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100-year-old kept active by making furniture
By: Meg Hibbert

100-year-old kept active by making furniture | 100-year-old, Dennis Whitlock, Salem, Shawsville, Richfield Retirement, Alleghany Springs, furniture

Photo by Meg Hibbert - Dennis Whitlock, who will be 100 Sept. 11, made this walnut poster bed and many other pieces of furniture after he retired. Dennis Whitlock recalls going to school – on his pony.

He keeps a black-and-white picture of Dolly on a table in his apartment in The Oaks at Richfield Retirement. Whitlock made the table, his four-poster bed and most of the other pieces of furniture.

"I'd take me an ear of corn in my book sack, ride the pony to school and turn it loose in the field," he recalled. "At the end of the day I'd call him and give him that ear of corn. I rode that pony to school about three miles a day each way for three years," starting when he was about 9, he added.

Whitlock was raised up the road about two or three miles past Alleghany Springs near Shawsville in Montgomery County, across the hill from the homeplace of his bride of 78 years, Blake. He's in better health than his 98-year-old wife, who is in Richfield's Memory Care Center. He goes over to spend time with her every afternoon.

His mind is sharp and his body still able to move the way he commands it, for the most part – just slower. He likes things just so in his studio apartment. For instance, he makes his own bed the way he likes it, smooth and neat.

It was his wife's failing health that prompted the couple to move to Richfield two years ago. "My wife had to leave, and, of course I had to come with her," he said.

Three years ago when they celebrated their 75th anniversary, he was still taking care of her in the house they built, in Alleghany Springs.

"I may take off back up there some day," he said, wistfully. The house is for sale now. Next to it is the workshop where Whitlock spent so much time turning out furniture and other decorative items from wood.

His pickup truck that he drove until he was about 98 is sitting in the garage there.

"I started driving when I was 14 years old," he remembered. "It was an old Model T Ford. I drove it in the country."

When he was 17, Whitlock went to work for Norfolk Western Railroad. "I bought my first car the year after," he said. He was laid off from the railroad, and took a factory job for a

couple of years in Newark, N.J.

He came home, became a building contractor, and built many of the buildings in the Shawsville area, including the doctor's office, clinic and drug store.

Construction is still his passion. All spring and summer he has "supervised" from his window the building of an addition on the back of the Virginia State Police Salem Headquarters that will house an area communications system.

"He would rather watch them build that building than go eat," said his daughter, Mary Firebaugh.

"There comes a time when you have to quit," Whitlock said. "I didn't want to, but the doctor in Shawsville told me I had to."

He was referring to Dr. Taylor and Dr. George R. Smith. Whitlock built several structures for Dr. Smith.

"I built his house way over on the hillside. He retired and left me," Whitlock said, with a little smile. Not long ago, Dr. Smith came by to visit Whitlock, added his daughter. Whitlock and his wife have a lot of visitors from their former community and church.

After Whitlock quit building houses when he was 65, "I went in my shop and started making grandfather clocks and furniture of all denominations," he said.

There are touches of home all through Whitlock's studio apartment. For instance, the end table holds the black dial telephone – with cord – he brought with him from the old house.

He keeps his favorite barbering person, too.

"He's very meticulous about his hair," his daughter said. "Sherry will come down from Shawsville to cut his hair just so before his birthday."

For their 75th anniversary, the Whitlocks' family threw a big party. He doesn't want something that big this year, he told his daughter.

"I don't mind a little birthday party, though." That will be on Sept. 16 at Crockett Spring United Methodist Church.

Attendees will include a lot of friends, their children, eight grandchildren and one great-great grandchild. There's another great-grandchild on the way. The children were Mary Alice Firebaugh, Nellie Jo St. Clair, Roger Whitlock and the late Evelyn Sisson.

Last week, on Aug. 31 the USA Railroad Retirement Board presented him with a

proclamation for his 100th birthday.

"I've had a pretty good life," Whitlock summed up. "I lived so long because I worked hard. I worked on the farm from the time I was big enough to work, and I've been working ever since."

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