

Chair Caning

Wilson Lawhorne, Coxes Creek



I first noticed the older man sitting in a wheelchair by the front pew of Cornerstone Church in Tyro, where Billy and I were attending services. One of his legs had been amputated and although he needed a little assistance leaving the church, he always had a kind word for those who spoke to him and his face seemed to radiate a constant warm smile. But it was his eyes that drew me to him the most; they were a clear ice blue that sparkled with enthusiasm as he talked. I could hardly believe it when someone told me he was legally blind. His eyes did not have the hazy or distant stare that many times accompany blindness but instead looked directly at you and into your soul as he gently spoke. His humble spirit really touched me and our preacher, Jerry Hopkins, shared that his name was Harry Wilson Lawhorne and he lived up on Coxes Creek just a short way from the church. Jerry said Wilson was one of the most spiritual men he had ever met, full of compassion and wisdom of seventy-nine years of living. He also told me that although blind, this remarkable man had learned the craft

Wilson Lawhorne with one of the chair bottoms he wove of chair caning through a program geared to help handicapped persons earn a living for themselves. For anyone *with* sight, you know what a difficult process it is to correctly weave chair bottoms. For a blind man, it would seem almost impossible. But as I got to know him better, I asked if I could interview him for the Backroads newspaper and after he said yes, we set a time for me to come to his house.

After I came to Wilson's modest house which was located at the junction of Route 56 and Coxes Creek, I talked with his wife Floriene (Flora) and his daughter, Nancy, before walking to Wilson's outbuilding where he does his weaving. Sitting there quietly watching him work and listening to him talk, I realized that many times the person we think of being handicapped has a better outlook on life and difficulties in general. Wilson Lawhorne is such a man. Life has not always been kind to him and yet he is not bitter and gives God praise in everything he does and is able to accomplish.

Sit back now while I take you on a little trip into Wilson's life to see where he came from and where he is going.

Born on Coxes Creek on July 17, 1915, in the little mountain hamlet of Tyro, Wilson was one of two sons and two daughters born to John Wesley and Rosa Belle Lawhorne. The attending midwife at his birth was Elizabeth Lawhorne who stated, "He was borned alive at 5'oclock in the morning." Of the four children, at this writing, he and his youngest sister, Velma Laura Strickland, are the only ones living. Although most of his early years were spent in the Shipman/Roseland area, in 1948 he came back to Coxes Creek and bought a piece of property from his daddy and had his present house built on it. He has lived there since then with his sweet wife Flora and their only daughter, Nancy.



Wilson and Floriene as young people; 25 and 20 years of age

Wilson and Floriene Fitzgerald grew up together as children and her brother married Wilson's sister. When Flora was thirteen years old, she came along with them to spend the weekend at the Lawhorne home. Although he had known her all those years, Wilson said it was that weekend he knew he had fallen

head over heels in love

with her. "I knew exactly when I fell in love with her. I don't know *how* it happened but it sure did," laughed Wilson. They waited seven more years before eloping to Rockville, Maryland, on August 29, 1940, when Flora was twenty years old and Wilson, twenty-five. The young couple lived with his parents for two years and then Flora's daddy offered to fix up an old house on his property for them to live in on Coxes Creek. They lived there six years and when Nancy was born in 1948, they moved into their present house and have remained there throughout the years.

Wilson remembers one house their family lived in that had five fireplaces as their only source of heat and cooking area. "We put our beans and potatoes in huge cast iron pots and skillets and just cooked them over the open fire. My Mama made ash cakes by raking hot coals from the fire out on the hearth and pouring a little pile of cornmeal dough down in them to cook. We'd rinse the ashes off with water when they were done and, Oh, they were good!"

In talking about the year's past, Wilson said he and his brother, Hermon, both played the banjos; his brother playing the standard method and Wilson playing the old claw hammer method. "Both

of us wished we could play like the other,” he recalled with a smile. “I could chord a little on the guitar but mostly it was on the banjo that I used to call attention to myself. I played for dances before I became a Christian but afterwards, I would no longer do it. I accepted the Lord in 1938, when I was twenty-three years old. I went to a little Methodist Church down in Massies Mill that was holding a revival and the preacher,



Wilson and Flora at their home in later years (1995)

a Mr. Hoover, seemed like he was preaching directly at me and I couldn't get away from his eyes. At the end of his message he said, “If you don't repent and accept Christ as your Savior, you are going straight to Hell.” Those were his very words and I could not forget them. Although I wasn't a bad guy to start with; my mama and daddy taught me right from wrong, and I didn't curse, smoke, drink, or run around, I realized that I was still lost and I couldn't be saved and go to Heaven just by “being good.” As I sat there in that church, the Holy Spirit began dealing with me and when the altar call was given, I was the first one down the aisle. I ain't been perfect but I've been growing ever since. But it hasn't been easy. I've had a pretty hard time down through my life. I've worked hard and treated people right and the Lord would be blessing me and then it seemed that something would happen and it would fall apart. During World War II I was classed as 4-F so the government sent me to Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center to learn the watchmaking trade. I built up a good business at home and moved to a shop on route 151 and was starting to make a little money when I found out I was going blind. I started noticing it while driving at night. It got worse and I went to the doctor where he did tests and they diagnosed me as having retinitis pigmentosa. So, I had to give up my watchmaking business. I also drove a school bus and had to give that up, too. Then through a program for the blind, I was sent to Butner, North Carolina, where they taught me the craft of chair caning. I learned the difficult kind of weaving known as seven-step hole bottom where you weave with something called binding cane. I also learned how to weave with flat reed that makes a herringbone pattern. Although I loved working with the seven-step caning, it became too difficult for me. It takes a lot of figuring so I went strictly to the flat reed type that only takes muscle and not brains. When you have nothing but “feel” you have to constantly check your wraps for mistakes. It takes me anywhere from three to five hours to complete one chair bottom. You have to soak your reed in water to keep it moist and pliable to work with. I tack the reed on the underside of the chair to start it and then weave a pattern that



Wilson preparing to start caning a chair bottom

calls for “under one/over three/under three/over three,” across the rest of the chair. It just takes time. I prefer to use the three-quarter inch reed over the half-inch because it’s stronger material and lasts longer, plus it goes faster.”

As we sat there talking, Wilson continued to weave for a few minutes and then stopped, felt his wrap and commented, “Opps, I missed a step. I have to take it out and start over.” I marveled at

his ability not only to weave sightless but to know when he made a mistake and correct it.

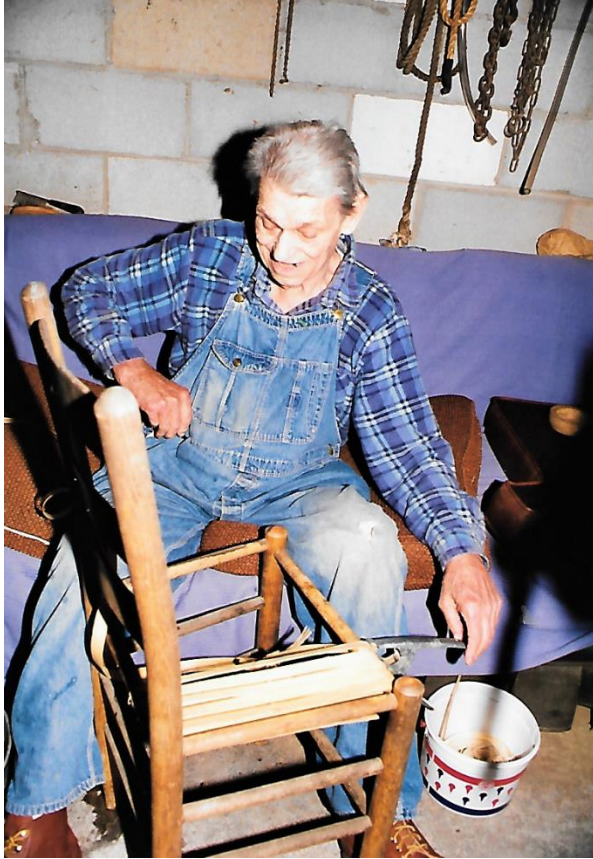
I commented about the workroom we sat in to do the interview. Wilson said that Flora and Nancy kept it neat as a pin for him and I found it to be a warm and inviting space with antique tools hanging from their pegs and a woodstove sitting in the corner. It’s a private place that Wilson can get off and work by himself a little bit. He shared the building’s history as we sat together.



Starting to wrap the splits



Drawing splits tight



Keeping the splits moist with water



Wilson showing the finished product

“In 1969 I had an outbuilding here with all my hand tools in it. Hurricane Camille came through and swept it away and we had nothing left. The Mennonites came to help us rebuild after the flood and they asked me how big a building I wanted. I told them I’d be satisfied with another nine by sixteen-foot building but they said they could build a twelve by twenty-six-foot building just as easy so that’s what they did. They put in lights and water and made a little washroom for Flora. I had some yearling calves at the time and I sold them and took the money to put in shelves, a drink box, and a snack bar. People kept coming in to buy stuff and I kept stocking the things they wanted. First thing you know, we had it so full you couldn’t walk around in it so I went to the bank and borrowed some money to build an addition onto it. The business grew by leaps and bounds and then we had another hard lick; Flora’s blood pressure started getting dangerously high and the doctor said for her to live, she’d have to quit the store. Because I had no dexterity in my fingers, I had never learned braille so I couldn’t keep records so we had to close down and I went back to caning chairs. But I’ve learned not to pay too much attention to the things of this life. I try to live each day like God would want me to so that I’ll be ready when Jesus comes back.”

Last September Wilson suffered a stroke and heart attack and the doctor tried to prepare him for dying. They wanted to put him on a respirator to keep him alive and he asked the doctor, “Is that all you have left for me?” To which the doctor replied, “I’m afraid so, Mr. Lawhorne.” Wilson got one of the nurses to call his preacher and to tell him that he wanted to do what the Bible says

and be anointed with oil. He said, "If God heals me, okay, and if He don't, just go on and let me die because I'm ready." Jerry Hopkins came and did the anointing and soon as the oil was poured on him, Wilson said he felt the Devil was trying to kill him for his blood pressure went sky high. Jerry laid hands on Wilson and prayed fervently. Within minutes, the blood pressure began falling until it was down to 140/80. "I knew God had heard my prayer," said Wilson, and today he is once again at home, continuing his craft and praising the God who saved him.

Wilson Lawhorne is truly a very special kind of man that this world doesn't often see. He's overcome many personal hardships and yet remains hopeful and confident in his faith. His testimony in church is one that people sit up and take notice of because Wilson Lawhorne lives what he preaches.

On July 20th, 1996, as if he somehow knew God was getting ready to take him home, Wilson began making plans to assemble his family and friends together at his Tyro home. He wanted the day to be called "Wilson's Last Roundup" and it was to be filled with gospel singing, heartfelt preaching and Wilson's own testimony about his life and his relationship to God.

The last memory I have of Wilson is watching him play his banjo that day and singing, "Let My Life Be A Light" and speaking about God's love to the large crowd gathered on his front lawn. I was there, along with 116 other people who came to hear Wilson speak. Like everyone else in attendance, I went home blessed, because it's not often one gets to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ presented in such a pure and humble way.



Wilson Lawhorne died at his home the morning of August 17, 1996. His wife, Flora, and daughter, Nancy, and those who loved him were by his side. As word spread, I know we all shed tears of grief, and yet, his death and subsequent funeral was one of the most spiritual uplifting occurrences I have ever witnessed. For I knew that the body lying in state was merely a shell as Wilson's soul winged its way to heaven to meet the Savior he had served on earth.

Three men preached Wilson's funeral service; Earl Sargeant, Jerry Hopkins, and Larry Walker, all pastors of Cornerstone Church, past and present. Each presented a powerful message on God's love and forgiveness. Larry Walker's words really spoke to me when he said the three things the world is obsessed with today are health, wealth, and fame. Wilson Lawhorne had none of the above, yet he was a man who had his priorities in the right order. A man who both feared and worshipped God in the good times and especially the bad.

As the funeral procession made its way up Coxes Creek to the Lawhorne family graveyard, I silently thanked God for sending a man like Wilson into our lives; to set the example and point us in the right direction. They say adversity is the true test of a man and although I'm sure he was discouraged many times, Wilson rose to the challenge and conquered each obstacle with God's help and strength. Like refined gold whose dross has been burned off in the heat of the fire, the goodness in Wilson's life shone like precious metal.

As we stood in that peaceful cemetery under the shadow of Three Ridges, I recall the verse from second Timothy that was read during the service and thought to myself how appropriate they were for a humble man living up on Coxes Creek by the name of Harry Wilson Lawhorne.

“But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

II Timothy, 5-8