



Wilson's Mills Recollections

Benji Parrish

Interviewed on May 14, 2025

Introduction

Benji Parrish, born in 1959, has spent his life rooted in the soil and spirit of Wilson's Mills, North Carolina. Now 65, he shares memories shaped by generations of family stories, farm work, school days, and small-town traditions. His reflections are more than recollections—they are a living thread in the fabric of Wilson's Mills, connecting past to present with heart, humor, and history.

Family

Benji's family tree is deeply entwined with the roots of Wilson's Mills. His grandfather was one of the few with a steady job during the Great Depression, delivering mail along country roads. His grandmother, Eliza Mitchner Parrish, came from one of the area's earliest families. "Somehow I'm kin to the Wilsons, the Uzzles, the Youngbloods—four or five generations back, we're all the same people, I guess," he said with a smile. The Parrishes once owned over 130 acres where the Handy Mart now stands, land passed down through the generations. Today, Benji still lives in the house his grandfather built in 1922—one of the town's oldest homes—surrounded by 77 acres of family land.

Life on the Farm

Growing up, Benji was no stranger to hard work. "Most people farmed around here," he recalled. "You'd help each other burn tobacco all day long just to eat lunch. That was their pay." At five years old, he was already behind the wheel of a tractor. By six, he was steering his father's '67 Ford pickup—with no power steering or brakes—down the road to JD's store, picking up moon pies and sodas for the farm hands. "It sounds unheard of today," he said, chuckling, "but back then, that was just part of growing up." He also worked grading cucumbers at the local buying station and hauling produce using forklifts, often working until 2:00 in the morning.

School Life

Benji's earliest school days began at Wilson's Mills School, where he spent countless afternoons shooting hoops in the old brick gymnasium, still standing today as part of Wilson's Mills Elementary. His mother, Leona Parrish, was a beloved English teacher whose name still echoes in the memories of former students throughout the Smithfield area. From the 1950s until her retirement in 1979, she taught with both firmness and heart, pioneering a mini-course system that challenged and inspired. Because of her job, Benji attended school in Smithfield, eventually graduating from Triple S High School in 1977. One of his first steps into adult life came unexpectedly—what began as a light-hearted remark about teaching turned into a real

opportunity when he found himself in front of a classroom as a substitute teacher in the early 1980s.

Around Town

To hear Benji tell it, Wilson's Mills was once the kind of town where everyone knew your name, and likely your grandparents' too. He paints a picture of a community knit together by front porch conversations, local stores, and shared stories. "The old post office used to be across from the police station," he remembered. "My granddaddy owned it, and right beside it was the gas company." JD's store was more than a place to grab a soda—it was where neighbors lingered, and news was shared.

He recalled the small businesses that dotted the streets—the barber shop run by Luke Capps, Mr. Atwood's convenience store, and the community dances held in what's now a church building near the railroad tracks. "There was a yellow house across the track where my cousin grew up. We spent our days riding bikes all over town. The population was only about 300 back then." The cotton gin, fertilizer warehouse, and the U-bar restaurant—transformed from a gas station—were staples of the local economy and memory alike. Even the fire department had a homegrown origin. "They built it in 1972. Just a two-bay building. That old antique fire truck in there? That's what we used back then."

The Train Derailment of 1977

Of all his memories, one stands out with cinematic clarity—a summer day in 1977 when a train derailed just feet from where Benji was working. He was 17, fresh out of high school, helping Peter Wilson put up siding on a building near the railroad. "I was holding the tape measure one minute and the next, I saw this cloud of white dust coming from the train. I thought it was Lyme blowing off the cars... but then I saw the wheels off the track!"

As the train rocked and rumbled, it finally tipped, "Boom, boom, boom!" Benji ran, turning only once to watch cars filled with coal and cornflakes pile up like dominoes. "It was like a bulldozer pushing dirt five feet high. There's probably still coal in front of the police station to this day," he said. Miraculously, no one was hurt, but the memory remains as powerful and vivid as ever.

Epilogue

For Benji Parrish, Wilson's Mills isn't just a hometown, it's a living memory. "What does Wilson's Mills mean to me today?" he mused. "A very different place." The fields have thinned, the stores have changed, and the quiet country pace has quickened. Yet the echoes remain, in the brick gymnasium where he once played basketball, in the porch steps of homes that still stand, and in the stories passed down like family heirlooms.

Benji's recollections are more than personal, they're part of a collective memory that tells the story of a town and the people who shaped it. His voice, rich with detail and affection, helps ensure that even as Wilson's Mills moves forward, it never forgets where it came from.