

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY 103 TIMES – ELMER WINNINGHAM

by Megan Trotter

**COOKEVILLE** -- Elmer (Shorty) Winningham is celebrating a big milestone today that not many people can brag about -- his 103rd birthday. What is even more impressive is that he lives alone, still bushhogs his 10-acre property himself and up until this last year, has planted an annual garden.



(Pictured: 103 yr. old Elmer "Shorty" Winningham standing by his Ford automobile at his home in Cookeville, TN).

When asked how he made it to such an impressive age, he replied with a chuckle, "Just being careful, I guess."

Winningham was born in 1907. By the age of 13 he was working for the state, bringing water to the men working on the roads in Overton County. He was paid \$1 a day and sometimes had to walk a mile to a mile and a half to bring water to the workers.

The state even had him make a two-day trip to drive a tractor to the Cookeville roads supervisor on his own.

He was 14 years old at the time. By saving his money, he was able to buy a Model T Ford for \$400 and fell in love with motor vehicles.

At the age of 20 he moved to Detroit, Mich., where he worked for Hudson Motor Car Company for three years and then at the Dodge Chrysler plant for 10 years. One day Edsel Ford, president of the Ford company and son of Henry Ford, came by to see if he could get Chrysler to cut a 10-foot gear for him to use in the 90-ton tankers his company was building.

"Nobody had a machine to cut the gear on that," said Winningham.

"They had come over there to the Dodge building where we were at with all the big machinery.

"They were in the front office, and he wanted to know if we could cut the gear, you see. They told him there wasn't any way in the world we could cut the gear. Then one of them spoke up and said, 'Let's call Winningham and see what he has to say about it.'"

Winningham, who was the head inspector for Chrysler's Sherman tanks, listened to what Ford wanted to do, and told them he would be able to do it.

"There were about four or five big shots sitting on the table, and they jumped up and said, 'Winningham, you can't do it!' I took them out on the floor and showed them how we could cut the gear. I bet they'd wished a thousand times that they'd never called me in, because a few of them got their walking papers," laughed Winningham.

Three days later he found a card on his desk from the Ford company, asking him to report to their office. They hired him on the spot and he worked there for 10 years before moving back to Tennessee in the 1950s.

One of Winningham's favorite stories to tell is how he met his now late wife, Geneva.

He was 21 and living in a boarding house in Michigan with a roommate when he decided to take a trip to Ohio to visit family.

While he was away, the owner of the boarding house had a niece who came to stay with her.

Since Winningham's room was going to be empty for a while, the owner gave the room to her niece.

Winningham returned earlier than expected late one cold, winter night and went up to what he thought was still his room.

When he saw the figure in the bed, he thought it was his roommate.

"My spats had froze up on me and I couldn't get them unbuttoned. I thought my roommate would be there. I was aiming to stick my cold feet on his bum.

"But I couldn't get my spats off, so I turned the light on." Instead of his roommate, he found a young lady in the bed instead. "I said, 'That's not Bob!'"

He raced out of the room and found the owner of the boarding house who explained the identity of the girl.

They all shared a laugh, and Winningham and the girl started dating shortly after.

They were together for five years before getting married and celebrated their 71st anniversary shortly before Geneva passed away in 2005 at the age of 91.

The couple had four daughters together, Wanda Fitzpatrick of Cookeville, Suzanne Worsham of Clifton, Va. and the late Shelby Elaine Winningham and the late Dianne Hesske.

Today Winningham plans to celebrate with friends and family with a special dinner and a birthday cake.

He offers the following wisdom for anyone looking to live a long life like his: "I never drank, I never smoked, and I didn't carouse around. I just tried to live right. I didn't want to embarrass my family and I tried to live like a human being should live.

"Every day when I get up I say, 'It's a good day and tomorrow will be a better one!'"

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 26 May 2010

\*See more history items at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>