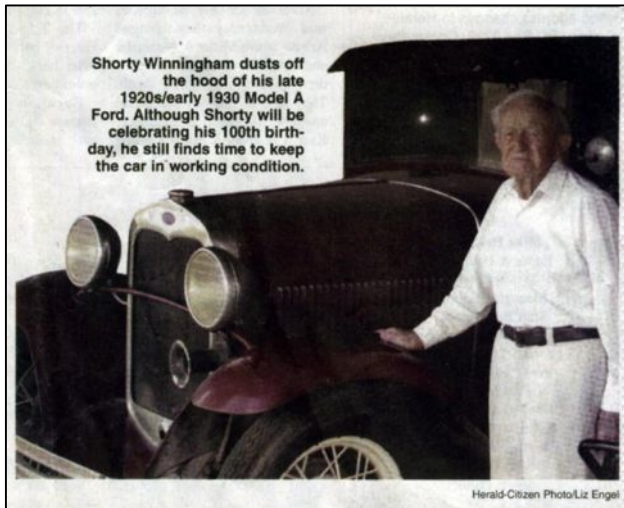


## 'SHORTY' HAS A CENTURY OF STORIES TO SHARE

Sitting over a plateful of catfish at Bobby-Q's restaurant in Cookeville, Elmer - one of Cookeville's oldest residents - reminisces with friends over some of the adventures he's had over the years.



There are the personal crowd favorites - like the time Shorty had to dig his dentures out of the septic tank - and others of a more historic nature - like the time he met then Ford Motor Company president Henry Ford - likely a rare event for factory workers in the 1930s.

If you were about to turn 100 years old, you'd have some stories to tell, too.

Shorty, who hits the century mark on Friday, credits his long life to hard work. Born in Overton County in 1907, he worked just about every day of his life and says he always had a job. After all, there were crops to grow and, from a combination of two marriages, about

21 brothers and sisters for his parents to feed.

His wife of 71 years, Geneva, who passed away almost two years ago, was also from Overton County, but Shorty says the two met at a boarding-type house in Ohio - there is a story behind that as well.

The couple married shortly after that meeting in Hanging Limb in 1933 and moved to Detroit, where Shorty initially found work with the Hudson Motor Car Company and then later with Ford. He spent most of World War II working with tanks and overseeing wiring for airplanes and other equipment.

"During the war, I was in charge of 100 women and a few men," Shorty said. "And I'll tell you what, that was a job."

The pair moved back to Cookeville in the 1990s, but Shorty moved back to Detroit again, working two jobs for about a year and a half to pay off the family's house.

"I couldn't stand to be in debt," Shorty said.

The couple later made a home out at the Scarecrow Bed and Breakfast before moving into an old-style 1700s log cabin, where Shorty still lives today. The house has been added onto and is now covered top to bottom with antiques - most left over from the antique store, Old Log Cabin Antiques, that Geneva ran for more than 40 years. There's not an inch of space left, yet each item has been placed with care.

"And every antique has a story," said friend Barbara Fields.

And Shorty remembers every story, too. Just point to an item and ask, and he'll tell you the history behind it - everything from the pie safe filled with antique butter molds to the Pennsylvania Dutch wood table in the dining room.

"Ever since we'd been married, she collected antiques. She never threw anything away," Shorty joked.

Shorty has friends that come help him tend to the house - with all those antiques, there is a lot of space to dust.

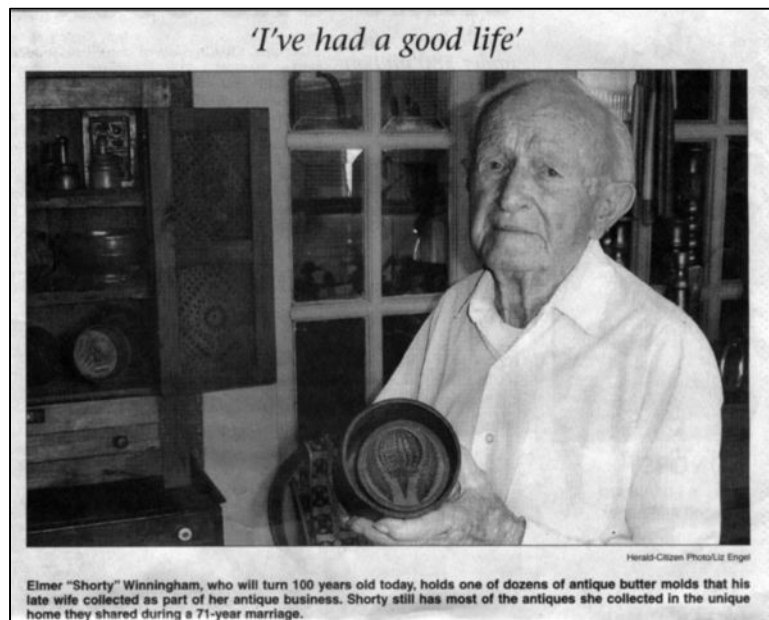
Shorty says he's proud of his friends, and he has an endless list of people that are constantly checking up on him. Not that he really needs, or uses, the help. To this day, Shorty still tends a small garden and mows his lawn the old-fashioned way, although it might take him a little longer than it used to. He still cooks for himself as well, saying he "had a good teacher" in Geneva.

"He has a lot of people that look in on him, its' just too much fund not to," Barbara said. "And he has great neighbors."

Those family and friends will be at his side as Shorty will celebrate his 100th birthday on Sunday with a party at the Scarecrow. It will likely be much tamer than his last big birthday - after all, Shorty was taking flight lessons at the age of 90.

"I've had a good life," Shorty said. "I got 100 years, but I don't know how many miles I've gone."

Herald Citizen newspaper, Cookeville, TN: Friday, 25 May 2007, front page.



**WINNINGHAMS CELEBRATE THEIR 70<sup>TH</sup>**  
Herald – Citizen, Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN

30 May 2004, front page

By Jill Thomas

‘Always marry the boss,’ says Elmer Winningham

He had an affinity for motors.

She had an eye for antiques.

For the first half of their lives together his interests sustained them. For the second half, hers did.

On Tuesday, Elmer and Geneva Winningham will celebrate their 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

“The moral to the story,” said Elmer with a twinkle in his bright eyes,” is always marry the boss.”

Miss Geneva gave a quick nod of agreement. They both knew who the “boss” was.

“She would have made a great top sergeant,” laughed her daughter, Wanda Fitzpatrick.



Elmer Wunningham comes from Monroe, Tennessee in Overton County. His father was married twice and Elmer ended up with 20 brothers and sisters. Geneva comes from smaller family in Hanging Limb where she only had ten siblings.

The two have one of the great first meeting stories of all times.

They didn't meet at school, at church, or at a Sunday social.

They met in bed.

Elmer had gone up to Detroit to work in the automobile industry. He was sharing a room at Geneva's aunt's home with another young man. As was routine in those days, the two men shared not only the room but the double bed.

Both left Detroit for a few days of vacation in the winter of 1928. With an empty room at her disposal, Geneva's aunt invited Geneva up for a visit. But then Elmer decided to come back early because of a forecast winter storm.

He quietly entered his bedroom that night saw a body in the bed and assumed it to be his roommate.

“I sat down to take off my spats, but they were frozen stiff,” Elmer remembered.

“As I struggled I said to my roommate, “When I get these off and get into bed I'm going to put my cold feet on your backside!”

“Then I turned around and there was a young girl in my bed! I raced out of the bedroom and woke her aunt and uncle up and said, ‘someone's sleeping in my bed!’

“They fell out of bed laughing.”

Elmer was 21 at the time. Geneva was 15.

Five years later they were married.

“I wanted her to finish high school,” he said.

“I had to wait five years for him,” she said.

She spent that time going to the Pleasant Hill boarding school near Crossville for one year, attending the Crawford High School for a year, and finally graduating from the Alpine School.

The couple were married in the front yard of her family's home in an area called “Nard Holler” by the Wunninghams, but spelled “Norrod Hollow” on maps.

Even though they weren't Church of Christ members, they were married by a Church of Christ minister, Dr. M. M. Smith.

“We were both Baptist, but there weren't many Baptist churches around back then,” Elmer said.



#### Now and then

Elmer Wunningham celebrated his 97th birthday last Tuesday. Next Tuesday, he and his wife Geneva, will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. The Wunninghams, at left, relax on a balmy summer's day in Cookeville. At right, 70 years ago the young marrieds look forward to their life together.

After the ceremony, they got into Elmer's Model A and drove back to Detroit. It was June 1, 1934.

Elmer had learned about cars by tinkering on them as a kid.

"I drove the first Model T truck in Overton County," he said. "I thought I was a big shot then."

Later the state highway patrol would call him in when there was a breakdown.

"Fixing motors just came natural to me," he said. "I'd study the machine. There was something new to learn each time.

When hard times hit, the 16-year-old with a love of cars headed for Michigan.

He worked at Hudson Car Co. for three years. Then went to Chrysler for ten, and spent another ten years at Ford. It was his expertise that eventually put him in good with VIPs like Edsel Ford and a young Lee Iacocca and others at all three motor companies.

"If they couldn't find an answer, one of them would say, 'Let's call in Winningham.' That was really something. A little person like me from Tennessee telling those big wigs what to do," Elmer said.

In fact, Elmer Winningham was exempted from service in the military because his work on motors that would be used in tanks and other wartime vehicles was considered indispensable to the war effort.

"By 1943 I had a pretty good salary," he said.

But in the 1951 problems between the unions and management were getting to him.

He and Geneva left Detroit and came home. Later, they moved back to Detroit.

"There simply weren't any jobs here," he said.

A few years later they moved back to Tennessee again.

There still weren't jobs in the auto industry in the Upper Cumberland. But for a while the family was able to live well on what Elmer had earned in Detroit.

"We were the first people in Hanging Limb to have running water, TV, and a motorized tractor," their daughter said.

Eventually, though, the couple had to earn money any way they could, taking any kind of job that became available.

"I've done a little bit of what everybody else has done a whole lot of," said Geneva.

Those jobs included factory work and teaching in Vines Ridge, Tennessee, near Wildr.

How did she like teaching?

"I hated it!" she said.

"In the little rural schools, you'd have some pretty large boys of 17 or 18 who were still in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. They could be tough to handle," said her daughter.

And Geneva was accused of one of the worst crimes there is in a rural area.

“They said she was ‘high falutin’ because she pronounced the word ‘the’ like ‘thuh’ rather than ‘thee,’” said her daughter.

“One family threatened her with a shot gun for telling their son not to say ‘thee,’” Wanda said.

But it was factory work that finally changed the direction of their lives. The day after she started working in a area factory, Geneva quit and took out \$400 from their saving to open an antique shop and became the area representative for Dritz Needlepoint materials.

For the next 20 years, from 1964 to 1985, the couple had a successful antiques dealership, buying objects from as far away as Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Elmer did the repairing and refinishing. Geneva searched out the antiques that were valuable and authentic.

“She had a good eye and could give good directions,” her daughter said.

And she could sell.

“Once someone told her she could sell a newspaper to a blindman. And she could haggle and get the most for the least and then sell it for the most,” said Elmer proudly.

“She taught us how to cook, and do all the things we needed to do. And then she taught us how to run a business,” Wanda said.

The Winningshams had four daughters. But only Wanda and Suzanne have survived. One sister, Diane was killed in a car crash. And an infant daughter, Shelby Elaine, died when she was only nine months old.

Wanda and Suzanne both grew up to be chefs and own their own restaurants. Wanda’s was The Scarecrow Inn, the only ‘white tablecloth’ restaurant in Cookeville for years. And people came from all over the state and country to experience the country inn feel of the atmosphere and food that was consistently rated as top notch.

Suzanne went on to open a trendy restaurant called Heart and Hand in Clifton, VA, a place where people like Nancy Reagan hang out.

The Winningshams also used this time to build a log cabin, using the remains of 17 older log cabins they were able to find and buy.

“They always worked as a team whatever they did,” said the Winningsham’s daughter.

“They were always holding hands and always checking with each other on what the best plan would be.”

“If we hadn’t done that, we never would have made it,” Elmer said.

And he added the one regret he had about his life.

“I wish I’d kept a diary.”

<http://www.ajlambert.com>