

“A Teacher AND ‘Rosie the Riveter’”

An interview with Velma (Edward) Wilkinson

By Dolores (Ford) Mobley

May 2016

Velma (Edwards) Wilkinson was the daughter of Thomas Allen Edwards & Marjorie (Brimberry) Edwards, and married Kenneth Wilkinson. Attending Campground School in Meacham twp., Velma would later go on to teach in the country schools of Shadden in Omega twp., and Camp Ground, Young, and Booker Schools in Meacham twp, as well as eventually working for several years at the Kinmundy Grade School. She has gathered photos from the schools she was with, and created a wonderful scrapbook. It was Velma’s scrapbook which brought me to her house in May 2016, but I learned quite a bit more. The fact that she was a “Rosie the Riveter” in the summer of 1944, was just one amazing tidbit that I heard about!

Here are a few more things I learned along the way ....

"I grew up down by Forbes Lake – my dad owned a farm down there where Forbes Lake is now – but I would walk thru the woods to the school, and when it was bad, dad would walk ahead and make tracks for us to walk in - but I was the oldest one, and I can remember walking in Dad’s tracks. My dad was a bachelor for some time - he was 52 when I was born. My mother was 15 when she got married. Dad was a good cook. When I was teaching, he’d have dinner ready when I got home at 4 o’clock. He had a homestead out in North Dakota, and he sold it and came down here and bought that place – they called it Miller’s Rattlesnake Hill down by Cedar Hole. He bought a 54 acre farm – it had a cabin on it, and that’s where I was raised.

My mother was a good cook too – she would make beautiful biscuits. She made biscuits and gravy, and then would make light bread twice a week. When I was little, she baked cookies and cake, and then at school, we’d trade around sometimes, and kids would want to trade for my cookies. She would make our lunches for school, also, since my dad worked on WPA, mother had to fix dinner for him to take. It was during the depression so we mostly had beans, and cabbage, and fried potatoes, and chicken and noodles. Mother had chickens too, so they could kill a chicken – if company would come, she’d go pick up a hen, and fix it and have chicken for dinner. Dad butchered, and had a smoke house, but we didn’t have beef, just pork. We had that salt bacon that you had to soak. We cured our meat – you’d take brown sugar, and got the stuff out of the bone, and then wrapped in a brown paper, and hung it in a sack, and put salt peter in the bone, and we hung it in the barn loft - and that was good - even in August and September.

Growing up, my chores were helping with the dishes, and washing them, and keeping things picked up. And now my girls laugh at me because I want everything picked up and hung up - I put them away and I then know where they are.

With so many grades in one classroom, the little kids listened to the big kids doing their work, and the bigger kids then helped the little kids too. I know one of the bigger boys helped me to learn to read -Freddie Miselbrook helped me to learn to read. We learned a lot by listening. We had a lot of teachers – Ben Millican, Ted Mangner, Lucille Hays – were some of them. I have a picture of our school the year I graduated from 8th grade and Lucille taught that year - she was a good teacher.

When I was 15 I picked strawberries for Guy Perry, and then I got a chance to work helping with a family – his wife had had a baby, and I slept with one of the kids, and I washed on a board, and I made bread, at 15 years old.

When I first started to high school in Kinmundy, I stayed in town with some people who had moved from the south to work in the oil fields up here - they lived over there where Dwight Day lives now, until he got transferred. (The oil people brought black eyed peas from the south and they would eat those a lot - but I never did like those black eyed peas.) When they moved, I went to Snellings and stayed with them until we got busses. And when we got busses I had to walk about 4 miles a day - morning and night – to meet the bus. I carried a lantern in the winter time, and I met the bus at Meyers' Hill – where Mrs. Meyers lived – that's where I met the bus so that I could get to the High School. I graduated from Kinmundy High School in 1944, and still have my graduation picture.

During World War II in the summer of 1944, I went to St. Louis and stayed with my aunt and worked for my room and board. I got a job in an airplane factory riveting wings on airplanes for the war. My dad called and wanted me to come home. He said that they needed teachers at home, and I could teach on an Emergency Certificate because of the war, and that's how I started teaching. It was also good because I had a little brother that was home and needed someone to help – I was 12 years older than my little brother. I also had a brother lost in service named Tom who was killed in Korea, and my sister died in Oregon, and we lost my little brother who died in Texas last year. I'm the oldest in the family and I'm the only one left. I was 91 years in March.

Because of the Emergency Certificate, I didn't have to go to college to begin teaching – I taught right out of high school. I graduated from the high school in June, and I started teaching in August. They hired me down at Shadden on the Emergency Certificate. I would teach in the fall and spring, and then I went to college in Carbondale in the summer. I stayed in a Baptist Home down there while I was going to S.I.U. During my last years of teaching, I also took some correspondence work, as well as one class from the University of Illinois - Early Childhood – and made an A+.

When I was at Shadden, I worked for \$100 per month, and I paid them board. I stayed with Luther and Evie Beard – they were really good people.

At school, I taught reading, writing and arithmetic, and every day after dinner, I always read them a story. They loved those stories. The big kids came to school when they weren't working too. At recess, the children played ball, and we had a merry-go-round, swings and a slide.. In the fall, we had a lot of trees so they would rake up a big pile of leaves, and play in those. In the winter, we'd build snowmen. Games like Andy-over and Fox and Goose were played too.

When I taught at Young School, I would saddle my horse up and ride up there from home. Virgil See would meet me and take care of her and put her in his barn, and then at 3:30 when I'd get thru with school, he had her saddled up, and ready for me to ride back home. I rode her back and forth until my school burnt at Young (in November of 1947). After the fire, we had bought our house up on the hill, and I finished up the school year at my house. They let me take two rooms, and make it into a school room, and they moved everything up there, and I finished up the year up there in my home. Earl Lane picked up the kids and brought them to school.

My first day of school at Young School was the 25th of August of 1947 - and we had a big flood. When I got down to Kenny's folks, Kenny came out and gave me a coat to wear home.

That's how I met him. We got engaged in December of 1947, and he went to Chicago and got my wedding ring. We were married in March of 1948 at the Assembly of God Church in Odin. My dad's brother stood up with me. I was a Christian and he was raised a Methodist, so that's why we went to the Assembly of God. Plus I had a real good friend who attended that church, and I had been there some with her.

The next year I drove over to Booker to teach. In my later years, we'd have a pie supper at school, and we kept the money so that we could have hot lunches once a week at school. We had ham & beans, and soup, and some of the kids would bring pickles. But I remember when I taught Booker, I was taking the beans to school, and I had a huge spill in the car, and I was so nauseated because I was pregnant. After I was pregnant with Linda, I didn't teach again for awhile. When I told them I wanted to resign, they asked me why, and I said, "Well I'm expecting in March", and I thought then if you showed, you shouldn't be in front of the kids, and I still believe that.

In all my years, I only had I boy I had to spank at school. When anyone went by, he wanted to wave at them. And I said, "You don't wave at them.", but he kept waving. Well after that, he never waved at anyone else that went by.

In later years, I substituted for quite a while here at the grade school in Kinmundy. They'd call me to substitute all sorts of classes, and I taught about everything - English and Special Reading, and I even taught for the Ag teacher for awhile. I went back for some more education, and they called me to help the teachers as a teacher aide, and also to help with the slow readers. So they moved me down there to help with the special slow readers, and I worked doing that for 13 years until I retired.

We didn't have electricity until the year we got married, and we moved south of town, that's when we had electricity for the first time. We didn't have indoor plumbing though until Linda was 9 years old, and we moved to the Baylis place, and we got a shower and put it in too. Then when we moved to the See place, and it had indoor plumbing - a bathroom and running water. We had daughters 11 years apart, Linda and Brenda. Brenda still lives in the house that we raised our family in.

I remember the Kinmundy Centennial in 1957, when my husband grew a red beard - and he couldn't wait to get that shaved off. I made a centennial dress and bonnet for myself, as well as a dress, purse and hat for Linda that matched. Kenny and I won best dressed old fashioned couple.

Thru the years, I also worked down at the nursing home in Salem for awhile and then I worked at the hospital as a unit secretary. I worked with therapy on the people who needed it, and I still have my uniform and nametag. I have been a member of the Royal Neighbors for 70 years, and we had two conventions here in Kinmundy - one down at the Grade School and one at the Legion Hall. I was also a member of the American Legion Auxiliary, and the Jolly Girls Club."

Both of her daughters told me that Velma has a wonderful memory and always has a story to tell. I sure am glad one scrapbook allowed me to hear just a few of them!