

John Milton Kimmins *By Glenda Dyer*



John Milton Kimmins has been a resident of Bedford County's Longview community longer than anyone else. All but about four of his 91 plus years have been spent on the Kimmins family farm where he was born to Will and Sallie Garrett Kimmins on Feb. 19, 1915.

The farm was once part of pioneer Edward Tarpley's vast estate. The Kimmins were pioneers in the area also, having migrated into Tennessee in the 1820s with the Cooper family and moving into the Longview area sometime later.

John's father, Will, was a farmer, a school board member and a Bedford County magistrate for eight years. His father also once owned a cotton gin in Longview with his brother, John Frank Kimmins. "It was the first gin in here that could put out 10 bales of cotton in a day," John said. "At one time it was the

only cotton gin in the county."

After the Kimmins quit processing cotton at the gin, hay was stored in the building. Somehow the hay caught fire, and the old cotton gin burned in about 1916.

When John was born, his family was living in a story and a half log house that Edward Tarpley had built in the 1820s. He and his older brother, Joe, helped carpenter Leon Taylor build a new brick, two-story home for the family in 1938. John and his wife, Kathryn, still live in the house.

The new brick house was built on the hill where the old Tarpley house had stood. When they tore the old log house down, the Kimmins used some of the weather boarding and other lumber to construct a small structure for the family to live in while they were building the new house. The small building later became a smokehouse. The family also kept the old log kitchen, which had a big fireplace for cooking, until the one in the new house was ready for use. "We used to render up lard in the kitchen when the weather was really bad," John said. "We would put the kettle in the fireplace with wood on one side of it. There was enough room in the fireplace on the other side of the kettle for someone to sit and stir the lard."

John started working on the family farm when he was just 6 years old and has farmed continuously, except the time he spent in military service during World War II. "I begged my daddy to let me milk cows and he did, but then he wouldn't let me quit," he said. "I plowed for the first time at 7 years old using a one-horse turning plow." When John was older he could turn two-acres a day, which required 17 miles of walking.

The Kimmins' farm started out with just about 200 acres but John, his father and brother, Joe, kept adding more acres until it was up to 525 acres at one time. The family grew wheat, corn, oats and other crops and raised sheep, hogs and cattle.

The Kimmins family worked long, hard hours in making their farm a success. One of their cousins observed that the Kimmins were progressive farmers, who often tried new techniques and farming equipment before they were in general use in the area.

John started school at Longview at age 5. The school at that time had two rooms and two teachers. He transferred to Community School at Unionville in 1927 and graduated from there in 1934. He played a saxophone in the Community School band, which was organized by a former band musician, Luther Smith, in about 1928 and went by the name of the Community Kings. Smith sold the students their instruments at cost. John remembers he paid \$55 for a soprano saxophone. The school band lasted for about three years but those still interested in band kept playing in a small orchestra type group. The group would play at picnics, ice cream suppers and other community gatherings.

One welcome event during John's school years was in 1919 when his family got its first car. John can still remember traveling to Murfreesboro and Shelbyville by horse and buggy before they got the car. The Kimmins' first automobile was a 1919 Ford touring car that had to be cranked. His father had ordered a 1920 model that had a starter, but the car had not yet come in. The touring car had a fabric top and curtains that could be put over the openings in the doors to close in the car. John remembers the car was still cold and airy, though. The roads at first were rough wagon roads with the only paved road in the area being Route 41 from Nashville through Murfreesboro and Shelbyville and on south.

When John and his brother, Joe, started to Community School at Unionville in 1927, some students still came by horse and buggy. Joe, who was 3 ½ years older than John, drove the two to school and gave other students from Longview a ride.

As a young man, farming was not John's only interest. With a keen curiosity and a strong aptitude for mechanics, he was fascinated with radios when they began becoming popular in the 1920s. About 1926, he found a 1920s book on radios and started studying it. From there he began building crystal radios. "I built one crystal radio set which could pick up a Chicago station without a ground," he said. "Then when we got electricity, I really got busy and went to getting parts and information." His radio hobby led to a spare time job of fixing radios. By the time he got out of the Army, television had been developed, so he took up repairing televisions in his spare time.

Another of his interests – fixing clocks and watches – also turned into a spare time job, which he continued until about 1975. John learned how to fix watches and clocks from books so he could fix his own, but word about his skills got out. Soon many people in the community were bringing their timepieces for him to fix.

His knowledge of radios and mechanics were a plus for him in the military. John went into the Army Air Corps in February 1942 and did his boot camp at Biloxi, Miss. He spent most of his service time at the Midland Army Airbase Bombardier School in Midland, Texas.



John, in his younger days, on the farm.

His first assignment was servicing aircraft radios but that turned into repairing civilian radios as well once his superiors learned he had that skill. Then headquarters decided he should go to aircraft mechanic school because of the high scores he made on the entrance exam. When he returned from aircraft mechanic training, though, he had been promoted to sergeant and was now over the radio department in his squadron. John was convinced the men under him could handle the radio work so he asked to be assigned to the flight line doing aircraft maintenance. His superiors assigned him to be ground chief on a bombardier trainer after he agreed to help with the radios if he was needed. He was promoted to staff sergeant. He was later made head of a hangar crew doing 50 to 100-hour inspections. After that, he was assigned to set up, put into operation and teach an aircraft mechanics school on the base. "I asked them what they wanted me to teach, and they told me it was up to me," John said. "So I had to set up the whole school myself."

John pursued another interest while in the Army Air Corps, which also led to other opportunities. "I was interested in flying and had to go on trips occasionally as the maintenance crew chief, so I decided I needed to learn to fly," he said. He took flying lessons and got a private pilot's license, which allowed him to fly the military planes on some test flights as a copilot.

Near the end of his military career, John left Midland to go to B-29 school at the Amarillo Air Base. He had one more day of school when World War II ended. He finished that hour and was then sent to a base in Fort Worth where he was soon assigned to a B-29 as ground crew chief.

In the meantime, he had put in for a discharge to get back to help with the family farm. He had been ground chief for only two days when his request was approved. He returned home in September 1945 and went back to farming. He also resumed his spare time jobs and managed to get in some flying time.



John & Kathryn Kimmins

John remained a bachelor until 1960 when he married Kathryn Crick of Rover, daughter of Glen and Sallie Mai Newsom Crick. The two met through a mutual family friend.

Kathryn was the oldest of seven children, so when her mother died in 1953 she left the Saint Thomas School of Nursing in Nashville to care for her younger sisters and brother. The three younger ones lived with John and Kathryn until they finished high school and found jobs or went on to college.

John and Kathryn have two children, Sally Kimmins Seivers and Joel Kimmins, who also live in the Longview area. They have five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

John is mostly retired from farming now, but he still sometimes bush hogs the pastures, tills the garden and cuts bushes with the chainsaw.

On his annual checkup, his doctor remarks about how good John's health is. "I guess it's unusual for anybody 91 ½ to still take no prescription medicines and to not go to the doctor often," he said. "The last time I saw the doctor, he said I want to see you a year from now."

John attributes his long and healthy life to hard work but admits that his genes may have helped too. He has many relatives who lived healthy lives into their 90s and some to around 100.

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