

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

by Michael G. Maness — Maness3@att.net

See previous articles at www.PreciousHeart.net/message



Coach Norman Turner

Coach Norman and Myrtle Joyce Turner have been together ... forever, it seems. He just turned 74.

Born in Livingston, Texas, Norman's family moved around bit, and they moved back to Chester in 1948 when he was in the fifth grade. Myrtle Joyce Wallace was in the fifth grade too. Both were shy and quiet and slowly became conscious of each other. Eventually they became high school sweethearts.

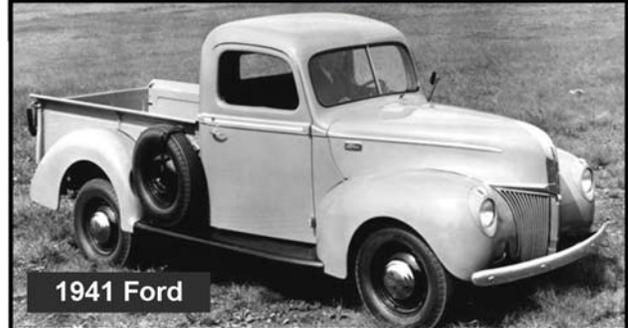
One day, to break the ice, Myrtle Joyce's cousin simply asked Norman if he was going to take Myrtle out to a party. "Sure," he said, without really thinking about it.

"She lived so far out in the country they had to pipe sunshine in," he joked.

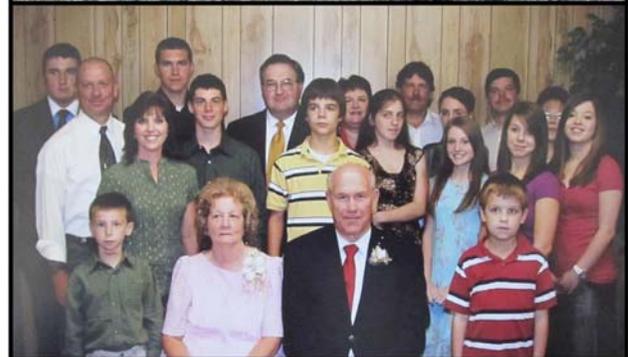
Norman got lost on the way. "I had to go and go and go," he said. He had to turn around and ask the cousin again for directions. Myrtle Joyce's home had no electricity or phone, but he found it.

On several dates, Myrtle Joyce had to shift around on the seat of Norman's old 1941 Ford pickup to avoid getting wet from water splashing up from holes in the floor board. But it was safe, as Norman was becoming an accomplished mechanic while in high school.

On one date, they had planned to go to see the movie *Shane* at the theater (first out in 1953), but he did not make it. There was a big sand bed in route to her house, and when he went through it, he "broke a tooth off of low gear," he said. How did one know if it was a low gear tooth? "Oh you could hear it," he said, as



1941 Ford



Coach Norman and Myrtle Joyce Turner
50th Anniversary
with sons, daughters, in-laws,
and a few of the grandchildren

though everyone could identify which gear had lost a tooth. That's a good mechanic!

"I had no idea what I was getting into," Norman said, referring to marriage. He was just a hard working young man who *discovered* the woman of his life, and the same for her, and today they simply wonder at how fast the years that have passed.

They fondly recollect those times of innocence and struggle, and the mutual affection that sprung between them, an affection that seemed just as normal as sunshine at the time. "It just turned out that there would be nobody else," he said. They met and have never left each other's side.

Their son Duane said, "He and my mom have always had a strong sense of family."

Norman's father rented a building east of Chester and did mechanic work. "When I would get out of school, after football practice," Norman said, "I would walk or hitchhike out to the shop about two miles out of Chester."

Norman loved football, playing center and guard under Coach Aubrey Bradly for Chester High School. "Ran more guard than anything else, defensive end and some line backer," he said. "They could not sub out like they do today."

He graduated in 1955 and entered Sam Houston State Teachers College. For room and board, he lived with a family with a child afflicted with polio and helped carry the child about and so forth.

Norman and Myrtle Joyce married in 1957, and, he affectionately said, "I had to pay my own room and board then." He was only 20 at the time, and his mother had to sign the marriage license (one had to be 21 to marry then). They will

celebrate 54 years together in September of 2011. (See the photo of their 50th wedding anniversary held at the Woodville Church of Christ.)

He did mechanic work on and off most of his life, even moonlighting while teaching. For a time he worked for W.T. Carter and Son Lumber Company in Camden in 1960, working 50 hours a week in the commissary for \$55. Lots of stories there on how the workers would entangle themselves in debt to the company. A friend of his told Norman, "If you stay here six months, you'll never leave." Meaning that Norman would be so far in debt he could not leave.

After about six months, Norman went to George Enlowe, the president of the Chester State Bank, and asked for a loan.

"I didn't have any money. I just knew I needed to go back to school and finish up my degree," Norman said. He went into the bank and told him, "Mr. Enlowe, I want to go to school."

"Son," Mr. Enlowe said, "You go to school and we'll take care of it."

"So," Norman continued, "I went back to school and Chester State Bank took care of me for three years." They did not pay for everything, but they helped him considerably as he worked his way through. "I squeezed four years into eight years," he said. It was a rough road, but he was determined and got his first teaching job in Monte Alto.

In 1965 he came to the Woodville ISD as an English teacher and junior high coach. He moonlighted for Jim Gainy at Western Auto in Woodville, where the Woodville Glass used to be, and where the Emporium for the Arts is now.

During school, Coach Turner said, "The kids would ask me, 'Can I do this or do that,' and I would say, 'No.' They would ask, 'Have a heart.' And I would

reply, ‘I don’t have a heart, I have a thumping gizzard.’”

At one eighth grade graduation, the class invited Coach Turner forward and they presented him with a t-shirt that had the words “I don’t have a heart” on the front and on the back “I have a thumping gizzard.” The Turners still have the t-shirt, and it is a mark of achievement and affection few teachers receive from *eighth* grade students.

Coach Turner’s youngest son Duane related a story of a friend and fellow student, Kevin Tunstall. Duane said, “Kevin and Lee Mann and a couple of other guys came by in a truck and dumped a bunch trash out in the yard. Right around Halloween. And my Dad always sat outside in dark clothes with a shotgun and some shells he had picked up. Well, they dumped the trash out and kept going passed the house. They weren’t too bright, because they turned around and came back. And my dad jumped out in the road and stopped them ... with the shotgun (Duane laughed). He gave them a little talking to, and the guy who was driving took off. When he did, my dad shot at them. Of course, there was no shot in the shells or anything. One of the guys that was in the back of the truck all of sudden yelled, ‘He shot me. That turkey shot me.’ Needless to say, they ended up coming back out to the house and cleaning everything up.”

In 1975 Coach Turner finished up his masters degree. In about 1981 he finished his administrative certification, and shortly after that he became transportation director for Woodville ISD.

In about 1995, he started teaching at Pine Grove Church of Christ. He retired from the school in 1997 and has never slowed down.

He has gotten more involved in church work, helping Dr. Keith Bellamy,

the preaching minister at the Woodville Church of Christ. Bellamy said, “Norman can be very spiritual and caring. He is honest and full of integrity.”

Through it all, “coach” became his first name – Coach Turner. Many former students still remember him with great fondness, often crediting him with a portion of their success today, especially from Coach Turner’s “board” of education.

In 2000, he began volunteering at the Gib Lewis State Prison, obtaining certification as a volunteer chaplain with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Several correctional officers remembered him, including Robert Scott and Sgt. Darrell Williams. Some officers gave credit to Coach as part of the reason they were officers and not prisoners. Officer Scott reflected that, “Many more of them might have ended up in prison if it had not been for Coach Turner.”

Coach Turner and Myrtle Joyce have two sons, two daughters, ten grand children, and three great-grand children. Their oldest daughter Norma lives in Center, and her husband is a minister of the Center Church of Christ. Youngest daughter Wanda is a department manager at Wal-Mart in Lufkin. Son Mark works in maintenance at Woodville ISD. Youngest son Duane is a captain in the Lufkin Fire Department, a fireman and paramedic.

Coach Turner has three brothers, Ray, Calvin, and Michael, the latter two recently retired from the TDCJ. The family still owns property in Enon.

What do you like do with your grandkids?

Fish!

Lots of fishing at Lake B.A. Steinhagen, or simply Lake Steinhagen, which was originally named Lake Dam B. To many it is still simply “Dam B.”

On a family trip with second grandson Matthew, fishing down the river, Matthew had not caught a single fish. Coach Turner caught a small bass about eight inches long. When Matthew was not looking, grandpa took the fish off of his line, placed it on Matthew's hook, and threw it back into the water.

Matthew caught his FIRST fish!

Matthew will be surprised to read it here. "He doesn't know yet that I did it," said Coach Turner, and laughed a little. When asked if it okay to print. "Yeah, it won't hurt if he knows it. He's Coach Perkins at Mason now."

According to son Duane, that was not the last time that Grandpa Coach Turner did the fish-hook-exchange to a grandchild. The secret's out now.

While this interview took place, Curtis Parton, with Cannon's Propane, arrived to refill the Turners' propane tank.

Curtis was invited in and introduced, "He was one of them I used to harass to no end," said Coach Turner with a laugh.

Mrytle Joyce said, "Curtis could tell you some tales about him."

"Oh, I could, but I'm not," said big Curtis. Why? "I am still scared of him."

Curtis continued with a smile, "I had him for English in the ninth grade, history in the tenth grade, shop in the eleventh grade, and I moved to Denver in my senior year. I told him I moved because I was not certain what he would come up with." Curtis chuckled. "To top it all off ... I go to work for the school (Spurger ISD), to train in the bus shop, and guess who does the training? Norman Turner!"

Fond memories. Turner trained and certified bus drivers for the entire county, including those for Beaumont and Bridge City during his last years for Woodville ISD.

"He was a good instructor. I'll tell you that," said Curtis and shared another

story. Before he left, he said with a serious smile, "But I do know that this man gave harder licks than anyone at the school ... there is no doubt. I'll vouch for that."

"You know it's amazing how these people beat us all the time ... I mean, literally, back then. They did not have to have a reason. Oldman (O.L.) Marsh, Marion Dale Odom, him (nodding to Coach), and J.C. Clark ... yah know, I mean they did not need a reason. They'd just stop you in the hall and beat you because they knew you would need it before the day was out. (Several people reflected that.) But we all can be friends.... They never really hurt us."

Curtis seemed well acquainted with the "board" of education. Curtis kind of concluded, "We deserved it."

The undertone between Coach Turner and Curtis was filled with affection and trust. After being paid for the propane and shaking Coach's hand, big Curtis just let himself out of the house – like one of the family. Not *truly* afraid. One felt, in a way, that it was big Curtis looking out after Coach now.

In some Facebook dittos, several had some strong opinions.

Sherri Jackson lived across the street from Coach Turner and said, "GREAT man! After my dad passed, he would come over and kill snakes for us when he'd hear my Mom scream." Sherri would get up extra early to ride his entire bus route with him.

Barbara Riley Walker said, "I remember Coach Turner when he really was a coach! To this day he is Coach Turner, just like Lionel Reese will always be Coach Reese!"

Several students mentioned how he "wore them out" with a board. Discipline back then was based upon honor and parents did not worry about abuse. Nor

did a teacher have to document every time he or she gave a swat with a board. Today, we cannot even swat convicted felons for disciplinary reasons.

Lindsey Britnell remembered well how Coach Turner would give licks for birthdays! Robert Eaves said, "He made you hate birthdays, man he loved that board."

Jan Anderson, Beth Powell, Erin Dennis Booth, and Jeanna Stafford all commented on their respect for Coach Turner.

Allen Loving said, "Coach Turner ... Wow! Hadn't heard that name in years. I had Coach for football tryouts, P.E., and maybe math in the late 60s. Also seem to remember him busting my butt a few times over what I don't remember. Always thought a lot of him. Tough, but fair."

We have lost something, since then, it seems.

Cheryl Vann Fowler said, "He was really good at giving nick names. Don't know why, but mine was 'Pockets.'"

Nancy Polk McNally said, "Coach is the reason I print instead of write in cursive now. He is also the first person to tell me he would pray for my son while he was in Iraq. Love that."

Robert Crawford said, "I was from Warren, but I met Coach Turner as an umpire at the ballpark, and he was one of the most honest and loyal people that ever umpired Little League Baseball."

Nick Nichols said, "I'll best remember him as an outstanding High School English teacher." Glenda Redmon Shane, Gregory Hall, Paul Eaves, Charlotte Bean, Sharon Kay Graham, and James Martin all said similar on Coach's teaching.

Coach Turner's oldest daughter Norma Perkins said, "All we have to do is call. If you need him, he'll be here...."

Whatever is going on ... they are willing to come. We were all brought up to do what you are supposed to do."

When Coach Turner runs into one them around town, youngest son Duane said, "They hug his neck and say we need people like you back in the school."

At the new Captain Ron's seafood restaurant in Woodville, over lunch, businessman Lonnie Grissom recalled some of his own eighth-grade years. One day he, Charles Branch, and Roger Ratcliff disrupted school by crawling down the hallway. Later that day in shop class, Coach Turner made the three of them crawl across the shop floor as he swatted each of them. That is something you do not forget.

"Coach Turner always had a toothpick," Lonnie said. "We got Coach a huge box of toothpicks," extending his hands one and half feet apart, smiling. *Those were the days* seemed to be on Lonnie's mind.

Daughter Wanda Andrus, said, "They have always been there for us, no matter what. My daughter got very sick, late at night, and he asked, 'Do you want me to come?' I said, 'Yes sir.' He said, "We are on the way.'"

"They are always there for you," said Wanda.

How did Coach Turner and Myrtle Joyce do it? Without a hitch, he said, "Dedication, patience, work, honesty, love for God." Coach Turner certainly is the example of that.

Perhaps, the wife of youngest son Duane, Tonya, summed it well: "He is a wonderful influence on his family." As well as on Tyler County.