

THE WAY WE WERE

Jack Lanier



Slope Mower invented by Jack Lanier



Jack's Welding Shop, Jacksonville

BY MARY WANSE
Resident Community News

Jack Lanier arrived in Jacksonville in a stranger's truck more than eight decades ago. He became known as an inventor and a collector. He is a ceaseless worker, a self-made man. Most extraordinary of all is that he will turn 100 this month!

Lanier was born on June 15, 1922 in Matter County, Georgia where his family was in the farming and pulp wood business. "I lived on a farm every minute of my life, but I didn't want to be a public worker, and I wasn't a farmer," he said. So, a week after graduating from high school in 1940 at age 17, he hitchhiked to Florida where he had aunts and uncles living in Jacksonville.

By early 1941, Lanier had his first job, pumping gas and fixing tires at a truck stop "near the edge of town," for Lloyd Eddings, an acquaintance of one of his uncles. "I'd have taken anything anybody'd offered me for work," Lanier said.

Eddings had owned a brand new Plymouth convertible, which he asked Lanier to put away in the garage. Never having driven before, Lanier scraped up the side of it. He was grateful that Eddings was an understanding man.



Jack Lanier, June 15, 2021, 99 years old

Lanier's second job was at the Winn-Dixie Bakery on Beaver Street, packing and stacking bread in the shipping department. He worked himself up to assistant foreman in charge of distributing paychecks. He became somewhat of a broker for the place and started lending money every week. "That's how I got to be an entrepreneur," he said.

A family friend introduced Lanier to betting on the dogs at the track on McDuff Avenue. Though Lanier was underage, his friend would

have him place bets for him and pay him a dollar or two of any winnings, which he added to his savings until he had enough to buy his first car, a 1935 Ford Convertible. That, along with his sleek wardrobe, made Lanier a hit with the ladies.

Desiring more challenging work, Lanier landed a better job at a local shipyard as a burner, cutting steel. Being such a reliable worker, Lanier was rushed through training by his supervisor, so he got out in the yard fairly quickly. While working there, in 1942, Lanier was drafted into the Navy and sent to Great Lakes, Illinois. "I got on a train, and I had never seen snow before. That was quite an experience," he said. Health issues saved him from being



Jack Lanier, Montana, January 2, 2017, 94 years old

put in a submarine. He was honorably discharged, and the government offered him a pension. He told them, "I don't need a pension; I'll make one." And that he did.

Lanier came back to Jacksonville and was living on Dignan Street on the Westside. He returned to the shipyards, working two shifts per day at most places. He expanded from cutting to welding to working with sheet metal. His name became so known at the local yards that all he had to do was show up and tell them he was looking for work; they'd find a place to put him. Sometimes, he took on welding assignments up in Georgia and Alabama.



Jack Lanier, Tootsie Toaster inventor, 1985

At the end of the war, he went to clean up a shipyard in Panama City. Lanier was so admired by one Jacksonville yard owner, having made a lot of money for the outfit, that he was asked to take over the whole yard. He accepted under one condition, and he told the owner, "I am the man who calls the shots." The other shipyard workers would dodge Lanier whenever they could, knowing he would expect them to work as hard as he did.

It wasn't only at shipyards that Lanier worked but also on the railroad, for Seaboard Coast Line. He also did some truck driving. Wherever there was work, he would take it. But by 1957, Lanier decided that he didn't want to continue working for others. He went into the welding and fabricating business for himself, opening Jack's Welding Shop. "I didn't know all the ins and outs of owning a business, but I knew I could do the job," he said. While in business, Lanier invented and patented some significant pieces of equipment, including a slope mower used by engineers who were building the interstate, pieces of hydraulics systems, and tree harvesting equipment for St. Regis Paper Company. Thirteen years and many dollars later, he closed the door of his shop. By this time, he had married his first wife and built a waterfront home on Hyde Park Circle.

Though Lanier has never been into sports, he was friends with Corky Rogers, the beloved football coach at Lee and Bolles. Lanier also patented a foot warmer called Tootsie Toaster that was used locally at the Gator Bowl, later by the NFL, and even at ski resorts.

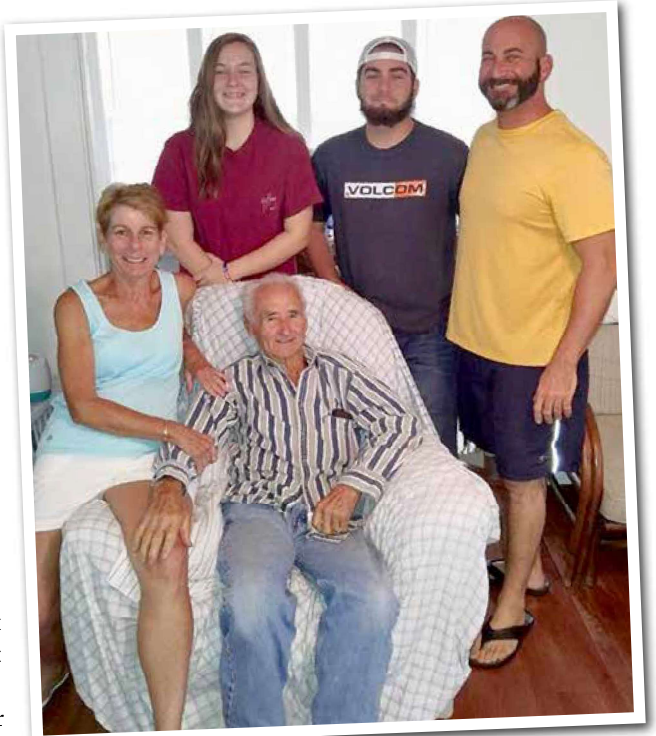
He likes boats and motors, so he bought a few from Florida Marine Patrol and became the first Mariner outboard motor dealership in Jacksonville, Jack Lanier's Marine Center, which included Lanier's assistance with troubleshooting mechanical issues.

All the while, Lanier had been dealing in real estate as well. Among his holdings are properties on the west coast of Florida and in Great Falls, Montana, where he still drives to twice per year. He also still changes by himself the oil in his vehicles, a 1991 Honda sedan and a 1997 Dodge truck. As successful as Lanier has been, he's known to be frugal.

Lanier is a collector, too. Of what? Cars, boats, motors, and more. He's been contacted by the American Pickers of Atlanta, wanting to buy some of it. "I got a lot of old stuff. And I don't like people plundering in my junk," Lanier said. He still works every day at some project or

another. "I'm going to work as long as I live," he said. He still wears coveralls often and carries a lunchbox daily, just as he did when he had his welding shop.

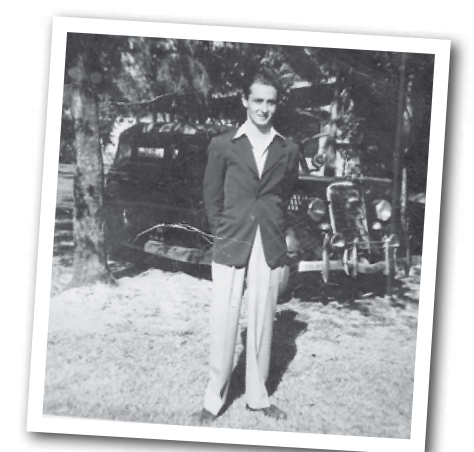
"You have never met anyone like my husband," said his current wife of 46 years, Mary, who still works part-time as a dental hygienist for Dr. Kevin Kirk. They live in Ortega Farms and belong to St. Johns Presbyterian Church. They met at the Green Pig Restaurant on Edgewood Avenue where Mary was a waitress when her son was a young boy. Michael Winston Lanier is now a real estate lawyer in town and a 1992 West Point graduate. He has given the couple



Grace, Miles, Mike, Mary, and Jack Lanier, 2016

two grandchildren, Miles and Grace. Jack Lanier spends every chance he gets with his family.

Lanier's neighbor, Linda Langston, is planning a 100th birthday celebration this month for the man whose motto is "Don't ever quit. Don't let anything whip ya'. When it gets rough, just get a little rougher."



Jack Lanier with 1935 Ford Convertible