

The Adventures of Forrest Blaine Wilson

HE RETIRED 32 YEARS AGO FROM BLUE RIDGE ELECTRIC, AND HE STILL HAS A WAYS TO GO

By Betty Jane Sheffield

When Forrest Wilson turned 100 years old last May, people asked how he has remained in such good shape. He said, “Living a good clean life, being a Baptist, and being a Republican.”

His advice for a long and happy life is “have a sense of humor” and “make friends.”

“It’s easier to smile and make friends,” he says, “than it is to be a grouch.”

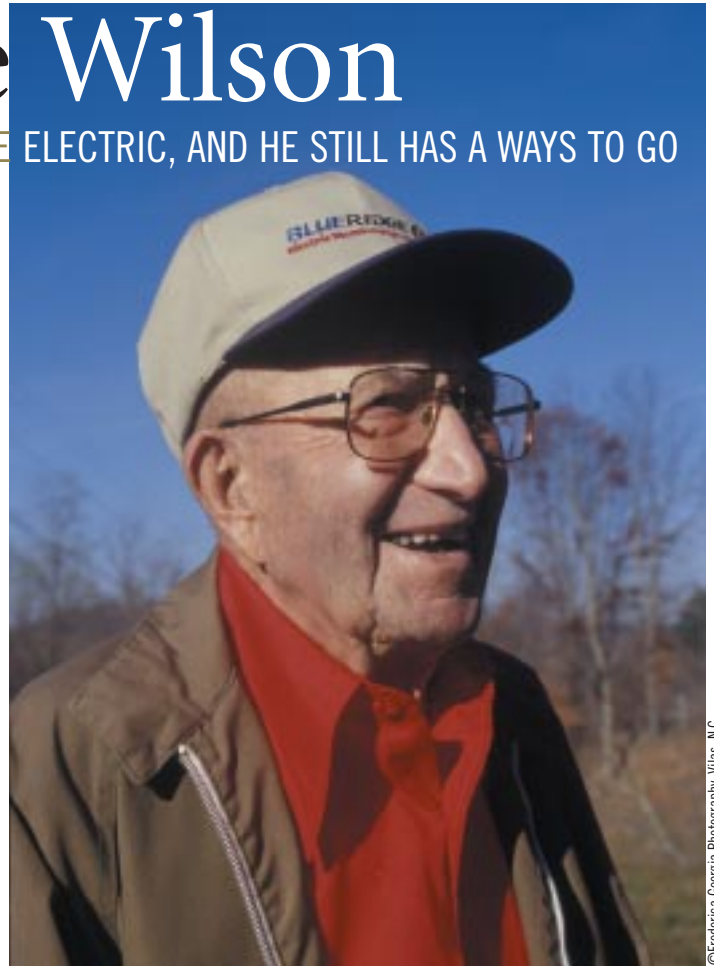
Mr. Wilson smiles at everyone he sees in the Lois E. Harrill Senior Center in Boone, especially pretty women, and it’s a frisky smile that sometimes seems to hide a secret or a sweet memory. He’s a regular at the senior center lunches, driving his Ford Tempo GL down from his Boone Mountain house off Highway 421 near Vilas after tending to his animals or other chores. He keeps goats, mules, cats, a pig, a dog, cows and horses. He’s up at about 7 each morning and generally makes himself breakfast: grits or instant oatmeal, one cup of coffee, and two or three times a week he makes three eggs, sausage or bacon, and buttered toast with grape jelly or honey. His son, Phillip, who lives next door with his wife, Bertha, and their daughter, Melanie Dawn, tells how his dad eats half a 10-inch cornbread cake, sweet milk, and a mess of green beans with a chunk of fatback, pours on about three spoonfuls of salt, and always eats the fatback first. His favorite food is hamburger, or the chicken and dumplings made by his housekeeper, Wanda Brown, who comes every Thursday. His diet must suit him. He says the only time he’s been in a hospital was to visit. The only medication he takes is a half an aspirin per day.

He grew up in Watauga County before electricity reached there and people got around by horse and wagon. Even after working with Blue Ridge Electric for 25 years—from 1946 to 1971—he jokes that he’s still not entirely accustomed to electric lights. During most of the year, he’s up with the sun and in bed asleep before dark.

Forrest Blaine Wilson was born on May 6, 1903, three miles west of Boone in a log house on the family farm. His father taught in the public schools for 40 some years. The family included one girl and five boys, with Forrest as the middle boy. “Mother was a good homemaker and took all of us boys to church in an old horse and buggy.” She lived to age 103. His brother Jerry is 95 and was a barber in Boone for 67 years. Forrest graduated from Cove Creek High School in 1926 and later from business college in Winston-Salem. He worked four and a half years at the Paramount Public Theater and became assistant manager. “I was in the movie picture business when movie pictures started,” he says.

In 1937 he moved into a brand new building that housed his filling station, feed store and living quarters. In 1938 he married Blanche Anderson. He was 35, she was 26. “She was a local girl. She got comin’ into my place of business to buy food. And I realized she was a good cook and a good church-goin’ girl. We got married and lived together for 62 years.” She died in August 2000.

When World War II broke out, Forrest wanted to enlist, but he was nearly 40 and the military wouldn’t take him. The local recruitment office set him up at a factory in Cleveland, Ohio, that made airplane parts. “I worked on the same machine for 16 months, seven days a week, two shifts. The fellow who was supposed to relieve me, he hit the bottle. The inspector wouldn’t let him work and asked me. So I was caught working two shifts—second and third.” On the trip



Forrest Wilson, of Vilas, turned 100 this year.



out to Cleveland, Forrest drove a Model A Ford, moving along at about 20 miles per hour. It was winter and getting colder the farther he drove. As he passed a road crew, he noticed the kerosene smudge pot heaters they were using. He took one to keep warm. On the way back from Cleveland, he set it back on the road where he'd found it.

After the war, back in Boone, he and his cousin, Solomon Edgar Moody, landed work with the fledgling cooperative Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation. Mr. Wilson says that Stanford Berry hired him temporarily, then kept him on when a blizzard knocked out all power in the area. Forrest and his cousin were setting out to go rabbit hunting when Stanford Berry tracked them down and asked them to help put the lines and poles back up. "Which we did," Mr. Wilson says. "Took our dogs and guns to the office and worked all day and slept in the office three nights until we got the power back on." During his time with the cooperative, Mr. Wilson trimmed trees, set poles, maintained lines, even visited people to collect overdue bills ("light bills were \$1.50 a month"). When he retired in 1971, he was the first employee of Blue Ridge Electric to be paid a retirement pension. This past May, Blue Ridge Electric honored Forrest Wilson at a ceremony during its annual membership meeting.

WALKING TO TRADE, AND CAMPING WITH GOATS

He enjoys telling stories about his exploits in the very old days. As a youth, his best friend was Charlie Wilkinson. "One Sunday, Charlie came by after church. After lunch we decided to walk over to Trade, Tennessee, about four miles, to chase the girls. We had to go out of state, because the good mothers didn't approve of it—chasing girls. I ain't gonna tell you nothin' else. But on the way came a storm, and Charlie and I went into this barn for shelter. While we was in there, I saw an old-time rake, to rake hay, and I crawled up on the seat and I noticed a hen's nest full of eggs on the ground. I told Charlie that I would eat one if he would. Charlie took one and I took one. In a little while, Charlie came around. I'm still on the seat. He looked up at me with a pitiful look and said, 'You know that last egg wasn't quite right.' He walked around a little 'til here come his breakfast, lunch and egg. He lost it all. I ate two. I held onto mine."

Then there was the time he and his brothers took a camping trip. "When I was about eight or nine years old, my two younger brothers, Albert and Jerry, used to work goats. And my two older brothers made me and my younger brothers a little homemade wagon. So in early spring, we decided to go camping. We harnessed up two of the goats and hooked 'em to the wagon. Jerry, my youngest brother, decided he wanted to



He tends a menagerie of animals at his place on Boone Mountain.

ride one of the goats. So when we decided everything was in order and were ready to go, we took off and went up to a pasture field on a dirt road. We went up the road about a quarter of a mile where there was a large flat rock along a stream. About the time we got there with our outfit, a big dark collie dog came out of the woods. He came up close to where we were camping, and the goats were afraid of the dog. So we realized we're in for some excitement. Jerry was still riding the large

angora goat, holding onto his long curly hair, and he broke loose and made back for the barn. We all started back, and when we got back to the barn, we encountered all kinds of excitement. The goat that Jerry was riding went up on top of this big barn with Jerry on it. Turkeys, geese, chickens, piggins, all a'makin all kinds of noise. Mother came out of the kitchen to see what the excitement was, and when she got out and looked around and saw Jerry on top of the barn with Jerry on the goat, Mother threw a fit. Oh, Lordy! She reached down

and got her long dress and she came down the hill. She called on the Lord to help us out of that commotion. After about a half an hour, everything was back normal."

Forrest Wilson can be reached c/o L.E. Harrill Senior Center, 132 Poplar Grove Connector, Suite A, Boone, NC 28607.

Betty Jane Sheffield is a member of Blue Ridge Electric and lives in Boone.



His younger brother Jerry, 95, was a barber for 67 years in Boone. Forrest says, "He was the workingest boy I've ever seen. And the teacher's pet. Liked him so much she kept him in one grade for three years."

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