

Glenn and Gerri, Just Friends

*by Dennis Payton Knight*

Glenn Morris, raised on a horse ranch near tiny Simla, Colorado, won the decathlon gold medal in the 1936 Olympics, and may have been the greatest athlete of his generation, even surpassing his Olympics teammate, the great Jesse Owens. He was once my mother's good friend, and these are her memories of him as told in her writings.

Glenn Morris and Geraldine "Gerri" Payton were in the class of 1935 at Colorado Agricultural College [now Colorado State University] in Fort Collins. She remembered him as the best looking and most personable young man in school, a football and track star, who became president of their senior class.

Glenn had sought her out because her father, a minister, had recently been given charge of the Simla Methodist church and became acquainted with his parents who lived there. They became good college friends but were never romantically involved. Her writing delicately infers her disappointment.

One day, Mom, bearing a big stack of books, waiting anxiously for a streetcar, and, wet freezing snow beginning to fall, heard a voice behind her saying, "It looks like Geraldine needs some help."

"Somewhat shy," she wrote, "I graciously accepted the help of this campus hero and every girl's dreamboat." As they split the load and waited for the streetcar, the curb got icier and her feet slipped out from under her. Books flew six directions with her on the bottom, and, with Glenn gathering her books and papers, the streetcar passed.

They waited for the next and, as Glenn stepped forward watching for it, *he* slipped and dropped the books in his arms. When transportation finally came, they boarded and rode back and forth to kill time. He didn't want to go to football practice in such weather. Their just-friendship flourished over the years and Morris, as class president, asked her to organize the class's annual senior breakfast.

After graduating as an All-American, Glenn Morris began training in hopes of competing in the 1936 Olympics decathlon. He broke world records in trials and broke them again in Berlin, taking the Decathlon Gold, an accomplishment that typically carries the accolade of world's greatest athlete.

Those were the same Olympics staged by Adolph Hitler to advance his propaganda of racial superiority; the very games in which America's speedy black athlete, Jesse Owens, thwarted the Fuhrer's hopes, winning four gold medals in track. Owens garnered justifiable headlines and history books but took much of the attention away from an equally deserving Glenn Morris.

In Berlin, Morris had an affair with Leni Riefenstahl, Hitler's favorite filmmaker and documentarian. Hitler offered Morris \$50,000 to stay in Germany and appear in sports films, but he refused, and the affair ended.

Instead, Glenn Morris came home to a tickertape parade in New York, an award as America's

top amateur athlete, and a starring role in one movie. He may have been the world's greatest athlete, but he was definitely not the world's greatest Tarzan.