

Sanford's Hotel Wilrik — Once a Major Stopover for Trains

A Massachusetts tourist on his way to Florida asked the location of the new hotel he'd heard so much about. The Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill, has "The Hotel Wilrik, Sanford, N.C. and Its Two Genial Hosts [Theo. Barrow and H. L. Chapman]," published (ca. 1930-1945) by Marken & Bielfeld, Inc., of Frederick, Maryland. It indicates that the hotel is "Located directly on U.S. Routes 1 and 15 and State Routes 50, 75, 60 and 52" and is an "Official AAA Hotel." The same card appears in Jimmy Haire and W. W. Seymour, Jr., Sanford and Lee County. Arcadia Images of America Series (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), pp. 104-105, along with two other views of the Wilrik, one of which is the lobby. Hand renderings can be found in *Downtown—Your Town* (for fourth graders, 1988), coordinated by Mary Ellen Bowen, Head, Downtown Revitalization Department of Sanford, and Dr. Shirley Owen, Elementary Supervisor, Lee County Schools.

The name of the Wilrik derived from [Lucien Perryman] Wilkins-Ricks Company, opened 6 August 1925, on the corner of Wicker and Steele. Built by local contractor J. W. ("Joe") Stout for \$200,000, it was Sanford's largest and tallest building and a major attraction.

Jesse Wicker once ran a small watch repair shop on the lot, and the Wilrik seems to have symbolized "change over time." An old livery stable was razed to make way for it. A stopover for train passengers, it later catered to companies from Boston and other northern cities that conducted annual tours along Highway 1 (Maine to Florida) to prove how comfortably people could drive their own cars to Florida for the winter. These "tours" influenced the passage of bond issues for southern road improvements, and, in turn, hotels like the Wilrik would be supplanted by motels.

The Wilrik was also a local venue for elegant dining and dancing, civic club meetings, housing for families moving into the area, and (in the 1940's) overflow accommodations for soldiers from Fort Bragg. As bachelors, "Twin Auctioneers" John W. and Herbert Goldston lodged there. Henry McLean was a porter.



The first meal served (Grapefruit Cocktail, Puree of Tomato, Fried Spring Chicken, Cold Roast Beef, French Fried Potatoes, Carrots and Peas, Corn on the Cob, California Peach Salad, Vanilla Ice Cream, Wafers, Hot Rolls, Coffee, Tea, and Milk) was a noon banquet for the Sanford Rotary Club, of which Wilkins was a charter member. Special guests from town were invited. The servers were "young women" dressed in white; the bell boy and butlers wore uniforms; an orchestra of Sanford youth played on the mezzanine.

On opening night, cars and buggies filled the streets of Sanford, and many drove their automobiles into town in the afternoon to be assured of good parking. In its first December, some 200 ate "supper" at the Wilrik on their way home from the Carolina-Virginia game in Chapel Hill.

About a year after the Wilrik's opening, hundreds watched "Human Fly" George O. Polley advertise for Oldsmobile by climbing its walls, at times swinging from the window sills by the fingers of one hand. When he reached the top, he stood on his head on a corner of the roof. In the mid-thirties, the State Bureau of Investigation posted men with machine guns throughout downtown Sanford to capture "Public Enemies" Bill Pane and Wash Turner exiting the Wilrik.

The outside, largely plain, relied on sheer mass to make its impact and succeeded: a visitor seeing a Buick sign on the sidewalk near the hotel exclaimed, "Ain't that a devil of a big garage!" The façade of the first two floors was covered with Indiana limestone and "capped" with a molded cornice. The upper four floors were brick, with the fifth and sixth divided by a horizontal stone band. The green tile skirt-roof was supported by brackets with diamond-shaped stones between them. The windows on the second and upper floors were simply but carefully distinguished.

The story of the Wilrik was primarily its



interior, whose furnishings throughout were in shades of wisteria and taupe. The lobby was tiled but offered Saxony rugs. On pillars near the clerk's desk were two mounted deer heads. The dining room was known for its magnificent draperies and beautiful accoutrements. The superb ballroom was on the mezzanine level. A beautifully decorated (courtesy) "retreat room" provided a place of "retirement" for ladies waiting for trains. The Wilrik had an elevator and 92 bedrooms that could sleep 150. The rooms offered hot and cold running water and phones, and many had private baths.

Entrepreneur Wilkins, of Turbeville, Virginia (near South Boston), needing \$2,000 to pay off his beef cattle farm, came to Sanford with his wife and two children around 1903 and encouraged other Virginians to accompany him. With the financial backing of a Mr. Ricks of Rocky Mount, he started a department store, Wilkins-Ricks Company, originally on Moore Street overlooking the train depot; moved it to Steele Street; and expanded it into what became Williams-Belk (1910). He built a second commercial business area a block west of Moore and also owned, on Wicker Street, a farm supply business (later Palmer-Reeves), a mule stable, a tobacco warehouse, and a car dealership. South of Sanford

on Highway 1 was Wilkins Peach Orchards. In 1932, he chartered Wilkins Corporation.

One of the six children of Lucien Perryman and Susan Temperance Betts Wilkins was William Banks Wilkins, who twice served as Sanford's mayor and become another area developer. As examples, he added grocery stores, gasoline stations, and tobacco-related refining operations on Wicker and saw that it was paved south to its intersection with Carthage.

Time had its way, and the Wilrik closed. The Wilkins children gave the building to Lee County (1969) for a Government Center (1970's-early 1980's). Later, the mezzanine level was converted to apartments, and the former lobby, which originally occupied the entire street level of the hotel, became a "ballroom." Known as the Wilrik Hotel Apartments and Ballroom Facility, it is still used especially for wedding receptions.

Dr. Lynn Veach Sadler, of Burlington's The Village at Brookwood, a former college president, is widely published in academics and creative writing and works as a writer and an editor. As Central Region Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet 2013-2015, she mentored student and adult poets. Her latest book, Chased with Truth, a collection of historical fiction, is recently out.

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