



Merrill “Sonny” Mitchell – Welder and Witness

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Merrill “Sonny” Mitchell was born in Port Acres, Texas, in 1929, and he’ll be 84 in October of 2013. Called “Sonny” because he was the oldest son, and his four sisters and one other brother had nicknames, too.

At 12, they moved to Nederland in 1941, and he remembers well Pearl Harbor as history unfolded.

He graduated from South Park High School in Beaumont in 1947.

“Soon after the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950, I got a letter from the President of the United States,” Sonny said in his bright and contagious smile. “It said my ‘neighbors had requested my service.’”

In September of 1950, he entered the U.S. Army, that eventually sent him to Fort Knox, Ky., for the Tank Leader Course for the 773rd Heavy Tank Battalion, becoming a tank commander. Then he was sent to Fort Benning, Ga., to train officers to be tank commanders. Yet, not all went well. Accidents happen. “Lt. Glass, a nice fellow, a tank hatch closed on his head and killed him,” Sonny said. “At night maneuvers, some soldiers were run over in foxholes. I’ll never forget. Still dream about them.”

Sonny’s warm and engaging smile enlivens his quick wit. His sincere laugh and gregarious nature allow him to enjoy an easy audience with anyone. In a few minutes, you’d think you were lifelong friends with Sonny.

After the war, he returned home to Beaumont and went to work for the Pure Oil Company as a welder, whose motto was “Be Sure With Pure.” Its . “Worked for them for 38 years, 5 months. Took early retirement at 58 and a half. Still got a welding machine.”

How would you describe your welding there?

“Well,” he paused, like it was a dumb question, but Sonny smiled, never unkind, “that is what holds a refinery together.” He chuckled. He was as a welding inspector his last ten years. To fabricate a pipe, one lays down a stringer bead, then a filler bead, then caps it off with a last pass. They welded stainless steel and



“one and a quarter chrome.” Many regulations. They inspected the welds with x-rays looking for any flaw. “A black spot, with slag in it, had to be ground or cut out. The pipes were under tremendous pressure, 6,000 lbs. per square inch or more.”

Sonny is an expert welder. In a way, he has been “welding” all of his life, only now, instead of steel, he has been connecting people to each other and to God.

Sonny had known Zelma Spurlock since high school. She married L. B. Graves, who died young, leaving her with a son and daughter. After Sonny got out of the Army, he caught up with Zelma again at a Jehovah Witness Bible study in a Beaumont home.

He became a Jehovah Witness in 1956, and they married on May 4, 1957. Sonny’s stepdaughter Glenda Kay Graves died nine months after their marriage. “She was a live wire,” he said, “unlike my stepson, James Paul Graves, who was quiet and easy going.” James worked in the funeral industry for decades, then started his own tree business, and has since retired from that, too.

Sonny and Zelma moved to Woodville ten years before he retired, to the Cherokee community on Hwy. 256.

On their 50th wedding anniversary in 2007, their son James and his wife took them to Branson, Mo., “to see that Japanese fiddle player” – whose name he understandingly could not remember. Shoji Tabuchi and his family are legends in Branson, “the best show in town,” and famous for their world-class combination of wholesome values in their plays, songs, and dance that include Country, 50s, Patriotic, and Christian themes (BransonTourismCenter.com).

Sonny and Zelma have been together 56 years now, and they love their ministry work at the Kingdom Hall in Woodville. When the Gib Lewis Prison opened in 1990, they attended the open house with their friends Fred and Jo McLaughton. Sonny became one of the first religious volunteers and has been coming ever since.

“We have had a real success,” he said. “Every year, we have baptized at least one. Sad to say, though, some get out, return to the world, and get put back into prison. Every Wednesday, 6-9 p.m., we have a Bible study, using the study article in the Watchtower magazine. We’ve had some inmates from all over the U.S., and some from Mexico, Guatemala, Canada, Bolivia, and South Africa.” Sonny’s heartfelt seriousness rises in tone. “We appreciate those [prisoners] who stay loyal, go home and began to study the Bible with their family.” He lifts and waves his hand. “This is the Bible belt. Tyler County is our area. We knock on doors! Be sure and emphasize that. We are Jehovah Witnesses for life! All ‘baptized’ witnesses *visit* door to door as long as they are able. We visit the prison too.”

Their prison team includes Sonny, the senior most, Brian Miller, Rocky Miller, Charlie Ensign, and few others over the decades. Retired Chaplain Maness said, “They have been regular, faithful, dedicated, respectful of security, always on time, and always ready to help.”

On Sonny himself, Rocky Miller said, “a fine fellow. You could not find a kinder or nicer person than him.”

What is your mission at the Kingdom Hall?

Sonny freezes a moment, wondering at the seriousness of the question (we have shared many jokes over the last 20 years). “To hold a Bible study in their home,” as though it was obvious, “in the quiet of their home.” Sonny does *not* joke about his ministry. “We recognize



that Jehovah is supreme of the universe, Jesus Christ is God's son, and the Holy Spirit is God's active force."

Reflecting on North Korea's threats, Sonny perked up, "See! Why we know that Satan is the god of this world. The world is going to get worse. We are close to the end. Matthew 24 describes the time. In the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus said we should pray, 'Our Father who art in heaven, thy kingdom come.' The 'Kingdom of God' that we pray for is God's heavenly arrangement that will come. 'THY kingdom come ... on EARTH'" Sonny emphasized, "is God's government under the rulership of Jesus Christ our savior. This earth will be *restored* to a paradise earth. That was God's purpose in the beginning, and that has *not* changed."

From your 23+ years of prison ministry, and decades in the church, what advice do you have for a young man? "First – watch the people you associate with. Do not, *do not*," he steeled his eyes, "DO NOT follow the crowd!"

To younger couples? Clear and straightforward, he said, "The greatest would be to listen. Good communication! Open communication with one another. More divorces are caused because of a lack of communication."

On their marriage, Sonny softens. "We have 56 years of real love for one another. Every day." He smiled slowly. "She is so gentle and loving. My appreciation just keeps growing. Love her more every day. She calls me 'Honey,' and I call her 'Sugar.' Probably have not said the word Zelma a dozen times in my life. Just love her more and more *every* day!"

Sonny, the old welder, is solidly connected to his wife, dearly, and – like welding stainless steel – these days enjoys connecting others to one another and to God, waiting for His Kingdom to come.