

BAXTER'S MAXWELL RECALLS DETROIT DAYS,
27 YEARS LIVING AT THE STAR MOTOR INN
By Jill Thomas, Herald Citizen Newspaper Staff
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Baxter's Maxwell recalls Detroit days, 27 years living at the Star Motor Inn

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SPARTA -- On the last day of eighth grade, P.T. Maxwell's teacher read a list of names to the class. Maxwell's was the last name on the list. He had flunked eighth grade.



Nephew Paul Davis, at left, and younger brother David Maxwell, at right, visit P. T. Maxwell at the Life Care Center of Sparta, P. T. Maxwell recently turned 100.

"So I got up and started to leave the classroom," Maxwell said. "And the teacher asked me where I was going.

"I said, 'I'm going to get the hell out of here, and I'll never be back!'" Maxwell said proudly.

But he did come back -- 60 years later.

When Paschal Theo Maxwell walked out on education, the year was 1921. He and two of his brothers decided to leave the family farm in the Baxter area since there were plenty of other siblings left to help his parents with chores, and to look for jobs in Michigan. He was 16.

He was the youngest of the nine children from his father's first marriage. By the time he was grown his father and step-mother had had seven more children. David, one of his closest brothers in Putnam County is 20 years younger than his brother -- a mere 80 years old.

Maxwell celebrated his 100th birthday last month and until a year or so ago he was still living independently and still driving.

"He always had a lead foot when he drove," laughed long-time friend Bill Parmelee. "If you saw him on the road it was because he was passing you."

But a car accident a year-and-a-half ago meant it was time for Maxwell to give up driving and to have help closer at hand and he moved into the Life Care Center of Sparta.

His memories are strongest when they focus on his beloved wife and those early years in Detroit.

After trying several jobs in the cold north, Maxwell became a milkman for the Borden Dairy Company. For the first few years he delivered milk, cream, buttermilk, eggs, and other dairy products by a horse drawn wagon. Customers would leave their empty milk bottles on the front stoop and Maxwell would replace the empties with the new order. Sometimes he delivered the milk in person.

"My horse knew our route better than I did. His name was Pat and that was some smart horse. When it snowed, he automatically moved over to the trolley tracks which were snow free," Maxwell said.

Eventually, though, Pat, the handsome dark bay horse was replaced by a snazzy all-white milk truck which Maxwell drove standing up since he had to be in and out of it so often.

Friends now give credit for Maxwell's long life to his early days of working outside as much as he did inside.

Two important meetings occurred on his milk route that changed Maxwell's life forever.

The first was romantic.

"I used to deliver milk to this old lady who was kind of mean. One day there was a young girl having breakfast with her and I began to flirt with her."

Eva Prince had come to the big city to earn a living as a piano player. For a while she played accompaniment for a radio news show and then she demonstrated pianos at a department store.

Five years later the two were still flirting and Maxwell was regularly picking up the young musician after work to escort her safely home after the store closed.

"Eventually she received a letter from her father which said, 'You've been going with Maxwell for five years. Either marry him or get rid of him,'" Maxwell laughed.

"She decided to keep me."

The other important meeting on Maxwell's milk route that changed his life was financial. There was a group of customers on his route which impressed the young milkman from rural Tennessee.

"These customers were very good customers and I noticed they all worked for the Detroit Edison company. I began to save my money and bought their stock whenever I could."

Maxwell said he ended up with 600 shares of Detroit Edison Stock.

"That was the making of P.T. Maxwell," he smiled.

It also meant that Maxwell could retire comfortably well off.

When Eva died in 1977, Maxwell decided it was time to come back to his roots and he moved back to Baxter. But once there he couldn't decide where to live.

"His sisters and brothers thought he should just buy a small house or rent an efficiency, but he didn't want that," David Maxwell said.

P.T. was married briefly to an old friend, but after a few months both agree they did better as friends than as a married couple and they divorced.

Maxwell renewed his friendship with school chums Otis and Oliver Rice, the "Rice boys" whose family had bought one of the first motels in Cookeville. Maxwell liked the look of the two story building called The Rice Motor Inn.

In the late 1970s, he moved into one of the rental units in the motel.

For 27 years Maxwell made one of the motel rooms into a home. He set up a recliner near one of the windows, had three papers delivered daily, and took most of his meals in his room or in the motel's restaurant.

When Bethel Rice, the son of one of the Rice Boys, died, Bill Parmelee bought the motel and renamed it The Star Motor Inn.

Parmelee still visits Maxwell at the Life Center.

"P.T. kept his room impeccably," he said. "He had his shirts arranged by color and always dressed in a coat and tie each day. In the winter he always wore cardigan sweaters with pockets."

Parmelee described P.T. as "extremely sharp mentally. He had a great sense of humor and always had a great eye for the ladies."

But Parmelee said that Maxwell's great love was baseball. The two had an annual "gentleman's" wager each season.

"We'd pick our teams during spring training and then follow the teams throughout the season. I bet according to my heart," Parmelee said. "But P.T. was clever and did some research. He always picked the best team rather than his favorite team. There's no doubt that over a ten year span, it was P.T. Maxwell who won the majority of wagers."

Parmelee said P.T. also read USA Today, The Tennessean and The Herald-Citizen each day.

"Living in a motel was the perfect solution for him. He didn't have to worry about cooking or about keeping up a house. He had the freedom to come and go at will and know everything would be protected.

"Unlike some elderly folks who become prisoners in their own homes because they can't drive anymore, P.T. was always a stone's throw away from people -- and from help."

"And in some ways, I think the people at the motel became his family," Parmelee said.

Now, P.T. Maxwell has visits from his younger brother David who is at the Life Center almost daily to see P.T. and his wife. His nephew Paul Davis and his wife Midge can drop by any time, as well. And he has an alert roommate with a sense of humor.

"Are you enjoying this?" P.T. asked his roommate in the middle of the interview while the centenarian was talking about his life as a milkman.

"I sure am," the roommate replied. "I'm learning a lot."

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