

Everything With a Smile: Loxie Dowdy

Alexandra Graham

Being one of ten children in any time period is hard enough but doing so under the cloud of the Great Depression was, to say the least, exceedingly difficult. This is the situation Loxie Dowdy was born into. Her father Shirdy and mother Mary Ann had her and her nine siblings in far-east Tennessee, in a small town within Pickett County called Byrdstown¹. Even today, Byrdstown is a vast expanse of open country scattered with some larger homes and some shack-like houses. During the Depression era, adequate housing, food, and education were inaccessible to the majority of people, but Loxie and her large family made do despite hard times. Her father was a farmer and some of her older brothers labored on the farm². She went to primary school in a one-room schoolhouse¹ and she and her sisters helped with household chores. When she was twelve years old, Loxie ran into some trouble in the schoolhouse. A boy in her class repeatedly poked her and pulled her hair. It got to a point where she'd had enough, so she ended up fighting the boy... and winning. He never came back to school³. Even from a young age, Loxie was not a person to take any nonsense from anybody. Though Loxie's family survived financially, the household environment was nothing short of hostile. Her father had a temper and was drawn to drink,³ so, for high school, Loxie and two of her sisters moved¹ from Pickett County to Muncie, Indiana. She graduated from Royerton High School (in Muncie) in 1950¹ and enlisted in the Air Force in San Antonio, TX in January of 1952¹.

Before her enlistment, Loxie lived at the YWCA and worked part-time jobs in silverware and ice cream factories¹. But she was looking for a better opportunity than factory work, so she attended a talk from a military recruiter and thought the military could be a means to a "wonderful life"¹ for her. For Loxie, military service was both an adventure and a way out of her circumstances. Anyone who knew Loxie would not have said that she was a negative or defeatist person: she just did what she could with what she had, and she did it with an "infectious smile."⁴ Joining the Air Force was one thing that she felt she could do that would help herself and the country.

It was very common at that time for people from fewer means to enlist in military service and that is still the case. "Those with lower family income are more likely to

join the military than those with higher family income," according to a 2008 study done by Syracuse University⁵. Four of Loxie's brothers were also in the military, her older brothers Hershell and Virgil (Army) in Europe in World War II and her younger brothers Cecil and Lonzie (Air Force) in Vietnam⁶. Her service during Vietnam was stateside, but she made essential contributions to the war effort which included training younger women and enacting administrative duties. She received five medals and several outstanding achievement awards for her work with the 3439th WAF Student Squadron³. Whatever the reasons behind Loxie's enlistment, her military service ultimately changed her life because it led her to meet her partner, Lucille Laugesen. Loxie and Lucy met in the early 1970s in the Air Force, and were together for most of their adult lives. Theirs is a story of love and joy, in a context that was all but nurturing to their affections for each other.

The history of the LGBTQ+ community in the military is fraught with dishonorable discharges and harassment, among other consequences. In his book *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military*, Randy Shilts describes the discrimination women in the Air Force already had to face whether they were lesbians or not: "...there was truism among male GIs that classified all uniformed women into one of two camps: those who would provide for a man's sexual needs and those who would not. The former were wh*res; the latter were d*kes."⁷ Though many women in uniform were not lesbians, the military's policies did all but outright discourage straight women from joining. Married women were not initially allowed in the military, and women who became pregnant were discharged⁸. Therefore, the military did end up enlisting large numbers of women who "leaned toward to nonbreeding side"⁷ in their sexuality. And those women were frequently harassed, whether they were out or not. The Vietnam War coincided somewhat with the second-wave feminist movement, and many women rebelled in their own ways, but so many were discharged because of their sexuality. Recently, however, the Air Force has been held to account to make amends with its homophobic actions. In 2018, several news outlets published articles about a particular woman, Helen James, who was dishonorably discharged in 1955 for being a lesbian⁹. It took a law-

suit, but the Air Force changed James' discharge from "undesirable" to "honorable." She was 90 years old.

As one could imagine from this information, Loxie and Lucy were not openly together during their military tenure³. Though they met on Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas and connected with "instantaneous magnitude,"³ they knew that their relationship had to be private. They had to spend five years in secrecy before Loxie retired from the military in 1974 and Lucy retired in 1975. Despite the objectively nerve-wracking circumstances, Lucy described their relationship as "perfect from the start."³ Lucy is a woman who gets straight to the point; she does not pull punches nor over-elaborate... but she could talk about Loxie for hours. From the way Lucy instantly liked Loxie, her initial impression that Loxie "dressed neat,"³ to the countless stories from their ten years living in Red Feather, Colorado, it is clear that their partnership was one full of positivity and deep love.

In 1986, Loxie and Lucy moved into Star Haven cabin in Red Feather Lakes, where they spent their days fishing and grilling, maintaining their property through the seasons, and (Lucy more than Loxie) playing little pranks on their neighbors. Lucy had a mind for that sort of thing: she would dress up mannequins and situate them in odd places around the premises just to get a laugh. Their neighbors would walk upon what they thought was a man trapped under a pile of rocks or wood, only to realize it was just a doll. Loxie loved it, and she'd often help Lucy with "the crazies."³ Loxie was also known to dance around to country music with a mannequin in her arms. Needless to say, Loxie had a playful spirit. She loved all sorts of games and sports, and Lucy's basement is still decorated with her many bowling trophies from the Air Force and after. The pair left Red Feather for Colorado Springs in 1996 but Lucy holds fond memories of their time there. As active as she had been for the majority of her life, Loxie's last decade was characterized by a slow decline due to dementia. While still approaching everyone with a beaming smile and a warm hug, Loxie became less able to engage with the more sharp and energetic parts of herself. Lucy served as a full-time caregiver for Loxie during this time and, after over 40 years together, they were finally legally married in 2014¹. They had been life partners for 45 years when Loxie passed away in 2017.

1 AUTHOR'S NOTES

The most profound thing about meeting Lucy was that before I walked into her home, Loxie was a woman who had passed away. Leaving her home, I found myself needing to mourn someone who had become very much alive to me in the few hours I spoke with her wife. Loxie was there in their home as Lucy told me stories and showed me their family photos and Loxie's favorite shirts

and bowling trophies. I hope this biography can bring parts of her alive to whomever may read it.

REFERENCES

- [1] Loxie L. Dowdy Obituary. Loxie L. Dowdy - Obituary (2017).
- [2] Ancestry.com. 1940 United States Federal Census (2012).
- [3] Graham, L. Lucille Laugesen (2019).
- [4] Stallsworth, N. J. Loxie L. Dowdy - Tribute Wall (2017).
- [5] Lutz, A. Who Joins the Military?: A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* **36**, 167–188 (2008).
- [6] Hassler, J. D., Gross, H. W. & Maiwald, R. G. *The Veterans of Pickett County* (2004).
- [7] Randy, S. Conduct Unbecoming: Gays and Lesbians in the U.S. Military. *Open Road Media* (2014).
- [8] The Women's Memorial. 1970s: Family Policy (2019).
- [9] Swenson, K. The Air Force Expelled Her in 1955 for Being a Lesbian. Now, at 90, She's Getting an Honorable Discharge (2018).