

Wilson retires as Democratic party chairman

By GARY TERPENING

On a wall in Hugh Wilson's home, amid diplomas, dairy cattle ribbons and political memorabilia, is a frayed, yellowing cartoon showing Wilson astride a cow, urging his reluctant mount to charge a windmill looming ominously in the distance. Wilson's mythical foe—the state Senate rotation agreement, which allowed multi-district counties to make nominations from only one county—was the issue on which he made his unsuccessful 1970 bid for the state Senate. By filing his candidacy, Wilson challenged the legality of the statute.

"I decided to run and test it," he said. "I was sure it was unconstitutional."

Although Wilson did not get on the ballot, his efforts were instrumental in abolishing the rotation agreement. "I didn't win," Wilson recalled, "but I got some things changed, you know. Why didn't they show me after I turned that windmill upside down?"

Wilson's days of political battles, both mythical and real, are over. On May 19, he officially retired as chairman of the Orange County Democratic Party, an office he had held since 1976.

Pulling himself from a comfortable, well-worn chair, Wilson walked to his cluttered dining table and rummaged through a chaotic pile of paperwork. "Yeah, they gave me a couple of things," Wilson said as he probed the disorder. "Ah, here."

He produced a small wooden gavel and a framed certificate signed by Gov. Jim Hunt. The gavel, presented by the Orange County Democratic Party, and the certificate, presented by Sen. Russell Walker, D-Randolph on behalf of Gov. Hunt and the state, commemorated over 30 years of service to the Democratic Party in North Carolina.

Before his involvement in local politics, Wilson was active nationally. He registered as a Democrat in 1932 and was actively involved in lobbying for Franklin D. Roosevelt's Lend-Lease bill. "Somehow," Wilson said, pausing to reflect on the winter

months of 1940 that he spent in the nation's capital, "I wound up in the forefront of the lobby effort. The bill was passed by just one vote. Without that vote, the war might have lasted two years longer."

Roosevelt did not personally know Wilson, but did give the young Democrat an autographed portrait to show appreciation for his lobbying efforts. "Roosevelt was a Navy buff, you know," Wilson said, "so Admiral Foote got the picture down here. Hell, Roosevelt didn't know me from Adam." The portrait hangs proudly, if somewhat tilted, in Wilson's living room.

Wilson became interested in North Carolina politics in 1948, when Robert Scott was basing a successful bid for the governorship on improvement of state roads. Wilson, a part-time dairy farmer, heartily endorsed improvements for farm-to-market roads that were suggested by Scott. Since then, Wilson has become something of a political legend.

Despite the richness of his own political career, Wilson is engrossed with the present and refrains from dwelling on the past. And of course, a favorite topic is politics.

"We're lucky in our representation, you know," Wilson said. "Yeah, we have some right fine fellows in the legislature now."

But he quickly qualified his statement: "There are also some real jackasses in there. You name it. Illiteracy, poor reasoning power—it's all there."

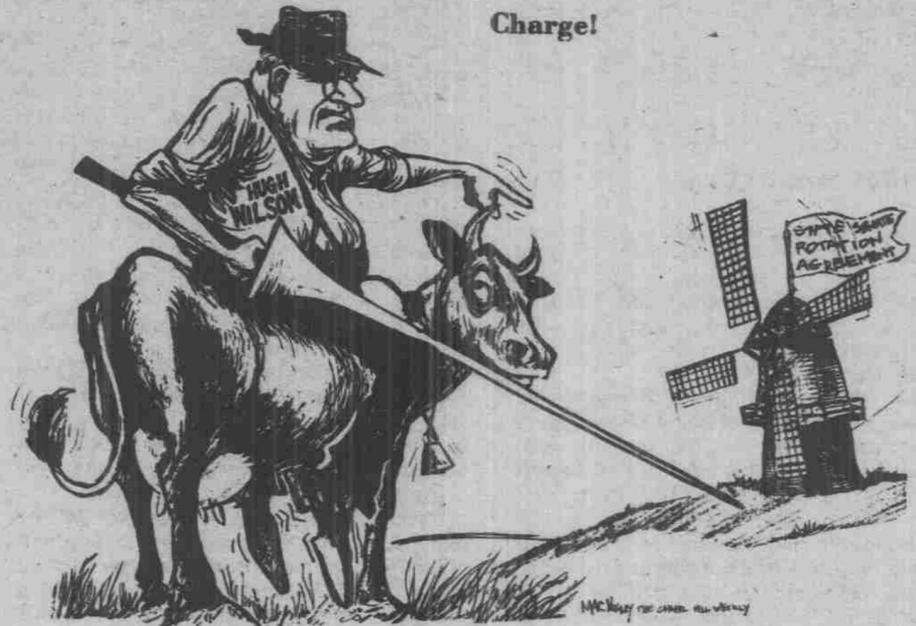
Exasperation with the legislature led Wilson into consideration of the current impasse in negotiations between UNC and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

"It seems to me," he said, "HEW is just trying to make headlines. They're caught in a bind between two lawsuits."

"Elimination of program duplications will destroy opportunities for both blacks and whites. The culturally disadvantaged will suffer if programs are crunched up, you know."

Wilson leaned forward and his serene, almost sleepy eyes became dark and intense. "Put it this way," he said with a trace of agitation. "The system is loaded against the black child right now. You're not going to bring cultures totally together. Not in one day. Not in 10 days. Not in 10 years. Eliminating duplication is not the answer."

"Money and facilities—that's what the hell we need. They said we needed 40 million, now we got it. Maybe that's part of the good that this HEW thing has done. But as far as



1970 Mac Nelly cartoon courtesy of the Chapel Hill Newspaper

duplication goes, the Federal government doesn't need to be in on it."

The sudden truculence in his voice subsided, and Wilson casually returned his body to the sprawl that covered two chairs. He is a tall, rangy man, and the grace and power of youth have yet to depart. "Hell," he said as the dark eyes twinkled, "I'm 68 years old and I learn something every day. I don't know what the answers to all these things are."

"I'd hate to be president. The pressure cooker they live in—I don't see how any man could retain his sanity with it."

Wilson lighted a pipe he had been filling for a half hour, and after coughing out a cloud of smoke, embarked on a softer political tangent. "Some people can grow with their office," he mused. "Others can deteriorate, especially if they get to the booze. Talking politics and drinking all night can really cause a person to degenerate."

Recalling his days in Washington, D.C., Wilson said piles of small, three- or four-ounce liquor bottles dotted the streets. "The bottles weren't there for no reason," he said. "In the morning, lawmakers would need a

Charge!

little eye-opener after drinking all night, so they'd add a bottle or two to their coffee. You can't last too long doing that."

Make no mistake, though. Wilson is not loath to drink, and, in fact, is considered a regular at Jeff's Campus Confectionery, where he can often be found sitting on the bench in the back and sipping a brew. "I've always liked to have a beer or two downtown with the boys," he said with obvious understatement.

One afternoon some years ago, Wilson was drinking beer with Rufus Edmisten, now state Attorney General. Wilson had recently discovered he was a "third cousin, once removed" to Sen. Sam Ervin, and that both men were distantly related to Richard Nixon. After learning of the discovery, Edmisten, who then served as an aide to Ervin, admonished Wilson not to tell his boss for fear of Ervin's having a heart attack. "Well, don't you tell Nixon," Wilson shot back. "He'd have to be put in a straightjacket."

Wilson's association with Chapel Hill goes beyond beer and drinking and frequent "gatherings for a little B.S." The grandson of Louis Round Wilson, he entered UNC as a freshman in 1929 and established a reputation as a tough, gutsy boxer.

"Boxing used to be the second most popular sport after football, at Carolina," he said. "Those two were the only moneymakers. Basketball was used as a preliminary to the boxing matches."

"I was a prime catcher—I got hit a lot and knocked around the head. I was clumsy and not totally mature, you know," Wilson said that he stood 6'-6" and weighed 179 pounds during his three-year stint in the ring.

"I was reading a lot in school then," Wilson remembered. "It would take me 15 minutes to do my lesson regularly, but in boxing season, it would take 45."

"It was the punch-drunk syndrome. There was one fellow who was so tough, you couldn't hurt him. He could take a blow in the head that would bend him over backward and bounce right back up. I think he's in an asylum now."

Wilson laughed and again lighted his pipe. Choking on the acrid smoke, he explained he had a sore throat and was just getting over a cold. When he was out of earshot, his wife, Cookie, revealed that he had caught cold while dancing up a storm at a pig-picking several days earlier.

"I've been getting better," he explained. "I've been taking the dog's medicine. It was the only stuff we had around, and it works."

Wilson delighted in the absurdity of a person taking dog medicine and chuckled heartily. His eyes sparkled not only with mirth but with the guile that has vanquished many a political foe. "Hell," he reasoned ever so logically, "if it's good enough for the dog, it's good enough for me."

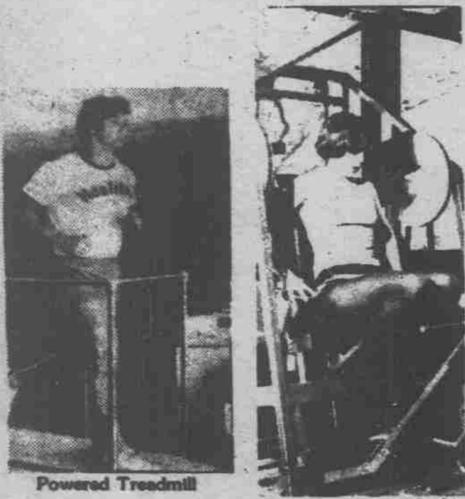
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