

Thank you for wanting to spend more time talking and thinking about the novel, *The Big Inch*.

This novel grew out of research I was doing for Longview Chamber of Commerce's 100-year-history compilation. (In my other life, I hire out as a freelance writer.)

I could spend pages updating readers of the actual history of the pipeline project that was built between Texas and New Jersey, the fascists slipping into the country to spy on Americans, the German U-Boats patrolling the Houston shipping channel, and crazy, big ideas that entrepreneurs had to supply the war effort with technology and products. I'll refer you instead to your preferred library and museums. The WWII Museum in New Orleans is a treasure of history, nostalgia, and culture of the times and I spent two trips wandering their halls and attending lectures. I also spent a lot of time in my local historical museum better understanding the impact of a war initiative like the Big Inch Pipeline, the Little Inch Pipeline and Harmon General Hospital on the community of Longview, Texas.

Creating characters to walk into the historical context was its own puzzle to solve. Because this was novel was a work of historical fiction, I changed a few names of actual people because I would be creating scenes I could not authenticate they would have been in and, also, putting words in their mouths. I did my best to honor their characters as presented in books and papers, not take liberties with the times, either. As a modern woman writing about an age far different than her own, I had to put a 1940s cap on my head and keep it there. I listened to a lot of Big Band Music, Texas Country, and Jazz to keep my focus set and then I borrowed heavily from some names on my family tree to craft the spunky, courageous character of Lane Mercer and her relatives. My mother was shocked to read the book and realize I'd leaned toward the Georgia kin and their stories. No direct correlations, but it was my first novel so I worked with what I knew.

As my first full-length novel, I threw everything but the kitchen sink into this book. A different editor might have taken me to task, but I hope if you're reading this addendum, you enjoyed the story regardless.

Once I had my research in place, a map of what Longview looked like back in the day, and a timeline of events, I set about creating two winsome leads to push the plot through. Lane Mercer was soft as a Southern dove and crafty as a drunken uncle. She was such fun to create! Spending time in books and videos related to the early days of the American espionage units opened my eyes to the ways women were willing to serve their country's efforts overseas. Most of the college girls who signed up for "spy work" had a romantic and soft focus lens on what they thought they would be doing. Reality came with a fierce bite. Since *The Big Inch* debuted, many novels have told the female spy story, and it is affirming that I got Lane right. Her heartaches, loss, fears, and struggles seemed universal and timeless and if that is why you identified with her, then share that conversation with your friends. If there was something else about Lane that spoke to you, then share that as well.

Ezekiel “Zeke” Hayes. Now there’s an interesting man. In my imagination I saw him fully formed and his voice rang between my ears. He’s a young character with so much living to do and it was great fun to put him through his paces in this novel and the following story, *Harmon General*. To me, he felt ripped from the pages of *LIFE* magazines, but his obstacles are as fresh as the ones our sons face today. I have had a few people tell me which actor they think should play Zeke—should this ever get made into film—and I’m hoping you have a few ideas, as well. All the baggage Zeke brings with him from golf, work, living conditions, etc. were spot on from the anecdotes and articles I’d read of the day. Which means he’d be about 90-something if he were alive today. Look around at the very old men in your community, it’s possible some of them were just like Zeke Hayes back in the 1940s. Weird, isn’t it?

Now, Velma, Theo, Emmie, and Slim were a little harder to form. They represented both good and bad and some very complicated motives. Did you feel you liked them better or worse for just knowing snippets of their back story? Taking completely fictionalized characters and having them interact with actual history was tricky. I had to remain true to certain facts. As you can imagine, rabbit trails were tempting to pursue. The storylines of Lane’s aunt and uncle were ripe for divergent plots as was the world of Judge Wyatt.

Racial factions in the 1940s in East Texas were a firecracker box ready to blow. Navigating that without inciting an incident was worthy of espionage strategy. Thankfully, Lane recognizes that even before her elders. She’s respectful and wary. Because of her time in the war effort, she’s also aware of the social injustice presented to Black soldiers who return home without any of the fanfare of their white counterparts. This informs her interactions with all residents in Longview. Do you think our culture has made progress since the war years?

Can you list products, brands, and ideas that are in place today as a result of having been created for the WWII efforts?

Did you have relatives who fought in WWII? Or worked in factories in support of the war effort? How were their lives forever changed? And that of your future?

Miss Molly Kennedy reflects a typical Longview lady of means, both a strict chaperone and a wily housemother. Of the many ladies who lived at Miss Molly’s, which one do you most relate to and why?

Hope your discussion points lead you into riveting conversations and time spent appreciating the sacrifices of others in pursuit for our liberties. Tip of the hat, to those brave men and women.

Thanks,  
Kimberly