

MAY 2025

# SALISBURY

the magazine

## STORIES FROM LIFE

*Alfred Wilson reflects on home, airplanes  
and construction*

• ARTIST GARY HESS HAS  
DESIGNED HELMETS, T-SHIRTS  
FOR NASCAR DRIVERS

• YMCA MAKES A SPLASH  
WITH SWIMMERS





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On the cover: Alfred Wilson stands next to his 1947 Luscombe 8E.
(Sean Meyers photo)

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# Celebrating spring

“One of my favorite books of all time is E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*. I cannot count the times I’ve read it: for myself, to my children, to school children, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It has timeless lessons for us all, lessons on friendship, on having trust in one another and on the circle of life.

White, of course, was a master at weaving imagery in our heads. I particularly love the way he paints Spring. Pigs doing backflips! Geese running serpentine, stammering their honks; new animal babies being born; sneakers wet with the morning dew and even furtive rats, searching for morsels. I think of White’s spring every time my snowdrops bloom.

This spring we have a new crop of articles for you. Local builder Alfred C. Wilson shares stories from his life and work. Al would be the last to tell you he’s a storyteller but all it takes is a sunny afternoon on a windswept hill to get them out of him.

Gary Hess quietly designs and paints breathtaking helmets and other items, usually in the dark of night. Even though he’s quiet, once he starts talking about his process, his enthusiasm takes hold and he talks a mile a minute! I know you’ll enjoy seeing whom he has painted for.

The YMCA has offered swimming to our community for 75 years: swimming lessons, swimming teams, recre-

ational swimming, therapeutic swimming, lifeguard lessons and even diving lessons – and it all comes at quite a cost. Despite the cost of providing it, we are afforded the opportunity to swim for mere cents on the dollar. Rowan-Cabarrus YMCA offers our community seven pools, with an eighth on the way.

The art take this month on the Robertson collection at Waterworks is by local-ish sculptor Ray Moose. As an artist himself, he offers new insights into the painting *Les tulips dans une vase delfte* (Tulips in a Delft vase) by Odilon Redon.

Our Bookish this month is a review by Margaret Basinger of the new book, *James*, by Percival Everett. It won the National Book Award and has been hailed by critics since its publication earlier this year.

So do some backflips! Pull your weeds and arrange your flowers! Celebrate the beauty of an early-morning spider web with the dewdrops still clinging tight. Spring is here!



Maggie

— Maggie Blackwell  
Editor, *Salisbury the Magazine*



# Another viewpoint of a classic tale

**T**oday, Dear Reader, I present to you a tale of two books written 140 years apart. One is based on the other. Their main characters are the same and the plots start out alike but veer apart. But most above all, their central theme is the same: slavery was not only based on one man's ownership of another but also the raw hatred that accompanies it. The second book makes it clear that that hatred is still alive today. It is called racism.

Reading Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" can enhance your understanding of today's reviewed book, though it's not essential. Released in 1885, Twain's novel continues from "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," exploring themes of friendship, adventure, race and society during the Civil War. Ernest Hemingway remarked that much of modern literature stems from this work. It tells the story of Huck Finn, a teenager fleeing his abusive father, and Jim, a slave desperate to avoid being sold and separated from his family. "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has been part of high school English curricula for decades.

Flash forward to 2024 and the publication of Percival Everett's novel, "James." Everett has won many prizes for his extensive body of fiction including the National Book Award for "James." "James" will forever be taught as the companion novel to Huckleberry Finn. It is told from the viewpoint of Jim. Like "Huckleberry," "James" is action-packed. It can be read for its pure entertainment. The unlikely duo strap together scraps of lumber and ends of rope and build rafts strong enough to carry them along the mighty Mississippi River. They travel by night with only the light of the moon to guide them. They have only

one goal to guide them...to find the free states. Along their journey they link up with a couple of conmen, the King and the Duke of France. This is where Huck and Jim are separated.

It is at this point in the book that the reader is introduced more fully to the real Jim. (James). Everett's James is portrayed as two people: one a stereotypical ignorant slave, and the other a well-read articulate scholar. To his owners and all other white people he encounters, his speech is what is expected of a slave. For instance, if a slave is walking down the street and sees that a white woman's kitchen is

on fire, he must say, "Oh Lawd, Missus ma'am, you wan fo me to get some sand?" Among the slaves he has mentored, James would say "Would you like for me to get some sand?" This is necessary because a slave cannot be perceived as someone smart enough to know how to put out a fire. He certainly wouldn't be able to speak articulately. James talks to white people in slave talk because "White folks expect us to sound a certain way, and it can only help us if we don't disappoint them." The reader is not told how James learned to

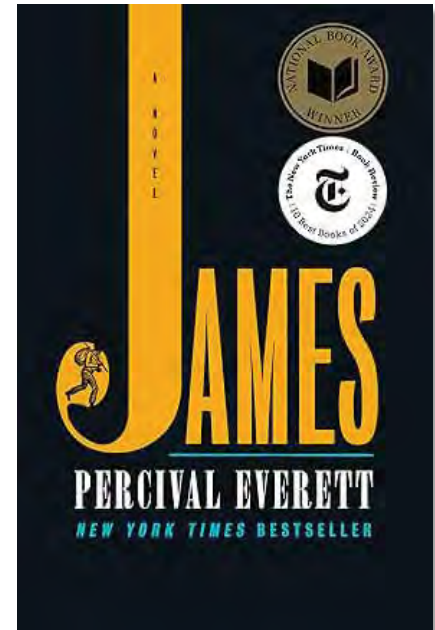
read, but because he had access to his master's library, he has conversations in his mind about slavery with the likes of Voltaire and Rousseau.

While he travels on his own, James links up with a group of traveling minstrels. He enjoys his time with them because he gets to display his beautiful singing voice. He trusts that they will help him in his dedicated mission to reunite his family. But when he hears that they are going to sell him to another singing group, he escapes them and heads back toward the Mississippi. Miraculously James finds Huck, and their adventures continue. James and Huck truly care



by

MARGARET BASINGER



"James," by Percival Everett

about each other despite the colors of their skin. This is evident in each book

Throughout the book, James faces slavery in all its horror. He reflects on the many ways that slave owners justify this atrocity and racism. James is especially aware of how religion is misused, saying "Religion is just a controlling power they employ and adhere to when convenient. There might be a higher power, children, but it's not their white God."

Although the theme of slavery is harsh and grim, "James" is also filled with humor. Mark Twain was known for the humor in his writing and Everett is a skilled humorist as well. Some of the funniest parts are when the slaves talk slave talk mocking their clueless owners.

There are twists and turns at the end that keep readers of all ages, even over-worked high schoolers, interested and entertained.

Unfortunately, it will probably be banned because of its subject matter just as "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" has been in some states. **[S]**



**THROUGH THE LENS** by Tim Truemper



Tim Truemper captured colorful birds on his feeder.

To submit a photo for Through the Lens, send a high-resolution photo to [andy.mooney@salisburythemagazine.com](mailto:andy.mooney@salisburythemagazine.com). Vertical orientation is required.



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MAY 2025 9





*Donna Groce takes a rare break on Easy Street in Downtown Salisbury.*



*Donna Groce rang in 2025 with bagpipes.*

# making CONNECTIONS

*Trinity Oaks' Donna Groce takes delight in the Rowan community*

STORY : **SUSAN SHINN TURNER** | SUBMITTED PHOTOS



If you've ever spent much time in downtown Salisbury, at St. John's Lutheran Church, at Rowan Chamber of Commerce events, or at Trinity Oaks Retirement Community events, you've likely met Donna Groce. Donna is the Learning for Life director at Trinity Oaks but she and husband Doug also take advantage of everything Salisbury has to offer, whether that's great restaurants, the symphony, or the theater. She was also recently honored as the Rowan Chamber of Commerce's Paul Fisher Volunteer of the Year.

Let's get to know this month's Rowan Original.

## **Q. How did your previous experiences build on your current position?**

I tell people everything I've done up to this point has prepared me to do my current job.

I interviewed at Childress Vineyards in 2009 and that was the perfect job for me. I worked in the tasting room. I was the first point of contact for every visitor. That job honed my customer service skills in an incredible way. It's a destination. People there are generally in a great mood. They come to enjoy themselves.

I gained experience in point-of-sale in business, and that gave me confidence on the business side. Over those eight years with Childress, I worked at progressively higher levels.

In the end, I needed a job that would serve my servant's heart. I prayed about it, but never did anything about it. Then a group from Trinity Oaks visited and a resident left her scarf. Because I lived in Salisbury, I offered to drop it off.

That's when I found out about a brand-new position called the Learning for Life director, so I sent a letter to Bill Johnson, Trinity Oaks' executive director. He invited me to lunch, which turned out to be a job interview!

He said, "We have been looking for a Learning for Life program as an amenity.

Would you like to help develop it?"

It was a very exciting opportunity — life enrichment with an academic flair. It's a little bit of marketing, too, as I'm the one who takes the

pictures and shows our active senior lifestyle. It's a great way for me to pursue my photography interest.

I'm a native of Dunedin, Fla. There are a lot of retirees there. It's the sister city of Sterling, Scotland. That's where I learned to play the bagpipes. I still play upon occasion. I feel like this all is a natural calling that landed me at Trinity Oaks.

## **What's been fun/interesting/challenging about being in a brand-new position?**

One of the first things I did was a focus group. I didn't know the residents. We talked about what they liked and what kind of general topics we should pursue and it took off from there. (Examples: the arts, foreign languages, history.)

It's most interesting to work with the residents because many of them still pursue hobbies or have had careers that provide content for my programs. Residents often present their own programs and share their common interests as well. They throw out ideas all the time, which I rely on. There's an endless supply of resources there.

What we have built through this program is community. That's made a huge difference with our independent living residents. They genuinely care for one another.

## **I see you have quite a robust volunteerism resume. I'm sure people ask all the time; how do you find the time to do everything you want to do?**

Part of my job is to be the Chamber of Commerce representative for Trinity Oaks. I just love making connections. I love being that community liaison person. Volunteering is in my nature. My mother and father set a fine example for me. It's how I can be God's hands and feet.

## **How do you re-energize on such a busy schedule?**

I am definitely extroverted. But I do have to go home and plug back in. I do a lot of yoga, which allows me to focus on my breathing and my body. I will sit quietly and put on relaxing music and light a candle. I love a good spa vacation.

## **When you are not at work or volunteering, what are some things that you enjoy doing?**

I exercise. I try to be outdoors. I walk in any kind of weather just to get outdoors and be in nature. I watch a little TV. The Hallmark Channel is just pleasant.

## **What are some of your favorite things about living in Rowan County?**

I love taking advantage of our amazing theaters, restaurants and symphony. Whenever Doug and I get the opportunity, we like to eat out together. I like the amenities of downtown, and I like visiting my sons on their farms in Cleveland.

Although I have little time to shop, I have never been much of an online shopper. I prefer to buy local and Salisbury offers everything I need. And our out-of-town guests always get a downtown tour. We are so proud to show it off.

## **Where are some of your favorite places to travel and why?**

I like to go to North Carolina wineries with friends. They're all so diverse, and I can talk a little bit about wine and see parts of the state I've never been to. And we visit family in Florida every chance we can.


## **How would you encourage someone who is interested in volunteering — either a young person or a retiree — but doesn't know where to start?**

Be curious. Dabble in as many things as you can, even if you don't think you have any interest. It's more about a personal connection. You might make a new friend in volunteering.

## **What are three things you always keep in your fridge or pantry?**

This is the most difficult question! Wine, chocolate and butter.

## **What do you wish you could go back and tell a young Donna Groce?**

You can trust yourself. It's taken me a while to come to that. 





# POOLING

## resources

*Rowan-Cabarrus YMCA makes a splash with swimmers*

STORY : MAGGIE BLACKWELL | PHOTOGRAPHY : JON C. LAKEY









It's likely that among you, your family and friends, someone is a member of our local YMCA. With eight locations across two counties, the Y's reach makes sure most everyone is local to one of its facilities.

Y members use pools for a variety of purposes: recreational swim, therapeutic swim, water exercise, lifeguarding classes, learn-to-swim classes and swim teams. The pools are offered year-round and provide a unique space for individuals of all ages to stay active, improve their well-being and foster connections within our communities. Managing these pools, however, comes with a set of operational challenges that require training, careful consideration and planning to ensure they remain safe, sustainable and accessible.

Rowan-Cabarrus YMCA currently operates seven indoor pools, with plans to open an eighth soon. The pools serve as vital hubs for health and wellness, offering a variety of programs that cater to individuals from all walks of life.

### ***WATER SAFETY***

Drowning is a leading cause of accidental death in children.





*Swimmers can start learning team skills and competitive swim techniques at age 5.  
(YMCA photo)*





YMCA water safety and swim lessons are crucial for several reasons. Skill development is key, as is confidence in the water. A child who learns to swim has a skill for life.

### ***ACCESSIBILITY***

One of the main advantages to the Y's indoor pools, of course, is their consistent availability. Access isn't limited to warm-weather months. With this broader availability, swim is available to a broader range of people, including people who work shift work, students and families with busy schedules.

Richard Reinholz, chief operating officer of Rowan-Cabarrus YMCA, says, "Our pools are vital assets to the communities we serve, helping us achieve our mission by providing programs to a diverse range of individuals. Managing pools, however, comes with its challenges including substantial liability, op-



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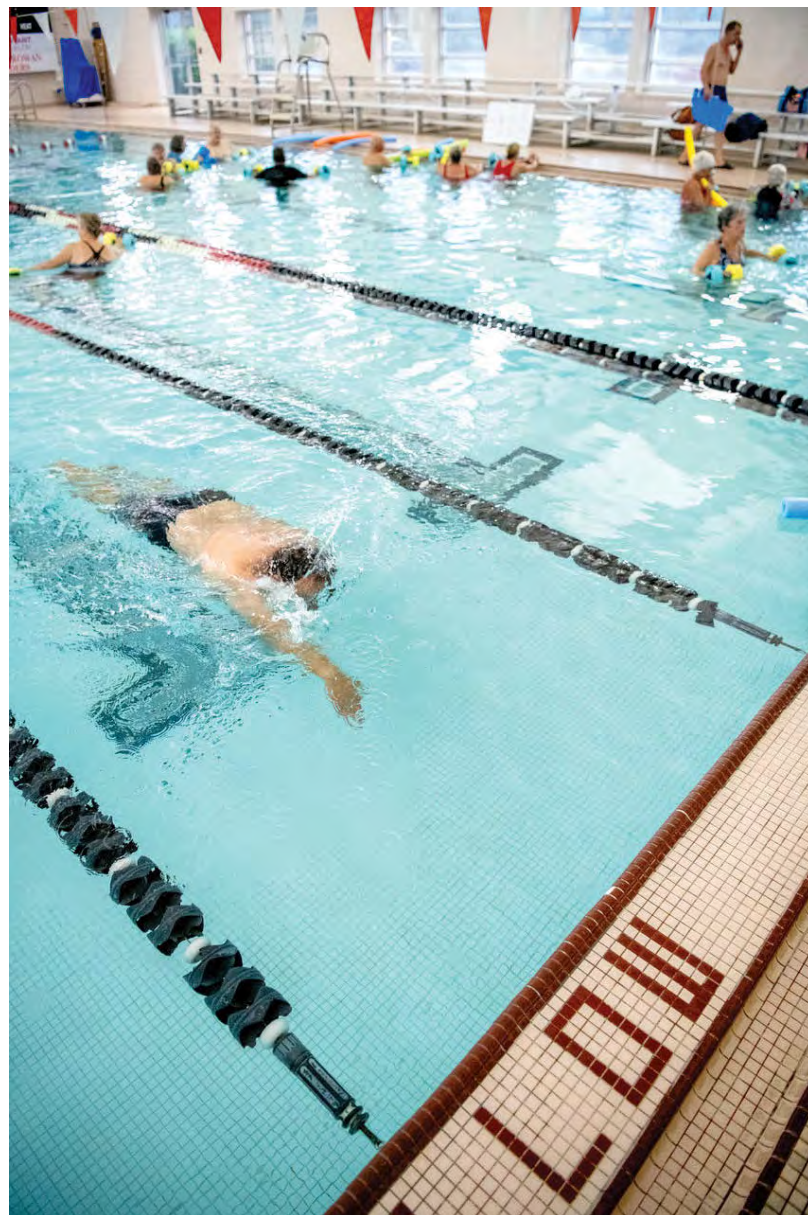
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*“RAC provided me with lifelong friends that I still consider my family today. I would not be where I am today without my RAC family; they have been there for every milestone and will always be. RAC coaches were my mentors as I continued to not only grow in the sport, but as a person. My time on RAC was the most fun years of my life, if I could go back to it I would!”*

— RACHEL GIBSON

*ECU swimming senior from RAC from Albemarle*



“As a parent, RAC has provided my daughter with a support system of friends and families. We are so thankful for the families we have met and friends she has made along her swim journey. Additionally, Y Swim team has taught her more than swimming, it has taught her how to be an encouraging teammate, sportsmanship, and life skills that we have already witnessed in her college career. We will forever be grateful to RAC, Coach Hannah, and all the other coaches who given their time to make this a successful program.

— JENNIFER GIBSON  
Rachel's mom



RAC founder Phyllis Steimel with her former RAC Kelly McLaughlin recently, at Kelly's HS Hall of Fame Induction. (YMCA photo)



  
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erational complexities and financial burdens.”

Those financial burdens include things like heating the water, maintaining air quality and managing humidity levels. All of these create high energy consumption. Also, maintaining water treatment systems and ensuring water safety adds to the ongoing financial burden.

Rowan-Cabarrus YMCA has made major investments in the pools in the past 24 months and will be doing more in the next 12 months:

- Kannapolis pool renovation and new roof: \$2.5 million completed
- Saleeby-Fisher YMCA new HVAC system: \$350,000 completed
- J. Fred Corriher Jr. YMCA New HVAC system: \$250,000 completed
- Harrisburg YMCA new pool construction: \$7.5 million in progress

- J.F. Hurley YMCA new HVAC system for both pools: \$1.5 million summer, 2025

Local artist Phyllis Steimel has swum, supported swim teams and painted swim portraits for over 30 years at her local YMCA. Phyllis says, “Swimming, of course, is a favorite sport of mine. It’s a lifetime sport; it’s a lifesaving sport; it’s a team sport; it’s an individual sport; it’s an all-around fitness sport. On a hot summer day, you will find the pool crowded with children. It’s a fun sport!”

RAC-Y – Rowan Aquatic Club – has provided instruction and competition for developmental, competitive and advanced swimmers for over 40 years. Many have or currently hold records at the state and national levels.

Enjoy your YMCA pool! It’s an investment for you and your health! **S**

“RAC and all the coaching staff have been a tremendous gift to our family: The dedication that they have to their swimmers and this program are top notch. We drive out of our way for this program because it is phenomenal. And it isn’t just the sport. They inspire kids to be accepting and supportive of each other. They are helping to raise our young men into upstanding and compassionate individuals. Coaches, like teachers, are invaluable. Make sure you thank one that has enriched your life today! Thanks Hannah and all of RAC!

— JANICE MCBRIDE

Parent of 15-year-old boys in RAC from Mocksville



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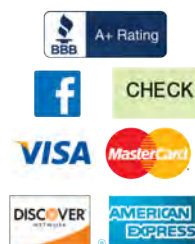
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*Gary Hess stands in his workshop with a mix of helmets.*

# motorsports ILLUSTRATED

*Artist Gary Hess has designed helmets, T-shirts and collectibles for NASCAR drivers*

STORY : MAGGIE BLACKWELL | PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS









*Laura Beth Barnhart had a custom Gary Hess tattoo placed on her thigh.*



*A custom Chicago Blackhawks flight helmet by Gary Hess.  
(Photo courtesy Gary Hess)*

**T**he U.S. Olympic Luge team, Joe Nemecek and Jeff Gordon all have one thing in common: They wore helmets designed and painted by Gary Hess in China Grove.

His home studio is outfitted with all the equipment he needs to prepare the fancy, custom pieces: a high-tech plotter/plastic cutter, a sealed paint booth with two exhaust fans, airbrush equipment ranging from large to tiny and many, many containers of paint, primer and topcoat — all precisely lined up and labeled. He laughs as he concedes he has OCD.

Stacked in exact form are white driving helmets with an array of breathing tubes, blank skateboards, blank T-shirts and other items waiting for his artist's touch.

And, yes, an artist he is. He's quietly confident in his abilities. He doesn't brag about it but one thing he knows: he can develop a mean design. Educated in graphic design at Central Piedmont Community College, he first worked at a company that sells racing ephemera to fans. He designed "trinkets to trash," including die-cast cars. Hess says

anything that sells from a driver's trailer, he designed.

A series of relationships with family of NASCAR drivers got his foot in the door designing their helmets. He designed for Jeff Gordon from 1999 through 2005. Because he owns the design, he makes replicas for fans, but he sticks to his self-imposed rule: he never makes more than 24 copies of any helmet. For those of you who may not know, 24 was Gordon's number.

Hess stumbles over his words as he explains his processes to design, prime, paint and topcoat the helmets. His enthusiasm is palpable.

Initially, his dad thought he was creating helmets using "rattle can" spray paint. When he saw Hess' first helmet, he was wordless. He immediately invested in Hess' business so he could continue crafting them.

Hess is painstaking in his methods. For metal-based helmets like a motorcycle helmet he's currently working on, he primes with epoxy. For plastic, he uses canned primer.

The current motorcycle helmet is designed to be worn backwards and perfectly emulates a Harley-Davidson ball





A Gary Hess-designed Dale Jr. T-shirt. (Image courtesy Gary Hess)

NASCAR

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*Gary discusses his process for creating his helmet designs.*



cap — down to the shadows on stitches, vent holes, embroidered logo and button. It all looks completely dimensional with highlights and shadows. The customer gladly ponied up half the cost up front, knowing once his buddies see his helmet, everyone will want one.

*A motorcycle gas tank designed and painted by Gary Hess. (Photo courtesy Gary Hess)*

Hess has always been strategic about his logo on all helmets: it sits on the left side, small but very noticeable. The placement ensures its visibility on any shots of drivers in their cars. Today, even for non-NASCAR helmets, he retains his placement.

Racing helmets have air intake tubes on the side. Before Hess paints a helmet, he builds a fake air intake from fiberglass in the exact correct place. The time to complete a helmet varies based on complexity, of course, but after years of practice, he can usually design and complete one in 15 to 20 hours.

Hess has a big following for tattoos, as well. Laura Beth Barnhart sports four of his designs. She seems to adore him. “The e’s a quiet intensity there,” she says. “He put me at ease. It was a relaxed environment but he was focused on doing his best work.”

Another big fan is Jason Shrader. One of his favorites is his North Caroli-





Above: T-shirts and artwork that Gary designed hang on the wall.

Left: Gary Hess' logo on a helmet.







*A Gary Hess pen-and-ink drawing of a 1973 Camaro. (Photo courtesy Gary Hess)*

na-themed bicep. It features Grandfather Mountain, the Longleaf Pine and his daughter's name.

Shrader says, "It's an experience because we're friends. Look at the quality of his work! I gave him an idea and he rolled with it."

Hess said at first Shrader was unsure, just saying he wanted an homage to his home state and he wanted to include his daughter's name. Hess suggested a barnboard background with the N.C. icons imposed on it. Shrader loved the idea and they rolled with it.

Hess says for someone to succeed in this work, they would "first and foremost" must have talent. They have to surround themselves with people who have business acumen. He was lucky to have his dad around, saying he was his "go-to." Someone would need to know ahead of time they will make mistakes and learn from them.

It's solitary work. Hess says he relishes in the solitude, often working late in the night.

"In my workflow, designing a T-shirt or hel-

met, I get into myself, tune everything else out. I listen to my music. I jam and get creative. I'm a night owl. Most artists have days and nights. I've always found having my shop at night, my phone doesn't ring. There are no emails. It's quiet. There's something freeing about working at night. I'm working and grinding and everyone else is asleep.

"I have worked 72 hours straight on a helmet to get it done, before, although I try not to do that." **[S]**





*Jason Shrader  
has several  
tattoos  
designed by  
Gary Hess.*

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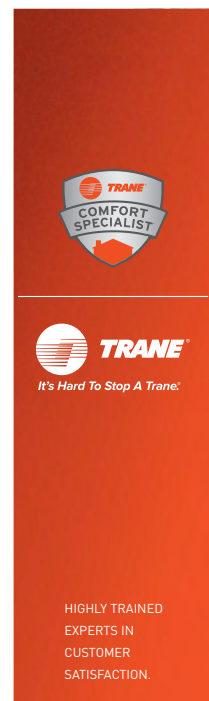


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*Gary Hess holds a miniature Jeff Gordon figurine that with the helmet that Gary designed.*



*Gary often scours the internet to find the right piece to finish his helmets. Here, he holds an old sticker that will be used on an older helmet.*



*Laura Beth Barnhart points to a Gary Hess tattoo that honors her late father and his love for Corvettes.*





*Al Wilson works on  
a fibe glass wheel  
cover for his 1969  
Cessna 182.*

# STORIES from life

*Alfred Wilson reflects on home, airplanes and construction*

STORY : MAGGIE BLACKWELL | PHOTOGRAPHY : SEAN MEYERS





*Al Wilson looks through an old scrapbook of his preservation work he has done in the community.*

Alfred Wilson sits outside on a gorgeous, windswept, sunny day to tell stories: stories of how he came to own the place, stories about airplanes, stories about building things.

The e's not a cloud in the sky. Al's blue eyes are direct but friendly. Their deeply carved laugh lines reveal years of seeing the humor in things.

He'd spent the morning flying his son out to the coast in his private plane. The afternoon was his to tell stories from his life. "Everybody has stories," he says. "They are what we live, day by day."

He and Lynn married 46 years ago. He had a degree in structural engineering; she was a teacher. They looked for a home, making concentric circles around Salisbury. In January 1979, they happened on the old Fowler place. He'd noticed it for years. He had to fight his way through kudzu to get into the property. "Lynn wouldn't get out of the car," he laughs. The Wyatts next door gave him the name of the

owner.

It was built by George Washington Fowler years ago; the heirs of Henry Fowler owned it. Henry Fowler bought a Pepsi franchise early, with plants in Charlotte, Rock Hill and New Orleans. His granddaughter was the heir to his fortune.

Al called her late one Friday afternoon and said, "You know it's your family homeplace and it's falling down." She said, "Call back on Monday and talk with my secretary."

"Lynn and I lived here and worked on it in exchange for rent. Mrs. Fowler paid for supplies. We moved in and did the dishes in the bathtub. We did have heat and electric. Bill Wyatt would help me any time I was doing anything. One day in 1982, Lynn came home a couple of years later, and there was a note on the door: "Love what you've done with the place. I'll sell it." She had him get it appraised first

Al takes off his cap and has a good laugh at this one. He had to get his own improvements appraised to buy the house! Fowler financed the deal and the Wilsons bought the



house and two acres.

Several years later, she decided to sell the farm and gave the Wilsons first option. Al bought enough to build his runway.

Al always worked in construction in one way or another. Lynn taught at Knox, Henderson, Isenberg, then Southeast. Today, retired, she works part-time at Communities in Schools. “She’s really great in the classroom,” he boasts.

They have three adult kids: Amanda, Alana, Allyn.

“For a living,” he says, “I’ve always done construction of one sort or another. When I was a kid, I looked really young. I graduated from UNCC in ’78. People only let me work on old junk. They call it, ‘historic restoration’ but most of it is deferred maintenance. You learn a lot working on existing structures. I studied structural engineering in school and always picked up odd jobs.

### ***THE BELL TOWER***

“The Bell Tower was one of the most fun jobs we’ve ever had: no adult supervision! Andy Eller (consulting engineer) made sure we didn’t color outside the lines. The e surely was a reason the doors were locked! It was termite-eaten with tons of structural damage in the interior — one good snowfall away from falling in.”

He says there were some steel beams for temporary support put in place in the 1970s, but they were badly bowed.

“I could’ve kicked one loose and it would just come down,” he says. “If they buckled, the steel supports would’ve come down with the roof. It was sketchy.”

Eller had gone up on a cable on a crane, climbed in one of the vents and looked around. “He made me well aware of what to expect,” Al says.

“I thought I knew what to expect,” he says. “But when I went in, it was like, ‘Holy Mackerel!’ “



*Al Wilson removes termite-damaged beams from the Bell Tower. (Photo courtesy Al Wilson)*





*From left: Uncle Jimmy Wilson, Al Wilson, Kemp Wilson and Oliver Wilson have been working on building a Vans RV12iS airplane. (Photo courtesy Al Wilson)*

They started by demolishing the floor and went one level at a time from the bottom up, until they reached the roof. KW Arthur had redone the roof years before and they came in to touch it up. Al and Dan Mikkelson put the copper finials back on. They soldered them back together, bored the center post out of the turrets, placed galvanized in and sprayed expanding foam before fastening them back on.

“They should ’t come back off” he smiles.

He compares it to the job at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church: he was hired to make room for the massive new organ and wound up replacing piers in the floor and making major structural repairs to the roof.

### ***THE BLACKMER-DIXON HOUSE***

“Suzanne Blackmer called me at three in the morning in 1989, saying, ‘Al, I just love your father and you’re the only one I’d trust to work on my house.’ I told her I would do it soon as I could.”

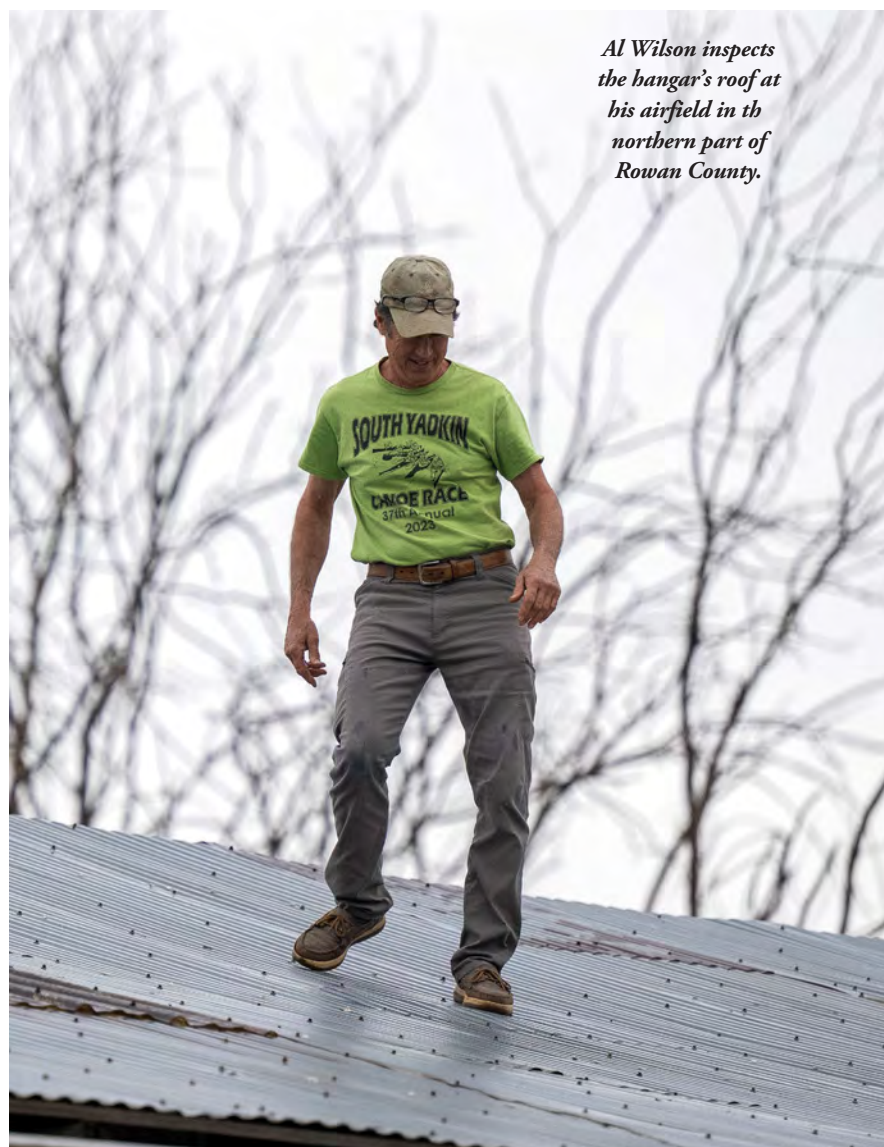
Ed Norvell was president of Historic Salisbury Foundation at the time. He asked for trusses and a temporary roof to protect what was left on the house.

Al says the place was a “charred mess.” He set a basic elevation for the floor, redid termite-eaten sills on front and reframed the perimeter. He says they nailed to whatever they could find, calling it a “major stabilization.”

When they left, it was stable and had a sound roof. They left it painted with the shutters closed.

“So, the work I did in 1989,” he says, “when I came back to it in 2013, I patted myself on the back for what we’d done.”

“I was over at Twin Lakes when Glenn (Dixon) called me. I



*Al Wilson inspects the hangar’s roof at his airfield in the northern part of Rowan County.*





was in immediately. Glenn and Beth are not new to restoration; they knew what they were in for.”

*A shadowbox of Al Wilson's career in the Boy Scouts.*

He says they had a good architect in Jon Palmer and Paul Fomburg at Cultural Resources to be sure they stayed true to history. He helped them come up with a plan so it would meet the demands of the 21st century and stay within the guidelines for preservation. The main thing for Beth, of course, was to get the kitchen right! ... and the master bath.

“Once we got all the plans in place and received preliminary approval from Cultural Resources,” he says, “it was off to the races! Then it was 12 months to the Certificate of Occupancy. All the credit goes to Glenn and Beth: they’re the ones who bit it off. They were undaunted. I was just the hired help.”

### BELL BLOCK BUILDING

One of the most challenging jobs, he says, was the Bell Block Building. He says there were roadblocks and some conundrums. One big challenge was getting power to the building; they had to run their own

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*Al Wilson exits his 1947 Luscombe 8E. Wilson likes to fly without shoes so he can have a better feel for the foot controls.*



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*Al Wilson constructed a barn and wedding venue for Dr. Steinman. (Photo courtesy Al Wilson)*



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**SCOUTING**

Al, his son Allyn and most of his family have achieved Eagle Scout status. He served as scoutmaster for Troop 448 for 20 years. His own scoutmaster was the local icon Jack Kepley, for whom the scouting building is named. Today he serves as assistant scout master. He's proud that he integrated aviation into scouting here.

**THE FAIR & SWEET**

In 2008, Al's dad was in poor health and the family needed a way to consistently visit him and their mom. They began taking a meal every Wednesday, then they'd all work to build their boat, "The Fair & Sweet." Wednesday gained the term, "Boat Night." It got his dad out of the house and they got a boat out of the deal. Although he died in 2008, the family launched the boat on Labor Day of that year. They put it on a trailer and got People's Choice and Best in Show at the Southport Wooden Boat Show in 2022. Materials for the entry quote Al as saying, "If you build a boat, you're tied to it forever. It's an extension of your soul."

"It was a great way to visit my parents," he recalls.

**PLANE DAY**

Boat Night has been replaced by Plane Day on Wednesdays. Al and his now-deceased brother George went to see a farmhouse someone wanted to buy and there was a set of aluminum wings there. The owner asked if they

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*Al Wilson uses a 124-foot tall lift to place a bead of caulk on those hard-to-reach areas on the exterior of The Bell Tower in 2017.  
(Jon C. Lakey, Salisbury Post file photo)*

wanted them! George said he would take them. He and Al rented a hangar and ordered the rest of the kit in 2022.

Today they have plane day every Wednesday. Al, his brother Russell, his sons Kemp and Geoff, Mike Wilson... Al says they are too numerous to name. Uncle Jimmy was a key person but he passed away in October.

"We miss Uncle Jimmy," he laments. "He was our adult supervision."

The shadows start to lengthen as Al reflects on retirement. He has his hands in many projects, he says, and there really wasn't a transition period. Now he works at his own leisure.

"I've been blessed with wonderful people all these years," he says. "I couldn't have done a thing without them. Not having employees is a freedom. Now I don't have to ensure continuity of work."

"You know, there are people who have given me sage words of wisdom but I don't know what I can say. Be prepared for most anything."

"Life is just a compilation of days and stories and events and you put them all together and there's a life. It's all just a ton of stories." [S]

*Al Wilson flies  
over his home  
in his 1947  
Luscombe 8E.*





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*Al Wilson tinkers in his garage.*



*Al Wilson, right, and his brother Russell play on the "Road Runner" they built as kids.  
(Photo courtesy Al Wilson)*



*A wooden model biplane rests in Al's office*



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# MODERN MASTERPIECES

*Now on display at Waterworks*

## The French artist Redon visits Salisbury

*By Ray Moose*

I feel lucky to be able to drive a mere 45 minutes and walk into a gallery of European master paintings—all made possible by Anne Scott Clement, the director of Waterworks in Salisbury and the prestigious art collection that is on loan from the Robertson Foundation.

I have this thing about art shows, especially paintings, that plays out in my imagination. I ask myself upon entering the exhibit, “If I were allowed to take one painting home, which one would it be?”

The energy in that room was powered by the many who had viewed this art over the years: a warmth and a love that the stillness of visual art can hold and release back into the air.

At the beginning, on the right hand wall, there is a very good description plaque about the Robertson Foundation and the collection of Julian and Josie Robertson.

Just beyond that, is a gouache painting by Marc Chagall. He was a visionary and a dreamer. Yet what really caught my attention was the glowing quality of his painting. It was painted in the 1920s but looked as if it was created yesterday.

A trip down the right-hand wall and left across the back wall revealed many familiar greats from De Kooning to Picasso, and Bonnard to Latour making up 38 paintings and two sculptures.

In the left corner, of the back wall, was the painting that I would love to wake up with every morning, and see.

The simplicity and the masterful taste that brought that beauty, and placed it in such a small, framed space, made me feel as if nothing ugly or mean or cruel could ever touch it.

Then I noticed the name. One of my favorite painters!

Odilon Redon (O-di-lahn Rea-dawn): born in Bordeaux, France in 1840 and lived until 1916. The French Symbolist draftsman, printmaker and painter did not consider himself a symbolist artist but is considered one of the best symbolist

artists of all time by many in the Art world.

Redon said, “Nothing in art is achieved by the will alone, it is achieved by docility submitting to the unconscious.”

Symbolism is, by its nature, an art form that is meant to reveal absolute truths through symbols, colors, line and general composition.

Redon seems duplicitous in his views. Many of his early charcoal drawings and prints were bazaar in nature, as he was inspired at that time by Edgar Allen Poe. Spiders and cyclops and strange faces! Yet later in his work he is famous for his still life paintings such as the one at Waterworks. Landscapes and figures that are mythological or of a religious or spiritual nature. His imagery and views of the world for the most part, came from deep within himself and his paintings matured as he did. Growing elderly did not deter his new ideas and creative expression.

We all feel, and view, visual art as differently as we live our lives. Much of Redon’s work, suggests an American Indian friend whom I was lucky to know years ago. He addressed our life in this Cosmos as “The Great Mystery, and the Earth as our Alter to it.”

Redon is a master of painting mystery and the metaphysical. His wordless poems and symphonies of glowing color. His exploration behind the veil and into the depths of the human unconscious show us a glimpse into worlds that are hidden from the everyday.

Or is this world that Redon paints an artifice and something geared to bring him recognition as a painter as our rational mind may tell us?

The symbol and color patterns flow out of him like a mountain spring. Whatever the meaning! Yet the beauty and depth in Redon’s work is, in my heart and mind, without question. **[S]**

*Ray Moose is a sculptor from Mt. Pleasant, N.C.*





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