

One Man's Ambivalent Retreat From His Racist Past

By HELEN O'NEILL, AP Special Correspondent, Sat Apr 4, 9:39 pm ET

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ROCK HILL, S.C. – Elwin Hope Wilson leans back in his recliner, a sad, sickly man haunted by time.

Antique clocks, at least a hundred of them, fill his neat ranch home on Tillman Street. Grandfather clocks, mantel clocks, cuckoos and Westminster, all ticking, chiming and clanging in an hourly cacophony that measures the passing days.

Why clocks? his wife Judy has often asked during their 49 years together.

He shrugs and offers no answer.

Wilson doesn't have answers for much of how he has lived his life — not for all the black people he beat up, not for all the venom he spewed, not for all the time wasted in hate.



Elwin Hope Wilson holds a framed photo he kept showing a mob he participated in during one of local civil rights 'sit-ins' that took place in the early 1960s, as he sits at home Wednesday, March 4, 2009, in Rock Hill, S.C.

Now 72 and ailing, his body swollen by diabetes, his eyes degenerating, Wilson is spending as many hours pondering his past as he is his mortality.

The former Ku Klux Klan supporter says he wants to atone for the cross burnings on Hollis Lake Road. He wants to apologize for hanging a black doll in a noose at the end of his drive, for flinging cantaloupes at black men walking down Main Street, for hurling a jack handle at the black kid jiggling the soda machine in his father's service station, for brutally beating a 21-year-old seminary student at the bus station in 1961.

In the final chapter of his life, Wilson is seeking forgiveness. The burly clock collector wants to be saved before he hears his last chime.

And so Wilson has spent recent months apologizing to "the people I had trouble with." He has embraced black men his own age, at the same lunch counter where once they were denied service and hauled off to jail as mobs of white youths, Wilson among them, threw insults and eggs and fists.

Wilson has carried his apology into black churches where he has unburdened it in prayer.

And he has taken it to Washington, to the office of Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta, the civil rights leader whose face Wilson smashed at the Greyhound bus station during the famed Freedom Rides 48 years ago.

The apologies have won headlines and praise. Letters have poured in, lauding Wilson's courage. Strangers, black and white, have hailed him as a hero.

But Wilson doesn't feel like a hero. He feels confused. He cannot fully answer the lingering questions, the doubts. Where did all the hate come from? And where did it go?

And the question he gets asked most often: Why now?

"All I can say is that it has bothered me for years, all the bad stuff I've done," Wilson says, speaking slowly and deliberately. "And I found out there is no way I could be saved and get to heaven and still not like blacks."

If you do get to heaven, his wife points out, they're going to be there with you.

All his life, Wilson has brandished his meanness like a badge of honor. To mess with Elwin Wilson, he says, meant a fist in your face. Especially if you happened to be black.

"I wasn't ever scared of no one, or nothing," says Wilson, still a tall, strapping man despite his illness.

"You were scared of the ghost of that black man you saw rocking in the chair," his wife reminds him, describing the nightmare several years ago when he furiously beat his fists into thin air.

Wilson narrows his eyes and scowls at her.

Wilson has a pale face, thin white hair and small pursed lips that rarely smile. Even recent fame hasn't encouraged him to be sociable. He doesn't care what people think of him and bluntly declares, "I might like you one day and not the next."

Wilson's 49-year-old son, Chris, describes his deep embarrassment growing up with a father who was always bracing for a confrontation. He would holler at blacks in restaurants, sneer at them in public, brazenly use the N-word in front of Chris' teen friends.

"He was real hard to live with," Chris Wilson says.

The recent apologies have stunned the son as much as anyone, inspiring a genuine pride in his father he never felt before.

For his part, Wilson seems unsure where his racism originated. It certainly wasn't inherited, he says. He was an only child; his parents treated everyone equally, though Wilson says his father, who owned several gas stations in town, once told him that his grandfather and grandfather's brothers had been involved with the Klan.

"I guess it was just the crowd I ran with," Wilson says with a shrug. "It was sport."

Sport was running moonshine with the likes of Junior Johnson, the famed NASCAR driver who honed his skills outracing police on the back roads of Wilkes County, N.C. Sport was gunning his 1955 Chevrolet — his "little red wagon" — in drag races all over the state.

Sport was marching down Main Street behind hooded members of the KKK. And taunting the young black students who, week after week, walked silently to the segregated lunch counters of Woolworth's and McCrory's only to get arrested by police.

Sport was drunkenly releasing flying squirrels in the bedroom where his young wife slept. Or dragging her to a black speakeasy after a day of catfishing, to show off his skills dancing shag.

"He could dance real well," she says. "But I was scared to death."

Sport was heckling the black protesters on Main Street as they solemnly held placards in front of the segregated stores. "Segregation, America's shame," the handwritten signs read. "No color line in Heaven."

And sport was lying in wait for a certain bus to pull into the Greyhound depot on May 9, 1961. Freedom Riders, they were called, black and white students traveling through the South, testing the new desegregation laws at bus station restaurants and restrooms.

Lewis described what happened in his autobiography, "Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement."

"I approached the 'WHITE' waiting room in the Rock Hill Greyhound Terminal, I noticed a large number of young white guys hanging around the pinball machines in the lobby. Two of these guys were leaning by the doorjamb to the waiting room. They wore leather jackets, had those ducktail haircuts and were each smoking a cigarette.

"Other side, nigger," one of the two said, stepping in my way as I began to walk through the door. He pointed to a door down the way with a sign that said 'COLORED.'... The next thing I knew, a fist smashed the right side of my head. Then another hit me square in the face. As I fell to the floor I could feel feet kicking me hard in the sides. I could taste blood in my mouth."

Wilson winces as he reads the passage from an autographed copy of the book that Lewis gave him. "I don't ever remember kicking him," he says. "But I know he got my fist."

For years Wilson didn't know the identity of the man he had beaten, though he says that over time, guilt began weighing heavy on his heart.

It was only recently, he says, that things became clear.

Willie McCleod. Robert McCullough. John Gaines. W.T. "Dub" Massey. Thomas Gaither. Clarence Graham. James Wells. David Williamson Jr. Mack Workman.

These are the men whom Wilson taunted all those years ago. The men to whom he has been apologizing in recent months, asking their forgiveness and blessing.

Their names are engraved on the stools at the counter of the Old Town Bistro on Main Street. The former McCrory's is now a family-run restaurant that bustles with hospitality and charm. Waitresses greet regulars by name and pour endless cups of coffee for patrons, black and white.

And yet it is impossible to walk in and not feel transported in time.

Sepia-toned photographs hang on the walls, images of young black men at this very counter, where "temporarily closed" signs went up as soon as they sat down.

Outside, a historic plaque marks the spot where nine Friendship Junior College students took an extraordinary stand on Jan. 31, 1961, choosing jail rather than bail after being arrested for ordering hamburgers and sodas. Convicted of trespassing and breach of peace, the students endured a month's hard labor in a chain gang rather than allow civil rights groups to pay \$100 each for their release. The case of the "Friendship Nine" drew national headlines and soon the policy of "jail, no bail" was being emulated all over the South.

Today, the eight surviving members are hailed as celebrities every time they walk in the door. "They're our history," says a young white waitress one recent afternoon as she serves coffee to Massey and McCleod. She tells them it's on the house.

The men, now in their 60s, smile as they recall those heady days — how young and foolish they were, how filled with conviction and pride. They describe weeks of nonviolent training with the Congress of Racial Equality, a Gandhi-inspired civil rights organization that taught them not to respond when men like Wilson dumped soda on their heads, or stubbed lit cigarettes into their skin, or flung ammonia at the counter.

And they describe the swirl of emotions they feel, even now, when they return to this place. There is joy and sadness, says McCleod, who owns a plumbing and septic business. Joy at what they accomplished. Sadness that there was such hate.

Says Massey, a retired minister who works with special education students: "There is always a small part of me goes back to that day."

The men say they never thought about their tormentors as individuals with real lives and real names. They forgave them a long time ago.

So it has been strange and somewhat discomfoting to suddenly be confronted by a real name, a real man, a white bigot who wants to repent.

An unease creeps into their conversation when it turns to the subject of apologies. There have been several in recent years — when Mayor Doug Echols officially apologized to Lewis during the congressman's January 2008 return to Rock Hill, when the York County Council apologized to the Friendship Nine at the dedication of the plaque. And now Elwin Wilson.

His apology, offered in the restaurant in January, was facilitated by the local newspaper, The Herald, which Wilson called after reading an article about the Friendship Nine.

Not all the men agreed to meet with him. Privately, some questioned his motives, his timing, his sincerity.

David Williamson, for one, had no qualms. He understands a man wanting to put his affairs in order before meeting his maker. "I think it is a testament to how the world has changed and how hearts have changed," Williamson says.

McCleod went too, saying it was not for him to judge another man's heart. Massey demurred, saying he couldn't take time off work.

It was at the January meeting that Wilson finally discovered that the student he had beaten at the bus station had gone on to become a congressman — a discovery that eventually led to his well-publicized apology to Lewis in Washington.

Mack Workman, another member of the Friendship Nine who now lives in New York, watched the apology on television, listened as the congressman praised Wilson's "raw courage." And yet Workman felt dissatisfied.

"In the back of my mind I just keep thinking, 'Why now?'"

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Wilson says he gave up drinking in 1976. He is less sure of when he gave up hating blacks.

"By the time I went to college I had dropped all that jumping on them," he says. "I still didn't want to marry one or anything like that."

That was in the 1970s when Wilson was in his late 30s. Over the years, he had drifted through different jobs — construction foreman, welder, millwright. He had joined the Air Force where, in Biloxi, Miss, he began associating with blacks as equals for the first time. And he had returned to Rock Hill, where he enrolled in the Friendship Junior College under the GI bill.

He saw no irony in the fact that the college was black. It was convenient, he says. And times had changed.

And yet there was a hardness in Wilson's heart that hadn't changed — a hate that boiled over frequently, especially when it came to race.

In the 1980s, when the local cemetery began burying blacks alongside whites, Wilson became so incensed he threatened to disinter the bodies of his parents. When a black family bought a house in the neighborhood around the same time, Wilson accosted the real estate agent and demanded that the sale be rescinded.

He yelled racial insults whenever his grandson, Christopher, whom he raised, talked on the phone to his black wrestling buddy. When a garden ornament — a stone statue of a black boy in straw hat — was vandalized in Wilson's front yard, he strung up a black doll with a noose around its neck, and threatened to use an AK-47 against a neighbor who complained.

As late as 1999, when his Baptist pastor began encouraging more black participation, Wilson got so upset he left the church.

Wilson says now he is ashamed of his behavior. He has since apologized to his grandson and to the neighbor he threatened. And he has been surprised by how liberated the apologies have made him feel. People don't understand the burden of carrying all that hate, he says.

The burden only grew as Wilson got older and began to put his affairs in order, buying burial plots for himself and Judy, dolefully pondering the afterlife.

"I'm going to hell," he told Clarence Bradley one day in January, when, feeling poorly after yet another doctor visit, he stopped by his friend's auto paint and body shop on Eastview Road. The two have long shared an interest in antiques and cars.

Slumped on the sofa, surrounded by mementoes from the 1950s — a vintage soda machine with bottles of Coca Cola and Orange Crush, dusty photographs of old cars and old times — Bradley had never seen his friend so sick or so low.

Bradley is a solidly built man of 62 with a serious manner and firm opinions about the urgent need for more people to invite the Lord into their lives.

"If you truly ask forgiveness and you mean it in your heart, you can be saved," he told Wilson. "You just have to let the Lord guide you."

They talked about it some more. Another friend, a part-time preacher, walked in. For the next five minutes the three men bowed their heads in prayer.

"Only God and Elwin know what's in his heart," Bradley says. "But I can tell you something in that man changed that day."

Wilson says he felt it too, a profound sense of peace, a feeling he was no longer doomed.

"It's not like I stopped cussing or anything," he says. "But I didn't feel the same hate."

A week later, Wilson spent the day watching the inauguration of the nation's first black president. He saw the local newspaper article about the Friendship Nine as they watched too. He knew exactly what to do.

Wilson's two-car garage is an ode to another era, stacked with old soda and pinball machines, vintage phones, an old gas pump, trophies from his drag-racing victories, photos of his father's gas stations in the 1950s.

Nailed to one wall is the "colored" sign that once hung over the restroom in the bus station. For years Wilson thought about selling it, or even donating it to a museum. Lately, he decided he must keep it. He needs to look at it now and then, he says, "to remind me what I did wrong."

In his living room is another reminder, a framed newspaper photograph from 1961. It shows a stylishly dressed black man wiping egg off his hat, surrounded by a bunch of sneering white youths. The muscular young man who threw the egg smirks for the camera.

"That was me," Wilson says, staring intently at the 48-year-old image, trying to remember the specifics of the day. He can't. There were so many like it.

"I am a different man now," he says.

He leafs through some of the recent letters that have poured into his mailbox and starts reading them aloud.

"When I read about your courageous apology, I was moved to tears," wrote a woman from North Carolina. "Your action in seeking forgiveness and the others in forgiving you is now a blessing for others."

"I am African-American and I just want to tell you how grateful I am to hear your story and to know that there are heroes like you in the world," wrote a woman from California. "Your apology touched my heart."

Not everyone was so moved. Wilson says he received one threatening phone call from a man accusing him of betraying the KKK. Another accused him of being a liar. His son, who accompanied Wilson to Washington, still receives racist text messages.

"It hasn't been easy," Wilson says with a sigh.

On this chilly Wednesday evening Wilson had been scheduled to speak at a local black church. But he has been feeling ill all day, so he calls the pastor at the last minute to say he can't make it. His health has to come first, he explains.

Putting down the phone, Wilson complains about being worn out by all the demands. He never thought one man's apology could trigger so much interest, so many invitations and calls. He has been asked to attend several events with Lewis, including one in Selma, Ala., but he is not sure if he will go. He has to consider his safety.

Wilson finishes his liver and okra and turns on his flat-screen television. He says he's tired of talking about the past. He just wants to watch his favorite true-crime show, "Nancy Grace," and catch the latest on the Florida toddler whose mother has been charged with her murder.

His wife says he is obsessed with the case. He follows each twist and turn, every day.

Wilson says he feels like crying when he thinks about the little girl and her terrible fate. "There's just so much bad in the world," he says, shaking his head. "Makes you wonder where it all comes from."

It's 8 p.m. Outside, Wilson's German shepherd, Heidi, barks into the night. Inside, a hundred clocks note the hour, chiming and clanging and vibrating through the house, drowning out the television as they mark the passing of time.