

Story courtesy of the Desoto Sun Herald

## **Woman's journal tells the story of her long life** **by Luke Wilson**

Anyone whose years span a century has a life story worth telling, and Eva Westberry, who passed away this month at age 100, was such a person. While some parts of her story were gathered from relatives and friends, most come from a handwritten journal found after her death.

Her journey of 100 years began June 14, 1908, in High Springs, Fla., as one of several children born to Wesley and Penelope Hines.

“We had the best parents anyone could have,” she wrote of them. “I never heard them argue in front of us, they took us to church and always had time to talk to us.” Church was some 8 to 10 miles away, a trip made by horse and wagon.

The Hines family made its living by farming. Their corn was hauled to town to be ground into meal and grits. They raised chickens, hogs and cows, and Eva recalled how they smoked meat and had plenty of milk and butter on hand, though she eschewed dairy products all her life. She recalled them getting rice only about once a month, and making syrup from the sugar cane they grew.

Among the memories she recorded were chores, such as using a rub board and tubs to wash clothes, scrubbing wooden floors by hand, and cooking on a wood stove. All of the Hines children were born before their home ever had electricity.

Of her siblings, she wrote, “We had lots of fights, but we loved each other very much. We were always close.” One memory of her childhood she recorded concerned her brother Earl, who was called “Early.” She wrote that he was lazy and that “I must’ve carried him a thousand miles on my back.”

They walked about a mile to school, and Eva completed her education by graduating from eighth grade. Her father sold the farm and moved to Madella, near Lakeland, in 1921 or 1922. Not happy there, the family moved to nearby Eagle Lake for a year, then to Bartow, where Wesley took a job cleaning the cemetery for \$15 per month. Penelope worked at a restaurant, then at a laundry, where her hands were badly burned in an accident that left them permanently crippled.

Two of Eva’s sisters had relocated to Nocatee and one of her brothers was dating a girl there, so Eva moved south and found work at the Nocatee Crate Mill. “I went to work there and met my future husband, though I didn’t know it at the time,” she remembered.

Eva married Levi Westberry in 1927.

Then came the children — Veleti “Vicky” in 1930, followed by W.R. “Buddy” 16 months later. Seven years passed before Peggy was born, after which Kenneth and Don came along in 1941 and 1943, respectively. Eva’s journal includes special descriptions and memories of each of her children.

Levi was a night watchman at the crate mill until it closed in 1951, and drove a school bus for 18 years, according to family members. Their home was lost in a fire in 1948, after which they collected but \$2,000 under an insurance policy. They moved in with one of their daughters and, later, into one of the old mill houses.

Eva took a job cutting and wrapping meat in an Arcadia grocery store owned by John Parker, and later did custodial work at Nocatee Elementary School from January 1977 until May 1980. Levi retired at age 58, suffered a heart attack in 1978 and died at age 70.

When health was failing her oldest and youngest sisters, she took them in and cared for each until their deaths, one in 1984 and the other in 1992, according to her family. Her love of family never faltered, her children said. As her own health began to fail, she battled and recovered from colon cancer in the early 1990s, after which she had a pacemaker installed for her heart.

Her favorite restaurant was the Golden Corral in Port Charlotte, where she dined on her 99th birthday and told the cashier on the way out that she'd see them next year, members of her family said. True to her word, the centenarian returned there to celebrate her 100th birthday with her family, just two months after her oldest daughter died.

Other than her family, she received her greatest joy from attending the Nocatee Church of God, where she served faithfully for decades. She'd often bake coconut cakes for the church pastor, the Rev. John Spratlin, who conducted services for her Jan. 8 funeral. Daughter-in-law Shirley Westberry described her "going home party" (funeral) as quite the celebration, reflected by the joyous music.

Of the Westberry children, only two brothers remain — Buddy and Kenneth. But Eva's lineage continues, with 16 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren, and 19 greatgreat-grandchildren, a remarkable legacy of a remarkable woman.



At left is Eva Hines Westberry of Nocatee, shown in 1978. She lived to see her 100th birthday and recorded her memoirs in a journal. At right, Levi and Eva Westberry celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary in 1977.