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Marrow of Human Experience, The

William Wilson, Jill Terry Rudy

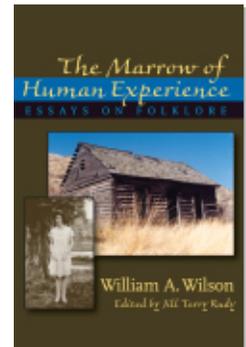
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A DAUGHTER'S BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM A. WILSON

In 1951 my father, William Albert (Bert) Wilson, enrolled at Brigham Young University (BYU) and began an academic life that would consume his energies for the next forty-five years. He interrupted his studies once, in 1953, to serve a two-and-a-half-year mission in Finland for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons); but even that adventure proved to be important preparation for future academic endeavors. Dad studied, taught, and fell in love not only with my mother, Hannele Blomqvist Wilson, but with the Finnish people, who would become the focus of his doctoral dissertation, *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland*. The vitality and quality of Dad's academic endeavors are evidenced best by the publication of his dissertation, as well as over eighty scholarly articles on folklore. In addition, Dad has directed folklore archives at BYU and Utah State University (USU), has served at BYU as English department chair and director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, has edited *Western Folklore*, has been elected a fellow of the American Folklore Society, and has received many prestigious awards for both scholarship and teaching.

In light of these facts, readers should know that Dad never took a college prep class in high school. In fact, he rarely even took home his books. Before and after school he worked manual labor for local farmers, for town businesses, and for his father, a railroad section foreman and owner of an eighty-acre irrigated farm in Downey, Idaho. Further, the hours Dad spent *in* school seem to have been devoted as much to mischief making as to learning. One of Dad's few memorable grade school writing experiences occurred during his fourth grade year. His teacher, Miss Salvesen, punished misbehaving students by requiring them to copy a page of their history book for each of their ill deeds. Dad and his lifelong friend Eugene England memorized the shortest page in the book, wrote it out many times, and kept the copies on hand as a hedge against future punishments. Similarly, Dad's *last* memorable writing experience in public school occurred during his senior year, when his history teacher/principal caught him and his friend Freddy Pickren sword fighting with yardsticks in the hall during class time and consequently assigned them both to write an essay on the United Nations.

The explanations for Dad's misbehavior are many, but lack of interest in school is not really one of them. Even in his youth Dad found that rigorous academic work made him feel more fully alive and more fully human. In fact, having recently read a considerable amount of material about the United Nations, he was delighted by the principal's writing assignment and worked diligently to produce an essay that he delivered (with a dramatic bow) to his amazed principal that same afternoon. ("Poor Freddy," says Dad, had to work many days to complete the essay.) Had more of such work been required of Dad at Downey High School, he probably would have gotten into less mischief. Unfortunately, he would have to leave his community behind in order to find enough intellectual challenges to keep him out of trouble.

In other ways, though, Dad never really left Downey. Rather, he became its ardent spokesman, devoting his professional life to recording and preserving the "lore" of close-knit communities like his Downey friends. During his college years when Dad switched his emphasis from English literature to folklore, I believe that it was the communal nature of folk art that appealed to him the most and that the reasons were intensely personal. He was moved not only by artistic appreciation of "lore" but by deep bonds of affection which he felt for the "folk" from his youth. And the older Dad became, the more his scholarship was driven by a passionate desire to illuminate, validate, and honor the culture that produced him. It is important, then, to understand Dad's youth in Downey, not because he left it so far behind, but because he *refused* to leave it completely behind; though Dad would live an adult lifestyle far different from that of his boyhood, his academic work was not the antithesis of his past but rather a natural extension of it.

Downey is currently only a ghost of its former self. The population within city limits has decreased from 750 in 1950 to 613 today, and most of the many family farms that once surrounded the town have returned to sage brush. By the time my grandmother died in August of 1996, only the bank, the post office, and one grocery store opened their doors for business on a Main Street full of otherwise vacant, boarded up buildings. Some newcomers have moved in to replace an aging, dying population, but many of the new residents commute some forty miles to work in Pocatello, Idaho, or in other communities and are not intimately acquainted with their neighbors.

In contrast, when Dad was a boy the town boasted (in addition to the bank and post office) a pharmacy, several major car dealers and garages, a number of "farm implement companies," three grocery stores, three hardware stores, three pool halls, a lumber yard, four cafes, and a theater, with an attached confectionary, which opened every night of the week. When I began interviewing Dad in 1996 (just one month after Grandma's death), his stories about his youth were in large measure a tribute to this golden age. Downey "was a real town," he explains, and in the absence of televisions, computers, and freeways, people depended on the town for both their entertainment and their livelihood.

Students were not bussed, as they are now, says Dad, to "a potato field in Arimo [a nearby community]" to attend a consolidated school with students drawn

from towns throughout the valley. Rather, children who lived in town walked to Downey Grade School (containing grades one through eight) and Downey High School. Of the twenty-three members of Dad's senior class of 1951, fourteen also appear in his second-grade picture. As had many of their parents a generation earlier, these children attended church together, played together, suffered through adolescence together, and understood each other as adults in ways most of us today will never understand our neighbors.

Adult community members also were both self-sufficient and interdependent in ways that most people of my generation can hardly imagine. For example, Grandpa raised cows, chickens, and pigs and grew a large garden. For their winter food supply, Grandma and Grandpa stored potatoes and carrots raised in the garden or purchased from local farmers, and Grandma canned produce from the garden such as corn, beets, peas, and beans and a lot of fruit (peaches, apricots, pears, and berries) which they brought home in a trailer from family excursions to nearby farms in Utah. My grandparents in turn sold much of the milk from their cows to local residents. To make ends meet, they thus depended on the goods and services, as well as on the business, of their neighbors.

Additionally, community members often worked *together* to produce the goods they needed. During harvest season especially, local farmers teamed up to help each other and employed "extra" young laborers from town. Besides cleaning toilets in the motel across the street, washing dishes in Jack's Café, grinding meat into hamburger in the grocery store, and helping his dad with work on their own farm, Dad worked seasonal jobs with his friends (picking potatoes; thinning and topping beets; tying grain sacks; plowing gardens; cutting, raking, and stacking hay) for other farmers. When he got older, Dad also worked alongside family members and neighbors for the Union Pacific Railroad, and sometimes they all worked under the direction of Dad's father, William (Bill) Wilson, who was a section foreman.

Grandpa experienced a unique set of challenges in being "boss" to people who sat by him in church and even ate Christmas dinner at his table. In response, he led with both firmness and kindness, as well as by example. His men knew he was capable of firing even good friends who did not take their jobs seriously, but they also heard his reassuring praise as he labored beside them. The rewards of Grandpa's efforts were the love and respect of family and community. Though he had only sporadically experienced six years of formal education, Grandpa was, in Dad's view, widely esteemed as a man of intelligence, gentility, and integrity.

As the son of Bill Wilson, Dad felt his place among a close-knit community of laboring-class workers and participated fully in the traditions and celebrations that resulted from their associations. Dad's stories passionately recount the predictable rhythm of Downey community life and the gathering places that facilitated it. He describes the grain elevators and flour mills where young boys gathered to play hide-and-seek and shoot rubber bands at each other with homemade guns; the ball games and dances that everyone in town, not just the teenagers, attended; the movie theater, the soda fountain, and the swimming pool where teenagers

mingled after school and on weekend dates; the pool hall, where young men especially hung out against their Mormon parents' wishes; the daily schedule that all good housewives followed (my grandmother and her neighbor, Mrs. Austin, competed every Monday morning to get their laundry on the line first); the Bannock County Fair, in which community members displayed prized animals, foods, and handwork; the sewing club my grandmother attended for forty years; the easy and comfortable family gatherings with relatives who all lived a short drive or train ride away; and the marvelous storytelling sessions that occurred over and over again at all of these family and community functions.

This cohesive community clearly provided Dad with a sense of place and belonging, which served as an anchor for him for the rest of his life. Once when he and his sister Gloria were playing, coatless, in a snowbank, the town doctor drove by, stopped the car, and marched into the house to scold my grandmother for not dressing her children appropriately. Years later, on the night before Dad left for his mission, the entire town gathered for a dance in his honor. How could one *not* feel nostalgic about such a place?

Dad was also, however, restless as a boy in Downey, and it would be misleading to suggest otherwise. He was, after all, the son not only of Bill Wilson but also of Lucile Green Wilson. Dad idolized his father, but in talent and temperament he clearly favored my grandmother. Specifically, he shared her keen mind; her musical ear; her quick wit; her inability to relax or sit still; her belief that if things could go wrong they usually would; her ability to find humor and value in the human condition, in spite of its essentially tragic nature; and her need to capture and communicate that value and humor through language—especially through the medium of story. As Dad explains in his essay about her, she and her extended family filled his youth with good conversation, much laughter, and moving, artistic narratives about their lives—narratives which, Dad argues, show the “indomitable human spirit” as artistically and movingly as any canonized literature he has read.

As a storyteller, Grandma represented a culture whose narrative traditions were preserved orally, rather than in written form. However, Grandma also was unique in her culture in that she took her schooling seriously and graduated from high school second in her class, in spite of serious health problems which at one time caused her to miss a year of elementary school. As a mother, she cared about her children's education and, by reading nightly to Dad, instilled in him a love of books that would carry him through many long hours of solitude in his father's fields (between irrigation water changes) or in railroad cars (between work shifts).

Through his love affair with literature, Dad acquired some sense of the largeness of the world and an interest in the people beyond Downey who occupied that world. His love of story would also lead to acting and writing experiences during which he discovered some natural ability. For example, during his eighth grade year, he rode a horse on stage while vigorously singing “My home's in Montana.” According to Dad, his robust performance delighted everyone except his mother, who was distracted by worries that the horse would mess on the stage. As he grew older he dreamed, like every other boy in Downey, of being a sports star and felt

that nothing else really “counted” in Downey, but he still made time to perform in several school and church plays and to edit his high school newspaper—until the principal “fired” him for writing an editorial against school consolidation.

Unlike most people in his family and community, Dad also decided, at his mother’s encouragement, to continue his education beyond high school. He enrolled at BYU with plans to major in political science and, though not a stellar student his first two years (he certainly had not learned to study in Downey), enjoyed most of the classes he managed to attend. He especially credits a freshman composition teacher, Nan Grass, for “turning [him] into a college student” (even though he never showed her his full capabilities) and a history teacher for assigning him essay questions like “Discuss all the major developments in slavery from the arrival of the first slaves in 1619 to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.”

If going to college helped expand Dad’s worldview, serving a mission in Finland (also at his mother’s encouragement) did so even more. Dad was moved not only by lush forests and lakes that covered the land but also by the stoic people whose reserved nature and dry humor appealed to him. He found their history fascinating and admirable, and he enjoyed learning their language. He was impressed by thoughtful Sunday School discussions among well-educated, literate, committed Mormon church members, and he was especially charmed by a Hannele Blomqvist from Lahti, Finland, who had joined the church a year earlier and was now serving a mission in her own country. After Mom and Dad had both completed their missions and resumed acquaintances at BYU, they married in the Salt Lake Mormon temple.

After his mission and marriage, Dad seems to have found more motivation and direction in his schooling. Having developed good study habits in Finland and satisfied the longing of his heart for love, he settled into a life of a serious student, abandoned his earlier plan to become a spy, yielded to “the allure of story,” and completed a bachelor’s degree in English, followed by one year as a high school English teacher in Bountiful, Utah, and then a master’s degree (again at BYU) in English literature.

At first, Dad explains, he thought he had to leave behind the stories of his youth and study more sophisticated literature. However, he eventually became “weary of the narrow elitism” of then-popular formalist literary criticism which “jerked literature from cultural context” and “tended to look with condescension” at the kinds of stories that had captivated him in his youth. Though deeply moved by much canonized literature, he objected to the notions that only educated people could craft good stories and that only educated people could determine what constituted good art.

Searching for a more inclusive discipline, he enrolled at Indiana University in a PhD program in folklore and focused his research on the political use of the *Kalevala* (an epic work based on ancient Finnish folksongs) in awakening a spirit of nationalism. With this focus he was able to combine his interests in politics and literature with his love of “all things Finnish,” and he was able to expand his study of literature to include the tales of common, working class peoples.

I believe that in studying the lore of common peoples, Dad made a highly symbolic (though probably not fully conscious) choice to stay loyal to his roots, no matter how much his new lifestyle would differ from that of his boyhood. But because his new lifestyle was indeed different, not to mention demanding, Dad would wander far beyond Downey (both literally and figuratively) for many years. “The damned dissertation,” as it was known in our house, was a nine-year project that took us back and forth between Bloomington, Indiana (where Dad earned his PhD), Helsinki, Finland (where Dad studied on a Fulbright scholarship), and Provo, Utah (where Dad eventually returned to BYU as a faculty member before actually completing said damned dissertation). And what I learned from both my parents during those years was not the importance of having roots but rather the excitement of cultural diversity.

This family focus on other cultures continued even after the PhD ordeal was over and we settled into more permanent residence in Provo and later in Logan, Utah. Mom, who knew well the pain of homesickness, often rounded up Dad’s international students and brought them to our house for holiday dinners. She also fraternized with a large group of Finnish women who, like her, had emigrated to Utah and married young American men. As a social worker, Mom introduced us to people from different socioeconomic groups (for example, Native Americans, patients at the hospital for the mentally ill, and migrant workers), with whom we would not otherwise have come in contact. And as a folklorist in a world of very few folklorists, Dad communicated often with colleagues all over the world. He went to conferences with them and took interest in the cultures they were studying. Sometimes these folklorists discussed their studies at our dinner table.

In short, the father I knew was not exactly the same boy my grandparents had raised. The youth who had milked cows before dawn became a college professor who haunted empty libraries and wandered the halls of his university department in his stocking feet until three and four o’clock in the morning. The young farmer who had once been “terrified” by the prospect of sitting by an African American woman on a bus in California now enthusiastically studied cultures far different from the one that had produced him. From a very early age, I understood that both my parents had a genuine desire really to understand their brothers and sisters of all cultures, and I recognized Dad’s interest in folklore as a means of gaining that understanding.

On the other hand, Dad’s folklore studies also gradually led him to a greater appreciation of and interest in his own culture. When Dad first began his PhD program, he had never really considered that folklore existed in his own culture. Folklore, he thought, belonged to other people; he had come to IU to study the folklore of the Finns. He therefore found very unusual a suggestion by his IU mentor, Richard Dorson, that he ought to collect some Mormon folklore. However, his views began to change in 1964 after he collected from his Bloomington ward (parish) members forty-five stories about the three Nephite prophets who, according to Mormon belief, have wandered the earth since the time of Christ.

By the time he returned to BYU as a faculty member, Dad had begun writing about western and especially Mormon folklore, and after finishing his dissertation, he began to pursue this interest full time. His studies over the course of many years have helped him to explain Mormon culture to non-Mormons as well as to define his own place within that culture, and in recent years he has especially found satisfaction in collecting his own family folklore. These accomplishments have motivated him to emphasize to his students that folklore is not just a collection of antiquated stories from the past; rather, folklore is constantly created by every kind of community imaginable in the *present*. Office mates at work, sports team members, neighborhood children at play, women's bridge clubs, and small cohesive towns like Downey—all of these “communities” develop traditions, rituals, and stories, in an attempt to create order, meaning, and beauty from their everyday experience, and all of their artistic expressions have meaning and aesthetic form unique and fully understandable only to the members of those communities or “folk groups.”

This definition of folklore was (and still often is) unfamiliar to nonfolklorists both within and without academia. Dad and his fellow folklorists thus have faced the monumental yet heady task of exploring with their students the implications of this definition and convincing those who make administrative decisions that folklore scholarship is a field worth supporting and funding.

Dad's approach to this task has been to encourage his students to start their folklore studies, not by studying a different culture, as he did, but by focusing on their own cultures and then by expanding out to a comparative study of other cultures—to a broader understanding of the ways culture works and to an understanding that all cultures are rooted in a shared humanity. He has found that his students initially understand the significance of their own cultures' folklore in ways that they never could understand that of other cultures and consequently are able to make meaningful contributions to academic discussions across many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and even international relations. These students often have expressed gratitude for an opportunity to study subjects which really matter to them on deep, personal levels. In applying scholarly analysis to their own cultures, they have acquired a deeper understanding of themselves, and sometimes this understanding has helped them come to terms with the more painful, disturbing elements of their heritage. Always it has helped prepare them for the equally important task of sensitively and fairly interpreting the folklore of *other* cultures.

In our current age of multicultural education, Dad's approach might not seem so revolutionary, but in the 1960s, when Dad began teaching folklore at BYU, the folklorists were way ahead of their time. In an age of formalist literary criticism, it was especially difficult for some humanities professors to consider that the communal stories, jokes, traditions, and creations of everyday people could have nearly as much artistic merit as the formalized art taught in university classrooms.

As the only folklorist at both BYU and USU for many years, Dad was keenly aware of these attitudes and, consequently, of the precarious position of most

university folklore programs. He understood that he had to spread his message beyond the classroom in order to keep folklore scholarship alive. Consequently, he spoke often in college English classes, in university lecture series, and even in Mormon “firesides”; and he continues today, even in retirement, to address church and university classes—especially about the importance of family folklore. Above all, Dad has shared his message by befriending students and colleagues and taking an interest in their stories. I remember often being designated by my mother to pick him up from his office while she waited with a younger brother in the car. Mom usually brought reading material with her for this occasion because it was always a long, drawn-out affair. Besides having to return to his office three or four times for things he had forgotten, Dad also had to stop and visit everyone whose door was open between his office and the stairs. Almost always I heard stories during these occasions, and though I was too young at the time to consciously realize it, I think now that the stories were especially well told by English professors who knew Dad was paying attention to every aspect of their storytelling performance. Dad hasn’t yet converted all his friends and colleagues, but as they have shared their stories, especially with such an interested listener, many of them have begun to recognize how the stories have shaped their own lives and moved them as profoundly as any novel or poem.

It would be grossly simplistic and unfair of me, however, to suggest that Dad’s networking habits have all been politically or professionally motivated. Mainly, they are just indicative of the person he was reared to be. Dad simply enjoys hanging out with a close-knit group of friends and habitually works to develop a sense of community and trust among them. As a child I saw evidence of these friendships when students came to our home for dinner or cohorts came for a visit or a card game. (I’ll forever cherish the memory of Eloise Bell’s bellowing laughter pervading my dreams and pushing them in pleasant directions.) Sometimes these associates even came to help with home maintenance projects. I believe half the English department helped paint our house after Dad’s malignant thyroid was removed in 1969. Twenty-five years later, when my husband and I were building our own home, Dad, with English department colleagues Doug Thayer and Eugene England, showed up at our doorstep one day to help us meet the bank’s completion deadline. While I felt deeply grateful to these men, I realized that their actions had little to do with me and everything to do with lifelong patterns of interaction with each other. And, though I can’t speak for Doug Thayer, I know that both Dad and Eugene credited some of those patterns of interaction to customary behavior which they both had learned as young boys in Downey.

As a folklorist, Dad has integrated the best of two worlds he loves. He has helped document, preserve, and even perpetuate the values and lifestyle he enjoyed in the western, Mormon, agrarian culture that produced him while still satisfying his desire for an academic lifestyle and for companions who share his intellectual interests. In other words, Dad has gradually developed a network—a community or folk group, if you will—of devout, Mormon intellectuals like himself.

But Dad also has done more than this. In bringing Downey with him to the university, he has made the academy a much more relevant, accessible place for

many students and has thus helped other folklorists to create a new, worldwide community of scholars not so far removed from the various “folk communities” that have produced *them*—a community of scholars not hiding out in an ivory tower but actively bridging cultural divides by interpreting different communities for each other.

All of the essays in this book show evidence of this bridge building. No matter what Dad writes, I believe he always envisions an audience full of family and friends, as well as academic colleagues. Never wanting to alienate any reader, Dad always starts by defining folklore, and he illustrates academic terms and concepts with stories which people outside his discipline can understand. Especially I think he writes (even now, after her death) for his mother, who read everything he wrote and was immensely proud of him. In the essay devoted entirely to her stories, he closes with a statement which I believe he would want you, the readers, to understand more than any other.

Too long we have looked for the expression of . . . glory only in the canonized works of the received literary tradition. It is time now to realize our democratic ideals by listening finally to all the voices in our great land. Especially it is time to seek in our own family stories the . . . [communities] that have created, expressed, and given direction to our lives. It is time at last to celebrate ourselves; we all have stories to tell.

—Denise Wilson Jamsa

