

Rev. Joseph Henderson Wilson and Sarah Catherine Welch Wilson

By: Pat Queen (great-granddaughter)

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Reverend Joseph Henderson Wilson

Rev Joseph Henderson Wilson, Papa Joe, was born on March 24, 1883, in Murphy, North Carolina, the child of Jackson Lafayette and Ava Rilla Williams Wilson. He married Sarah Catherine Welch, who was only 16, on November 30, 1902. They had nine children in 21 years. From the handwritten notes of his daughter Hattie¹:

Joseph Henderson Wilson (1883-1948) was what is now called a Southern Baptist minister. He preached in Bryson City and several surrounding cities. To make a living he made brick and was a brick mason, a trade he learned from his father, Jackson Lafayette Wilson (1828-

¹ A detailed account of the family, written by daughter Hattie in *Swain County Heritage* (article 435) notes that Joe also taught school at Almond and pastored the Baptist Church there.

1913). He built the first (brick) courthouse in Franklin, Macon, North Carolina. It was torn down in the 1972 to build a larger one.

According to U.S. Census information, Joe was a salesman in a feed store in Charleston, NC (now part of Bryson City) in 1910 where he owned the home in which the family resided. Based on deed research, it appears that the home was next to that of his parents, Jackson Lafayette and Ava Rilla Wilson, who sold adjacent properties to their son and daughter-in-law in 1905 and 1909. In 1915, after both of Joe's parents had died, the home was sold to the Wilson's neighbor, Jack Coburn. All of this property is in the vicinity of what is today the Relax Inn.

The Wilsons moved to Hazel Creek, where Joe took a teaching position at Proctor, as did his daughter, Grace, who also later taught at Whittier. In his article "Life on Hazel Creek (Proctor) with Ritter Lumber Company" (*Heritage of Swain County*), Clarence Vance, whose father worked for Ritter, recalled "We had a good Sunday School, B.Y.P.U and good singing. We also had good preachers including Professor Joe Wilson, who was a school principal for years as well as our pastor."

Proctor, named for Moses and Patience Proctor, early white settlers in the area, was isolated when the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) built Fontana Lake. The land acquired by TVA was turned over to the National Park Service and has been a part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park for over seven decades.



**Proctor school buildings and playground, April 1943
(Photo courtesy of National Archives, Morrow, Georgia)**

Today, the playground is the site of Campsite 86 (Proctor), one of the more popular campsites for visitors to Hazel Creek. Bricks used in the foundation of the school can still be found on the hill just across the road to the south and east of the campsite. The voices of children are no longer heard, and water no longer flows from the fountain whose remains can be found about 100 feet from the upper school structure.

In 1925, the Wilsons purchased six lots and part of another in the Arlington Heights section, where they would make their home. In the 1930 census, Joe was listed as a *Methodist* preacher (possibly an error on the part of the census taker). Living with Joe and wife Sarah on Schoolhouse Hill were 18-year old daughter Hattie, who taught in the public school (likely Bryson City Elementary), 13-year old son Jackson, 12-year old daughter Edith (who would later teach school in Swain County High), 9-year old son Clyde, 6-year old daughter Kathryn, 26-year old daughter Mary Ensley and her daughters Dorothy (6) and Mildred (5), and daughter Ethel Sherrill (20 and her toddler sons Jack and Bob – a grand total of thirteen family members in the big white house. Bob recalls watching the Bryson City High football team playing in the field out from the Wilson house in the mid-1930s.

Prior to 1940, Joe took the position of pastor at the Hayesville Baptist Church (now Truett Memorial Baptist). Declining health, perhaps complicated by the death of son Clyde during a training exercise in WW2 led the family to return to the home on Schoolhouse Hill in Bryson City. Reverend Joseph Henderson Wilson died on May 7, 1948, in Bryson City from a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 65, and was buried in the Bryson City Cemetery in a family plot near the southeast corner of the cemetery. He had purchased the plot from Sallie Keener Franklin shortly after the death of Clyde. Joe outlived two of his children, Ethel and Clyde. His wife, Sarah, son Clyde, daughter Ethel and grandson Jack Sherrill are buried alongside him.



The Wilson Family 1912: Back Row, Gov, Mary, Grace. Seated: Joe (29), Sarah (23). Ethel on Joe's lap, Hattie on Sarah's lap



Sarah Catherine Welch Wilson

Sarah Catherine Welch Wilson, a native of Brush Creek and my maternal Great Grandmother, was better known to the grandkids and great grandkids as Mama Wilson. My earliest memory of her is going with my grandparents and mother to a family reunion at her big white house on School House Hill in Bryson City. I was about 6 or 7 and it seemed huge with all the rooms and the boxwoods in the yard so big they were scary. To this day the smell of boxwood immediately recalls Mama Wilson and her home. She also had beautiful set of china with a wide gold rim that fascinated me because I had never seen plates like that before. They were only used for special occasions.

The summer I was 10 or 11, I got to spend 2 weeks with her. She had told Grannie and Mother that she was going to teach me to eat celery - which I richly disliked. Every afternoon she would have a snack and give me a stick of celery. I always asked to take it outside and she would say OK because even squirrels won't eat celery! What she didn't know was that as I went down the hall to the front door, there was a door under the stairwell that had the knob removed to keep kids from playing there. The hole was the perfect size for the stick of celery and that's where every stick went. She told Mother and Grannie she had taught me to like celery. When the house was sold many years later and they opened that door, no one could explain the blob on the floor - and I wasn't about to!

She always said I reminded her of my Aunt Ethel, whom I never met. That association seemed to give us a special relationship. She wanted me to visit in the summers and when I was there the times were quiet and not rushed. She talked about Uncle Clyde who had died in World War II and about her other children, grandchildren and greatgrandchildren. I would play badminton in the big side yard with a neighbor who lived behind her and help Mama Wilson with chores. She had all kinds of books for me to read so I was happy and content there.

When she went to live with Aunt Kat (her youngest daughter) in Warne, North Carolina, I truly missed the house in Bryson City. She always made me feel special and encouraged me in every way - including celery!



Photo circa 1964. Pat Queen, Beatrice Ayers Queen Rice, Grace Wilson Ayers, Mama Wilson



Grave marker for Papa Joe and Mama Wilson