

Harrison and Lillian Starr-Whitson's Courtship and Marriage

A dance was buzzing in the rural community outside Ft. Smith where Harry and his buddies gathered outside on the porch to visit. Lillian worked many hours to afford material for a new black dress she wore to the dance that night. Having noticed the group of young men congregating outside, Lillian walked up to Harry and asked him to dance. Harry was very shy and replied "ask JD." (Maness) Lillian replied back to him, "I don't want to dance with J.D; I would like to dance with you!" Harry was smitten! He woke his mother from sleep that night and told her he'd met the girl he was going to marry. Harry had a girlfriend and Lillian had a boyfriend they each said good-by to and began their short courtship.

The depression years were at their highs in 1933, the year Harry and Lillian married, almost 50 % of Americans lost their jobs. Harry was one of the lucky ones being young and health fortunate enough to keep his job at Ft. Smith's brick yard. Times were very hard back then with the couple having no money to start a life together. Harry helped his family stay afloat by giving his weekly pay check to his mother to help support that family. A justice of the peace married the couple and they moved into the house with Ben, Laura and his five siblings.

Lillian told of their lack of privacy in the family's home. Mom Whitson honored them with the guest bedroom while the rest of the family slept on a sleeping porch. Every room was accessed through either the kitchen or the guest bedroom while their room was a pathway to other rooms in the house.

Shirley and Frankie were born in Ben and Laura home with a doctor in attendance. The remaining four children were born at St. Edward's Hospital at Ft. Smith Arkansas.

When Harry and Lillian left his parents home, they walked into poverty, yet, their love and devotion to one another never wavered. Their life together began in dire poverty. Harry worked several jobs to keep us afloat. Harry worked the Smelter in the mornings, auto mechanic when he could find work, helped Mr. Ben Epton buy and sell cattle in addition to operated a slaughter house for a short time with Lillian helping when she could.

In WW II, about 1943, Harry was drafted into the army but failed his physical and declined for health reasons. He was deaf in one ear.

In about 1953, the Ft. Smith smelter plant closed. Harry was out of work for some time before joining a group of men to look into Reynolds Metal Company opening in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. Harry left his family in Ft. Smith while he roomed with the other men who had all been hired. Lillian was expecting their sixth child and

could not join him until she delivered the baby. Michael Steven was born the day after Thanksgiving while Harry was at home celebrating the holiday. They decided to move when their children's school year's mid-terms ended. He found a rent house with their first indoor bathroom. The house was clean but very simple having a small living-room, dining room, large kitchen, large bathroom and two bedrooms. The house was such an improvement from the old one they'd left behind.

Harry worked many extra shifts to pay outstanding bills from being out of work for so long. Harry was well respected at Reynold's Metal Co, where he soon trained to operate a machine. He helped engineers find a way for aluminum to conduct electricity. When a new plant opened in Messina N.Y., Harry was sent to help it open. The company offered him a job at one of their plants in Venezuela but he declined for the sake of his family.

Lillian was in the hospital suffering from a blood clot. Frankie and Marilyn stayed with him at his home as he was in early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Harry said to them "That girl is the other part of me! Lillian told us many times "your dad is a diamond in the rough, when they made him they threw away the mold." Looking through old family pictures he came across one with Lillian in a bathing suit taken at Mulberry River on a family summer's outing. Harry replied to his daughters "Now you see why I love her." Lillian was forever the girl he first saw at the dance so many years ago. (Dad chewed tobacco and mother hated the habit.) There was such love between them to the end of their lives together. After Harry died, Lillian was asked if she would accept an invitation to dinner with a man, she replied, "why would I do that, I was married to the love of my life, he was my prince. They were married 56 years.

Harry suffered from Alzheimer's disease and succumbed to a heart attack in 1989 at age 77. We lost him a memory at a time as his personality changed from the disease. What a dear, dear man!

Harrison Calvin Whitson was my hero. He chewed tobacco, his speech was common but his heart was huge as he poured himself out for everyone but himself. *I once ask dad if we were poor, his reply was "we aren't exactly poor...we just don't have much money. That's the way it was... We were poor but always felt our parents love, though poor, we were wealthy.

Harry and Lillian's legacy is their family. Each of their children became upstanding citizens who forged good lives for themselves by their parent's example.

