

By *LYRYSA SMITH*, Staff writer

First published: Sunday, February 18, 2001

Three-ring ceremony

Trio of sisters and grooms gears up for one big wedding day

They say good things come in threes, and the Phillips sisters are true believers. For example, imagine the average wedding: a bride and groom, six or eight attendants in the wedding party, and maybe 200 guests. Then, multiply by three. Now, that's an extraordinary wedding, and Vicki, Terri and Becca Phillips say it's a very good thing.

CINDY SCHULTZ / TIMES UNION

Groom Jim Myers, center, gets teased about his girth as shop owner Anthony Commisso, right, measures him at Tuxego in Latham, while Ronald Phillips, Myers' soon-to-be father-in-law, looks on.



In late May of this year, the three Phillips sisters, who are not triplets, are having a triple wedding.

"People who know us aren't surprised; they're taking it in stride. It just makes sense to them because we've always been so close and everyone knows it," says Terri with a shrug of her shoulders.

"But if it was anybody else, nobody would believe it. It sounds crazy," admits Vicki, the oldest of the sisters. "But for us, everything blends together beautifully."

To describe these sisters as close is an understatement. They have shining smiles and the same hearty laugh. They exude warmth and easily finish each others' sentences. It's a rare day when they don't see or speak to each other at least once.

Veronica Lynn Phillips (Vicki), 32, has been with Pete Gogis for 17 years. They have four children together, Amanda, 10, Matthew, 9, Erika, 5, and Krista, 7 months, and recently bought a house. They have been meaning to get married for quite some time.

"Every time we went to do it, something else came up," explains Vicki. "Another baby, a death in the family, something kind of big. So this works out better all around."

Theresa Marie Phillips (Terri), 30, and Tom Nelson have known each other since they were 5 years old. They began dating about 3 years ago and were engaged on Dec. 16 -- a date Terri spouts out as quickly as if it were her own birth date.

Rebecca Lee (Becca), 25, began dating Jim Myers 5 1/2 years ago. They've been engaged since Thanksgiving of last year and are living together.

Wedding whirl: The woman at the center of all the wedding whirlwind is Elma Phillips. She and her husband, Ronald Phillips, are the parents of the brides.

"They had all been dating for a while in these steady relationships, so I was sort of expecting this next step," says Elma Phillips, with that certain motherly composure and intuition. "And I knew they'd been talking about it. I believed in my heart that it would culminate with all of them together at the same time."

"It is something we always talked about over the last year, saying, 'Wow, wouldn't it be neat?' says Vicki. "I'm glad now that Peter and I waited, because I get to celebrate with my sisters, and I'm glad they are unselfish enough to share it with me."

And what a celebration it will be. More than 650 guests and a wedding party of 37 will pack the Trinity Lutheran Church in Amsterdam. Pastor Dennis Meyer, who has known the sisters since they were babies, will officiate. Following each bride's wedding party entrance, Ronald Phillips will walk that daughter down the aisle and then head back to escort the next daughter after her wedding party precedes her.

Once the three brides and grooms and their attendants are assembled (and Ronald Phillips catches his breath and sits in a front pew), Pastor Meyer will comment about each bride personally, sharing something special about each.

"We'll have three separate sets of vows, one for each couple," says Becca. "Then there will be a group part all together, the pronouncement and finally, a big kiss ..." Becca's exaggerated motion with her hands sends the threesome of sisters into rollicking giggles.

At that moment, the daughters notice their mother's eyes have welled up. With a quick wipe of a tear from her cheek, Elma Phillips sighs, and says, "I'm just sentimental. I cry easily -- at everything. But I'm OK about it, really, because it isn't like they are going far away. In a way, it was harder when Becca went away to college. But I get teary-eyed about this wedding because it is such a wonderful happening."

On the home front

The Phillips family members all live within a half-mile radius of each other, surrounding the family farm in Pattersonville, where they all grew up. Their various jobs also keep them in the area. Elma Phillips has a tax advice and preparation service in downtown Schenectady. Vicki

works at the tax office with her mother and part-time for Donnelly Construction. Terri works the family farm and plans to take over its operation. Becca has a child-care business in Schenectady.

The family farm is central to the wedding, too, as the reception will be held in an open building with a number of canopy tents set up to accommodate the food, beverages, all the guests and, of course, dancing.

It's nearly impossible to imagine the planning of this super-event, but the sisters reveal no pre-wedding panic or tensions and, almost four months ahead of time, seem to have everything under control.

CINDY SCHULTZ / TIMES UNION

Terri Phillips, left, holds up bouquet options at Vly Creek Flower Patch in Voorheesville, At right is her niece Amanda Gogis, 10.

"Sunday became our meeting and planning day. Now the plans are pretty much complete," says Terri, as Becca hoists onto the table a large canvas bag neatly stuffed with carefully labeled file folders for each aspect of the preparations.

"We have a photography team of two, which I think we'll need with all the people and different groups," says Becca.

"There will be one large cake with three separate cake tops, one for each couple," explains Terri. "And we're thinking of an artistic kind of symbol for the top of the cake that will represent all six of us."

The costs of an average wedding may be daunting, but a mega-wedding could be shocking. True to their sharing natures, though, the sisters, grooms and parents are all chipping in.

"We sat down with everyone and figured out how much we could each afford. We made a budget and we're sticking with it, so it's working out fine," says Vicki confidently.

Not surprisingly, the sisters also agreed on the styles and colors for their wedding gowns and their attendants' wardrobes. The brides' gowns are ivory satin in a similar, but not identical style. Each gown has a feature that sets it apart from the others, and is distinctive to the style of each bride.

Elma Phillips announces proudly that Vicki's daughter, Erika, is going to be the flower girl and that they are tailoring down Elma's wedding dress to fit the little girl. Elma and Ronald Phillips met through the 4-H club as teenagers. They were married in 1965 and celebrated their 36th wedding anniversary on Valentine's Day.

"It definitely helps that our parents are together," says Becca. "They set a great example." Her sisters concur and Vicki adds, "They have always been there for us, for the good and the bad times. They guide us but don't ever give us the answers, they make us figure it out."

Honeymoon tour: While agreeing that the sisters are exceptionally close, longtime friend Barb Taylor also says the three are sisters, after all.

"They are three people with distinct personalities. They have spats and they get mad. But they talk it out, say what they need to say and it's done. There's no jealousy and no grudges," says Taylor. "The grooms all have personalities that fit in perfectly, too. They're carefree and each one has a great sense of humor. These couples, the triple wedding -- it's a natural, it's meant to be."

Not everyone, however, has supported the triple wedding notion from the beginning.

"At first when we discussed it, I wasn't into it at all," confesses Jim Myers, Becca's fiance. "I felt like it should be our day, just mine and Becca's, and that's it. But after we talked about it and I had a chance to think about it, I warmed up to the idea and I came around. I think it's going to be neat with all of us together. I thought with the planning, there would be mass chaos, hot tempers, a lot of controversy. But it hasn't been that way at all. It's working out much much better than I thought and I'm really excited about it."

So that all three couples, their attendants and their parents could travel together, the sisters decided to rent a tour bus. It's Myers' task to select the special bus for their wedding day. He works for Nova Bus Company in Schenectady and, if he can swing it, he has his eye on one model with flames painted on the side.

Myers and the other grooms, Pete and Tom, have become good friends and they sometimes get together without their brides. Myers says they are all really looking forward to the honeymoon trip -- a "love boat" extravaganza.

"We're taking a cruise to Key West and Cozumel, the six of us, plus we invited our wedding party friends to join us and, so far, a few have decided to come along," says Becca.

"But we do plan some private time with our husbands, too, we won't spend every waking moment together," says Terri.

Vicki jumps in, "Yeah, it's our honeymoon after all!" A triple chorus of laughter erupts.