

# Martine Yewell Tompkins (1889-1998)

By Jerry Long



Martine Yewell Tompkins, age 100, in front of her home in Curdsville, Daviess County, KY



Martine Yewell was born 17 February 1889 in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY. Her parents were Martin Buford Yewell (1853-1924) & Amanda Bradley Taylor (1863-1926). Martine and an older brother, George Taylor Yewell (1886-1969), were residing with their parents on Frederica Street in Owensboro at the time of the 1900 federal census. Martin Yewell was a lawyer; he served as city attorney of Owensboro and during 1901-1905 as mayor of Owensboro. Martin & Amanda Yewell are buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Owensboro. During the first decade of the 1900s Martine Yewell was frequently listed in the Owensboro newspapers in the social columns. She was an attendee at numerous parties, dances and other social events and was a participant in school events and various clubs.

Martine Yewell married Samuel William Tompkins on 3 June 1908 at Jeffersonville, Clark County, IN.

Clark County, IN Marriage Book 5, p.441:

Application is hereby made for a license for the marriage of

**MALE** *Samuel W Tompkins* **FEMALE** *Martine Yewell*

UPON THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT OF FACTS RELATIVE TO SAID PARTIES:

<p>1. The full christian and surname of the man is <i>Samuel W Tompkins</i></p> <p>2. Color <i>white</i></p> <p>3. Where born <i>Owensboro Ky</i></p> <p>4. When born <i>June 7 1875</i> (Day, Month, Year)</p> <p>5. Present residence <i>Isaac Conest</i></p> <p>6. Present occupation <i>Isaac Conest</i></p> <p>7. If no occupation, what means has the male contracting party to support a family?</p> <p>8. Is the male contracting party of nearer blood kin to the female contracting party than second cousin? <i>No</i></p> <p>9. Full christian and surname of father <i>Alexander Tompkins</i></p> <p>10. His color <i>white</i></p> <p>11. His birthplace <i>Virginia</i></p> <p>12. His occupation <i>Isaac Conest</i></p> <p>13. His residence <i>Isaac</i></p> <p>14. Full christian and maiden name of mother <i>Elizabeth Venase</i></p> <p>15. Her color <i>white</i></p> <p>16. Her occupation <i>Housewife</i></p> <p>17. Her birthplace <i>Virginia</i></p> <p>18. Her residence <i>Isaac</i></p> <p>19. Has the male contracting party been an inmate of any county asylum or home for indigent persons within the last five years? <i>No</i></p> <p>20. If so, is he now able to support a family and likely to so continue?</p> <p>21. Is this his first marriage? <i>Yes</i> If not, how often has he been married?</p> <p>22. Has such prior marriage, or marriages, been dissolved?</p> <p>23. If so, how? <i>25. When?</i></p> <p>24. Is the male contracting party afflicted with epilepsy, tuberculosis, venereal, or any other contagious or transmissible disease? <i>No</i></p> <p>25. Is he an imbecile, feeble-minded, idiotic or insane, or is he under guardianship as a person of unsound mind? <i>No</i></p> <p>Signature of applicant <i>Samuel W Tompkins</i></p>	<p>1. The full christian and surname of the woman is <i>Martine Yewell</i></p> <p>2. Color <i>white</i></p> <p>3. Where born <i>Owensboro Ky</i></p> <p>4. When born <i>Feb 17 1857</i> (Day, Month and Year)</p> <p>5. Present residence <i>Owensboro Ky</i></p> <p>6. Present occupation <i>Have none</i></p> <p>7. Full christian and surname of father <i>Martine Yewell</i></p> <p>8. His color <i>white</i></p> <p>9. His birthplace <i>Masonville Ky</i></p> <p>10. His occupation <i>Lawyer</i></p> <p>11. His residence <i>Owensboro Ky</i></p> <p>12. Full christian and maiden name of mother <i>Maudie Taylor</i></p> <p>13. Her color <i>white</i></p> <p>14. Her occupation <i>Housewife</i></p> <p>15. Her birthplace <i>Uniontown Ky</i></p> <p>16. Her residence <i>Owensboro Ky</i></p> <p>17. Has the female contracting party been an inmate of any county asylum or home for indigent persons within the last five years? <i>No</i></p> <p>18. Is this her first marriage? <i>Yes</i></p> <p>19. If not, how often has she been married?</p> <p>20. Has such prior marriage, or marriages, been dissolved?</p> <p>21. If so, how and when?</p> <p>22. Is the female contracting party afflicted with epilepsy, tuberculosis, venereal or any other contagious or transmissible disease? <i>No</i></p> <p>23. Is she an imbecile, feeble-minded, idiotic or insane, or is she under guardianship as a person of unsound mind? <i>No</i></p> <p>Signature of applicant <i>Martine Yewell</i></p>
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State of Indiana, Clark County, ss: *Samuel W Tompkins* deposes and says that *he* has personal knowledge of the facts above stated and that they and each of them are true.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this *3rd* day of *June* 19*08*

*Curtis W Ballard* Clerk Clark Circuit Court.

State of Indiana, Clark County, ss: *Martine Yewell* deposes and says that *she* has personal knowledge of the facts above stated and that they and each of them are true.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this *3rd* day of *June* 19*08*

*Curtis W Ballard* Clerk Clark Circuit Court.

**BE IT REMEMBERED**, That on the *3rd* day of *June* 19*08* a Marriage License was duly issued to *Samuel W Tompkins* and *Martine Yewell* which license is in words and figures following to-wit:

**THE STATE OF INDIANA, CLARK COUNTY, SCT:**

To Any Person Empowered to Solemnize Marriage in said County, Greeting:

You are hereby authorized to join together in the honorable state of MARRIAGE, *Samuel W Tompkins* and *Martine Yewell* for which this shall be your sufficient warrants.

Given under my hand as Clerk, and the seal of the Circuit Court of said County, at the City of Jeffersonville.

[L. S.] this *3* day of *June* 19*08*

*Curtis W Ballard* Clerk.

**BE IT FURTHER REMEMBERED**, That on this *3* day of *June* 19*08* the following Certificate was filed in my office, to-wit:

**STATE OF INDIANA, CLARK COUNTY, SS:**

THIS IS TO CERTIFY, That *Samuel W Tompkins* and *Martine Yewell* were joined together as Husband and Wife, by virtue of a License issued by the Clerk of the Clark Circuit Court, this *3* day of *June* 19*08* by me.

Attest *Curtis W Ballard* Clerk. *Clawson D Bailey* Priest.

**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 4 June 1908, p.5:**

**Surprise Wedding**

Mr. Sam W. Tompkins and Miss Martine Yewell, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Yewell, of Owensboro, were quietly married at 3 o'clock Wednesday afternoon at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Frayser, in Jeffersonville, Ind. The news of the marriage was received here yesterday afternoon in a telegram and comes as a great surprise to the many friends of the couple, though the secret was known to quite a number several days ago. The ceremony was performed by the Rev. J. E. Bailey, of St. Paul's Episcopal church.

The couple was accompanied by Miss Mary Belle Rice, of Louisville; Dr. William Little and J. N. Alsop, of Owensboro. Mr. and Mrs. Tompkins left immediately after the wedding for a trip to New York. The bride has been visiting Mrs. E. Rice in Louisville for the past few days. Mr. Tompkins went to Louisville yesterday morning.

Sam Tompkins, the son of Alexander Campbell Tompkins (1804-1940) & Elizabeth Mary Venable (1844-1908), was born 4 June 1873 in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY. His father, A. C. Tompkins, was a wealthy resident of Owensboro, who was engaged in farming, tobacco and distilling and represented Daviess County, KY in the Kentucky Legislature during 1893-1897 and 1902-1904. Samuel Tompkins (38), wife, Martine (21) and their son, Samuel (2) are listed together in the 1910 census of Daviess County, KY. They were residing at 812 Frederica Street in Owensboro. Samuel was listed as the owner of the property and his occupation was given as own income.

Samuel & Martine Tompkins separated in September 1910. On 15 June 1911 they signed a division of property agreement. A final divorce was issued in Daviess County on 30 October 1912. Martine was granted custody of their son.

**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 31 October 1912, p.2:**



By a decree entered in the circuit court Wednesday afternoon Judge Henson, who for three days has been presiding over the special term of the court, granted an absolute divorce to Martine Yewell Tompkins from her husband, Samuel W. Tompkins, and also granted her the custody of their child, Samuel Yewell Tompkins.

When the court calendar was set there was also a suit pending of Samuel W. Tompkins against his wife, Martine Yewell Tompkins, in which the plaintiff sought to recover a considerable amount of household goods and other personal property and to have

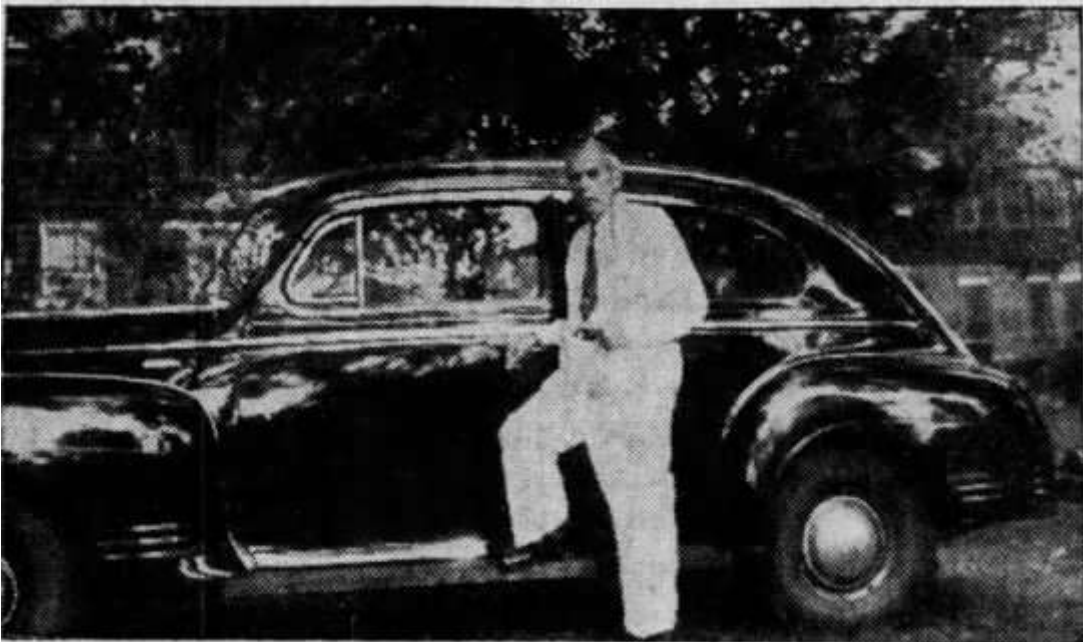
a deed that he had executed set aside and held for nought. Shortly after the session of court was convened the plaintiff withdrew the petition and only the suit for the divorce remained on the docket.

Following the granting of the decree, the court ordered the case stricken from the docket. For the past year Mr. Tompkins has been residing in Chicago, to which place he went from Owensboro.

At the time of his divorce Sam Tompkins was residing in Chicago, IL. By 1918 he moved to New York City. In 1922 he married Esther Laredo (1883-1963). They are listed in the 1930 and 1940 censuses of Richmond County, NY. He died in New York City on 7 November 1941. He was survived by his wife, Esther, their son, George Gaw Tompkins (1926- ) and his son, Tom Ewell, by his first marriage. He was cremated.

**Owensboro Messenger, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 20 November 1941, p.3:**

Samuel W. Tompkins Dies In East



Samuel W. Tompkins

New York, Nov. 19. – Funeral services for Samuel W. Tompkins, of 3672 Richmond road, Richmond, were conducted yesterday afternoon in the Oberg Funeral home at 3037 Richmond road, New Dorp.

The Rev. F. R. Godolphin, rector of St. Andrew's church, Richmond, officiated. Cremation followed, in the Rose Hill Crematory, Linden, N. J.

Mr. Tompkins died Friday night in Richmond Memorial Hospital, Dreyfus Foundation. He was ill only two days. He was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, 68 years ago and had lived on the Island about 20 years.

Surviving are his wife, Esther, and a son, George, living at home. A second son, by another marriage, Ewell Tompkins, Broadway actor under the stage name of Tom Yewell, also survives.

Mr. Tompkins was a son of the late Mr. and Mrs. A. C. Tompkins, pioneer citizens of Owensboro. Mr. Tompkins' father was a wealthy tobacconist and served one term in the Kentucky State senate.

Martine Yewell Tompkins married second John Reid Alexander (1882-1948) on 12 December 1914 in Evansville, IN (Vanderburgh County, IN Marriage Book 58, p.142). He was the son of Romanzo Elliott Alexander & Lucinda Mason Barron. John R. Alexander, wife, Martine, and stepson, Samuel Tompkins, were residing on 18<sup>th</sup> Street when the 1920 census of Daviess County, KY was taken. He was reported as being a farmer and owner of his home. John R. & Martine Alexander were living at 1812 Frederica Street in Owensboro at the time of the 1930 census. They were the only residents of the home that they were renting and his occupation was listed as being none. John R. & Martine Alexander had no children. They separated in July 1933 and she filed for a divorce in April 1937. She was granted a divorce in Daviess County, KY in May 1937 and the court ordered that her name be restored to Martine Yewell Tompkins.

In April 1921 Martine served on the first all woman jury in western Kentucky. In 1936-1939 Martine Tompkins served as recording clerk in the secretary of state's office in Frankfort, KY. In 1940-1943 she was deputy state treasurer in the insurance securities office in Louisville, KY. During these periods she resided in Frankfort and then Louisville, before returning to Daviess County to reside in 1943. During the times she was away from the county she maintained her 440-acre farm near Delaware in Daviess County.

Martine Tompkins married third Daniel Leslie Clifford (1897-1960) on 13 August 1943 at Springfield, KY (Washington County, KY Marriage Book 33, p.35). He was a native of Louisville, KY and was the son of James Lithgow Clifford & Nellie Mae Dudley. Daniel & Martine's marriage reported he was a salesman. Martine in Daviess County in September 1944 filed for a divorce from D. L. Clifford on the grounds of cruelty. In December 1944 she was granted a divorce and restored to her former name of Martine Tompkins.

Martine Y. Tompkins appears in the 1950 census of Daviess County, KY. She was living alone on the St. Joseph & Delaware Road near West Louisville and was reported to be age 62 and divorced. In 1966 she and her son, Yewell Tompkins, of New York City, purchased a house and lot in Daviess County on the south bank of Green River at Curdsville from Wallace Byrne. Mrs. Tompkins moved from her farm to the Curdsville house. At the same time Martine Yewell Tompkins transferred one-half interest in her farm of 440 acres at Delaware in Daviess County.

On 4 June 1974 Martine Tompkins was designated an honorary admiral of the Green River by Kentucky Governor, Wendell H. Ford due to her hospitality and greeting of tugboat crews passing her home at Curdsville.

Martine Yewell Tompkins, 109, formerly of Curdsville, died Friday, March 6, 1998, at Hillcrest Healthcare Center in Owensboro. Her ashes were scattered in Green River near her home. A memorial stone was erected in St. Alphonsus Cemetery at Mount St. Joseph in Daviess County, KY. She was survived by a grandson, Taylor Allen Ewell.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 18 August 1974, p.1C:**

**3 toots at Curdsville  
sounded for Martine**

By Joanne Evans

One for the bend, two for passing and three for Martine.

While tugboats plying the Green River must sound their horns when approaching a bend in the river or passing another boat, they toot three times in Curdsville out of respect for the Admiral of the Green River.

The Admiral of the Green River is 86-year-old Mrs. Martine Tompkins, who at least five times, if not 16 times, a day steps out of her small frame house on a gentle slope overlooking the river in Curdsville to wave at passing tugboat crew members.

The title is not a nickname given Mrs. Tompkins by passing tugboat crews.

Mrs. Tompkins is an honorary admiral, having been so designated by Gov. Wendell H. Ford and Secretary of State Thelma Stovall last June 4. The plaque designating her an honorary admiral in part reads :

"At the request of several of your friends, I am very pleased to acknowledge your friendship to those who travel the river and the high esteem in which you are held by those who navigate the waters."

Mrs. Tompkins' friendship with tugboat crew members began eight years ago, when she was forced to move from her farm to the riverside home in Curdsville after suffering a stroke. "After moving from the farm, I had a lot of time to just sit outside and watch the river," said the petite whited-haired lady, "and, of course, I'd wave at the passing boats."

Now, if Mrs. Tompkins is not in her yard waving, the tugboats' pilots will blow for her to greet them.

"They blow three times just in case I do not hear the first toot," she said, "but I'm usually outside waving by the time they have tooted three times. I can hear them coming up the river."

Sixteen boats pass her house daily – eight during the day and eight at night.

At night, each pilot shines his boat's spotlight in Mrs. Tompkins' front window, at which the drapes are never drawn. She returns a greeting by raising and lowering the shade on her living room lamp. The pilots, in turn, answer by blinking the lights on the side of their boats.

As not to miss a single tugboat's passing, Mrs. Tompkins' bed is so situated in her bedroom that the boats' spotlights awaken her.

"If I'm home, I'll wave or signal whether it is 3 p.m. or 3 a.m. " said Mrs. Tompkins, whose son is actor Tom Ewell.

Twice, while this reporter was visiting Admiral Tompkins, the interview was interrupted by passing boats.

The Anabel was greeted with a friendly wave from Mrs. Tompkins' front porch.

Later, when the Boonesboro passed, Mrs. Tompkins briskly walked to her picnic area located within six feet of the riverband and not only waved, but also bowed deeply to the crew.

"I started bowing like the Chinese do to some of the boats after one rather large pilot greeted me one morning with a low bow. Not to be outdone, despite my age," she quipped, "I bowed so low that my head almost touched my knees. He still can't bow as low as I."

Curdsville is one of several crew-change stops along the Green River.

"Whenever the boats change crews here, the crewmen wait on my porch for their boat," boasted Mrs. Tompkins. "We drink coffee and wait for either the boats or for their wives to come for them it all depends on whether they are going to work or getting off work."

Although she has been invited several times to go aboard a tugboat, Mrs. Tompkins never has done so.



"It is a nine-hour trip," said Daviess County's only female admiral. "I've got sense enough to know that at 86 I'd get awfully tired."

Each Christmas, Mrs. Tompkins decorates a pine tree in her yard for "her boys."

"I enjoy decorating the tree and I know they appreciate it," she said, displaying one of the numerous Christmas cards she has received from tugboat crew members.



For the past 8 years Martine has greeted tugboats on the Green River from her home at Curdsville



**Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, 24 May 1978 Metro Edition, p.1B:**

Actor's mother has had 89 full years

By Bob Hill

CURDSVILLE, Ky. Martine Tompkins is telling a story. She is telling it while firmly perched on the seat of a pickup truck. Her 89 years don't begin to show. She has wonderful timing, and her story emerges from underneath the round brim of her sun hat in perfect order.

A party was held in her honor recently in a nearby town. Her car broke down on the way. She went into a country store near a tavern and dance hall about 10 a.m., dressed in a white sequined dress. A little old lady sat in the store crocheting. (Martine Tompkins hunches over and imitates a little old lady crocheting.) The little old lady refuses to cash a check at 10 a.m. for a woman dressed in a white sequined dress.

"She's convinced," Martine says, "I've spent all night dancing and drinking."

After some reassurance Martine finds a way to call and pay for a tow truck. The guest of honor arrives at the party riding shotgun in a tow truck, her car dangling off the back end.

"Father always said he wanted me to be a lady," Martine says, "but he failed anyway."

Let us now back up and fill in the 89 years. Martine Tompkins was called to help deliver three babies, the last when her husband refused to assist her.

"A boy came riding up on a horse and said the baby was being born," Martine says. "I poked my husband and told him to help. He told me, 'What the hell, I didn't have anything to do with it nine months ago, and I'm sure as hell not going to have anything to do with it now.' "

Martine married three times. Each ended in divorce. Her first marriage resulted in her only child, Tom Ewell, the actor who recently completed a four-year stint on "Baretta."

"This story is about son, isn't it?" she asks.

She calls Tom Ewell "Son" the way other parents call their children Chuck, or Karen. There is nothing affected about it. She has always called him Son.

"We talk by telephone every other night when I'm not with him," she says.

Martine Tompkins received the 400-plus acre farm about 15 miles outside Owensboro in a divorce settlement from her first husband, and has been its straw boss and foreman for almost 60 years, including the 30 years she lived there. She still supervises all the crop planting.

She dug and planted the young trees that towered above the main house and above a second guest house that Martine designed herself on the back of a shingle.

She tried living with Ewell and his wife in New York, but the lure of Kentucky pulled her home.

"I was so homesick I couldn't stand it," she said.

Fourteen years ago, after suffering two slight strokes, she moved to a 100-year-old white frame house on the banks of the Green River in Curdsville. Again she filled her yard with trees, shrubs and flowers. But this time she found an added attraction. She adopted, and was adopted by, the barge crews that pushed ceaselessly back and forth in front of her house.

The tow boats often change crews at a landing in front of her house, and she goes out to help supervise. She bakes them cakes and pies, and gives them coffee, and a crew member knitted her a three-piece shawl.

The tow boats signal her with one long horn blast and two short ones, or play their spotlights through her living room window, and she flips a window lamp on and off.

She drove a crew member 10 miles cross-country so he could spend more time with his wife and new baby before his boat – making the longer river route – picked him up again.

She moved into an Owensboro hotel this winter, the first winter she ever left the river house, because shoveling snow twice a day was beginning to wear her out. She moved back to the river last week.

"One of the crewmen hollered at me, 'Don't be gone so long,' " she says.

She sits for pictures in front of her house as a tow boat slips past. She cocks her head, smiles and poses as the sun splashes across her face and suit.

"This story is about Son?" she asks.



**Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY, 18 October 1990, p.3A:**

*101-year-old lady recalls  
memories of Hawesville*

A lady who visited Hawesville "way back when", some 85 years ago, was in town again Tuesday, visiting her friend, Pat Jackson, the wife of Hancock County Jailer Russell Jackson. Mrs. Martine Yewell Tompkins of Owensboro, who is 101 years old, has lived a life full of excitement,



and shared some of her memories with The Clarion. This remarkable woman was the first female resident of Owensboro to drive a car, the first woman in Kentucky to have a driver's license, and is the mother of former actor Tom Yewell [sic].

"I've never seen such a change, since the first time I was here 80 or 85 years ago," she said of Hancock County and Hawesville. "It has grown but is still a beautiful place... a place to be proud of. In those days, Hawesville was a building here and a building there. There was a little building where your office is, and I'm trying to think what was there. It was a small building that burned."

"When I was a girl I went to parties at Ferncliff, where the McAdams girls lived. I knew Mrs. Sam Rosenblatt and Mrs. Black, the lady who owned the hotel. We had a boarding school for girls in Owensboro, and I knew Mrs. Black's daughter, Jenny Mae, before she was a Black."

Mrs. Jackson became acquainted with Mrs. Tompkins in February, 1986, and they became friends.

"I took care of Martine, as a private duty nurse, for 4 years," she explained. "My friend, Anita Tooley, was expecting a baby and she called me because we had worked together before, and asked if I'd take her place while she went on maternity leave. Nita had been with her for 5 years, and she was staying at Gabe's Tower when I first met her. I started working for her 5 days a week and some on Saturdays and Sundays. I found her to be a fascinating lady. I learned she'd had an article in Reader's Digest; was the first lady in Kentucky to have a driver's license; the first to drive an auto, and had been in politics."

"She's been in everything but a jail!", Mrs. Tompkins interrupted.

"She has a lot of knowledge and wisdom, and we can learn a lot of things from her," Mrs. Jackson continued. "Nita, her nurse, brought her here today. She lives at Curdsville, but the doctors want her to move into town for the winter to be closer to the doctors and the hospital."

Mrs. Jackson, a certified nurses aide, said her visitor has a heart condition, the only thing wrong with her. When she was 95, doctors felt it advisable to have a companion, skilled in nursing, with her 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Mrs. Tooley, a certified nurses aide, who also works at Carmel Home, stayed with her before Mrs. Jackson and started back with her in January of this year. Mrs. Tompkins wears glasses only to read, has her own teeth, and can still walk very well. She lived almost totally independently in her home at Curdsville until 6 years ago.

Mrs. Tompkins has the following advice for anyone who aspires to live to be 100 or more. "Always do anything you're old enough and big enough to do. I've always been in good health. I don't smoke, but I've never objected to it; and if I wanted to smoke, it would be a corncob pipe."

As for an exercise program her analysis is, "a broom and mop-handle will give you all the exercise you'll ever need!"

Mrs. Tompkins came from an affluent family. Her father, Martin Yewell, was an attorney who served as the first [sic] Mayor of Owensboro, 1901-1905. She had one child, Tom Yewell [sic], who took his grandfather's name as a stage name. He is now retired, living in California. Mrs. Tompkins declared she wanted to be an actress when she was young, but her family discouraged her ambition. When her son became interested, she encouraged him. He started acting in a stock company, and later in movies. She said he had to work 8 to 10 years to become successful.

Her friends asked her to list all the places she has traveled to outside the U. S. She listed France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, with the quip: "I've been around a little bit, haven't I?"

She was involved in politics during the early 1930s. She was Secretary of State and was Deputy State Treasurer in 1933. She recalled "Happy" Chandler was Governor, and held her nose as she spoke the name. She did not like him, but declined to tell the reason.

According to her friend, Mrs. Tompkins was married at about age 19 to Samuel W. Tompkins, a man who had a lot of money. She described his business as "inheritance", and Mrs. Jackson said she was told he never held a job in his life. The year was 1908 when Mrs. Tompkins had her first driving experience, in an era when it was "scandalous" for a woman drive.

"I saw a car in a showroom and asked Mr. Dawson if I could drive it," she related. "He said, 'are you interested in buying it?' I said: 'if I like it'. So I got in it and went up on one sidewalk, came down, hit a pole. So I started out in the country and got in a nice ditch. It was a good one! I finally managed to back out and I've been driving ever since."

The car was a 1908 Maxwell, and Mr. Dawson was the Owensboro dealer. She said that her husband did not drive.

"He always had a chauffeur, but I didn't want anybody chauffeuring me around!", she asserted. Looking back on all the firsts she accomplished and her adventurous experiences, Mrs. Tompkins summed up: "I've had a wonderful life."



**Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, 25 February 1996, p.1B:**

**Self-Starter ... 107-year-old was a leading lady in more ways than one**

By Byron Crawford

CURDSVILLE, Ky. Martine Tompkins, who is believed to be Daviess County's first woman driver, has just turned the corner of her 107th year and is on the way to 108.

"I know I was the first woman driver because we had the second car that was bought in Owensboro," she said. "Mr. Nat Alsop had the other one . . . and he didn't marry until he was old enough to die.

"The first time I went out on Frederica Street – way out on Frederica – there was a deep ditch, and I got in that ditch. And a man came up and said, 'Lady, can I help you?' I said, 'Yes, you can help me by standing back and letting me back out.' I backed out on my own. . . . Then I went up on Third Street and just got up to a plate-glass window, but I didn't break it. And I backed out of that."

Tompkins, who voluntarily stopped driving at age 95, claims to have never had an accident.

Her father, a lawyer who was mayor of Owensboro near the turn of the century, never wanted his daughter to pursue her first love, acting.

But she yearned for the stage and spent many of her early summers on the front row of Chautauqua performances in Daviess County. She even landed a few parts in home talent productions.

"I was a leading lady. Ohhh, mercy," she said. ". . . We had rayon stockings, and I'd always pull my dress up a little bit."

Her only child, Yewell Tompkins, was born in 1909, and she encouraged his love of acting.

He went to Hollywood, where he made a career in pictures as Tom Ewell. Among his many film credits are co-starring roles with two of Hollywood's leading ladies of the 1950s – Marilyn Monroe in "The Seven Year Itch" and Jayne Mansfield in "The Girl Can't Help It."

"I never called him anything but 'Son' all his life," Tompkins said. "We loved each other, and I'll never get over losing him." (He died in 1994.)

She was married three times, but all her husbands have long since passed on.

"If you've had three husbands and all of them liked the bottle, there was trouble," Tompkins reflected.

"I could see some good in all of them. My heart governed me instead of my brain because they held me up so . . . and made me think I was something special. But I wasn't, or I wouldn't have married them."

In her younger days, Tompkins once served as Kentucky's assistant secretary of state, a position that took her to Frankfort, but she has spent the rest of her life in Daviess County, where she is affectionately known as "The Queen of Green River" by riverboat crews who pass by her white cottage a short distance from the shore.

They still blow their horns when they pass her place, and sometimes they stop to share with her a piece of custard pie or warm conversation.

Once, a towboat captain invited her to ride to Evansville and back.

"And I said, 'Lower the gangplank!' "Tompkins remembers.

She loves to dance, she said, but hasn't tried it since she was 105 and nearly lost her breath while dancing at a senior citizens' center.

A few months ago she threatened to bite an acquaintance who stopped her on the street to marvel that "as old as she is," she still has her real teeth.

Laughing off any secrets of longevity, Tompkins says she has always done everything she was old enough to do, has eaten everything she could afford and has worried about nearly everything.

"I'm worried now because I'm as deaf as a post in both ears," she said. "I can hear you because I just had new batteries put in (both hearing aids), knowing you were coming."

Her birthday is Feb. 17, and not long after her 107th-birthday dinner at Red's Fishhouse of the South in Sorgho, she declared that she has few regrets.

"I've accomplished practically everything I've wanted to do," she said. Asked what that was, she smiled, then said, "I'm not telling."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 9 March 1998, p. 2B:**

### Martine Tompkins

Martine Yewell Tompkins, 109, formerly of Curdsville, died Friday, March 6, 1998, at Hillcrest Healthcare Center in Owensboro. She was born in Daviess County and was a member of Trinity Episcopal Church. She was an assistant secretary of state and deputy state treasurer in the 1930s, and in 1974, then-Gov. Wendell Ford gave her the honorary title of "Admiral of Green River." Her son, Tom Ewell, died in 1994.

Survivors include one grandchild.

Services are at 10 a.m. Tuesday at Trinity Episcopal Church in Owensboro. There will be no visitation. Glenn Funeral Home in Owensboro is in charge of arrangements. The family requests that expressions of sympathy take the form of donations to Spouse Abuse Center of Owensboro, c/o Glenn Funeral Home, 900 Old Hartford Road, Owensboro, KY 42303. Memorial contribution envelopes are available at the funeral home.



## Tompkins was one of a kind

By Keith Lawrence

If you didn't know Martine Yewell Tompkins, I wish you could have.

She was an amazing person.

She died in 1998, less than a month after her 109th birthday.

Her life encompassed more than half of Daviess County's history.

She was a living landmark — the first woman in Owensboro to drive a car and one of the first women in Kentucky to serve on a jury.

She also served as an assistant secretary of state and deputy state treasurer in the 1930s.

When she turned 100, a reporter asked her for the secret to a long life.

Exercise with "a broom and a mop and a spade," Tompkins replied.

"I've just had a good time all my life," she said. "I just take life in its strides."

The daughter of Owensboro's 10th mayor, Martin Yewell, who served from 1901 to 1905, Tompkins had lived an unconventional life.

She often told the story of how she outraged the community as a young wife by riding through the county astride a horse — not sidesaddle — to sell Liberty Bonds.

In 1908, her husband, Sam, bought the second car in Daviess County.

And 19-year-old Martine Tompkins decided that she was going to drive that new Stevens-Duryea.

"People thought it was terrible," she recalled in 1983, when she was celebrating 75 years behind the wheel — without an accident or a ticket.

"Men would give me bad looks sometimes," Tompkins said. "Women were supposed to sit on the front porch with both feet on the floor. We could never even cross our legs, much less drive a car."

She was still driving to Florida by herself when she was 90.

That year, a Florida trooper pulled her over for speeding — but let her go when Tompkins explained that she was in a hurry to get back to Kentucky to see her baby.

Her "baby," actor Tom Ewell, who starred with Marilyn Monroe in the 1955 classic "The Seven-Year-Itch," was 70 at the time.

Tompkins farmed until 1966, when a stroke at age 77 forced her to slow down.

She moved to a house on the Green River at Curdsville — and promptly became a legend on the river.

In the summer of 1974, then-Gov. Wendell Ford designated Tompkins as the "Admiral of Green River," an honorary title.

Men who worked the riverboats on the Green had bestowed the title years before.

Tompkins would sit in her yard and wave to passing boats.

As time passed, the ritual became more elaborate. Boats would blow their horns three times in greeting as they passed.

At night, pilots would shine their spotlights in her front window.

Tompkins would raise and lower the shade on her living room lamp.

And the pilots would respond by blinking the lights on the side of their boats.

Tompkins was older than 12 states.

She was 5 years old when the first movie was made, 14 when the first airplane flew, 31 when radio came along.

And only a handful of the buildings in Owensboro were here when she was born.

In 1994, on Tompkins' 105th birthday, President Clinton called to wish her his best.

She was one of a kind.



*1908 Martine Yewell Tompkins driving Sam Tompkins new Stevens-Duryea.  
Photo on display in the Court House, Owensboro, Daviess County, KY*



Martine Tompkins was first woman to drive a car in Daviess County. Picture from Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 4 August 1983, p.1B.





Martine Tompkins, 101, with David Adkisson, Owensboro Mayor, at unveiling of Owensboro Mayor picture gallery. Picture from the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 5 September 1990, p.1C.



Martine Tompkins at her 105<sup>th</sup> birthday party at Red's Fish House of The South in Sorgho. Picture from the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 16 February 1994, p.1C.



Martine Tompkins at her 107<sup>th</sup> birthday party at Red's Fish House of The South in Sorgho. Picture from the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 14 February 1996, p.1A.



Martine Tompkins, 107. Picture from Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, 15 February 1996, p.1C. Memorial, on right, is at the St. Alphonsus Cemetery, Daviess County, KY; her ashes were cast into the Green River near her home.



### **Some newspaper articles about Martine Yewell Tompkins:**

- Owensboro Inquirer – 1902: 12/24 p.1 (Miss Martine Yewell, daughter of Mayor Yewell, injured yesterday by the discharge of a toy pistol)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1905: 2/15 p.3 (Miss Martine Yewell starts new dynamo at electric light plant)

- Owensboro Messenger – 1907: 11/29 p.8 (Miss Martine Yewell is ill at her home on South Frederica street)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1908: 6/4 p.5 (Martine Yewell, of Owensboro, married Sam W. Tompkins on 3 June 1908 in Jeffersonville, Indiana)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1908: 10/29 p.3 (Samuel W. Tompkins transferred to George A. Williams 440 acres on the Curdsville & Delaware Road for \$1, Williams in turn deeded the same to Martine Yewell Tompkins)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1911: 6/18 p.1A (Samuel W. Tompkins and wife, Martine Yewell Tompkins, separated in September 1910, they signed an agreement dated 15 June 1911 by which he deeded her property and wife was to have custody of their child, Samuel Yewell Tompkins)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1912: 2/17 p.2 (Tompkins divorce suit)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1912: 7/2 p.3 (“Sequel to Elopement: Samuel W. Tompkins Seeks To Recover Household Goods From Wife”)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1912: 10/31 p.2 (divorce from Samuel W. Tompkins granted)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1912: 12/10 p.1 (“Sam Tompkins is Under Arrest: For Attempting to Defraud Baltimore Hotel”, he is addicted to dope)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1912: 12/14 p.4 (Martine Tompkins suffers a nervous breakdown)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1914: 12/13 p.6 (Mrs. Martine Tompkins married John Reid Alexander at Evansville, IN on 12 December 1914)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1974: 8/18 p.1C (“3 toots at Curdsville sounded for Martine”, by Joanne Evans)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1978: 5/24 p.1B (“Actor's mother has had 89 full years”, by Bob Hill)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1983: 8/4 p.1A (“In the forefront at the wheel: Daviess County's first woman driver still on the road at 94”, by Keith Lawrence, picture of Martine Tompkins)
- Henderson Gleaner, Henderson, KY – 1983: 8/5 (“Owensboro's first woman driver still motoring at youthful 94”)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1989: 2/17 p.1C (“woman celebrates century today”, by Karen Owen, picture of Martine Tompkins)
- Hancock Clarion, Hawesville, KY – 1990: 10/18 p.3A (“101-year-old lady recalls memories of Hawesville”)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1990: 9/5 p.1C (picture of 101-year-old Martine Tompkins at unveiling of 23 portraits of former Owensboro mayors)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1993: 2/18 p.1C (“She's a symbol of what's good about Daviess County' Martine Tompkins celebrates 104 years as part of county's history”, by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1994: 2/16 p.1C (picture of Martine Tompkins on 105<sup>th</sup> birthday)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1994: 2/19 p.8B (“Clinton phones local woman on 105th birthday”, by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1994: 9/6 Community p.3 (“History of Curdsville community is colorful patchwork”, by Glenn Hodges, 1983 picture of Martine Tompkins)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1994: 9/13 p.1A (“Owensboro’s ‘Itch’ actor Ewell die’s)

- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1995: 2/14 p.1A (picture of Martine Tompkins on 107<sup>th</sup> birthday)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1995: 2/14 p.1C ("An inspiration to all", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1996: 2/15 p.1C ("Miss Martine has packed a lot into her 107 years", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1996: 2/16 p.1A ("Tompkins, 107, a youngster to some", by Keith Lawrence)
- Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY – 1996: 2/25 p.1B ("107-year-old was a leading lady in more ways than one", by Byron Crawford)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1996: 6/18 p.1A ("On the Block - More than 300 attend auction of Martine Tompkins' belongings", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1998: 3/7 p.1A ("Martine Tompkins, oldest Daviess resident, dies at 109", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1998: 3/9 p.2B (obituary of Martine Tompkins)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1998: 3/11 p.1A ("Tompkins going home in style", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 1998: 5/10 p.1C ("Celebration of Life: Last wish of Miss Martine was party, ashes spread on river", by Slone Hutchison)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 2008: 2/21 p.1C ("Tompkins blazed the trail for Owensboro's female drivers", by Keith Lawrence)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 2018: 8/23 p.1B ("Miss Martine drove for women's rights", by Keith Lawrence; James H. Parrish, a local banker, brought the first car, a Waverly, to Owensboro on 24 July 1900; a woman drove a car for the first time in Owensboro in 1908; Sam Tompkins in 1908 bought a new Stevens-Duryea, and his 19-year-old bride, Martine Yewell Tompkins, drove it to Hawesville the same year; she later said 'People thought it was terrible. Women were supposed to sit on the front porch with both feet on the floor; she died 20 years ago, her ashes were scattered in Green River in May 1998)
- Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer – 2022: 12/8 p.1C ("Tompkins was one of a kind", by Keith Lawrence)



**Martin Yewell**  
(1853-1924)

Mayor of Owensboro, KY, 1901-1905

Memoirs of the Lower Ohio Valley, Vol. II,  
Federal Publishing Company, Madison, Wis., 1905, pp.24-25:

Martin Yewell, mayor of Owensboro, Ky., was born in Daviess county, of that state, Dec. 22, 1853, and is a son of Harrison and Sarah (Lewis) Yewell, both natives of Nelson county, Ky. The grandfather, Martin Yewell, was a son of James Yewell, whose father was one of three



brothers who came from England at a very early date and settled in Virginia. Martin Yewell was a native of Virginia, but came in his early manhood to Kentucky, settling in Nelson county, where he was engaged in agricultural pursuits and milling operations all his life. Harrison Yewell was also a farmer and miller. He located in Daviess county in 1840, and there followed these occupations until his death in 1885. During his life he was one of the well known and influential citizens of the county. His wife died in 1895. Both were members of the Baptist church and consistent practitioners of the tenets of their religious faith. They had the following children: Joseph and John, who both died in the Confederate service during the Civil war, the former at Tunnel Hill, Ga., and the latter at Bardstown, Ky. Thomas and Martha died in infancy; Linda is now living at Owensboro as the widow of H. M. Haskins; Nannie married William Mobbelly and is now deceased; Vardeman lives in Missouri; Martin is the subject of this sketch; Mary Belle is the wife of E. Rice, of Louisville; Sarah Todd is at home, and Robert Lee is a farmer in McLean county, Ky. Martin Yewell received a good common school education, studied law under Judge Yost, of Greenville, Ky., and was admitted to the bar on April 20, 1880. He first began practice at Uniontown, where he was elected city attorney, but in 1881 came to Owensboro, where he has ever since practiced his profession until elected mayor in 1901. In August, 1882 he was elected county attorney of Daviess county and held the office for two terms of four years each. Mr. Yewell, until 1896, was an adherent of the Democratic party; since that time he has affiliated with the Republicans. He was elected mayor in November, 1901, and his term expires in December, 1905. On Jan. 7, 1885, he was married to Miss Mamie B., daughter of George and Volinda Taylor, and they have two children: Taylor, aged seventeen, and Martine, aged fifteen. Mr. and Mrs. Yewell are both members of the Baptist church.



Some references to Samuel W. Tompkins in the Owensboro newspapers:

- Owensboro Messenger – 1889: 4/19 p.4 (Sam Tompkins is now a messenger at the Owensboro Savings Bank)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1897: 5/15 p.5 (Samuel W. Tompkins author of song "Lillian Lee")
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1898: 7/18 p.4 (Samuel W. Tompkins has gained a reputation as a composer of music)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1900: 3/7 p.1 (Samuel W. Tompkins has gone to farming, his mother owns a fine farm of 354 acres in Prince Edward County, VA, which has been in the family for nearly 200 years, it is the old Venable homestead, 'Gardenia Villa', worth about \$15,000, it is within a mile of Hampden-Sidney College, she & her husband, A. C. Tompkins, have deeded the property to their son for love & affection, he will leave April 1 to take charge of his farm)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1900: 3/8 p.8 (Sam W. Tompkins now the owner of old Venable homestead in Prince Edward County, VA, which has been in family for about 200 years)
- Owensboro Inquirer – 1900: 4/2 p.4 (Samuel W. Tompkins left this morning for Prince Edward County, VA)
- Owensboro Messenger – 1900: 4/29 p.2 (Samuel W. Tompkins owns a gun from Venable family that is over 275 years old)





Alexander C. Tompkins was born in Charlottesville, Va., on the 28th day of February, 1840. Mr. Tompkins sprang from that hardy, vigorous, Scotch-Irish race and has inherited many of the characteristics of his ancestry, being strong physically and mentally. The Tompkinses for many generations have lived in Virginia. Alexander's father was William W. Tompkins, and his grandfather, Dr. John Tompkins, and further back in the line of ancestors was his great-uncle, Daniel D. Tompkins, who was chosen to fill the exalted station of Vice-President of the United States. Many of Mr. Tompkins' people were preachers in the Christian church and he was named in honor of the celebrated Alexander Campbell, the founder of that church. Mr. Tompkins' mother was Frances Samnalla Pendleton, a daughter of Henry Pendleton, a Virginian. Our subject left the State of his nativity in 1858, going to Henderson County. He remained here, however, but about three years, when at the breaking out of the war he returned to Virginia, and in the fall of that year enlisted in the Twenty-seventh Virginia Infantry as a private. After the battle of Antietam he was transferred to the Second Virginia Cavalry, Company K, and was assigned to General Fitz Hugh Lee's brigade, in which he served until the surrender of Lee's army which closed the war. He came out of the army with the rank of Second Lieutenant. After peace was restored between the North and the South, Mr. Tompkins again went to Henderson County and engaged in farming, and in the fall of 1865 removed to Daviess County. He here engaged in mining and farming on the Bonharbor farm; in which he is still interested. In 1873 he began to operate in tobacco, and now (1883) is doing one of the heaviest tobacco trades in Daviess County, handling as high as 1,000,000 pounds in a single year. In addition to his agricultural interests and his large tobacco business, Mr. Tompkins, in 1880, became a member of the Owensboro Distilling Company, and is now actively engaged in the distilling business. June 10, 1868, Mr. Tompkins was united in marriage to Miss Lizzie Venable, at Owensboro. She is a daughter of Samuel and Virginia Venable. Mr. and Mrs. Tompkins have had two children, one living, a son, born in July, 1873. Himself and wife are both members of the Cumberland Presbyterian church. Mr. Tompkins was elected member of the Common Council of the city of Owensboro, in April, 1882.

