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DECATUR



PHOTOS BY AUSTIN JACKSON/WCMESSENGER

GOING STEADY — Jack and Shirley Gainer hold hands in their kitchen as they reflect on 70 years of marriage Wednesday in Decatur. The couple got married July 7, 1951.

A love story that's lasted 70 years

BY AUSTIN JACKSON

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It seems like just yesterday when a cowboy from Adrian and a farm girl from Vega decided to go steady in 1950.

That cowboy, Jack Gainer, a man who never could keep still, and Shirley, a woman with a kind smile and pillow-soft demeanor, enjoyed a banana split like they have each year on July 7.

This time, it was to celebrate 70 years of marriage.

"We might have to split the banana split this year," Shirley said about their anniversary tradition.

The couple has only forgot their anniversary once. Luckily for Jack, Shirley forgot, too. When Shirley

woke up in the middle of the night July 8 several years ago with the realization, Jack knew he had dodged a bullet.

They never forgot again. The 70th anniversary of Jack and Shirley's wedding in Tucumari, N.M., was a milestone worth celebrating with two spoons this year.

Little things, like ice cream, and big things, like battling cancer, have marked the long, winding path of their marriage.

Time has passed, hair has lost its vibrance and skin has weathered, but their love for one another remains wholly intact.

The key to staying married for so long was simple, according to Shirley.

"It's basic; you both have to live long

See Gainer on page 5



Jack and Shirley Gainer

70th wedding anniversary July 7, 2021



SHIRLEY AND JACK GAINER

Jack and Shirley (Hammonds) Gainer of Decatur celebrated their 70th anniversary with a private dinner.

They married in

Tucumcari, N.M., July 7, 1951. The couple has two sons, James, of Decatur and Jeff, of Wichita Falls; and five grandchildren.

Jack is employed by the Wise County Historical Museum and Shirley is a homemaker. They attend Faith Baptist Church.

Gainer: Husband and wife together for 70+ years

Continued from page 1

enough to be married 70 years," Shirley joked, adding, "It's not been a bed of roses every day. There's been bad days, weeks and months. I don't think there's ever been a bad year."

The closest thing to a bad year was when Jack served in the Korean War. The soldier came back home, and from there, they made it work.

"We just hung in there; we held on," Shirley said.

As the couple sat down at their kitchen table in Decatur, reflecting on their lives, Jack, 91, showed he can still carry a tune on the harmonica, and Shirley, 85, looked at him with the same eyes and smile that caught his attention on their first date so long ago.

The relationship started 71 years ago, when Jack harassed his cowboy buddy to finally find him a date to accompany him while he took his buddy and his date to Amarillo.

"Some wild stories were made about me that weren't true, so nobody would date me," Jack said. "I told him one night if you don't find me a date, I'm going to quit taking you."

The buddy came through on his end of the deal eventually. He knew of a pretty girl in the nearby town of Vega. Her name was Shirley June Hammonds. Jack soon figured out she was the one. But he probably didn't know he would be with her for the next 70 years.

The two made a stop at the farmhouse, and Jack knocked on the door to see if Shirley would go on a date with him.

He had to go through her mother first.

"Her mother was putting her hair up in curlers for church Sunday morning that night," Jack said. "But [Shirley] went with me on a date. I think she only said two words all night. She was real bashful. I told her right then, jokingly, 'I want to marry you.' Sure enough, we did."

The sailing wasn't smooth immediately after.

Some rumors about Jack made their way to Vega. Jack's mom sometimes drank at bars. As a teen, he would accompany her and people figured he drank and smoked cigarettes, too.

Today people might not think that's a big deal, but back then, it was a scandal.

Jack tried smoking a cigarette once. He took one puff and gagged at the taste.

That didn't stop the rumors. And when Shirley's mother told her she couldn't go on any more dates with "that cowboy Jack Gainer from Adrian," he sat down with Shirley's mother and told her who he really was.

"She said, 'I heard you

do this and that.' I told her no ma'am — I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't use girls," Jack recalled. "After that, she let us go together."

Shirley was 15 at the time. Jack was about 20. After a few months of dating, Shirley got in more words, and Jack swooned her with a harmonica at his lips, playing hymns.

"I was definitely impressed," Shirley said.

They kept going to those shows and dates across the Panhandle. By then, Jack knew.

He wanted to marry this girl.

Soon after, he took Shirley to Palo Duro Canyon and asked that crucial question.

This time, Jack was serious.

"I didn't say no," Shirley said, later clarifying that she did, indeed, say yes.

Before they could exchange vows, Jack was drafted to fight in the Korean War. The couple snuck off to New Mexico to get married before he was deployed.

In Tucumcari, Jack said, they didn't require a blood test. Like many who have gotten married at an on-the-fly wedding in the desert, not all of their bases were covered.

They got married without telling Shirley's mother, but that secret didn't stay kept for long.

"Your mother was talking when she shouldn't have been," Shirley said.

One of Shirley's eight siblings found out about the marriage, and reported the stealth matrimony to Mrs. Hammonds who was none too pleased.

Jack opened an envelope at Fort Hood that nearly singed his eyebrows.

"She wrote me a letter that burned down every post office it went through," Jack said.

Even through the family drama, and a relationship separated by an ocean, the couple stayed the course.

Love letters carried them through six months when Jack was stationed in Japan. It was the toughest time of their marriage, but when Jack came home, it was as if they hadn't skipped a beat.

A photo album is peppered with pictures of the young couple. This week the couple poured over them, recalling various life stages, triumphs and troubles.

It's hard to pin down a title for Jack. Even though he's 91, Jack still works to this day at the Wise County Heritage Museum.

"I don't know how to sit down and do nothing," Jack said.

His workshop at the house is filled with tools that have not collected dust.

And as a younger man, Jack was no different. Spanning his

youth to several "retirements," Jack has been a professional firefighter, a soldier, a cowboy, a construction worker, a home builder, a business owner, a mechanic, a salesman and a bus transporter shipping vehicles to nearly every state in the country. That's just to name a few.

Shirley eventually joined Jack in the transporting business, with the couple traveling side by side across the country, where they averaged delivering 100 buses a year.

They went through every state, except Alaska, Maine and Vermont. They would've probably gone through some of those states if they could. They made extra money if they didn't use much gas.

"It behooved you to take it in a direct path," Jack said.

Over the years, the couple moved endlessly. Shirley did some office and administrative work, but primarily raised two children and made each new house along their travels a home.

Staying in one spot for an extended period of time was a foreign concept to the couple. The white wood home with pillars and blue shutters in Decatur is where they've lived the longest.

They moved to Decatur in 2008 to split the difference between their two boys. Their sons wanted to be closer to Shirley as she battled cancer.

Shirley has beat cancer four times.

She still feels some of the scars from early radiation therapy. But at 85, she's sharp and sweet, exuding grace, even as she ruthlessly competes against the home computer in card games.

When Jack's not working at the museum, fixing up the historic college building and preserving obituaries, he paints landscapes, tinkers with grandfather clocks and



AUSTIN JACKSON/WCMESSENGER

TESTED BY TIME — Jack and Shirley Gainer walk around their home Wednesday in Decatur. The couple celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary with a banana split, a tradition that's carried on for decades.

whittles down pieces of wood into cell phone stands that he's made a habit of giving away.

"We've been blessed with a good life," Jack said. "God has held us together."

The couple has slowed down some, but not much. And like they have for the past 70 years, they've done everything together.

There's a warmth and comfort to Jack and Shirley's relationship. It's well-worn, easy, comfortable and tested by the measure of time.

On Wednesday, it was especially sweet, as

the two splurged over a banana split. Sitting across from one another at the breakfast table Thursday, Jack and Shirley celebrated the first day of their 71st year of marriage. It was a reminder of some advice Jack got at an early age.

"My grandfather told me, when you get married, you have to remember you have to look at that woman, across the breakfast table, her hair up in curlers, for the rest of your life," Jack said.

To Jack, the sight of Shirley is one he can't wait to wake up and see.

