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Glenn, Yvonne, and Mary Spivey at the kitchen table

From Farm to Factory and Loving It All The Way:

How often do you hear someone say “I enjoy my work. I love my work?” In a world where so many are completely dissatisfied and unhappy with their chosen occupation, one such person stands out. His name is Edward Glenn Midyette, most folks call him Glenn, and he resides right here in Beaufort County where he has lived pretty much all of his life. Glenn’s love for his work didn’t just happen though. At a recent meeting with Glenn and wife, Yvonne, he revealed the story behind his love for his work. It all started with years of hard work as a child growing up on a farm back in the 1940s and early 1950s. Glenn grew up as the older brother to six younger sisters, which in the

40's and 50's meant a lot of hard work because he was the only male sibling. The hard work began at an early age, too.

On the Farm:

Glenn remembers getting pretty involved in helping his father, William Midyette, on the family farm at the age of eight when he was a third grader at the Old Ford School. "I had to miss a lot of school, about fifteen days a year maybe," said Glenn. His job starting out as a third grader on the farm was to do the harrowing, which is what they called smoothing the ground after it had been broken up. Two mules pulled this piece of equipment that was about ten feet wide. Of course, Glenn was the one keeping those mules on track.



Glenn's third grade picture.

Something else Glenn helped with as a third grader was setting out tobacco. He recalls vividly the day he stayed out of school to drag the rows down to make them flat so his granddaddy could set out the tobacco plants. He did this by taking a mule and hooking a log behind it that would cover two rows. Glenn says his granddaddy “always liked to fuss,” and this particular day was no exception. He “fussed” that Glenn was not staying far enough ahead of him, because Glenn would make a run up and down the field and would stop to let the mule rest since it was sweating. But after Glenn’s dad told him of the complaint, Glenn went ahead and finished about three acres before stopping to let the mule rest. He then took the mule back to the stable where it ran into the pasture and fell over dead. “And mules cost you something back then, too,” says Glenn. “I won’t in but the third grade then. So we had to go out and bury the mule the next morning.” This must have been a powerful lesson for an eight year old about the importance of periods of rest along with hard work.

The farm was located on Highway 264 west of Washington, which his dad had bought when Glenn was about three years old. It was the old Grimes Farm that had been divided into 50-acre farms and sold for \$7,000 each. Glenn remembers that his dad was able to pay off the Farmer’s Loan on the property in only seven years; property that included a house, packhouse, chicken house, milking barn, smokehouse, two tobacco barns, and an outside toilet. There was a write-up in the newspaper about Glenn’s dad paying off the property in seven years.



Glenn with his mom and dad and other family among the tobacco plants.

On the property was an old house that was said to be an old tenant house or an old slave house. Glenn does remember living in that old house for a brief time until they built the newer house, kind of small, that had no running water at first, but did have electric lights. “A little bit,” says Glenn. Back then, the term “electric lights” meant just that, “lights.” They had no electrical appliances, just mostly lights. The refrigerator was an icebox, literally. Big blocks of ice were delivered to put in the box to keep things cool. There were no deep freezers. All the meat was kept in the smokehouse. They burned coal instead of wood in a thick cast iron stove for heating the house. Glenn’s mom used a washing pot outside to soak the family clothes in boiling water and then wring them out with the wash board. She eventually got a wringer washer and an electric refrigerator.

By the time Glenn was in the sixth grade at the John Small School, he “started

staying out of school a lot. I would do most all of it, most anything [on the farm],” he said. Things like getting up at 4:00 in the morning to take tobacco out of the barn, or getting up at 5:00, before school, to take tobacco off the sticks so it could be graded. Glenn recalls that their farm produced some of the prettiest tobacco around. They even had pictures published in one of the farm magazines.



Glenn in the tobacco field at age 12 or 13.

By the time Glenn entered the seventh grade at Washington High School (yes, the seventh grade was high school back then), his dad was really depending on him a lot since he was the only boy in the family. He missed over forty days of school that year in order to work on the farm; so many days that he failed his grade and had to repeat the seventh grade the next school year. Of course, he didn't really mind missing school because "I hated school," says Glenn. Glenn's wife, Yvonne, says "He was very, very smart but he hated school." "I was good in math and spelling, but I didn't have to study for it, it just

come natural,” said Glenn. English, geography, and history didn’t come so naturally.

It was along about this same time, age 13 - 14, that Glenn was the one to take care of the ten acre cotton crop. Since there were no harvesters back then, the cotton had to be picked by hand, so he and his dad would drive into town and pick up 15 - 20 people to help pick the cotton. The pay was .03 cent per pound and a really good picker could pick up to 300 pounds per day. They could just drive into town and load the truck up any day with people who were ready to pick cotton. The cotton was taken to market at Singleton’s on West Third Street. Sometimes the line would be so long with farmers waiting to sell their cotton that it might be 1:00 or 2:00 o’clock in the morning before he finished getting the cotton to market. “Daddy always came up the next day to get the money. Don’t know how much it sold for,” said Glenn.

In the eighth grade, Glenn’s dislike for school continued. About half way through the eighth grade, he quit school. That didn’t last very long, though, because the truant officer came and sent him back to school. During that school year, he did get a few weeks of respite from the hard work. It all started in his shop class when the students were making knives. They used a 4-5 gallon bucket with gasoline in it and they would light it in order to heat their knives. One of the other students thought there wasn’t enough gasoline in the bucket one day so he decided to pour in more while it was burning. You guessed it; the flame immediately came up the can. So he threw the can down, and it went all over Glenn. “It burned all the skin off my legs,” said Glenn. “I didn’t enjoy those six weeks out of school.”

After going for about half of the ninth grade, Glenn quit school again. This time it was for good. He continued farming with his dad for about a year. By this time they had

18 acres of tobacco and they still used mules, though they did have a one-row tractor.

But the next year, Glenn's dad quit farming.

On to the Factory:

Now that Glenn was almost 17 years old, he went to work at the Sampson Shirt Factory here in Washington. He was hired as a bundle boy but in a few short months he began to take more responsibility at the factory by coming to work at 4:00 or 5:00 o'clock in the morning to light the boilers that heated the building and made steam for the irons, and he would stay late in the evenings to clean up and sweep the floors. After six or eight months at the shirt factory, he was offered the opportunity to become a sewing machine mechanic. The mechanic from the main office in Kinston trained Glenn for about eight months. "After that, I was ready to take care of it by myself," said Glenn. So he did just that. All those years of hard work on the farm proved to be good training for him as he ventured into the world of textiles and sewing machines. There were approximately 100 sewing machines in his care at that time. In fact, throughout his 18 years as a mechanic at the Sampson Shirt Factory, Glenn trained a lot of mechanics. "I trained five mechanics all at once. Which I didn't know it all," he said.

The Washington Garment Factory was Glenn's next job. He remembers learning a lot there. Once again, he was a mechanic and also trained other mechanics, including one female who continued to work there until they closed a couple of years ago. After about five years, Glenn went to Coastal Apparel in Belhaven to continue working as a mechanic.

There were other jobs where Glenn was able to put to use everything he learned on previous jobs and on the farm growing up. He worked at Pamlico Canvas on 264 west of Washington, where they made Army tents and bags. His next job was Belvoir

Manufacturing where he eventually became the Vice-President of the company that made hospital gowns, sheets, and scrubs. He was in charge of getting the work flow going and since he had two mechanics there, he only worked on machines when necessary. After being at Belvoir for about a year, the company bought a new double-wide mobile home for Glenn and Yvonne to live in out behind the plant. He left his home in Washington just like it was, furniture and everything, and went to Belvoir to live for about four years.

Following the job at Belvoir, Glenn had a offer to go to Haiti to work. He knew some people who were starting a plant up there. All of the arrangements were made to go when he received a better offer from a plant on the other side of Greenville that made golf clothing for women. He had done some work on the side for them and when they found out he was moving to Haiti, they offered him a position as their plant manager. He never made it to Haiti. There he was in charge of “whatever come up.” He worked there for about five years until the market for expensive golf clothing for women began to decline. When he left there, he started driving everywhere, 200 - 300 miles per day checking out all the little upholstery shops and plants. “I finally built me up a business,” he said. “I was working 80 - 90 hours a week in the early 90’s.” There were a lot of little plants that couldn’t afford a full-time mechanic, so they hired Glenn to work a day here and there. He traveled as far as Mount Olive twice a week.

“For the last 16 years, I’ve worked on my own and enjoyed every minute of it. I enjoy my work. I love my work,” says Glenn, who will be 69 years old in October of this year.



Glenn at work on one of many sewing machines.

It Hasn't Been ALL Hard Work:

Now, if you wonder did the hard-working young boy on the farm and the man in the factory ever have time for anything but work, the answer is “yes, of course.” As a young boy, Glenn and his family visited his grandparents in Smithton on Sundays to spend the day. There he would hook up with his cousins and roam the fields, hang around the creek and maybe do a little fishing, listen to the radio, play croquet, or pitch a few horse shoes. Oh, and they were “real” horse shoes, too. Not the ones like folks use today.

There was more fun for Glenn when he had a pony that he enjoyed riding, a black and white pinto. Sometimes he would ride the pony up to Wharton Station and get together with some friends to ride. He had friends in the Wanoco Community that he hung around with, also. They went on hayrides down to Tranters Creek. He had lots of friends. He went to church pretty regular, too, at Cherry Chapel where he got saved and joined the church.



Glenn dressed in his Sunday best.

Today, Glenn likes to take time out from being a sewing machine mechanic to tend the lawn or garden or set out flowers (Does that sound like more work?). He also enjoys fishing, especially on the James River during croaker season. Sometimes he and Yvonne take trips to the mountains with some of the rest of the family (there are two sons and four daughters along with sons-in-law and four grandchildren). However, those trips are usually only for about 3 days. "I've never taken a whole week off," he said. Now why is that not surprising? For someone who "enjoys" and "loves" their work like Glenn, a week would be too long to be away.



Glenn and Yvonne with most of the family on Easter Sunday



Glenn and the six sisters he grew up with