

The Woman George W. Bush Didn't Marry

The question is why

BY TIM FLECK

THEY LOOK SO CAREFREE AND YOUNG, trapped in time, sitting on a carpet in front of a fireplace. He's in a suit and tie; she's in a sleeveless dress, smiling, her hair cropped short. Their hands, presumably intertwined, are hidden beneath a cushion propped between the two.

The date is January 1, 1967, and the picture and engagement notice in the Houston Chronicle trumpet the engagement of future Texas governor George W. Bush and the daughter of a Jewish father from the Bushes' Tanglewood 'hood.

It's a major event in George Bush's life that has gone unmentioned by the first wave of profiles on the likely presidential candidate. More than one journalist who has plowed through the Bush family history finds it curious that the announcement, presumably followed by a cancellation, left only one long-forgotten fossilized engagement notice. With Campaign 2000 heating up, several political camps have circulated rumors about the engagement, enough to provoke inquiries to at least one Houston society source from Newsweek, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the National Enquirer.

The governor, a Methodist, has upset Jewish leaders who questioned a statement he made five years ago. The then-candidate for governor told a reporter that those who do not accept Jesus Christ cannot go to heaven. Before a trip to Israel last year, he joked that he would tell Israeli Jews they were all "going to hell." In a post-trip news conference, Bush declared he would let God decide who goes to heaven. Those comments have fueled speculation that the Bush family broke up the 1967 engagement because the prospective bride had a Jewish background.

Now that Bush is the odds-on favorite to carry the Republican presidential standard into battle next year, a curious process is taking place. Folks linked to him over the years are becoming fresh fodder for biography and politics, sought by everyone from the human vacuum cleaners at the tabloids to future presidential scholars trying to get the jump on history.

Which brings us to the former Cathryn Lee Wolfman, a college student who had the mixed blessing to have loved and apparently lost the future governor when both were juniors, he at Yale and she at Rice.

"Congressman's Son to Wed Rice Co-Ed," read the New Year's Day headline 32 years ago. In a four-paragraph item, Mr. and Mrs. Lee Wolfman of 5706 Tecumseh Lane in Tanglewood gave their glad tidings.

"George Walker Bush, son of Congressman-elect and Mrs. George H.W. Bush of Houston and Washington, will take pretty Cathryn Lee Wolfman as his bride." The notice goes on in workmanlike fashion to supply

the embryonic resume of the couple. Cathryn had graduated from St. John's in Houston and attended Smith College before returning to Rice and joining the Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society.

Her maternal grandfather, Roy Hazelhurst, hailed from McAllen. Wolfman's other grandfather, Ben Wolfman, ran a popular women's ready-to-wear clothing store on Main Street called The Fashion. Neiman-Marcus bought the space in the early '50s, and Ben's son Lee, Cathryn's father, opened a high-end clothing store called Wolfman's, on Kirby.

As for George W. Bush, the son of a future president and a future presidential contender himself, was still in his Big Man on Campus stage at Yale as president of Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity.

Father George had just graduated from the oil business to Congress, having defeated District Attorney Frank Briscoe for the job. Barbara had not yet become 'Bar,' the white-haired mother of the nation. The heaviest title in the family still belonged to former Connecticut senator Prescott Bush.

The announced marriage does seem puzzling, since by all accounts Bush was a wild and crazy party guy at Yale whose carousing, according to friends, continued well into his thirties before he settled down with his wife, Laura, and gave up boozing.

Bush spokeswoman Karen Hughes checked with the governor and reported back. "Yes, Governor Bush, while he was in college, was very briefly engaged to a very fine person he thinks the world of," explained Hughes. "Ultimately, they went their separate ways." According to Hughes, they do not keep in touch.

As to the details of the long-ago engagement, the wall of silence by family and friends that has so far shielded Bush's younger years from media scrutiny continues to hold. Wolfman has since married, taken the name Young and moved out of state. Attempts to contact her were unsuccessful. A call to her grandfather Roy Hazelhurst, now retired in Kerrville, yielded a slight crack.

Asked about the pairing of Bush and Wolfman, Hazelhurst explained, "They were very good friends..." At that point, his wife broke into the line, chiding, "Roy, Roy." After she ascertained that the caller was a reporter, she ended the conversation: "I'm sorry, we cannot answer any of your questions."

The father of the nonbride wasn't talking, either. "I don't give out any information on George Bush," he snapped, before slamming down the phone.