

## Unforgettable Weddings

-by Herb Flanders

**S**ummertime is the season for lazy afternoons under a shade tree, for splashing and splashing in a pool or lake, for sitting on the creek bank waiting on a fish to bite, and for devouring fresh vegetables from the garden followed by a little homemade ice cream. Oh, if summer was only so simple as that idyllic picture! But one thing is for sure; summer is the time for blushing brides and stuttering grooms, for proud Mamas and for teary-eyed Daddies, and for all the funny gaffes that can take place when the anxiety level is set on HIGH in front of a crowd of people . . .

I remember my first wedding. The room was packed and nerves were on edge. There were only three of us there – myself, the bride and the groom, all shoved into my little office at Cannon United Methodist over in Gwinnett County. After I did the ceremony, I served as photographer

and then refused their honorarium as I then admitted I'd never married anybody before. The bride left not completely sure the whole thing was legal.

One fall afternoon found me in the backwoods of Barrow County to perform a wedding at a home. It was clearly my wildest wedding and it's one I had a mind to leave but I was afraid they'd kill me. The bride entered to that traditional wedding song by none other than Roy Orbison, "Anything You Want," and the groom messed up his lines and let out with a little sailor talk. When we finally got through the ceremony, as it were, I filled out the license and prepared to offer a toast. Raising my glass of sparkling and non-alcoholic Ginger Ale, I

launched in with my best wishes to the bride and groom. Standing on the back deck of this wooded home I realized that the neighbors were burning leaves they'd just raked; no, perhaps that smell was from faulty electrical wiring in the stereo sound system. NO, some of the guests were smoking marijuana out in the yard! (Yes, the Methodist preacher knows what pot smells like from attending a concert or two back in college and no, I never smoked any. Please don't call my Bishop to complain.) My toast was abbreviated, and I abruptly made tracks for the Barrow County line.

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Another time I was pressed into wedding duty when a friend had to rush off to do his cousin's funeral. Having never met the happy couple I knew not what to expect. We got off on the wrong foot when I discovered they expected me to be there *two* hours prior to the service while I planned to get there only *one* hour early. Then, the Unity Candle, that big candle the couple lights that represents their life together that begins at the wedding, that beautiful candle so rich in symbolism concerning their future, yes, *that* Unity Candle, went out just seconds after the couple had lit it. No amount of effort would get

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the thing to fire back up and we were left with a beautiful, symbolic, smoldering mess. To make matters worse, the Matron of Honor blurted out just loud enough for all to hear, "I sure hope this isn't some kind of omen!" Last I heard they were still happily married and teaching Sunday School in that very church.

Then there was the bride who got mad at what she perceived as her future mother-in-law's intrusion into her wedding and she protested by wearing a black pantsuit during the ceremony. A candle played a role in that one too; the aforementioned mother of the groom had placed a candle in the sanctuary and the bride refused to enter unless the candle was removed. It may have been the first time the groom ever stood up to his mother, who bawled so much during the ceremony that I kept looking for the corpse. No word on how that happy couple is doing.

Recently I asked a bride if she'd have her beloved to be her "lawfully wedding wife." That's not legal in Georgia but it did bring an air of levity to the occasion. Another time I was told that "Uncle Elmer" would video the ceremony but he would be discreet and "we'd never know he was there." The best man, groom and I walked in, took our places and I realized there was a video lens sticking out from among the flower arrangements to my side, right up front. Then, I felt a presence coming ever closer from my right; glancing sideways I saw Uncle Elmer closing the distance and standing now about 5 feet away. There he remained throughout the ceremony.

It's easy to see why most preachers approach weddings with a mixture of wonder, fear and expectation. You just never know when a ring bearer might clonk the flower girl upside the head or when a groom may forget his lines. The very next wedding a preacher performs may be the very one talked about years later; it may be absolutely unforgettable.

But I have to let you in on a little secret. Of all the unforgettable things I've ever seen at a wedding, the one that tops them all took place on August 9, 1986, at the First United Methodist

Church of Warner Robins, Georgia. That's when I looked up and saw a green-eyed beauty in white strolling down the aisle to take my hand.



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