally, I graduated, and was supposed to go to work, but alas. I had no idea what a zoology major did for a living (I had become a zoo major instead of a pre-med major when I got married, which was before women's lib). So, I got a job babysitting. This was for a baby-sitting service, and there were some standard fees. The customers paid one dollar for any amount of time between 9 and 12, 1 and 3, and 4 and 12. Then the sitters got 70 cents of the one dollar, so that sometimes I would work for five hours for seventy cents! For any time outside of those specific hours we got a straight 25 cents an hour. Well, pretty soon I was making \$20.00 per month, and our income rose 25%, and we could finally begin to do some extra things. I missed school and decided to go back for a master's, but my major professor (in genetics) was a real weirdo, kept files for his files, and you can imagine how that went with unorganized me.

After a few months of crying in my office when I was supposed to be looking at chromosomes, I heard of a really good waitress job, so I quit my graduate work and became a waitress. This was my first exposure to working with people of other races. Some of the girls were Chinese, the bus boys were Black, some of the kitchen help was Black and some Philippine, and the other white girls were mostly "poor white trash." In four months, I got promoted to assistant hostess, which I enjoyed tremendously for I got to arrange banquets, the food, price, help, etc., and finally to bring off the banquet, or wedding reception or whatever myself. We served parties from six to 500. It was a big responsibility, but I loved it. The hostess quit and they wouldn't pay me what they had been paying her, so I took a civil service exam to be a mechanic. Eventually I got a job at Alameda Air Force base as a mechanic (remember the war was on by then). Jack had taken a job in Honduras. My recollection was that it was two years at least, but that if he was still working for United Fruit at the end of two years, he could bring me down. Can you imagine, we'd been married less than three years and he left for two years. He doesn't remember it this way, and he

may be right, but that is the way I remember it. When he left, I moved in with my girlfriend who was married to a black guy and lived in a big old house in Oakland with another black girl. So, from then on for a while I ran with an all-black crowd. Someone told me once that there had been a fight at a party I didn't get to, over whether I was black or not. I was certainly passing for black (socially, though not at work), and feeling pretty nearly the same things they felt. I, too, was refused service. I, too, lived and danced and drank and went to the wild black places. It really was a very wild time in my life. I suppose I should regret it, but I learned so much that I don't. When the time came to straighten up, I straightened up. I never had such a wild, party-type life before or since. The crew at the Air Base was a mixed lot, too. A Japanese guy, a Mexican girl, some Blacks, some Jews. In fact, I was the only Aryan in the bunch, and no one (except the Jewish boy I got to know very well) suspected I was a college graduate. His parents were both dead and all the children, ranging in age from late twenties down to a retarded girl about 10 or so, lived together in a big house. I was out there often, and it was very interesting how a parentless family managed.

Jean would soon be caught up in a lifestyle completely opposite to what she experienced in San Francisco. This presented no small struggle, but adjustments came as we shall see in the next chapter.



Rosie the Riveter