



Wilson's Mills Oral History

Carolyn Dobbin, Ruth Harper, and Joan Harris

Interviewed on June 5, 2025

Growing Up in Wilson's Mills

Carolyn Dobbin, Ruth Harper, and Joan Harris all spent their childhood in Wilson's Mills during a time when life moved at the pace of a mule cart and community meant knowing every neighbor by name. Ruth and Joan recalled a childhood surrounded by farmland, blacksmiths, cotton gins, and the comforting rhythm of family life. Joan, who was in first grade around 1945, vividly remembers a time when there were no cars in town—only wagons and mules. “There were some cars, but very few... the highway was a dirt road back then... more mule and wagon traffic.”

Town Life

Their stories paint a vibrant picture of early Wilson's Mills—one where mail was hung from a tall pole and caught by a moving train, and outdoor movies were shown on the wall of a nearby store building. “Miss Kelly was the postal carrier back then,” they remembered, as well as Mr. Capps, who ran the local barbershop. On one side of the tracks, there was a post office, fish market, gas station, and stores, while in another part of town, there was Durant's store. They recall watching the ice man come from Selma with blocks of ice and butter that was churned at home. “Our dads would milk the cows in the morning and bring the buckets inside. We'd strain the milk before it went in the fridge—or the icebox, I guess!”

Community Life

Life was simple and strong. Families grew their own vegetables, canned food in big batches, and stored potatoes underground for winter in a spot they lovingly called ‘Potato Hill.’ “We shared what we had—food, tools, time. Nobody thought twice about it.” Church events were a central part of life. Chicken pastry suppers, Bible school, and holiday programs brought everyone together. They remembered walking to church in the summer and sitting in the same pews her parents had occupied. “We didn't have to worry about anyone getting snatched or harmed. We left doors unlocked,” they said. “It was a pleasant life—I wish we could go back to that way.” Neighbors helped each other farm, build porches, and carry heavy loads. Joan's grandfather once helped move an entire church building—using only logs, ropes, and willing hands.

Traveling to Smithfield

Before local groceries were available, most families traveled to Smithfield for supplies. There were no buses at first, and no traffic signals. "There were no stop lights. No, nothing, you know." Ruth recalled catching a train to Selma for a movie and being picked up by Carolyn's grandfather, Mr. Major Wilder, in his car, where he was the janitor at Selma Elementary. "We were younger than teenagers at that time." Despite the unfairness of segregation, they fondly reminisced about a restaurant called The Red Apple, where they were only allowed to place orders at the back door.

Wilson's Mills Today

Though they all noted that growth has brought change, their love for the town remains strong. "I love it myself," Carolyn said. "It's a part of me," Joan added, "The families knew each other from day one." They shared that they would welcome a few more restaurants but hope that future development doesn't erase the small-town spirit they've cherished their whole lives. "We were all friends. That's what made Wilson's Mills special."