

THE WAY WE WERE

Mary Virginia Skinner Jones

BY MARY WANSER
Resident Community News

Mary Virginia Skinner Jones came into the world at St. Vincent's Hospital in May 1928 as the youngest child and only girl of Chester and Virginia Skinner, natives of Georgetown, South Carolina. Four years later, her father founded Meadowbrook Farms Dairy in San Jose Forest.



Mary Virginia Skinner Jones in 2022 at her childhood home on Meadowbrook Farms

The family home sat adjacent to the dairy, and so it was on that land that Mary Virginia, a tomboy, shared the adventures of farm life with her two older brothers, Chester and Brightman, the middle names they were referred by. She loved growing up in the country, where she always felt safe. Playing in the haybarn, riding the horses used for herding cows, roller-skating on the milking floor, and floating in wooden washtubs down Christopher Creek were among the simple pleasures the three enjoyed while their mom welcomed folks through the back kitchen door to share her home cooking, as these were the days of the Great Depression.

At 13, while sitting with her family in their study and listening to a sporting event on the radio after Sunday service at Riverside Park Methodist Church, Mary Virginia heard the interrupting news announcement that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. Soon after, Chester and Brightman entered the military, and high school girls started dating the Navy men training in Jacksonville.

Mary Virginia's early schooldays were spent at South Jacksonville Grammar School, now The Lofts San Marco. Her parents had intended for her to attend Bartram School for Girls afterwards, but Mary Virginia persuaded them that co-ed Landon High would suit her better. She joined the Lionette drill team and the cheer squad, finding it great fun. Often, her cheer friends would drive over the red bricks of Old St. Augustine Road to practice in the Skinners' front yard. They usually performed locally at what was then called Fairfield Stadium, but once, they cheered at the Miami Orange Bowl.

By 14, Mary Virginia was working in the family business, driving a tractor to bring cornstalks from the field to the silo so they could be used as fodder. At the end of the week, she enjoyed standing in line with the other workers to collect her paycheck. Sometimes, Mary Virginia would hunt on that land with her dad. One day, she killed two turkeys with a single shot.

At 16, with both brothers off to college, Mary Virginia gained use of Little Henry, the family's black Model A Ford. It had four doors and plenty of room for transporting her friends to San Marco Theatre for a movie, to the drug store next door for sodas and snacks, or the lanes nearby for bowling. Though Mary Virginia considered herself somewhat shy, by senior year in 1945, she was so popular that she won the Best All Around trophy and had been elected president of Senior Girls.

With psychology as a major and sociology as a minor, Mary Virginia completed college at Agnes Scott in Atlanta, Georgia. Upon returning home, she taught third grade for a short while at what was then duPont Elementary School. In January 1952, at the same Methodist church she would attend with her family, she married Mac Jones, whom she had met on a blind date.

The newlyweds moved to Elizabeth City, North Carolina, where Mac was stationed as a midshipman. While there, their first child, Malcolm, was born. The family of three moved back to Jacksonville, and Mac joined his father at Graham-Jones Paper Co. near Myrtle Avenue and Logan Street. They soon became a family of four when their second son, Ned, was born, and then five with the birth of Ginny.

Mary Virginia raised her three children in the same San Jose area where she and her two brothers had grown up. As a family, they were active members of Southside Methodist Church. Once her youngest had entered school, Mary Virginia picked up a tennis racket and has been a member of San Jose Country Club's team ever since. She'd be on the court whenever she wasn't serving in one school leadership role or another.

Just as she used to cheer for Landon's team in years prior, Mary Virginia would cheer for Malcolm on the football field, Ned in the pool, and Ginny on the volleyball court. All three had inherited her love of sports. She'd even feed honey to Ned's swim team at meets, whatever it took to support her children and their activities, whether locally through



Mary Virginia Skinner Jones on hunting day, circa 1940



The Skinner Family, 1940s: Charles Brightman, Virginia Brightman, Arthur Chester, Arthur Chester Jr., Mary Virginia

elementary and high school, or out of state for championship events at their respective universities, where she later established endowment funds in their names.

Now, at 94, Mary Virginia retains her love of sports and fun. She's still a Gator fan and has plenty of paraphernalia to prove it. She still joins her tennis team for Thursday lunches when she's not able to play, and she would never think to boast that none but she had one time dined with Virginia Wade on Wade's English estate. She's part of a two-table bridge club with a group of lifelong friends, including Nancy Mahon and Nancy Edwards.

Mary Virginia still travels, too, and can be packed in five minutes, just as Mac had always joked. She says that the destination doesn't matter. Sometimes, it's to their home in Cashiers, North Carolina. Sometimes, it's shopping in Atlanta, Georgia. Sometimes, it's to Ginny's in Tampa. Soon, she'll be traveling to the graduation of one of her five grandchildren in Birmingham, Alabama. In earlier days, she had sailed on the QE2 to Europe and flown to Japan.

For many years, Mary Virginia had volunteered as a Pink Lady at St. Luke's Hospital and served on the board of the Y.W.C.A. She supports Seamark Ranch, The Bolles School and the Jacksonville Symphony, too, believing that every city should have one. She holds membership in the Watsonia and Hibiscus Garden Circles of the Garden Club of Jacksonville.

Though in her modesty Mary Virginia usually prefers her generosity be concealed, her lineage is woven into the fabric of the city. Portions of the thousands of acres of land that her father had owned hold today's St. Johns Town Center, Seven Pines, and the University of North Florida (UNF) — making the Skinners instrumental in Jacksonville's history and particularly that of the school, as Mary Virginia and her brothers donated the land for UNF's original campus and subsequent expansion. She

has enjoyed seeing Jacksonville grow into the city it is today.

Since Mac died in 2019, Mary Virginia has sold their San Jose Forest home and purchased an Epping Forest townhouse, which she had renovated. She described her new neighbors as kind and sweet. She introduced herself to

them by hosting a cocktail party for everyone on the street. She walks through the neighborhood daily, visits the mansion for a glass of wine occasionally, eats well always, works out with a trainer regularly and drives herself wherever she needs to go.

Mary Virginia has always loved fulfilling the role of hostess and cooking for her close friends, whom she chooses wisely, as well as her large family, which now includes eight great-grandchildren. With the approach of her 95th birthday in May, she is planning a luncheon for 50 girlfriends and a gathering for family at her home in Atlantic Beach.



The Skinners: Mary Virginia, Chester, and Brightman



Landon High School, 1945.
Mary Virginia Skinner Jones is 3rd from right, 7th from left