

Seniors



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Hard work, close family, and nearly a century of life

By Dee Ann Campbell
 The Choctaw Sun

ISNEY – “People don’t know hard times these days,” she says. “We had to work hard for what little we had.”

Her life has spanned nearly a century. Her memories contain vivid accounts of over 9 decades of life – years that include the good and the bad, the happy and the sad. She’s seen the world pulled apart by two global wars, seen 17 U.S. presidents come to office, and lived through the Great Depression. She’s buried her parents, her husband, and two of her ten children, and she’s seen a myriad of changes brought to the world by time and technology.

In August, Esther Cunningham Toomey will celebrate her 98th birthday. Despite her years, she still retains the sharp mind and strong spirit that has carried her through the hard times, and she is quick to give a warm, bright smile when she talks about her family and her home.

It is that family and home, she says, that have been the source of her strength, the reason for her hard work, and the bright points that light up her memories. Although somewhat dimmed by time and tempered by years, those memories are still filled with vivid stories of growing up nearly 100 years ago in southern Choctaw County.

One of 9 children born to Eddie Cunningham and Edna Lloyd, Esther was born in 1909 to a family not unlike most other families during that time period. Her father farmed land owned by local landowners, sharing the yield with those who owned the property.

The work was hard, but the Cunninghams



Choctaw Sun photo by Dee Ann Campbell
 Nearly 98, Esther Toomey still lives in the house she and her husband moved into after their wedding in 1925. She is pictured here with 3 of her 10 children.

worked together to bring in enough to feed their large family. Except for a few months when her father worked a farm in Mississippi, Esther’s family lived, worked, and grew up in the southern portion of the county, farming land near the border of the two states.

For the children, life meant working alongside their parents to grow the crops and the livestock, with few opportunities to play games or even go to school.

“We didn’t get much education,” Esther says. “I just went to the 4th grade. We didn’t get to go to school much because all

of us kids had to work.”

Yet Esther’s memories are not just filled with hard work. She recalls the happiness that comes from pulling together for the sake of the family. And, she recalls, the funny little memories that still stand out in her mind today.

“I didn’t like to milk the cows,” she says with a grin. “I was scared to do it because every time I’d go to milk one, my older sister would say, ‘She’s gonna kick you!’ So I did my best to get out of milking those cows.”

In 1925, at the age of 16, Esther married her long-time sweetheart,

Esther Toomey remembers life through the decades

James Toomey – a boy she had had her eye on since she was only 12 years old.

“I knew him for 5 years before we married,” says Esther, laughing as she adds, “I believe he loved me at first sight.”

The couple began their life together in a house that was not far from where she had grown up – a small frame house on a hill that would become her home for the rest of her life.

“We already had our house built when we married,” she says with pride. “I’ve been living here ever since.”

With a household of her own to run, Esther’s life was somewhat different – but in many ways still the same.

“When I got married, I went right back to the field,” she remembers. “We farmed, just like my parents did.”

Times were often hard for the young Toomey family. Surviving primarily on what they could grow and raise on their farm, Esther and her husband raised ten children in much the same way that her parents had raised her. With money hard to come by, the family survived on their own, purchasing very little from the local store.

“We had to buy our flour,” Esther says. “But most everything else, we made it ourselves.”

And on those special days when they went to make their few small purchases, the Toomey family would hitch up their horse and wagon and travel to the once-thriving town of Silas.

“All the other roads were still dirt roads,”

recalls Esther, “but the one to Silas was paved. It was a treat to go to Silas. That was when the town was different from what it is now. There were stores everywhere.”

Like most parents raising families during that time period, the Toomeys sacrificed much for the sake of their children. From working long hours in the field to giving up their own comforts to provide for the kids, the couple raised their 10 children with all that they could provide.

“They would use the flour they bought and fix us biscuits for breakfast,” says daughter Eunice, who now lives with Esther. “And they would just have cornbread instead.”

Farming for the Toomeys meant more than just raising vegetables and growing cotton. It meant growing sugar cane for syrup, raising livestock for meat and lard, and picking cotton to raise money for those things that they could not produce themselves.

“Planting cotton was our money crop,” Esther remembers. “We worked about 9 acres. It didn’t go very far, but we’d sell it and buy the children’s clothes and what food we had to buy.”

“We had it hard,” she adds. “Sometimes we didn’t have all that much to eat. But we got by.”

Work was difficult for farmers like James. For days on end, he would work the fields, back bent over and hands working to the bone. Even when the work became almost too much to bear, Esther says, her husband kept

going. “He’d work with his back bent over all day, day after day,” she says. “He told me he would pick 300 pounds of cotton in one day. He would even faint in the field, and get up and go back to work.”

In July, 1974, the back-breaking labor took its toll on James. He passed away after complications from back surgery.

“We had been married for almost 50 years,” Esther says, eyes wondering off into her memories.

Today, Esther still lives in the little white house where she has lived since her marriage some 82 years ago. Although two of her 10 children are now deceased, most of the remaining 8 live within a few miles of where they grew up.

Still in relatively good health despite her years, Esther no longer has to spend her days working hard to run a farm and feed her family, and a fall that broke her leg six years ago keeps her confined to a chair much of the time. In appreciation for their mother’s work in caring for them, her children are now caring for her.

But if she only could, Esther would still be working, she says, spending her time in the same way that she always has for much of her 98 years – working hard to make her house a home.

“It gets to me that I can’t get up and do things for myself,” she says. “If I could, I would love to do it. It’s just not like me to sit here when there’s work to be done.”



Choctaw Sun photo by Mickey Bryant

Celebrating 99 years with Grant Brown

Mt. STERLING -- Grant Brown celebrated his 99th birthday in Mt. Sterling recently, surrounded by family members. Pictured in Mr. Brown, seated, along with 5-generations of his family



Choctaw Sun photo by Dan Melvin

Morris celebrates 97th

BUTLER – Jean Shaw Morris, pictured seated, recently celebrated her 97th birthday with a special event at Butler Senior Center. Morris is one of the county’s oldest citizens and a long-time dedicated member of the senior center.

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