

Meeting an angel on a Greyhound bus

MEGHAN COOKE
STAFF REPORTER

Fifty-seven years ago, Lonnie Sain boarded a Greyhound bus in Winston-Salem on the day after Thanksgiving as he made his way to Appalachian State Teachers College.

Little did he know, he would meet the girl of his dreams.

The bus stopped in Pfafftown where a young girl stepped on the bus and sat with Sain.

"It was a simple meeting," Sain recalled.

Her name was Norma Jean Bowen. The two chatted casually before she got off the bus in Elkin.

"By the time I got to Appalachian State, it felt like a hammer had hit me in the chest," he said. "Something in my heart told me, 'My God, that's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.'"

Amidst his studies, Sain couldn't stop thinking about that beautiful girl.

Shortly after he returned to school, the Korean War broke out and Sain joined the Marine Corps on Feb. 12, 1951.

Six months later, after training at Paris Island and Camp Lejeune and a three-month tour aboard ship, Sain returned to Winston-Salem on leave.

Clad in his uniform, Sain stopped in the old Woolworth store for a drink and a snack. Behind the candy counter was a beautiful girl with a striking familiarity.

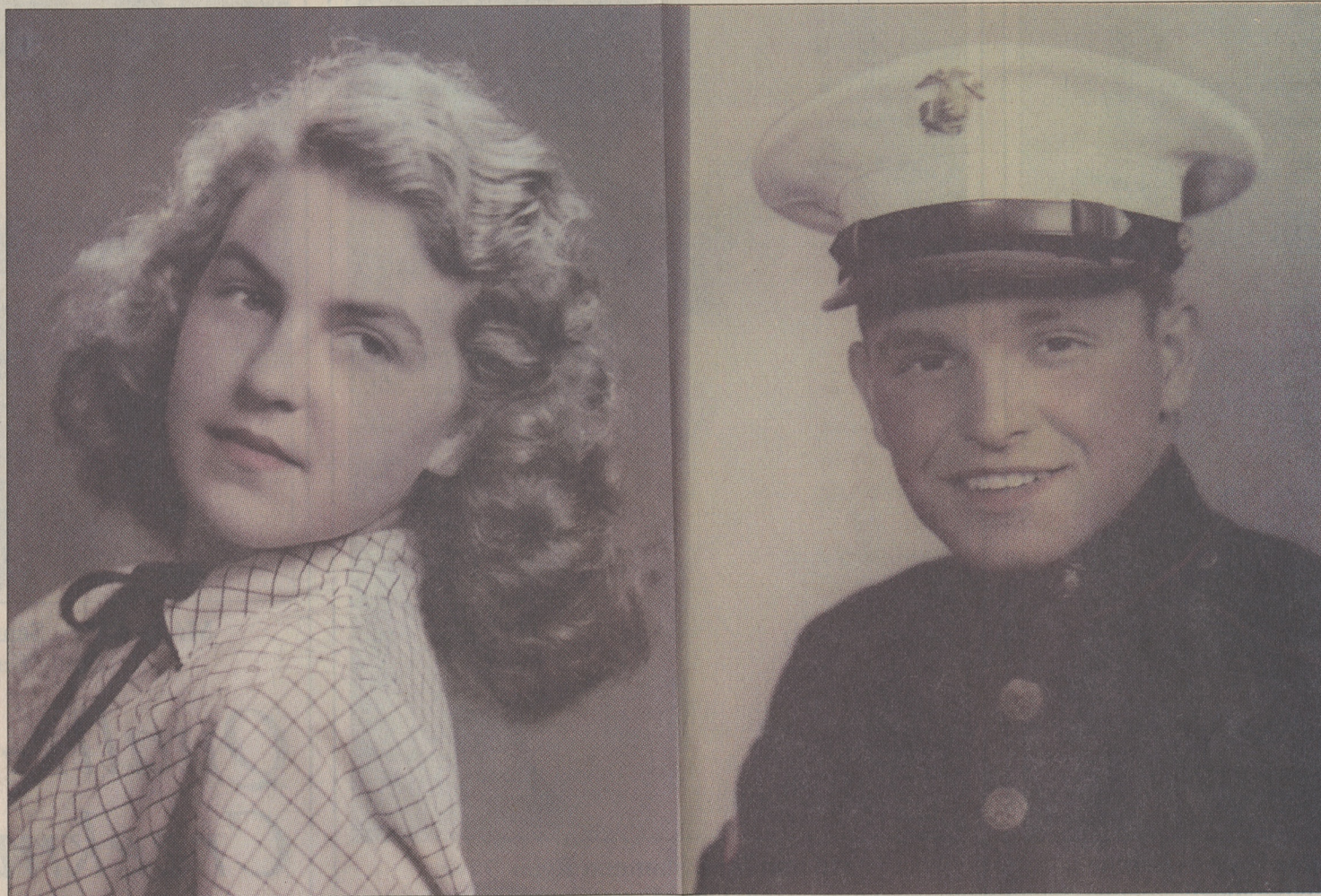
"She kept looking at me and I kept looking at her," he said.

He said he felt as though he knew her, but could not remember where they had met. He finally got up enough nerve to speak to her.

As they spoke, they immediately recognized each other. She was the pretty girl he met on the Greyhound bus.

While stationed at Camp Lejeune, Sain visited Norma Jean every weekend possible following their reunion.

Later that same year, he proposed to Norma Jean on the day



Norma Jean Bowen and Lonnie Sain, pictured around the time of their meeting, were married almost 52 years.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MEGHAN COOKE

after Thanksgiving — the same day of their fateful meeting on the bus.

Only a few months later, on April 12, 1952, they were married.

And so began the love story between Norma Jean Bowen and Lonnie Sain. From that day at the candy counter forward, Sain said they never parted.

"I truly believe in my heart that God meant for us to spend our lives together," he said.

Sitting in the lobby at Northern Hospital of Surry County where he volunteers every Thursday, Sain described their life together.

During his 14 years in the

Marines, they moved seven times. After his honorable discharge, they moved 10 more times as Sain worked for Hanes Knitting Company, Perry Manufacturing, and eventually, Armtex Surry Industries in Pilot Mountain, where he was employed for nearly 24 years. They had four children: Gene, Karen, Jane and Patricia.

Lonnie and Norma Jean finally settled in Pilot Mountain where they attended First Methodist Church.

In 1989, Norma Jean became ill. She reached the point at which she needed constant care, so Sain retired in 1995 to be with her.

Over the progression of Norma Jean's illness, she underwent 17 major surgeries.

For nine years, Sain bathed, clothed and fed his wife. He quickly learned how to maintain the medical equipment necessary for his wife's care.

With the help of Hospice of Surry County and Senior Quality Care, he cared for his wife as her illness worsened and eventually left her paralyzed.

Sain did not let her condition prevent them from having a happy life together. He took Norma Jean to her 50th high school class reunion.

Putting his wife in a nursing home was never an option,

Sain said.

"I looked after her and I'm proud," he said.

On Feb. 27, 2004, Norma Jean's battle for life ended peacefully at her home.

"I was standing right beside her bed when she passed away," Sain said. "I reached down to give her a kiss and tell her how much I loved her. She took one more breath and she was gone from this earth to be with her heavenly father."

Reflecting on his life with Norma Jean, Sain said it is a simple, but sweet tale.

"I think it's a beautiful story of a marriage that lasted almost 52 years," he said.

But it's not just a story of a beautiful marriage — it's a story of one man's will to keep fighting.

Four years before his wife's death, Sain was diagnosed with lymphoma.

Since then he's had more than 140 hours of chemotherapy, but it has not slowed him down.

"I'm still going strong," said Sain, who never lost his hair or got sick as a result of the chemotherapy.

He continued to care for his wife throughout his treatments.

Sain's nurses could not believe he was able to continue caring for his wife, he said. He was often referred to as "one tough nut."

"God looked after me to look after my wife," he said.

In his wallet, Sain keeps a photo of Norma Jean as a young woman. The photo shows the high school beauty queen with thick, sandy blond hair swirling over her shoulder.

"I don't mind telling people that I'm proud of our life together," he said.

Excluding the 12 days Sain has spent in the hospital since his wife's death, he said he has visited her grave every day. He recites the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23 or both during each visit. On special holidays, Sain said, he often sings her favorite hymns.

"I know where she's at and I look forward to being with her," he said.

"But to sum it up, we had a wonderful a married life as any man and wife could ever have," he said. "I met an angel on a Greyhound bus."

Looking back, Sain said he would do the nine years he spent caring for his wife all over again.

"I would do it a hundred years if I had her back one day if I could look her in her eyes — her beautiful eyes — and tell her once more how much I love her," he said. "End of story."

Contact Meghan Cooke at megcooke@email.unc.edu or 719-1952.