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Couple looks back on 73 years together

Blake and Dennis Whitlock have been together through four children, numerous jobs and one Great Depression. Their secret? There isn't one.

By DAWN BAUMGARTNER
THE ROANOKE TIMES

SHAWSVILLE - Blake Whitlock still remembers exactly what her husband said to her when he proposed marriage in 1929. Dennis Whitlock, who had been working in New Jersey, returned home to Shawsville on a visit and came to call at Blake's house.

"He said he wanted to take someone back to New Jersey with him, and would I go," said Blake Whitlock, 92.

"She sure did put a smile on her face," Dennis Whitlock, 94, said.

The Whitlocks and the Halls, Blake's family, were certainly no strangers to each other. Dennis and Blake were neighbors and had played and gone to church together since they were "that high," Dennis Whitlock said, indicating just a few feet off the ground. As they got older, they began to see more of each other.

"Back then, our parents were so strict, they wouldn't let me go out anywhere," Blake Whitlock said. "He came over and we sat in the living room and talked."

Dennis Whitlock began working at Norfolk and Western Railway when he was 17 but was laid off five years later. So he found work at a flashlight company in New Jersey. Then he came back home and called on Blake. They got married Sept. 7, 1929, at the preacher's house in Christiansburg, then returned to New Jersey. The railroad called Dennis back to work in March, and they piled all their belongings into their new Ford Roadster and drove back home to Virginia.

More than seven decades later, the Whitlock home in Shawsville is filled with photographs of their four children, eight grandchildren, 16 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild. Of their children, daughter Mary Alice Firebaugh lives in Roanoke, Evelyn Sisson lives in a nearby assisted living center, and Nelli Jo St. Clair and Roger Whitlock live in Tennessee.

All four Whitlock children were born between 1930 and 1938, in the midst of the Great Depression. It wasn't an easy time for any American family, the Whitlocks recalled.

"It was so hard to get a job," Blake Whitlock said.

"It was pretty tough times,"

Dennis Whitlock said. "I did some work for 10 cents an hour."

Eldest daughter Firebaugh, 72, remembers going to the farmers feed market with her grandfather. She would pick out the feed based on the pattern of the feed sack material - material later made into clothing by her mother.

"I don't remember ever being deprived of anything," Firebaugh said. "We didn't get everything we wanted, but we got everything we needed. My mother was an excellent seamstress. Everything was Class A."

She also remembers her father being away at work a lot when she and her siblings were young, but there were always happy homecomings.

"We'd go to Christiansburg at 11:30 at night to meet him on the train. He always brought us a treat in his bag," she said. "If there were hard times, we never knew about it."

When World War II began, Dennis Whitlock was called to service but was disqualified because of a work accident that had severely injured his ankles and feet. He went to his military physical exam still on crutches. Unable to continue working at the railroad, he began his second career - house building.

He built several New River Valley homes, among them his own house and the current Shawsville home of state Sen. Madison Marye.

"He's a good fella," Whitlock said of Marye. "He's a Democrat and his daddy was, too. I've always been a Republican, but I vote both ways."

"Neither one of us voted for a Republican or a Democrat," Blake Whitlock said. "We voted for the person."

Whitlock's house-building career continued until his retirement at age 65. "I just like to work. Most of my people were carpenters," he said.

At 65, he began yet another career: making furniture out of walnut and cherry wood. The Whitlock home, as well as their children's homes, are filled with his work, from tables to cupboards to grandfather clocks.

"I just taught myself, looking at pictures," he said. "Never did use a pattern." Whitlock made his last table, now in the dining room, when he was 92.

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After their children were grown, Blake Whitlock worked at the old Shawsville School for 18 years as the cafeteria manager.

"I fed them all," she said of the students in first through 12th grades. "I started at 10 a.m. feeding the smallest ones. The only trouble was that the room wasn't large enough.

"I couldn't say I did it for the payday," she joked. "My last raise was from 90 cents to 95 cents an hour. I just liked being busy, and I had done a lot of cooking."

The Whitlocks still live at home, on the site of the former Alleghany Springs Hotel, less than three miles from where they grew up.

Now the couple spends their time with family and at their church, Crockett Springs United Methodist. "We love to go to church better than anywhere else," Blake Whitlock said.

The Whitlocks celebrated their 73rd anniversary at church Sunday. Dennis Whitlock turns 95 Wednesday. *LAST*
There's no secret to a long life and long marriage, Blake Whitlock said. "I loved him when I married him and I still love him. I got married to live with him the rest of my life, and that's what I've tried to do. Love keeps the family together."