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Avanell Sherrill Mitchell poses with her “Employee of the Century” award earlier this week, which she received in 2000 when the Southwest Daily Times hosted a reunion to honor former staff, including Jim Elsberry. Mitchell spent 51 years with the paper, retiring in 1994. She will turn 90 on Wednesday and family and friends are hosting a come-and-go reception Saturday from 2 to 4 p.m. at First Christian Church. L&T photo/Ananda Coleman

Avanell Mitchell recounts 51 years at the Southwest Daily Times

By ANANDA COLEMAN

Leader & Times

Originally, Avanell Sherrill Mitchell never intended to work at the Southwest Daily Times for more than a year. However, 51 years later, when she finally retired from the Times, Mitchell received the title of “Employee of the Century.”

During that time, she rose from bookkeeper, her starting position in 1943, to assistant to the publisher, her official position at the time of her retirement in 1994. She worked closely with five different publishers and proved her value to each.

Despite her initial reservations about the work, eventually, it grew on her. "I enjoyed every bit of it," Mitchell says now.

When Mitchell first applied for the job, Liberal was in the throes of the war effort, fighting the powers of the Axis Alliance and Adolf Hitler. The Times' then general manager Lloyd Smith wanted to avoid the seemingly inevitable turn-over that flooded the town.

"That was during World War II, and of course, all the men were in the service," Mitchell explained, "And the women were either following their husbands or working in the war effort in the airplane factories at Wichita and such."

Smith interviewed Mitchell for two or three hours before offering her the job.

"Finally, he told me I had the job, under one consideration: I had to promise to stay for a year. They had a big turnover of help," Mitchell laughed. "He said, I want you to promise to stay a year, which I did. But I thought, 'Oh, when that year is up, my promise is over with.' He only stayed there for six months after I went to work, and I thought, 'well I promised him.'"

However, other factors in Mitchell's life prevented her from leaving. Her husband, an enlisted man, was placed in 4F, a military designation for those too sick to serve on active duty.

"We didn't realize there was anything wrong with him – he was the picture of health. On it, all it said was active Tuberculosis (TB). Back then in '43 and '42 when he got the active TB notice, we only thought of TB in the lungs, and we went to doctors here in Liberal and they X-rayed his lungs and they could find nothing wrong."

Mitchell and her husband even visited a doctor in Hugoton to get another opinion.

“He told my husband, ‘feel lucky, they got your records mixed up with someone else’s. But as time went on, his health started deteriorating, and it was TB of the spine, instead of the lungs. About six months after I started working for the newspaper, he ended up having two spinal fusions and had to be flat on his back for over a year, with a pillow under his head.”

Her husband’s illness kept Mitchell working at the Times longer than she first intended and eventually caused him to join her there.

“He ended up having to change vocations because of his health problems and the publisher at that time was Jim Cinnamon. He was a former linotype operator and wanted him to learn linotype. But he had to work nights until he could learn to type (basically faster),” Mitchell said. “He ended up being a linotype operator. Of course, by that time, over the years, I forgot about my promise of one year and I just kept working and working and working.”

Mitchell’s life began to revolve around the Times. She and her husband worked between 50 to 60 hours each week. Co-workers “felt more like family” and the work was “never boring.”

“In a newspaper of that size, you end up doing a little bit of everything,” she said. “I threw complaint papers. I took care of the carrier boys. I still remember some of the boys who still live here in Liberal.... But it was interesting each day. Everyday something new happens. It did not have a chance to get boring. It was always something different.”

Despite the incredible changes newspapers have undergone since the ’40s, Mitchell sees similarities in today’s paper with the ones she helped produce for years and years. Even as time replaced typewriters with computers and the business changed radically, the importance of a newspaper and its role in the community remained stationary for her.

She believes the Times’ prime occurred between the ’70s and early ’90s but still subscribes to its current incarnation.

Of the Leader & Times' current management, she says this: "I think for the number of people they have working for them, they are doing a good job. I know they work long hours. I know Earl and Larry do. I think they are doing a good job. They may not be attending to details as much as they should, and it bothers me so when I see errors in the paper. But you know, you have a computer and you have spellcheck and you have different words with multiple meanings and spellcheck does not catch that. I think for what they have – for the people they have – they are doing an excellent job. People do not understand how much hard work there is in a newspaper. They do not appreciate it."

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