

History of Ben Whitson Jr.

Ben Whitson Jr, generally referred to as “Junior”, was born to Ben and Laura Whitson on May 5, 1923. He was the last of their six children. Like his three brothers, Junior began working at an early age, taking on whatever menial jobs he could find during the depression. One job that he particularly remembered was at a nearby rendering plant where he loaded animal carcasses into vats to be processed into dog food. Junior’s shift was before school and he recalled the embarrassment he felt because the smell followed him to class and lingered throughout the day.

Eventually, Junior found better employment in Maness’ grocery store, located across Towson Avenue from the family home. Also working at the store was Lila Maxey, whose family lived in the Cavanaugh community where her parents had relocated from the town of Center Ridge.

A relationship was starting to bud between Junior and Lila when the country was plunged into World War II. Junior left school early and joined the Army. After training he boarded a ship for North Africa. The campaign against Rommel was soon over and the unit was redeployed to Italy. Junior was part of a 60mm mortar crew that was stationed in Italy for the remainder of the war and saw intense fighting, particularly in the battle for Monte Casino.

After returning home, Lila and Junior resumed their courtship and were married in 1946. During their earliest years of marriage, the couple worked together in Ancil Moran’s store. Junior used his military benefits to receive training in meat cutting, while Lila took business courses.

By 1949, the couple was making plans to build a store of their own. Whitson’s grocery and market opened in 1950 on Old Jenny Lind Road, two short blocks from their home on South 22nd. Shortly before the store opened, Junior and Lila became new parents when their first son, Michael Ben, was born in January of 1950. Their second son, Stephen Lynn was born in August of 1951. Junior and Lila had their last son, Kim Alan, in September of 1956. The couple ran the neighborhood store together and their three sons grew up carrying out groceries for customers and restocking the shelves. The store remained open for over 30 years and many patrons were more like extended family than customers.

Before the war and for a time afterwards, Junior was an avid baseball player. He coached and played second base for the local Mill Creek team. Later on, his fondness for the game was rekindled in the form of a men’s softball team. The group of middle-aged friends had fun playing, but weren’t very competitive. Junior decided to concentrate on coaching and had soon assembled a successful team. One weekend, Junior happened on a women’s tournament being held at the local softball field. He had never imagined that women could play at the level of the One-Eyed Jacks team from Little Rock. It wasn’t long before the men’s team was disbanded and a women’s team was being assembled. Junior recruited some of the best female athletes in the

area and the Whitson's Grocery team became a contender. The store also sponsored teams of younger girls, some of which Junior also coached. Eventually, his women's team would advance to play in the national tournament in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

In later life, Junior and Lila became active in the Mill Creek Baptist Church. They seldom missed a Sunday service and Junior was selected as a deacon of the church.

In his mid-seventies, Junior began to show signs of dementia. The diagnosis was Alzheimer's along with Parkinson's. When Lila could no longer care for him, Junior was moved to a nearby nursing home. Junior Whitson died on November 1, 2001 in Saint Edward's Hospital. Soon after, Lila began showing similar symptoms of dementia. Her diagnosis was Diffuse Lewy Body Disease. By 2002, Lila had broken her hip at an assisted living facility and was placed in a nursing home to rehabilitate. Lila Whitson was never able to leave the facility and died on May 7, 2005. Ben and Lila Whitson were buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Fort Smith, where they will remain side-by-side for eternity, just as they had chosen to do in life.