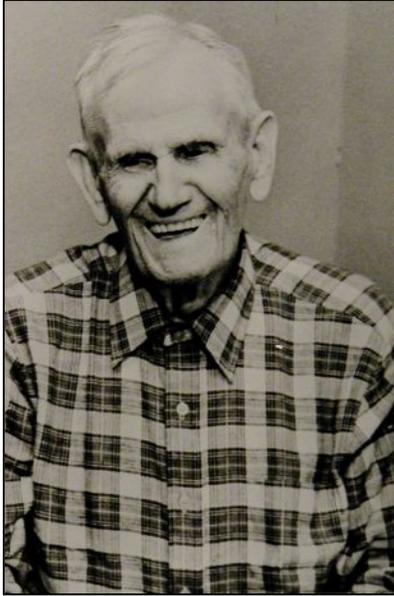


A CENTURY OLD AND STILL GOING STRONG  
WILLARD PENDERGRASS LED A FULFILLING LIFE

Dispatch: TN  
January 1985  
By Kim Allen



COOKEVILLE: During a lifetime that has spanned a century, a continent, and medley of jobs from a whiskey runner to an oil driller, Willard Lonzo Pendergrass has “enjoyed it all, with no regrets.”

William will be turning 100 years old on January 24. Although his hearing and sight have become dim with the years, time hasn't altered his love for life of his carefree humor.

“LIFE HAS BEEN GOOD TO ME” – Dispatch photo by Kim Allen. Willard Pendergrass could easily pass for 20 years younger, but January 24 will mark his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. His family will be holding an open house on Sunday, January 27 from 2-4 p.m. to celebrate Willard's birthday. Friends and acquaintances are invited to come.

Born in the Bussell community of Putnam County in 1885, Willard was the son of William Washington Pendergrass and Rachel Franklin Stewart. Although his family was poor, Willard always had a knack for getting by.

He recalls one cold winter morning when the snow was four inches deep on the ground, and he was a young lad, just a kid. “I'd been going to school barefoot all winter, because I didn't have any shoes. My brother did, though, and he was going hunting. I've always loved to hunt, and I wanted to go, but I couldn't, because I didn't have any shoes.”

“Well. I asked my sister if I could borrow her high-topped shoes, and she let me, and I hunted rabbits all day long.”

A dashing young man with a sharp wit and adventuresome ways, Willard turned into quite a ladies' man. “I courted a lot of girls in my lifetime, and I had a lot of fun....a lot of it I don't want to tell,” he said, laughing. Asked if he chased women, Mr. Pendergrass replied, “Women weren't hard to chase. I'd catch one once in a while – I've enjoyed my life pretty well.”

Besides chasing women, William had plenty of things to keep him busy. After leaving Pleasant Hill School, (he graduated from the eighth grade) he bought a team of horses and logged for a while and also helped his father do carpenter work.

He also helped his dad during liquor runs to Sparta for barrels of whiskey, which was bought wholesale and returned by horse and wagon to Cookeville, where it was sold retail at Jess and John Gill's saloon.

He recalls the good ole days when the moonshine was legal and pure. “It was stamped,” he said, grade A stuff. What made the trips especially memorable and pleasant for Willard and his dad were the sips along the way.

“We had two barrels in the back, and no way to drink it. So I got a rock and a nail and poked a hold in the barrel. Then, I picked some straw off of the side of the road, and picked a couple of good long ones, put it in the barrel and we had plenty to drink.”

Considering it is a long ride from Sparta to Cookeville by horse, they must have been feeling pretty good by the time they arrived. "The horses knew the way home by themselves," he said. "I just tied the lines up." For the next ten years Willard worked as a clerk at Whitson Hardware, and in 1912 he was married to Laura Ada Hutchinson. "I was 26 and tired of being single," he recalls fondly. "We'd talked about marriage and one day I decided to marry her. So I went to the courthouse to get a license, called her and told her I was coming to get her. Then I got the buggy and picked her up, and took her to the Justice of the Peace.

It seems much of Willard's lifetime was just as impulsive as this. In 1917 Willard and his wife moved to California, where he worked in the oil fields in Coalinga, and later in some field near Los Angeles.

Returning to Tennessee in 1922, Mr. and Mrs. Pendergrass stayed only a short time before returning once again to California. Willard worked in some more oil fields there, set among the orange groves of Yorba Linda.

Having enjoyed fox hunting all her life, he took up his old pastime in the wild lands of Carbon and Santa Ana Canyons. He remained in this area for about four years, before returning yet again to Tennessee, in an open touring car – a trip which lasted 20 days. The roads in those days were not paved, but rather mere ruts and dirt paths. Willard recalled how he would get stuck in the ruts, and have to be pushed out, to start all over again.

Shortly after returning to Tennessee, Laura Pendergrass passed away at the age of 35. She died after an operation for an infected gallbladder. They had no children.

Willard then went to Michigan where he worked for Chevrolet, and where he met Minnie Brown Shipley, who had four children from a previous marriage. He married her in Ohio, and returned with her a year later to Double Springs, where they had two children, Bill and Joan. The family lived on a 30 acre farm where Willard built a log house and raised calves.

The traveling itch hit him again, however, and Willard returned to California, where he helped to build an Army camp in Pasa Robles (Camp Roberts) and finishing that traveled to southern Arizona to work on Fort Huachuca, a Japanese concentration camp. He then moved to Kingman Arizona, where he helped build a gunnery school for the Army.

Well, a rolling stone gathers no moss, and that little analogy always fit Willard perfectly. Mildred Howell, Willard's stepdaughter who recently visited him (she lives in California) said, "All his life, Willard was impulsive. When he decided to do something, he'd do it that afternoon. He couldn't stand to wait even an hour."

Besides returning to Tennessee for short visits and working as a contractor in Knoxville for a while, Willard and his family stayed in California until 1949, the last few years of which he worked as a contractor for the Navy in Alameda.

The whole family returned to Tennessee for good in '49, where Willard and Minnie owned and operated the Double Springs Grocery Store for many years. In 1981 Minnie passed away, and Willard moved in with his daughter Joan Loftis and her children.

To live a century, Willard must have done something right, but he's not sure just what it was. "I've been careful," he says, then adds with a laugh, "They tell you not to smoke, but I've smoked and chewed my share; they tell you not to drink, but I've drank more than anybody and it hasn't killed me yet."

"Remember how many quarts I drank a week? he asks Mildred. "At least seven," she replies, "one a day. I'd bring him a quart of gin when he got up to go to work." Willard says, however, that he never touched it while he was working, although Mildred recalled one period in his life when his back was giving him trouble and the drink cured it."

Although Willard has trouble getting around without a walker, and he had to give up his vegetable garden because he couldn't see to tend it, there's plenty of life left in his 100 year-old body.

Perhaps the reason Willard has lived so long and so happily is just because he always enjoyed life, no matter where he was or what he was doing. "I've made lots of mistakes, and I'm always ready to make another, but I can't say I enjoyed one place or one job more than another, I guess I don't regret anything. I had a good life.

So when he sang for me in a rusty yet strangely melodious voice an old four-note song he used to sing with his grandfather, I couldn't help but think he was right.



Written on back of picture: Guess you can tell Willard is in good health by the picture. He wore his good clothes and didn't want to oil up in them so his old buddy Pumper said to wear his. We was going fishing Easter Sunday and he was working from eleven at night till 7 in the morning. We went by for him and this is the way he looked. Ho! Ho!

Text from newspaper article: Willard Pendergrass was a charming and good looking ladies man back in his oil-drilling days in California. Here he poses by the wells in Coalinga.



After his first wife passed away at a very young age, Willard moved to Michigan where he met his second wife, Minnie Brown. He married her and took her and their children across the county in his never-ending travels. Here the two of them prepare for a Sunday outing.

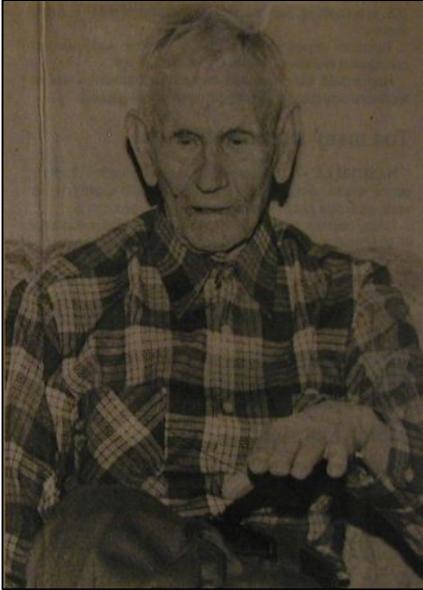


Willard & Minnie Brown Shipley Pendergrass cutting their anniversary cake.

**AROUND TOWN:** Dispatch: TN

**STILL SINGING AT 102**

By Paul Manke: Dispatch Staff



**DOUBLE SPRINGS** – At age 102 going on 103, Willard Pendergrass can still sing a four note song.

“My voice has changed so I can’t sing,” he said, apologetic.

While saying that his voice isn’t as good as it once was, he can still say the notes and can call them right.

And if asked at a recent Saturday birthday celebration, he might have obliged just as he did a few days before the memorable event.

“He does enjoy people dropping in and talking,” said Joan Loftis, who cares for her father at the family home on Blackman’s Fork Road.

Pendergrass, who worked and lived mostly in Tennessee and California, has 12 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

Although he had his first child at age 49, one benefit of living such a long life is seeing his grandchildren and great grandchildren grow.

A gardener until well into his 90s, Pendergrass can take his listener a few years back when Cookeville and Putnam County had fewer buildings and less people.

Pendergrass can retrace five generations of the family tree and remembers his grandfather, among others.

“If he ever had a enemy, I never knew it...he was a good man, that’s different from me...I’ve never been too good, but I’ve never been in any trouble,” he added.

Having worked in construction and carpentry, Pendergrass has seen and can remember the origins of many buildings in Cookeville, among them what is now the McMurry Roberson store on the square and an early building off Dixie Avenue on what has turned into the Tennessee Tech campus.

He and his father helped pound the first nails in one building that still stands on the Tech campus.

“I used to know everybody who lived in Cookeville. Now you probably wouldn’t know a quarter of them,” he added.

Dressed in a blue plaid shirt and blue trousers, and sitting on the couch, Pendergrass could pass as a typical elderly person.

Except, of course, that he’s 102 and can still sing four note songs.

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