

Blossoming romance remains fresh in couple's minds after 60 years Love & Remembrance

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There is a lot of fabric yardage in a World War II parachute - enough for a wedding gown and a negligee.

Arlee and May Belle "Bonnie" Gowen, who recently celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, survived not only the war, but also emerged unscathed from some of the shortages that afflicted the U.S. population in the mid-1940s.

Silk material, for instance, a must for a wedding dress, was among the items in short supply.

Arlee has always been an innovator, resourceful, as it were, wherever that has been a need. He had flown reconnaissance missions to observe damage behind enemy lines over Corregidor, Bataan and Iwo Jima while stationed on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific theater of operations.

Arlee and Bonnie Gowen pose for a portrait in their home. They have lived in Lubbock for about six decades and recall that they once were given a chance to buy a house and 30 acres of land for \$3,000, but they considered it too far out in the country. It was at 42nd Street and Boston Avenue.

But the parachute he kept aboard for such missions seemed meant for a better purpose after Japan surrendered. Maybe in the hands of a skillful seamstress ...

Arlee brought his parachute to his bride, and a wedding dress resulted. The couple had become acquainted before Arlee entered the military.

"We met at a church party," he remembers. "It was a kind of mixer for new students at Tech."

Arlee, who was a senior journalism major at the time, frankly went along to check out the new crop of freshmen girls.

"And then I saw this one," he said of Bonnie.

She stopped him in his tracks.

And what did Bonnie think of him?

"I thought, wowwee!"

May Belle "Bonnie" Gowen fashioned this wedding dress from the parachute that had been carried by her bridegroom, Arlee Gowen, in World War II. The shortage of silk material available on the market was no deterrent to the couple. And Arlee, who had once briefly served as sports editor of The Avalanche - Journal, took this picture with a 4X5 Speed Graphic camera.

Then, she recalls, "He asked could he take me home, but I had already accepted another. I can't remember his name."

She still is a bit put out because Arlee waited three weeks to call. It was September, and they went to the Panhandle-South Plains Fair for a first date. Arlee had to explain on the way that there wouldn't be any carnival rides because he had spent all his money on a car repair.

Bonnie remembers that was a relief - she was terrified of Ferris wheels.

But a carnival worker, who gave passersby a chance to swing a hammer and ring a bell, saw Bonnie in the crowd and invited her to show how the device worked. She rang the bell easily - and repeatedly - while blacksmith types failed at the rigged device.

According to Arlee, they won dolls and even cash prizes. Bonnie's ability to beat the muscular competition was a real crowd-pleaser. They walked away with enough money to enjoy the fair.

Arlee remembers that he worked part time at The Avalanche-Journal, where he manned the telephone switchboard, read proof, and carried copy between floors. He quickly advanced to assistant to the assistant sports editor - a three-man department - then briefly to sports editor when the two above him were called to military service.

The Gowens Arlee Gowen - Native of Lamesa, entered Texas Tech in 1939. Bonnie Gowen - Native of Crane, entered Texas Tech in 1942. Couple Married Feb. 16, 1946.

They have lived in Lubbock for almost 60 years. The bridegroom served in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific during World War II. He left the service as a lieutenant junior grade. He had worked for a time at The Avalanche-Journal, founded Southwestern Crop and Stock magazine after the war, still has farming interests and operates an office furniture business. The bride, who made her wedding dress from a World War II parachute, has been a teacher and homemaker, and is a student of the Bible.

After graduating from Tech, Arlee also went into the service, and Bonnie stayed in school to become a teacher.

They kept a continuing flow of letters going each way.

The climate of the time was one of anxiety, both at home and in the Pacific.

"When I went to the movie, it would always be a war movie," Bonnie said. "I would sit there and cry. They were tough times."

Besides the dangers of flying the observation missions from an aircraft carrier, Arlee's group also was subject to Japanese aerial attacks on the carrier.

"We managed to shoot down most of the Japanese planes," Arlee said. "But the kamikaze ... we took five of those aboard. One was a twin-engine plane with a 500-pound armor-piercing bomb.

"He crashed through the flight deck. The bomb came loose, cut through the flight deck like it was butter, and five decks below that it exploded in the mess hall. Just barely missed the powder magazine as it went through."

Arlee, who was forward on the hangar deck, had been talking to two men, facing them, when the bomb struck. "Each of them were hit by shrapnel, both killed. It missed me. I was fortunate."

Arlee didn't escape entirely. He still has a hearing loss after more than 60 years.

Bonnie remembers the way Arlee looked when he went to war.

"He was so muscled up, and had a gorgeous body - he looked so beautiful. And when he came back, he was so thin - he had lost 40 pounds. He had lost part of his hair, and had lost all of his eyebrows and eyelashes."

Arlee also was aware of the changes made by war:

"From the first time that dive bomber was launched from the catapult, my youth was over. I was an old man."

They married in Bonnie's hometown of Crane on Feb. 16, 1946, about six months after the end of the war. She wore a white gown made from a parachute, and carried an orchid on a Bible.

The negligee was for a honeymoon in Midland and Ruidoso, N.M.

When Arlee left the military soon afterward, they moved to Lubbock, and have been here ever since.

The Gowens remember the way they were, and still are.

"We go every year to the fair in September and remember our first date,"

Bonnie said.

Their letters are no longer available, but remembered still.

"You see, he's a journalism major and he's always written, always will. You ought to read those love letters," Bonnie said. "My mother burned them. She said they were a fire hazard. I wish our girls could read what their daddy wrote. He was a writer. Still is."

She also remembers a kind of general proposal Arlee made on one of their early dates.

"I remember he said to me, 'I want to take you to church, and I want to take you to dinner.' And I thought to myself, that's what I have been wanting to hear."

