

Message in a Bottle

Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Don Woodrome – the Family Man

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“Family and the good Lord,” Don said, “everything else really does not matter.”

A lot of people say that. All of us believe it. Some families even have annual reunions.

The Woodromes get together every Saturday. All of them. A lot of the time, a hundred can be seen at their ranch.

“We’ve been getting together all of my life,” Don said proudly.

Don and Sadie met as children, grew up together, married as soon as they could, lived in their old home 38 years, and in their new home for the last six years. This June 2012 they will celebrate their 49th anniversary in Alaska on a cruise ship with all of their children and many grandchildren.

Can it get any better than that?

“My wife’s mother was a jam-up cook. Wife was good, my mother too, but not as good as Sadie’s mother.”

Goood home cooking too. It does not get any better than that!

Don was born in Camden, ten miles from Chester, and spent all 12 years at Chester ISD.

“Lived here all my life,” Don said.

For many years, the Chester grocery store was in their family, and at 10 years old he worked there.

They are perhaps best known for Woodrome Stake that they ran from 1967 to 1984. When they fulfilled their first “test” order of 17,500 stakes for a vendor, the business really took off.

When the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) lowered its age limit, he went to work for them in January of 1964 at the Ramsey prison.

“I was the first 18-year-old correctional officer (CO) hired in TDC,” he said.

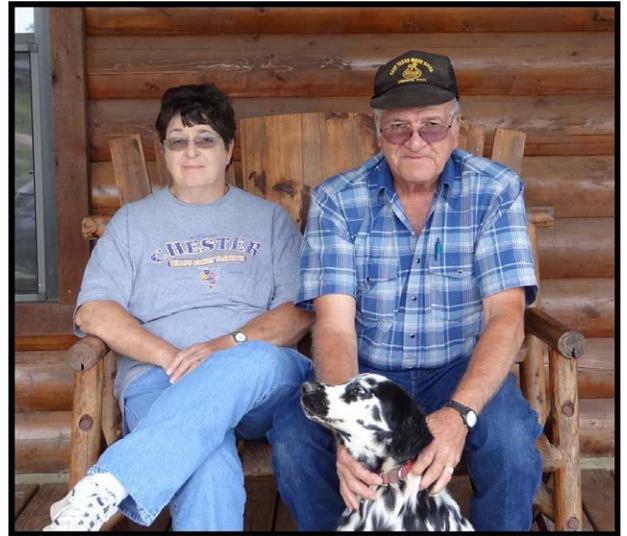
His brother-in-law, Sadie’s brother, worked for the prison for over 33 years, James Dee Henderson, a.k.a. “Bugger Red” or to prisoners “Red Rider.” Bugger Red became a field major.

At 19, Don became a deputy for Tyler County Sheriff Grady Ray, but prison Warden Lanier kept Don’s uniform behind in case Don returned. Don’s father was Tyler County Precinct 2 Justice of the Peace, and Don made one run for Tyler County sheriff.

“Wife did not like me being a deputy,” he said. “I was gone all the time.”

He went back to the prison and loved working with the horses and dogs.

“Best job I had in all of my life,” he said. Then a thought crossed his mind. “The prison system is not what it used to be. Everybody knew their position.... Back then you could take



care of business. Many thought we beat the convicts. That did not happen! In 1964, if you told a convict to sit down – one way or another, he was going to sit down.”

Don knew David Ruiz very well, the prisoner who became famous for the lawsuit he filed in 1972 that brought the Texas prison system under federal oversight for decades, causing many reforms. Bugger Red spent a lot of time in a courtroom, and Don wondered why they never asked him to testify in the Ruiz case. Ruiz died at 63 in 2005.

What did Don think of Ruiz?

“I would have to really study to find something good to say about him,” Don thoughtfully remarked. “We could not get Ruiz to work.”

Strange as it was, Don had escorted an international tour when TDC was a model prison for the whole world in the 1960s. After the Ruiz case started, TDC was not so great.

“The building tender system ... it worked for everyone,” Don said, referring to how stronger inmates were used to help run the prison and control other prisoners.

“A few years later, I was at the Ferguson prison, and we had two killings. The moment I drove up, you could see the walls pumping with noise.”

“One day,” Don reflected, “a construction boss (CO) was in the hall. I was in the control picket. An inmate was cussing the boss left and right, circling the boss and cussing. I said to the boss running the control picket, ‘Let me in, and I believe I could quiet that down.’” It is hard for a family man to watch a friend take a cussing.

Sadie worked in the prison too, lastly in the food service department.

How did Don and Sadie meet?

“I traded her daddy a three-legged beagle for her,” he said.

Excuse me?

“Her father, brothers and I hunted together,” Don said, “we hunted deer, squirrel; we fished; you name it, we did it. Her old man had a deer dog, and I had a good three-legged beagle. The beagle was not fast, but he was steady.”

Still hard to handle: “Traded ... a three-legged beagle for her.” Meant in fun, the undertone was that her family was as close to him as his own.

He smiled, “I met her when I was 11 or 12. She’d come to the store. Saw her playing basketball. I asked her sister-in-law Jackie, ‘Get me a date with Sadie.’”

Last June, 2011, Sadie had a heart attack, and Don had to coerce her to go to the hospital.

“I really puckered up at that,” he said, “I really did not know what I would do without her. This story is all about her too.”

For a long time, they had a syrup mill cranking out syrup from ribbon cane.

How do you make it?

“It is a lot of work,” he said. “Plant in the spring, harvest in the fall, strip the fodder off (leaves). It will cut you like a razor; you’re going to get cut. Then you run it through a tractor-powered crusher to get the syrup. Then you cook it down. That syrup was good!”

How good?

Don replied, “Take a biscuit and run it through the syrup. If it tears the biscuit, then you know it’s good syrup.”

There is usually a fire in the fireplace on cool days.

“Use some shavings from a pine knot to start a fire,” he said. “I just cannot pass up a piece of lighter pine or pine knots. I like a good fire. Basically we use the fireplace to heat the house.”

Their greatest gatherings came around harvest time.

“We would kill a hog and cook the backstrap and tenderloin. Fried in hog lard.”

“Our family really sticks together,” Don said. They have four children: James Ray “Poncho” drives log trucks; Doyle Wayne works for Precinct 2; Jennifer Lynn teaches in Chester; Kimberly Dee was named after Bugger Red and is a counselor for Colmesneil ISD.”

Kimberly was crowned the 50th Dogwood Queen in 1993.

A Saturday ago after the 2012 Dogwood Festival, Doyle Wayne caught and cooked 100 pounds of catfish. One wonders at such a close family that gets together so regularly.

Don is right. There is not much else that matters in life except the good Lord and family. Don “had some ideas” on that too.

“In heaven, I don’t think we will have all these denominations,” he said, rather matter-of-factly, “I think we will all just be Christians in heaven.”

Yes, and we all will sit down to dinner together too. Regularly, we hope, just like the Woodromes have done all of their lives.