



Grace Rosanky Putnam Jones: World War II pilot, boutique owner

12:00 AM CST on Sunday, February 24, 2008

By **JOE SIMNACHER** / The Dallas Morning News
jsimnacher@dallasnews.com

Grace Rosanky Putnam Jones was an icon of Texas runways.

During World War II, she flew warplanes, including a B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, out of Dallas Love Field and Blackland Army Air Field in Waco.

After a postwar career as a fashion model, Ms. Jones returned to Texas, where she converted a Central Texas bank building into a haute couture boutique. Her shop occasionally held fashion shows, where the creations of top designers were strutted down a runway in a nearby pasture.

Ms. Jones, 87, died Feb. 16 of stroke at the Hill Country Nursing Center in Gonzales, Texas.

"Nothing in her childhood would have given you the indication that she was going to lead such an extraordinary life," said Mary Margaret Quadlander, owner of the Austin School of Fashion in Austin. Ms. Quadlander, a longtime friend, is writing her master's thesis on Ms. Jones.

Always seeming to test limits, she met her husband after she had made a trick landing while delivering an aircraft to a Florida airfield.

"Her niece tells this story, and I think it's probably true," Ms. Quadlander said. "Grace had done some trick landing at an airfield, and the commander came out to reprimand her, thinking she was a man. Grace got out of the plane and shook her hair out from underneath her helmet. That's how [Lt. Col.] Jack Jones met Grace."

There were fewer than 2,000 Women Airforce Service Pilots, 38 of whom were killed in the line of duty, according to records in the WASP Collection at Texas Woman's University in Denton.

After the war, Ms. Jones traveled with her husband's military assignments with the Berlin airlift and in Japan.

By the mid-1950s, the couple was in New York, where Ms. Jones modeled for agencies including Mary Alice Rice and John Powers.

"She was really too short to do runway modeling," Ms. Quadlander said. "This was the beginning of television, and she was smart enough to get into commercial modeling."

One of her long-running television ads was for Spic and Span. In another, for Ford Motor Co., she wore a gold original Christian Dior gown while standing with Hugh Downs.

When Col. Jones retired and wanted to move back to Texas, Ms. Jones' compromise was to open a boutique.

With the help of an architecture student, Ms. Jones remodeled the shell of a limestone bank building on Main Street in Salado. She added chandeliers and spacious private dressing rooms.

Ms. Jones used her fashion knowledge and guts to put her upstart boutique on the map.

"In the beginning, I'm sure she was just going to market and buying, but she was so selective about what she bought and so exclusive that she and Neiman Marcus were some of the only stores that carried some of these designers," Ms. Quadlander said.

To build her exclusive customer base, Ms. Jones tried to borrow money from bankers from Austin to Dallas.

"She said, 'It's not that I needed the money – Jack had plenty, I had plenty – but I wanted them to tell their wives about this new boutique opening,' " Ms. Quadlander said. "Sure enough, that's how she got some of her first customers."

Seven of her first customers were the bankers' wives.

Ms. Jones' business plan took off. Designers and customers came to her boutique, some landing on a helicopter pad fashioned out of a pasture.

Customers initially came from Central Texas, then from Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, and soon after from Los Angeles, New York and Mexico City.

She dropped in at the White House to check on three special customers: Lady Bird Johnson and her two daughters.

Twice a year, Ms. Jones attended fashion shows in Paris, Milan and Rome. Some of the designers at those shows visited her shop, about 40 miles north of Austin.

Ms. Quadlander isn't sure which designers visited the Salado salon, but she knows Ms. Jones had an original Geoffrey Beene gown that the designer considered "his most remarkable."

"She would do such things as having a runway show out in a field behind her salon, instead of some wonderful, exclusive hotel in downtown Dallas," Ms. Quadlander said. "She just built a runway back there and the cows would be meandering around the runway while the richest people in the world were sitting there watching a runway show."

Ms. Jones was religious and helped found Churches of Christ in New York and Salado, Ms. Quadlander said.

"She had an insatiable curiosity about so many things," Ms. Quadlander said.

Ms. Jones had served on the boards of directors of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin; Scott and White Memorial Hospital in Temple, Texas; the Institute for Humanities in Salado; and the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin.

Born in Waelder, southeast of Austin, Ms. Jones grew up in nearby Smithville, where she graduated from high school.

Her father was a rancher, and the family would shop at Neiman Marcus in Dallas. She was on an allowance and had to pick her clothes carefully, she once said.

Ms. Jones attended San Marcos Baptist Academy before enrolling at Baylor University when she was 15 years old. She was attending UT when she read about the need for female pilots known as WASPs.

Ms. Jones, who had never flown in an airplane, persuaded her father to pay for flying lessons in Austin.

A pilot's license in hand, she entered the WASP program. She received additional training at Avenger Field in Sweetwater, Texas, where she was one of 84 female pilots to graduate in October 1943 out of her class of 122, according to records in the WASP Collection at TWU.

Services were Tuesday in Salado. Ms. Jones left no immediate survivors.