

John Wilson's Interview of John Parris

June 5th, 1975

HL_MSS17-03_19_46

Transcribed and Annotated by

Jo Norwood

For ENGL-653: Southern Literature

Instructor: Dr. Mae Claxton

October 26th, 2025

Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography was prepared by students in ENGL 659: Southern Literature. The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

- Demonstrate proficiency with research tools and relevant technology for this subject along with appropriate scholarly material
- Communicate scholarly information to a group of peers
- Develop an appreciation of the culture, history, and art of the region

All work is presented as submitted by the graduate students. While they take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are possible. As they learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires meticulous research and corroboration by authoritative sources. Our objective is to provide transcriptions and annotations of WCU's Special Collections materials that will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, patrons, and all users of our library's resources. If you wish to submit an emendation or correction for this document, please email Dr. Mae Miller Claxon (mclaxton@wcu.edu).

Introduction

This edition is created from the audio file containing a conversation between John Wilson and John Parris. Within the audio recording John Wilson relays to John Parris information on the death of Oscar “Ott” Lloyd Blair. Wilson asks Parris about a story he did on Blair, but Parris says he never did such a story. The two of them go back and forth for a minute about this, and Wilson mentions seeing the story in a newspaper. Wilson goes on to ask Parris to help him set a foundation and scholarship at Lees-McRae College in honor of Blair.

John Alvis Parris Jr. was born in Sylva, North Carolina on November 23rd, 1914. John served as a correspondent during the second world war, reporting from the European and North African theaters respectively. After the war, John began working for the *Asheville Citizen* and *Asheville Citizen-Times* as a regular contributor with the column he’d come to be known for, “Roaming the Mountains.” Parris wrote several pieces on the mountains including *Mountain Cooking*, *The Cherokee Story*, and *These Storied Mountains*. John Parris also helped to establish the journalism studies program at Western Carolina University and he is now the namesake for the “John Parris Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Cultural Studies” position at WCU in the Department of English. He died on May 17th, 1999. Parris’ remains are currently interred at Keener Cemetery in his hometown of Sylva, North Carolina.

John Bernhardt Wilson was born in Lenoir, North Carolina on March 10th, 1932. He was an incredibly accomplished scholar having graduated from several prestigious schools including Princeton University, Harvard Business School, and Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. During his lifetime, Wilson worked as a professor at Appalachian State, the owner of the Mast General Store in Banner Elk, and a Presbyterian minister. Wilson also owned and

operated a greenery alongside the shop's namesake, his wife Lee. He passed away at 72 years old on August 27th, 2004 after a long battle with illness. Wilson's remains were cremated.

Oscar "Ott" Lloyd Blair Sr was born on September 9th, 1894 in Watauga County, North Carolina. His exact place of birth is unknown. Ott lived all his life in Avery County, where he found his home in Banner Elk. He had several children with his wife, Myrtle Blair, who is buried next to him. Ott had many jobs in his life including general laborer, potato farmer, and lumberman; however most people knew him as the "sled man." While being the "sled man," Ott handcrafted sleds from his home off of Highway 194, and these sleds would be used to draw horses. He died at 80 years old on June 4th, 1975, and his grave is located at Elk Valley Baptist Church Cemetery in his home of Avery County, North Carolina.

Transcription

John Parris: Hello

Dorothy Parris¹: For John Parris?

John Wilson: Yes

Dorothy: Go ahead

John Wilson: Um Mr. Parris?

Parris: Yes.

Wilson: It's John Wilson, and I'm very honored to talk to you. My mother's Delle Wilson² down in Morganton.

Parris: Oh, yes.

Wilson: Alright. I teach up here at Appalachian³ and run mast store⁴, you know?

Parris: Oh, yes.

Wilson: One of your friends and mine died yesterday. He's Ott Blair, that you wrote an article about the old that makes the sleds down the road. Do you remember?

¹ Dorothy Luxton Parris, Wife of John Parris; (1905-1995).

² Ella Delight Bernhardt Wilson, Mother of John Wilson; (1903-1984)

³ Appalachian State, located in Boone, North Carolina, was first opened as a teacher's college in 1899, later allowing other programs and eventually joining the University of North Carolina school system.

⁴ The Original Mast General Store was first created as Taylor & Moore General Store in the 1850s. It was then partially sold to William Wellington Mast, after which it was called Taylor & Mast General Store up until 1913 when it officially became the Mast General Store. The store was sold by the Mast family in 1973 to a doctor from Atlanta and a professor at Appalachian State University. That professor was John B. Wilson.

Parris: Ott Blair

Wilson: He makes sleds down between Banner Elk and Heaton, North Carolina.

Parris: That must have been somebody from I recall seeing a story

Wilson: No you wrote it

Parris: I?

Wilson: I've seen your article about it. You wrote it and told the welfare people to go to hell.

Parris: No, not me.

Wilson: Keep on working.

Parris: No, not, not me.

Wilson: I think it was John.

Parris: Uh I was gonna say that there was a piece in the Charlotte Observer. (Parris stammers).

Wilson: It's in the City Chronicle and everywhere else. I think you've been there.

Parris: Well, I never, no I never did. Uh, um. (Parris stammers again).

Wilson: Well

Parris: Because um, when I discovered I I'd heard about him and then the Charlotte Observer did it, and I was going to wait a while after it died down you know, before they uh

Wilson: Alright

Parris: So, I never did.

Wilson: Well, let me just tell you what

Parris: Right

Wilson: I'd like to ask your help in doing something

Parris: Uh huh

Wilson: Umm, he died yesterday, and he's been an awful good friend of ours up here. Only thing I needed to do was to set up a scholarship here at uh Lees-McRae College.⁵

Parris: Uh huh

Wilson: For a student from this area. (Long uh). You know, um. If you, of course first priority is the Blair children⁶, if there are then grandchildren⁷, but to those children who, as far as we're concerned, best exemplified, the kind of thing Ott stood for.

Parris: Mhm

Wilson: Which was, far as I'm concerned, left up for individualism and work

⁵ Lees-McRae College is a private college affiliated with the Presbyterian Church that was formed in 1900. It was named after local teacher, Elizabeth McRae, and college benefactor, Susanna Lees.

⁶ Lillie Mae Blair; (1917-1980)

Pvt Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr; (1919-2000)

Carolyn Harriest Blair Hicks; (1921-1997)

Susie Lorain Blair; (1923-2016)

Oscar Lloyd Blair Jr; (1925-1935)

Ernest Hoover Blair; (1928-1997)

Charles Hazen Blair; (1937-1979)

⁷ Louise Myrtle Blair Laws; Daughter of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr (1940-2007)

Frances Blair Harmon; Daughter of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr (1942-2025)

Dorian Lee Blair; Son of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr (1953-2016)

Lloyd Harrison Blair Jr; Son of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr

Kathie Gwyn; Daughter of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr

David Harold Blair; Son of Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr

Carter Lee Blair; Son of Susie Lorain Blair

Parris: Right

Wilson: Hard work

Parris: Right

Wilson: Which is what he did. And I'd like to set that foundation up⁸. And here at Lees-McRae and I'd like to get your help, if you would, because he's a legend here in the mountains. I don't know how to do anything

Parris: Right, well. How can I help?

Wilson: You can help by once we set the thing up, by telling his story and his stories over and over again. You know, the welfare people came to him, told him he need to quit work, that they could pay him more than they could make him work. And he told them to go to hell. You know, he's gonna keep on working. He worked, he died when he was 83 years old

Parris: When did he, he died yesterday?

Wilson: Yes. He made all these sleds, you, you, I'm sure you've seen them, you know, I'm sure you've.

Parris: Well, I, I knew about it, but I never gotten around. I'd never done a story on him.

Wilson: I thought you did, John.

Parris: No, but uh, um uh

Wilson: I know Johnson City Press Chronicle had and I know Chase Carrie had too

⁸ Scholarship founded in Fall of 1975 by John B. Wilson in honor of Oscar "Ott" Blair.

Parris: Mhm

Wilson: Some other people

Parris: I

Wilson: But what I'm saying is I'd hate for just to go to my measly two-hundred dollars a year. You know? I think with a little bit of press, that man, as far as I'm concerned, he just epitomized all the values that I've ever seen that were really about these mountains

Parris: Well, do you have any material, or any of those clippings

Wilson: I can get them for you

Parris: or anything?

Wilson: Yes, ma'am. I can get them. Yes, sir, I can get them for you.

Parris: Alright what, what about uh, now, what about you?

Wilson: Funeral's tomorrow, funeral's tomorrow

Parris: Well you see, I can still come back, I mean, on next week and do a story saying here is this man uh

Wilson: Well I'm saying if he aint ever been in your column Roaming in the Mountains he sure as hell deserves to be.

Parris: What I wanna know is now, who's gonna set up the foundation? Alright, will you tell me all about that and when you're going to do it? And I mean, with your uh, send me all the material that you can, whatever, that you think should be added to it in your own words and whatnot.

Wilson: Okay

Parris: And then I'll do a story on it. Alright?

Wilson: Well I appreciate it, is that all it takes

Parris: Let me give you my address

Wilson: Yes, sir

Parris: See I only go into Asheville, but once a week and my mail

Wilson: I wouldn't go in that much

Parris: Cause I'm usually out. It's John Parris, Box 638, Sylva, S Y L V A

Wilson: Uh

Parris: And that's uh, zip code, 28779

Wilson: Alright

Parris: Could you get it to me as quickly as you can and uh everything that you can and then how can I get back in touch with you if I

Wilson: You've heard of the old Mast store here?

Parris: Oh, yes

Wilson: Well, I own the old Mast store for about five years, I run it

Parris: Well uh I uh

Wilson: All you gonna have to do is call the mast store

Parris: Uh I was coming up the Charlotte Observer's done a lot on that and

Wilson: *unintelligible* He's done a good job

Parris: And uh, usually when, just before that I didn't know I was working out a trip to go up there and do some things, and was going to go by the mast store. I've done stories on Mast over the years, and here I pick up the paper and bang here and cut a story. So uh, you know

Wilson: Well uh don't worry about that, we're doing a lot more things than that. Now my wife Lee⁹, she has a cat, I recon you saw the article they did

Parris: Right

Wilson: About the greenhouse¹⁰

Parris: Yeah

Wilson: And I dont know you just need to get up this way. I've read every book you got and I like every one of them. And I swear to goodness, I thought that you had done this thing about Ott.

Parris: No I, I

Wilson: He's one of the first people I ever met when I came here 12 years ago to teach at Lees-McRae and uh I don't know, he epitomized anti-government and everything else and individualism here in the mountains. You know, right?

⁹ Lenore "Lee" Larson Wilson, wife of John Wilson; (1931-2016).

¹⁰ Lee's Greenery was first founded in 1974 and was named after John Wilson's wife, Lee. The greenhouse was located on Hall Court in Banner Elk, North Carolina. It closed its doors after close to 20 years of being open in 1994.

Parris: I usually work a couple of times, I get up for the singing on the mountain, I used to stay up there three or four days and then go on round to *unintelligible*

Wilson: Well when you come, come see us

Parris: and then I get up , get back up there in July for the other and I do the same thing then

Wilson: Well, I'm right beside the college

Parris: Right

Wilson: So when you come in, just come in to the college and turn right, they're trying to tell us now, you know, because of zoning¹¹ that we can't sell out of the greenhouse you know?

Parris: Is that right?

Wilson: Oh yeah we got a law kind of battle going. But listen, you got company and I just wanted to call you

Parris: No, I haven't got company, that was my wife answering the phone

Wilson: Oh , I thought I heard a lot of noise

Parris: No, you just heard the TV (John laughs)

Wilson: Yeah okay

Parris: No, is the old Mast house still there?

Wilson: Yes sir, built one building, now we're a bicentennial site, and so is that place

¹¹ Lee's Greenery would file for a change of address on December 9th of 1976.

Parris: What about the uh weaving house¹²?

Wilson: Sir?

Parris: What about the weaving house?

Wilson: I hope it's still there, uh, one of the buildings fell down, I don't know which ones which.

My Aunt Margaret Harper¹³ in Lenoir, was Fort Defiance¹⁴ all the time

Parris: Mhm

Wilson: And she is very concerned about the weaving house, I told her, I don't know which one is the weaving house and which one isn't

Parris: The weaving house is a log house out in front of the big white house

Wilson: On the left or on the right

Parris: It's on the left

Wilson: Well, it's still there then, the one on the right fell down

Parris: It's a two story, but uh um, I mean an outside stair we used to have is about to tumble down when i used to, and then behind that was a lock shed with a lot of tools and stuff in it.

Wilson: Well I think that's probably what fell down, but now you're gonna have to come up and see it

¹² The Weaving House in Banner Elk is now known as the Banner House Museum.

¹³ Margaret Ellen Harper, Aunt of John Wilson; (1895-1984)

¹⁴ Fort Defiance is on the National Register of Historic Places and was the home of Revolutionary War General, William Lenoir. Lenoir is the namesake of both Lenoir County, North Carolina, and Lenoir, North Carolina in Caldwell County.

Parris: Alright, I will, I'll get up there, because I had done when one of the mans was still living in the house there, he was blind

Wilson: I don't know that one

Parris: And uh, well he's been dead for uh

Wilson: Well, I'll tell you what I've got uh Mr. Parris

Parris: Uh huh

Wilson: I hadn't paid much attention to the store for years and then I got back into it because a lot of people were saying its going out. I've been teaching over at Appalachian,

Parris: Right

Wilson: But now I'm going to do this greenhouse thing full time. We found old books all the way back to 1890, I mean old ledgers, and old receipts and stuff we pasted them on wallpaper books, and it's, it's uh historians gallery. You know, if you want to order off and compare the prices, if nothing else. But we got stuff here. Exxon¹⁵ has found out we're the oldest Exxon digger in the east and they have now set up and I want you to be here when they do that

Parris: Right

Wilson: But don't say anything about it before that

Parris: Right

¹⁵ Formerly known as Standard Oil, Exxon had been a partner of Mast General Store since 1930 and helped in getting the original store put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

Wilson: And they have, we have set up a foundation for the preservation of the store and they are contributing twenty-five-hundred dollars to do things that we wouldn't ordinarily do in the course of business, like put in either a sprinkler system or a heating system or something else of that nature

Parris: About twenty-five-thousand they coulda put in without me

Wilson: Well, I think, I think we might get them up at them but we've got some people that as them to other than us. You know?

Parris: Right. When do they plan, when do they plan to do that?

Wilson: As soon as we get the foundation set up, we see about next couple of weeks

Parris: Okay

Wilson: Well I'll be in touch in with you

Parris: Alright, bye

Wilson: I'm glad I found you, and um, I tell you this other thing, um, this is one of the greatest men that's ever, far as I'm concerned, that's ever

Parris: Well I, I

AUDIO CUTS OUT AT END OF CONVERSATION

Works Cited

- “Dell Bernhardt Wilson.” *North Carolina, U.S., Death Indexes, 1908-2004*. The Blackstone Group.
www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/8908/records/6805384?tid=&pid=&queryId=e4b0d864-f3de-457d-8e0c-32c8c5073690&_phsrc=XQK117&_phstart=successSource.
AncestryLibrary. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.
- “Dorothy Luxton Parris.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 30 May 2010.
www.findagrave.com/memorial/53011514/dorothy-parris. Accessed 30 Oct. 2025.
- “Ella Delight ‘Dell’ Bernhardt Wilson.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 19 Nov. 2014, www.findagrave.com/memorial/138973281/ella_delight-wilson. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.
- “Filings for Lees Greenery, Inc. (North Carolina (US)).” *Opencorporates*. OpenCorporates Ltd.
https://opencorporates.com/companies/us_nc/0084367/filings. Accessed 31 Oct. 2025.
- “History.” *The Mast Story*. Mast General Store. www.mastgeneralstore.com/the-mast-story. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.
- “History of Lees-McRae.” *Lees-McRae*. Lees-McRae University.
www.lmc.edu/about/history.htm. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025.
- “John Alvis Parris Jr.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 30 May 2010,
www.findagrave.com/memorial/53011423/john-alvis-parris. Accessed 1 Nov. 2025.

“John Bernhardt Wilson.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 29 October 2022. www.findagrave.com/memorial/245162984/john-bernhardt-wilson. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

“John Bernhardt Wilson.” *U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007*. The Blackstone Group.

www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/60901/records/46482434?tid=&pid=&queryId=c4c5b567-fa3c-46c4-9600-78fd65afdb0c&_phsrc=XQK112&_phstart=successSource&_gl=1*6xtsg5*_up*MQ..*_ga*NDU2Nzc2MzIxLjE3NjIzNTEzMjA.*_ga_4QT8FMEX30*c2M3ZTRmNGYyLWRiY2UtNGE5MS04YjY1LWNkZmI4YjBmMTYzOCRvMSRnMCR0MTc2MjM1MTMxOSRqNjAkBDaKaDA.*_ga_LMK6K2LSJH*c2M3ZTRmNGYyLWRiY2UtNGE5MS04YjY1LWNkZmI4YjBmMTYzOCRvMSRnMCR0MTc2MjM1MTMxOSRqNjAkBDaKaDA. *AncestryLibrary*. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.

“Lenore ‘Lee’ Larson Wilson.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 13 Dec. 2016, www.findagrave.com/memorial/173847776/lenore-wilson. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025

“Margaret Ellen Harper.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 2 Jul. 2008, www.findagrave.com/memorial/27978427/margaret_ellen-harper. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

“Myrtle Bell Stansberry Blair.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 21 Nov. 2010, www.findagrave.com/memorial/61964352/myrtle_bell-blair. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025.

“Our History.” *App State*. Appalachian State University. www.appstate.edu/about/history/. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025.

“Oscar Lloyd ‘Ott’ Blair Sr.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 21 Nov. 2010. www.findagrave.com/memorial/61964312/oscar_lloyd-blair. Accessed 25 Oct. 2025.

“Origin.” *The Mast Story*. Mast General Store. www.mastgeneralstore.com/the-mast-story. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.

“Pvt Lloyd Harrison Blair Sr.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 21 Nov. 2010. www.findagrave.com/memorial/61964205/lloyd_harrison-blair. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

“Susie Lorain Blair.” *Find A Grave*. Ancestry/The Blackstone Group, 3 Feb. 2016. www.findagrave.com/memorial/157757804/susie_lorain-blair. Accessed 5 Nov. 2025.

“Welcome to the Banner House Museum.” *Banner House Museum*. Greater Banner Elk Heritage Foundation. <https://bannerhousemuseum.org/>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

Hilliard, Nita. “Lees-McRae Scholarship To Honor ‘Sled Maker’.” *The Watauga Democrat*, “Behind the Byline,” 29 Sep. 1975, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn82007642/1975-09-29/ed-1/seq-2/#words=John+B,+Wilson>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2025.

Zehmer, J.G. and Sherry, I. Penney. “Fort Defiance.” National Register of Historic Places Inventory/Nomination Form, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina, 26 June 1970. <https://files.nc.gov/ncdcr/nr/CW0002.pdf>. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.