

Interview of Andrew “Andy” Wilson by John Parris

Sunday, July 6th, 1975

MS # HL_MSS17-03_19_47_Parris_Wilson_1975-07-06

Transcribed and Edited by

Nicholas Griekspoor

For English 659: Southern Literature

Instructor and General Editor: Dr. Mae Claxton

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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 Claxton (mclaxton@wcu.edu).

Introduction to the Document

John Alvis Parris Jr. (1914–1999) was one of Western North Carolina's most influential writers and cultural preservationists. Born and raised in Sylva, Parris began his journalism career as a teenager, contributing local columns to *The Ruralite* before earning national recognition at just sixteen for his coverage of a serpent-handling preacher. His reporting talent led him to positions with United Press and later the Associated Press, where he covered major events of World War II, including the London Blitz and the North African invasion. Despite his global experiences, Parris's heart remained rooted in the southern Appalachians.

In 1955, he returned home to begin his long-running *Roaming the Mountains* column for the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. Over forty-two years and more than 7,000 columns, Parris captured the stories, speech, and spirit of mountain people, preserving a rapidly disappearing way of life. His columns and five books -

Roaming the Mountains (1955), *My Mountains, My People* (1957), *Mountain Bred* (1967), *These Storied Mountains* (1972), and *Mountain Cooking* (1982) - blend folklore, history, and lyrical prose to celebrate Appalachian culture. Parris's ability to earn the trust of locals gave his writing an authenticity few outsiders could achieve. His work earned numerous honors, including the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Award and Western Carolina University's first Doctorate of Humane Letters. Today, his legacy endures through the John and Dorothy Parris Distinguished Professorship in Appalachian Cultural Studies at WCU. Parris remains a vital voice of the mountains - a chronicler whose work immortalized the people and traditions of Appalachia (Casada, "John Parris: Muse of the Mountains").

Parris recorded the following interview for his *Roaming the Mountains* column on July 6, 1975, nearly seven months after the Sylva division of the Mead Paper Corporation shuttered its 45-year-old facility. He spoke with Andrew Bridges "Andy" Wilson, owner of a local insurance agency, about Wilson's comments in the *Raleigh News and Observer* article covering Mead's closure, which appeared in that day's paper. Steve Berg, the article's author, had interviewed Wilson while he stood on Sylva's Main Street chatting with his friends, attorney W. Paul Holt Jr. and Jackson County Sheriff Fred Holcombe. There are minor discrepancies between Wilson's remarks to Berg and his later conversation with Parris, leading to a humorous story about Wilson being too intoxicated to remember what he had said earlier. Overall, the discussion captures the townspeople's mixed reactions to the paper mill's closure and offers an intriguing glimpse into the lives of some of Sylva's most prominent and influential men.

This recording was preserved on cassette tape and is housed in Western Carolina University's Special Collections. Care was taken to faithfully transcribe both speakers' words, accents, and tones of speech, preserving any stuttering, word repetition, or filler words. Relevant non-speech sounds occurring within the conversation are noted in brackets.

Transcription

John Parris (0:01 – 0:16) An interview with Andy Wilson¹ on uh, Sunday, uh, July the sixth, uh, 1975, on uh Mead Corporation² quotes in the News and Observer³.

Andy Wilson (0:17 – 0:19) Hasn't done as much as it's gonna do if we don't get something back in it.

JP (0:19 – 0:32) I mean, what, what, what if the closing – what impact has the closing of Mead had on the county⁴? In your estimation?

AW (0:33 – 0:58) Of course, Johnny⁵, it's hurt business. But, personally, I've had enough insurance, you know, that I had the personal insurance leave up there. I didn't have any of Mead's, but I had – I had enough of the other fellows that have gone. I don't know how many was hit with this but they've gone to Alabama, and they went to Indiana, and they went to Virginia.⁶

JP (0:59 – 1:03) Mm hm. How many would you say that you lost?

AW (1:04 – 1:07) I don't know John exactly how many I lost, uh –

JP (1:07 – 1:08) Thirty or forty?

AW (1:09 – 1:11) Well no, not that many. I lost fifteen –

JP (1:11) Huh?

AW (1:12 – 1:15) I lost fifteen or twenty.

JP (1:16 – 1:22) Mm hm. Uh, do you think this has set the county, uh, Sylva⁷ back uh, twenty or thirty years?

¹ Andrew Bridges “Andy” Wilson, 1919 – 1991 (Find a Grave). Native of Jackson County NC and owner of Wilson Insurance Agency (Other Deaths: Andrew B. Wilson). He was 56 years old at the time of this interview.

² The Sylva Division of the Mead Paper Corporation. This plant was operational from 1928 to 1974 and made paper from wood pulp. By the 1950s, it employed hundreds of workers and had a yearly payroll of more than \$1,000,000. It was the county's largest employer for decades (County's Economic Juggernaut).

³ A primary newspaper read by many North Carolinians, first published under this name by Samuel A. Ashe in 1880. The paper has a complex political history; notably, it was a propogandist instigator of 1898 Wilmington Massacre under general editor Josephus Daniels. By the 1970s, it was considered a moderate to liberal voice on civil rights and a “government watchdog” (Martin and Cotell). The *N&O* had published an article on the paper mill's exit this very same Sunday morning, July 6th, 1975.

⁴ Jackson County, North Carolina. Located in the southwest corner of the state, it includes the communities of Sylva, Dillsboro, Cullowhee, Cashiers, Glenville, Balsam, and Tuckasegee, as well as part of the Qualla Boundary of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

⁵ John Alvis Parris, Jr. (1914 – 1999), Sylva Native, author, and influential newspaper columnist best known for “Roaming the Mountains,” a column published in the Asheville Citizens-Times Newspaper from 1955 until his death. He won numerous accolades, including the Mountain Heritage Award and the North Carolina Folklore Association Award, and was Western Carolina University's first ever honorary Doctorate recipient (Casada).

⁶ As the owner of a local insurance company, Andy would have been hard-hit by the mass exodus of workers out of Sylva following the paper mill's closure.

⁷ The county seat of Jackson County, NC.

AW (1:24 – 1:32) Well I'd hate to say that, Johnny. I, as quick as, especially if something would, you know, could break on this other deal.⁸

JP (1:33 – 1:59) Okay, now, I've, I've loaded you and I'll ask you something. Uh, now, I'm gonna get around to tell you what. You're just quoted in the *Raleigh News and Observer* today, in a big uh, story about uh, the paper mill's exit, and it quotes you as saying that, uh, this has set us back twenty or thirty years.

AW (2:00) Well.

JP (2:01 – 3:10) And it says, uh, uh, this, this, this thing said, uh, this has set us back twenty or thirty years, said Andrew Wilson, a local businessman, as he sat behind the wheel of his panel truck⁹ parked on the town's Main Street. Uh, then it goes on to, uh, businessman Wilson, County Sheriff Fred Holcomb¹⁰, and Paul Holt¹¹, a local attorney, were chatting on Main Street just before the cloudburst¹². Talking about a rain. Smell (question mark) asked Wilson, cocking his head towards the old Mead plant site five blocks down the street. I loved that smell, smelled just like money. He said he had lost maybe thirty or forty of his insurance clients since the shutdown. They moved out of the county, he said. Then, listen to this. The sheriff said the crime rate was up some but not *necessarily* because of the plant closing.¹³ And then it got Holt. I don't think we've felt the full impact yet, said Holt. Uh, didn't uh –

AW (3:12 – 3:14) Mm hm. [laughs]

JP (3:14 -3:25) Didn't, uh [laughs] wasn't Holt and uh, whatnot [AW continues laughing], the attorneys? I mean just, I mean you know, I mean, did they lose the account?¹⁴

AW (3:26) Well, yeah.

JP (3:27) Huh?

⁸ Andy may be referring to Statler Industries Inc. of Medford, Massachusetts, a manufacturer of tissue paper that had expressed interest in moving to Sylva. North Carolina insisted that it comply with anti-pollution laws if it decided to occupy the abandoned plant, a demand that Mead itself had refused (Paper Mill's Exit).

⁹ "A small enclosed delivery truck accessed from the rear" (*OED*).

¹⁰ Fred Holcombe (1921 – 1987). First elected sheriff of Jackson County in 1962 and remained sheriff for 24 years (County's longest-living sheriff). He was 54 at the time of this interview.

¹¹ W. Paul Holt Jr. (1929 – 2018). Attorney at Hall and Thornburg of Sylva; additionally, represented Jackson County Board of Commissioners for 27 years, Jackson County School Board for 50 years, and Harris Regional Hospital for 25 years. Founding member of Southwestern Technical Institute (now Southwestern Community College) who served in a leadership capacity for 54 years (Obituary, W. Paul Holt Jr.) He was 46 at the time of this interview.

¹² "A sudden and very heavy rainfall, often brief or localized, sometimes accompanying a violent storm" (*OED*).

¹³ Records combining employment and criminal activity are scant in the United States, let alone in 1975 Jackson County, NC. However, a study involving more than 1 million laid-off Norwegian workers published in 2020 found that male workers who were laid off through no fault of their own experienced an overall 20% increase in criminal-charge rates in the year after a layoff (Layoffs lead to higher rates of offenses). This somewhat contradicts Sheriff Holcomb's assertion by drawing a powerful link between job loss and crime rates.

¹⁴ David McKee Hall of Hall and Thornburg had represented Mead decades earlier in the 1953 NC Supreme Court case *State Utilities Commission v. Mead Corp* (*State ex rel. Utilities Commission v. Mead Corp*). It seems from this conversation that Mead Corp. retained the group's services, meaning that Paul Holt would have worked closely with them, as well. After Mead's departure, Hall and Thornburg would no longer be representing them.

AW (3:28 – 3:30) Yeah, they used to do a lot of work for Mead. They were their local attorney.

JP (3:30 – 3:35) Well, you know, Dave¹⁵ had it in the beginning, and I didn't know where they, I, I thought they'd carried it on over, right?

AW (3:35 – 3:36) Yeah, they carried it on over.¹⁶

JP (3:37 – 3:57) Right. Well, [laughs] we got some fine quotes from our county, uh, chairman of our county's board of commissioners and from his uh, niece down in uh, they, they built a story around, uh, his relative in the Ritz theater¹⁷.

AW (3:58 – 4:02) Who? Whose relative? Is that that boy we was talking to down in front of Holt's office?

JP (4:03 – 4:29) No, they didn't, yeah a guy named Steve Berg¹⁸ is out of the Raleigh News and Observer, who wrote the story, and uh, he said uh, said gone too is the sulfuric, uh, paper mill stink that townfolk have grown so used to. It's great said Lynda Wike¹⁹, sitting in the box office of the Ritz movie theater, selling tickets to a few stragglers trickling in to see the early show. You can see the sky.

AW (4:31 – 4:33) Who, who s - who is that, now, Lynda who?

JP (4:33 – 5:12) Lynda Wike, and uh, said County Commissioner Chairman Bruce Wike²⁰ guesses that perhaps one third of Mead's, uh, direct and indirect workforce left, uh, etc.²¹ “Meanwhile, down the street at the Ritz theater, Lynda Wike, the niece of the Jackson County Commissioner Chairman, was still selling movie tickets. ‘You see the buildings in the town? Some of them been cleaned off, but you can see the ones that haven't. They have that thick black film on them. I don't have to scrape that black soot off my car anymore, and that's just fine with me. You couldn't even see the sky for the smoke, except on Sunday.’” [laughs]²²

¹⁵ Almost certainly referring to David M. Hall.

¹⁶ “Carrying it over” is likely referring to Hall and Thornburg continuing to represent Mead after David Hall's death in 1960 (“Hall, David McKee”).

¹⁷ The Ritz theater was opened in 1942 and operated in Sylva for 40 years before closing in 1982. The building sat abandoned until 1999, when the town purchased it and turned it into a public parking lot (History: The last curtain call?).

¹⁸ Steve Berg wrote for the *Raleigh News and Observer* for 5 years, after which he went on to become a writer, political correspondent, and editorialist for the Minneapolis Star Tribune for more than 30 years (Berg, “About”). He would have been quite young when he wrote this story.

¹⁹ Possibly Lynda A. Wike, born July 1957. She would have been 18 years old at this time (“Lynda Wike”).

²⁰ William Bruce Wike, Sr. (1936 – 2006), chairman of Jackson County Board of Commissioners and county manager from 1970 to 1978 (Find a Grave, “William Bruce Wike Sr.”)

²¹ Besides the 150 direct employees working at the time of Mead's closure, there were approximately 150 others who were indirectly dependent on Mead for related jobs such as logging and equipment sales and maintenance (Paper Mill's Exit).

²² The intense pollution produced by this plant caused a considerable amount of discontent among many of Sylva's population. The N&O article reporting on this story states that “[NC] Gov. James E. Holhouser Jr. and state environmental officials received an avalanche of letters, probably more than ever before on an environmental matter.” One woman even sent the governor a plastic bag filled with the black soot she'd swept from her porch one morning, saying that Mead had not “cleaned up the air” as had been reported (Paper Mill's Exit).

AW (5:13 – 5:30) Holt and myself after a Savings and Loan meeting we'd ben in and had about three or four drinks. Holcombe had just walked up when we walked out. Somebody was in the funeral home, and that's where he'd been [AW burps] Excuse me.

JP (5:30 – 5:33) [laughs] Well I thought you would get a kick out of this –

AW (5:34) Well, we did. [laughs]

JP (5:34 – 5:45) For instance, I mean the guy's done about three stories. We got a – there's a picture of a – a picture showing the Mead plant –

AW (5:45) Mm-hm.

JP (5:45 – 6:33) and it says, uh, then deserted mill operated for forty-five years, and then it shows a, uh, Main Street of Sylva against the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains²³. I'm gonna write my friend.²⁴ I mean, he's got another story about, uh, Western North Carolina, he toured, uh, ten counties in three days, you know? He's got four stories in here and pictures, and on the editorial page, here – here's a nice picture of uh, the Jackson County Courthouse²⁵. Uh, but then on a picture of, uh, this guy talks about the Smokey, the Great Smokey Mountains, S-M-O-K-E-Y –²⁶

AW (6:33) Mm-hm.

JP (6:35 – 7:38) So Claude Sitton²⁷, who is the editor of the News and Observer is a longtime friend of mine, used to be on *New York Times*²⁸, and I'm gonna [short laugh] I'm gonna drop him a note on my personal stationary, saying, uh, Claude, you just keep shooting me down. Uh, for years and years I've been trying to convince the folks up here, and, and in our mountains, that the *News and Observer*, and the folks down in Raleigh, really do recognize that, uh, there's a place out west of Asheville²⁹. But gee, how can I can't go on like this when you do it like this, and you – I said when your guy come up here and he calls em the Smokey, S-M-O-K-E-Y, and it, uh, here we look down Main Street. Those aren't the Blue

²³ A subdivision of the Appalachian Mountains spanning from Pennsylvania to Georgia, known for its distinctive blue haze (History of the Blue Ridge).

²⁴ Probably referring to Claude Sitton.

²⁵ Called the “most photographed courthouse in NC,” this picturesque building was constructed in 1914 and is situated on a hill facing the East down main street. It is now home to the Jackson County public library and numerous exhibits on Jackson County history and mountain culture (Jackson County Courthouse).

²⁶ This is a misspelling of “Great *Smoky* Mountains” that also functions as a shibboleth in this context.

²⁷ Claude Fox Sitton (1925 – 2015), general editor of the Raleigh News and Observer from 1968 to 1990. He is well-known for his fearless coverage of the civil rights movement while working as a Times' Southern correspondent from 1958 to 1964. As general editor of the *N&O*, his leadership was marked by “aggressive direction of reporting and [a] determination to hold accountable those he thought were not acting in the public good” (Price).

²⁸ Founded in 1851, the NYT is considered one of the world's leading newspapers. It was notably involved in the landmark 1964 Supreme Court case *New York Times v. Sullivan*, a civil rights reporting case in which the Court ruled in favor of the NYT. This was a key decision supporting freedom of the press (A History of the New York Times).

²⁹ The largest city in Western NC, situated in Buncombe County. Asheville has a rich history and a vibrant tourism industry, with an estimated 2 million visitors per year (The History of Asheville).

Ridge, those are the Balsams!³⁰ [laughs] You know I'm kidding, but, I mean, what isn't this stupid on uh, on uh, the ol' reliable³¹, I'm gonna bring that in, you know, the *News and Observer*.

AW (7:39) Yeah.

JP (7:40 -7:46) But, uh, these guys, I said, they should know about their state, you know?

AW (7:48 – 7:50) Well, that's about too tall.³²

JP (7:50) Huh?

AW (7:50 – 7:55) I'd forgotten about that boy³³ even being there.

JP (7:55) [laughs]

AW (7:56 – 8:06) Holt and myself was about shot. But Holcombe wasn't, he'd been over at the funeral home. Well, I don't mean, I'm not trying to say that he drank, I just mean that, you know –

JP (8:06) Right.

AW (8:07 – 8:13) Uh, he wasn't at that time. Holt and myself was plumb bleary eyed, I don't know what I said to him.³⁴

JP (8:14 – 8:19) Well, you know, and so suddenly, one day you wake up and here it is in black and white.³⁵

AW (8:19 – 8:24) Well, well a-ha John, I've got to go, man.

JP (8:25 -8:26) Okay, I'll see you –

AW (8:26 – 8:27) I'd like to read that thing when it –

JP (8:28 -8:29) Yeah, I'll save it³⁶ for you –

AW (8:30) Okay –

JP (8:30) Right.

AW (8:31) Bye bye.

³⁰ As you look West on Sylva's Main Street, the mountains towering above you are the Plott Balsams, a subdivision of the larger Blue Ridge Mountain Range ("Plott Balsams") Calling them "Blue Ridge Mountains" wasn't technically incorrect, but it does reflect the writer's relative lack of local geography knowledge – especially knowledge that would distinguish Sylva from its more recognizable neighbor, Asheville.

³¹ *The Raleigh News and Observer*.

³² Perhaps as in "too tall of an order."

³³ Steve Berg, the interviewer.

³⁴ As in, Andy Wilson and Paul Holt were allegedly drunk when they were interviewed by Steve Berg.

³⁵ As in, Andy may not remember what he said, but his words were printed in the *N&O* anyway.

³⁶ That day's copy of the *News and Observer*.

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