

Memories Of Appleton

Part One

~~The Wilson Tribe of West Somerset Road~~

In 1972 my parents bought a lot on West Somerset Road in Appleton and built a house. The lot was the former site of a migrant labor camp, and the old buildings were bulldozed into a big pile of rubble at the back corner of the lot. This was a fun place for a boy to explore, the only real danger being from the rusty nails, splinters of wood, and bits of broken glass that littered the ground.

I was nosing around the debris one afternoon when I spied what I thought was a piece of colored carpet beneath some wooden planks. I reached down and grabbed it, and for the only time in my life that I can recall, screamed in pure terror. It was a snake. It was probably an Eastern Milk snake, with bright red, white and black bands, and pretty much harmless. I probably frightened it as much as it frightened me.

I flung the snake away from me and ran crying to my parents, who were raking the new lawn by the house. Barely looking up, they dismissed my hysterics with an uninterested "Just a snake? They won't hurt you," and returned to their work. My parents seemed rarely phased by anything. If a spaceship had crash-landed in our back yard, their only concern would have been whether or not it had clipped a few branches off the lilac bush.

One morning we awoke to find our front yard, still dirt but newly raked and seeded, all pockmarked with hoof prints. Sometime during the night a horse had wandered around the property. It gave me an eerie feeling to know that such a large animal had been lurking silently outside my window while I slept. It didn't help that young Billy Swan from across the road told me a weird story about a horse that was killed and hung from a rope swing in his father's barn. I glanced over at the big old barn, looming dark and ominous, and almost believed him.

I had swung on that rope swing many times in those days. I considered the Swan barn the best in the neighborhood, edging out the smaller Hyde barn down the road, whose empty hayloft could only boast an indoor basketball hoop. Even though the Swan family only lived on West Somerset Road for a few years, and moved away in 1973, I still called it the Swan barn. It was tall and unpainted, with a spacious hayloft to explore and play in.

The rope swing was the main attraction; but the earthen ramp leading up to the loft was perfect for riding bikes up and down, and there were plenty of haybales to climb on and make forts with. At each end of the loft there were ladders built into the wall, leading straight up to windows beneath the eaves. I never had the nerve to climb so high; just looking up made me dizzy. Eventually the barn began to lean, and in 1978 it toppled over in a windstorm, the first of several neighborhood barns that succumbed to age and neglect. I miss those old wooden barns.

Upon our arrival in Appleton I quickly became aware that we had moved into a neighborhood practically overflowing with Wilsons. Next door across a hayfield was the Steve Wilson family, then the Dave Wilson family, and finally the Bill Wilson family who owned the Wilson dairy farm, including that hayfield. Further along were one or two Rhodes families, whom I was told were connected to the Wilsons by marriage or something. Down at the other end of the road I eventually met the Donald Wilson family, allegedly unrelated, but by then I had my doubts.

Being a newcomer to a long-established neighborhood of Wilsons, and possessing a surname similar to but emphatically *not* Wilson, resulted in an uneasy feeling, as if I was an uninvited interloper in their private domain. The womenfolk didn't exactly draw their skirts aside as I passed, but whenever I met one of the Wilsons I seemed to feel I was being subjected to a silent but critical scrutiny.

I imagined they were giving me a good looking over and weren't sure if I quite measured up to their standards. I could almost hear them thinking: "Oh, so you're the ones who built the new house at the old labor camp? Well, I suppose there is nothing we can do about *that*, but just make sure that you are *very* careful to behave yourselves around here."

One day in those early years I was innocently exploring an overgrown field next to our new house. It was an abandoned farm that had gone back to nature, and the old fields were covered over with young trees, brambles and thick brush. I was prowling around near a culvert that ran underneath the road when I spied a teenage girl walking towards me. Being a typical boy, my natural instinct was to duck down and hide until she passed by. But through the weeds I could see that she had stopped in front of the culvert. Had she seen me? Was she looking towards me?

The next moment my heart gave a leap of fear as she called out: "Go home!"

I cowered in the bushes. I supposed I was in trouble of some kind, but I was too afraid at the moment to move. The girl yelled again, in a stern voice: "Go home! Go home now!"

That was it. I stood up slowly on trembling legs, and in a small meek voice said: "Okay. I'm going."

She turned to me in surprise, and then broke into a silvery peal of laughter. "I wasn't talking to *you*! I was yelling at my dog."

She pointed down the road, and only then did I see the little dog trotting dejectedly away, tail between its legs, along the shoulder of the road. I blushed with embarrassment as the girl walked on, still giggling to herself. I went back home myself, feeling every bit as dejected as that dog. To be fair, I don't think she was one of the Wilsons, but I was left with the feeling of being a not-entirely-welcome outsider in the neighborhood.

This feeling was only heightened one night in late autumn when our family was startled by two loud thuds hitting the side of our house, followed by the sound of a car speeding away. Someone had hurled two ears of field corn at the house. My father set off in hot pursuit, but as our family car at the time was just a Volkswagen Beetle, the miscreants easily made good their escape. My parents dismissed the incident as teenagers playing pranks, but I figured it was some of them Wilsons trying to run us off their territory.

Being practically surrounded by Wilsons not only gave me a nagging sense of inferiority about my name and status in those early years on West Somerset Road, but it also led to my spending the next several decades being mistaken for a Wilson. It didn't help that I have never been able to pronounce my own family name clearly. It always comes out sounding like a mush-mouthed "Wilson."

At one time I even considered giving up the struggle and, for the sake of a peaceful life, changing my name to Wilson. But then I studied my family history, and traced my forefathers in a direct line back to the 1500s. I discovered that each one of them down through the centuries had been mistaken for a Wilson at one time or other.

And when I read an account written by my Revolutionary War ancestor, about how he was denied a veteran's

pension simply because his name had been misspelled Wilson on the muster roll, and had to make a trip across New York to Boston in the deep cold of the winter of 1820 to secure proofs that he did indeed serve in the war — well, then my fighting spirit was roused.

On that day I vowed that no matter the cost, no matter the confusion, a Wilson I would never be. An innocent doctor's office receptionist soon felt the steel of my resolve when she ventured an unwitting: "Are you...uh, Mr Wilson?"

"I am not!" I declared loudly, fixing her with a defiant eye, as if daring her to make something of it.

That receptionist was easily cowed, but others over the years have been more tenacious in their misconception. I once encountered an auto mechanic who knew the Wilsons of West Somerset Road, and was convinced I was one of them. My memory isn't always entirely accurate, but the resulting conversation may have possibly gone along these general lines:

He: "West Somerset Road, eh? So which Wilson are you?"

Me: "None of them. It's a different name."

He, uncomprehending: "Huh? You a cousin or something?"

Me: "No, no, my name isn't actually Wilson."

He, suspicious that I was playing games with him: "Uhhh...y-yeah. Well, you know Dickie? Chuckie? Valerie? How about them?"

Me: "Yes. I mean no. I mean yes, I remember them. But no, we're not related."

He, in desperation: "Billy? Kelly? Debbie? Sherrie? Conita? Jolita? Nanita? Ummm...Jonathanita?"

Me: "Sorry, no relation."

He, dumbfounded: "What, not at all?"

Me: "Not even a little bit."

He, flummoxed that anyone who clearly just said his name was Wilson was not actually one of the Wilsons: ".....oh."

After a long awkward pause, during which I gave him no help whatsoever, a dim light of recollection finally glimmered in his eyes: "Wait...wait...uhhh, are you Tammy's brother?"

And that is usually the way it is: if I am correctly identified at all, it is only by association with one of my more notable siblings. I am always "the brother of" somebody or other. So now, having finally established me as "the brother of," the auto mechanic felt he was on secure ground and was able to deliver his *coup de gras*:

"So...ah...what was your name again?"

~~Forgive Us Our Trespasses~~

Meanwhile, back in the 1970s, I felt as though the Wilsons were keeping a watchful eye on me whenever I ventured forth down West Somerset Road in their direction. There was the time I took a bike ride with one of my cousins and we stopped off at the Staples orchard for a handful of cherries. One of the Wilson girls came walking by and, with neighborly suspicion, stopped to ask: “Do you have permission to pick those?”

“It’s okay,” I replied, evasively.

“Well, you should ask first before you pick any cherries.”

“It’s alright,” I reassured her.

After she walked on out of earshot, my cousin looked around nervously and asked: “DO you have permission to pick these cherries?”

“Sure! Well. You know. Probably.”

In this case it was perfectly fine. I was on friendly terms with the Staples family, who had apparently deemed me a harmless if not overly bright addition to the neighborhood, and had a standing invitation to help myself to an occasional apple or strawberry as I passed by their farm. With other local landowners though, my standing was more ambiguous. Some of them didn’t seem to mind the sight of me lurking along the edges of their corn fields, while a few of them did seem to mind a little bit.

Directly across from the Staples orchard was the Sweeney dairy farm. They had a cherry orchard of their own, tucked away safely out of reach behind a field. But they also had couple of stray cherry trees growing temptingly along the side of the road. I was bicycling along one day and thought a couple of cherries might give me that extra bit of nourishment I needed to pedal the last half mile home.

But no sooner had I dropped my bike and reached up to the nearest branch, than the quiet afternoon was split by a hoarse voice simply bellowing with rage. I looked over to see a red-faced Mr Sweeney leaning out of his barn window, shaking a fist or two, and giving me every ounce of lung power. He seemed displeased about something. This was puzzling, as the only other time I had met him he seemed jovial enough.

I couldn’t quite catch his words, either because in his wrath he was nearly incoherent, or because he was using a vocabulary I wasn’t yet old enough to be familiar with, but I did get the general idea that he would rather I left his cherry trees alone. I wasn’t overly alarmed; there was a stream and a cow pasture between me and him, and I knew I could outrun him anyway. But I did suddenly change my mind about those cherries after all. I nonchalantly picked up my bike, dusted off the seat, carefully looked both ways for traffic, and casually pedaled as fast as I could all the way home.

A rumor circulated briefly around the neighborhood that I had returned later that night, after dark, armed with a flashlight and paper bag. But since I started that rumor myself, I can now vouch for its total inaccuracy. The truth is I spent that evening in front of the TV, watching *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

So, what with the occasional misunderstanding like this one, I soon learned to take certain stealthy precautions when wandering around the various Appleton farms. I could have simply asked permission from the landowners, but I felt that would lead to unwanted complications. I had the farmers’ best interests at heart, and my reasoning went something like this:

If I asked permission to walk on their property and they refused it, I would be then tempted to go traipsing all over their land anyway. This would in a sense make them guilty of contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I wouldn't want to burden them with that kind of guilt, so I concluded that it would be best for everyone if I just didn't bother them at all.

There was also the matter of theology. I had learned in Sunday School that the earth ultimately belonged to God, and that mankind had been given stewardship over it. As a conscientious steward, I felt it was my sacred duty to walk around and take a good look at things now and then. In my pious devotion I couldn't allow a few misplaced No Trespassing signs to interfere with the will of God. It was far better to just ignore them.

Secure in this conviction, I surreptitiously explored all the farmland in the greater Appleton area. I became familiar with every woodlot, orchard, hedgerow and pond from the Lake Ontario shoreline down to Hoffman Road; from Phillips Road in the west even unto Hosmer Road in the east. The fact that I made every effort to remain unseen only added to the adventure of it. Many an honest farmer went quietly about his industry, tilling and sowing the good earth, completely unaware that a grubby boy was skulking through the undergrowth only a few feet away.

But I never meant any harm, and I don't believe I ever did any real harm. I can think of only three escapades from that era that I now view with regret: The Keg Creek Incident (to be chronicled eventually, now that the statute of limitations has run out), the Great Frog Massacre (a blood-chilling tale for which the world is not yet ready), and the relatively minor Episode of the Bee Boxes.

I was just a bystander when it happened, but I felt a certain responsibility. There was a boy named Ken living in Appleton at the time. He was not one of my small circle of vagabond friends, but he insinuated his way into our activities nonetheless. Ken excelled in making a nuisance of himself. He was abrasive, vulgar, and quarrelsome. I can feel sorry for him now, having learned a little about his troubled life, but at the time he was just a pain in the neck. Every word was spoken as a sneer; every action seemed designed to make trouble for somebody.

Ken showed up at my house only once, uninvited. But in the space of a mere hour he managed to insult my sister, offend my mother, vandalize our neighbor's bee boxes, and shoot me in the foot with my own BB gun before being ordered off the premises.

Sometime during that eventful hour, in an effort to get Ken away from the house, where storm clouds of parental disapproval were already threatening to burst, I had taken him out back into the woods and fields. We tramped along peacefully for a while, until we came upon a few old bee boxes in a hedgerow. Ken wanted to take a closer look. He said he was curious about how honey bees lived, which meant he was looking for an opportunity to cause some mischief.

Despite my protests he strode forward and knocked the covers off the boxes, and I think he even kicked one over. There were plenty of bees living inside, and they didn't appreciate this outrage committed upon their residence. A lively chase across the fields ensued. I escaped unscathed, but Ken got stung once or twice along the way. Hearing his anguished howls gave me my only moment of happiness that day.

As an epilogue of sorts, if only to illustrate the old saw "What goes around comes around," I must recall a day many years later when I was trimming apple trees at the old Whearty farm on Lake Road with a Mexican fellow named Chabo. It was a grey winter day and the work was monotonous. I decided to take a break and investigate some bee boxes across a nearby cornfield.

Chabo hung back at a safe distance.

“You’re going to get stung,” he warned.

“Nonsense!” was my reply. “Bees hibernate in winter. They won’t bother me.”

I confidently walked up to the boxes, lifted the nearest lid, and peered inside. A few seconds later I was bounding nimbly across the field, waving off a swarm of angry bees. Chabo was already on the move, and even in that distressing moment I was impressed that, for a heavyset man, he was making remarkably good time. I endured his “I told you so!”, for he was right of course, but I could have done without the laughter.