

The Mount Airy News

Serving Surry County since 1880.

Issue 98, Volume 141

Breaking news at mtairynews.com

Friday, May 15, 2020 • 75¢

Submitted Photo



Floyd and Edna Sexton, during a family gathering around Christmas 2018. The couple always had more to celebrate during the Christmas season — they were married on Christmas Eve in 1951.

Best of times, worst of times

Through 68 years, local man, woman lean on faith and one another

By John Peters

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Floyd Sexton is a little more philosophical about the effects COVID-19 has had on society, taking it as an opportunity to bring a little joy to his neighbors.

Don't misunderstand, he fully appreciates how serious the pandemic is — "This is the worst thing I've ever seen, worst I've ever experienced," he said recently. But, he also understands how to take things in stride.

After 90 years on Earth, the past 68 of those walking hand-in-hand with his wife, Edna Sexton, he has a bit of a long-term perspective, particularly given his experiences — growing up during the Great Depression, fighting in the Korean War, raising three children, starting a successful textile business, watching the decline of that business through no fault of his own, and now living in an assisted living center.

He and his wife moved into Twelve Oaks

assisted living center in Mount Airy in September, after she had been in another center in another community. They moved to Twelve Oaks so he could be with his wife.

"As she continued to have some failing health, he said he promised Mom he'd take care of her 'Until death do us part,'" said his daughter, Shirley Sexton Peele. "He said 'I feel like I should be there with her.'"

Now that the center, like all assisted living

centers, has closed to virtually all outside visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic, he's using the stay-at-home policy as a way to bring a little light to others.

"He plays the guitar, he sings," his daughter said. "He'll walk up and down the hall, play the guitar, with his mask on, just trying to cheer up the residents."

"We're trying to be a blessing," he said recently of his efforts. "I've been playing the guitar,

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singing, all my life."

Sexton said he fell in love with music when he was 4, not because of someone he heard, but because of something he saw — a ukulele. Lying on his brothers' bed.

"I'm the youngest of 13 children," he said. "My brother, he was probably 17 or 18, when I was 4. He did a lot of trading, and one day he came in and had a ukulele and laid it on the bed, and I thought that was the prettiest thing I ever saw. Aleck, I called him Eck, said 'I tell you what I'll do, if you learn to play that thing I'll give it to you.'"

That was one challenge Sexton, even at age 4, couldn't pass up. The instrument had a booklet with it, and his

brother used that to show Sexton the chords on the ukulele.

"Wasn't long before I was playing that thing," he says with a wistful chuckle. "He played the guitar, and he and I would go out places to play. We'd play at church. We used to play homecomings at churches, we could go to places like that."

They would also set up just about anywhere there were people gathering, in public, to play. One time, he said, they were playing at a graveyard.

"I wasn't over 5 at the very most ... we were in a graveyard, I remember very distinctly, people got up to us and were throwing money down to us, throwing nickels, dimes, some guy threw a quarter... and I stopped playing to get that quarter."

The wonder of music and the joy of having a little money was awesome for such a youngster in that time, but Sexton said all good things must eventually end, though that can often be because of better things coming. His brother married, which soon ended their street-playing days, but Sexton and another brother, Lloyd, began playing the guitar and mandolin, again earning money for their music.

"We sang all over Galax (Virginia) in the early days, we'd go to the furniture factory on

a payday and play, and the men would give us money. That was after the minimum wage was 40 cents an hour. Things were getting better then."

Grown up

Years later, at age 18, Sexton joined the army. That was in 1948. In 1949, while home on furlough, he met a young lady who he took a shine to, and her to him. While the two of them only dated a few times during his furlough, they continued writing during his time away.

That correspondence was a saving grace for Sexton, a way to stay in touch with his roots and his hopes at home while in the midst of some fierce fighting. He was part of a unit that lost nine men one night after they were ambushed.

But they kept writing, sharing what was going on in their lives, their dreams. Once his army stint concluded, Sexton said he wasn't going to waste any time.

"I don't know if it was love at first sight or we fell in love writing...I got home on Thanksgiving Day in 1951, I went to her house a day or two after I got home. When we got up there, we went out to the car, I had a brand new 1951 Chevy I had bought, we talked a little while, I knew before I went up there I wanted to marry her. I just looked straight at her and said 'Would you marry me?'"

and she said 'Yes.'"

They married little more than a month later, on Christmas Eve, 1951, settling in Mount Airy four years later.

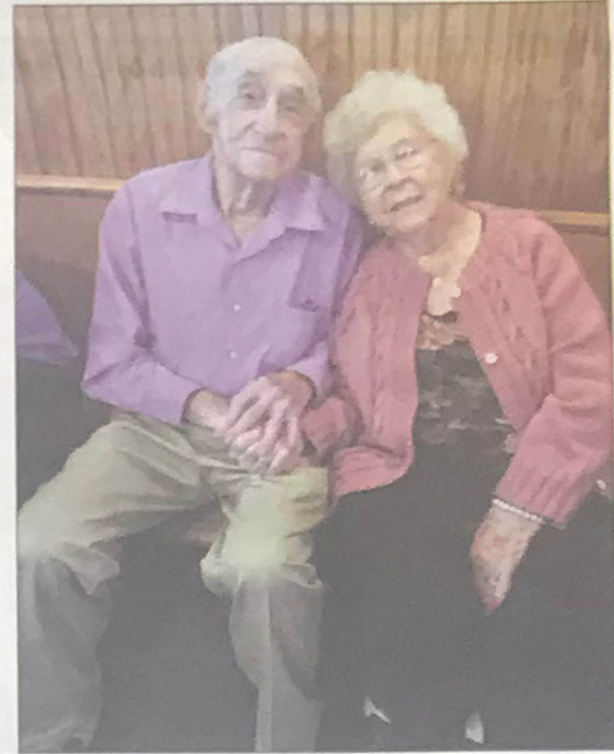
Both of them eventually ended up working in local textile mills, and after a while Sexton figured he could do more than work for someone else. He and two partners, James Smith and McArthur Forest, started Kim Mark Hosiery, a knitting operation in Beulah that supplied yarn to some of the very textile firms they were working for.

"We went to the bank, borrowed \$1,700, the three of us signed a note, went to a company in Charlotte that sold hosiery equipment, they had some old used knitting machines. We bought eight at \$200 apiece. We scrounged around and got other equipment, got them started, got the thing off the ground going pretty good."

So well, in fact, it became apparent the business needed full-time tending, which is something his partners weren't willing to do.

"They didn't want to stop and quit their jobs. Both had good jobs, making pretty good money. They offered me a deal, all of it...they just offered me a real good deal and I just bought it."

Soon, his wife was working for him, leaving a secure job in a Mount



Submitted photo

The happy couple, Floyd and Edna Sexton, holding hands at a Veteran's Dinner a couple of years ago. Airy sewing plant, and the plant continued growing.

"At one time, we had 17 people working for us," he said. "The Lord really blessed."

Eventually his sons, Steve and Mark, joined the company, finally taking over its operations as Sexton retired. Even in retirement he stayed involved, taking socks and other goods made there to sell at outlets in other states.

Through good times and bad, he and his family kept the operation running, making a good living for themselves and offering jobs to others.

The one obstacle they couldn't overcome was

ing salmon." Once retired, he had no reason not to go, so Sexton said they took the trip in a Ford van he owned, driving for ten days, then staying for four weeks before heading home.

He enjoyed the fishing so much, they made a number of trips back, simply to camp and fish for weeks at a time. "We just had the greatest time I ever had," he said. "I've dreamed so much of going back up there."

Happy Marriage

"We've had a good life together," he said of he and his wife, Edna.

He said there are just a few keys to such a happy union — trust and tempering your anger.

"First of all, just trust in God, trust each other, try to be good to each other," he said. "I never will forget when her daddy said, 'Whatever you do, both of you don't get mad at the same time.' That was pretty good advice. We had our ups and downs just like all families do. It ain't been all peaches and cream, we've had bad times, but we've had a lot more good times than bad times."

And now, with COVID-19 so radically changing life — his family is not able to visit — Sexton said he's just trying to spend time with his wife and be a blessing to others at the community.

"Me and her are together, and I believe the Lord worked it out for us. I prayed he'd let us spend our last days together... We're making it, through all of this. It's not easy living through this, but I know it's for our good, the things they're doing for us here."



Floyd Sexton shows off a salmon he caught in Alaska during one of several fishing trips he and his wife, Edna, took in the 1990s.