

VOLUME

XXX

NUMBER 1

1 JAN 2008

WILLIAMS LAKE

A Sampson County Tradition

by Kent Wrench



Williams Lake as it appeared in 1950. The lake reached its heyday in the sixties when “The Williams Lake Dance Club” was popular and drew crowds in the hundreds. (Photo courtesy of Jerry Honeycutt)

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Williams Lake

A Sampson County Tradition

By Kent Wrench

Do you remember Williams Lake? Well, many of us do! It is best remembered by those from the thirties, forties, fifties and sixties for swimming, picnics, dancing and the loud, loud music from the jukebox and later the bands. The lake's water amplified the music and ratcheted up the level of excitement in the dancer and bystander. Dancing to the music of the jukebox lasted for three decades or more and then came the bands. But let's not get ahead of our story.

The land that would become Williams Lake lay vacant for the earliest years of our country and was claimed in 1796 by a land speculator, named Roger Alden, who claimed 30,000 acres of vacant land covering parts of Mingo, Plainview and Dismal Townships. The tracts of land that would become Williams Lake were purchased from Alden and his heirs, by Jonathan Holly and Drewry Jackson. Holly purchased land on the West side of the Caesar Swamp in 1806 and Jackson purchased land on the East side of the Caesar Swamp in 1837. Eventually, these tracts of land were acquired by Joel Jackson and his descendants.

In 1931, Clayton Williams, a son of J. T.

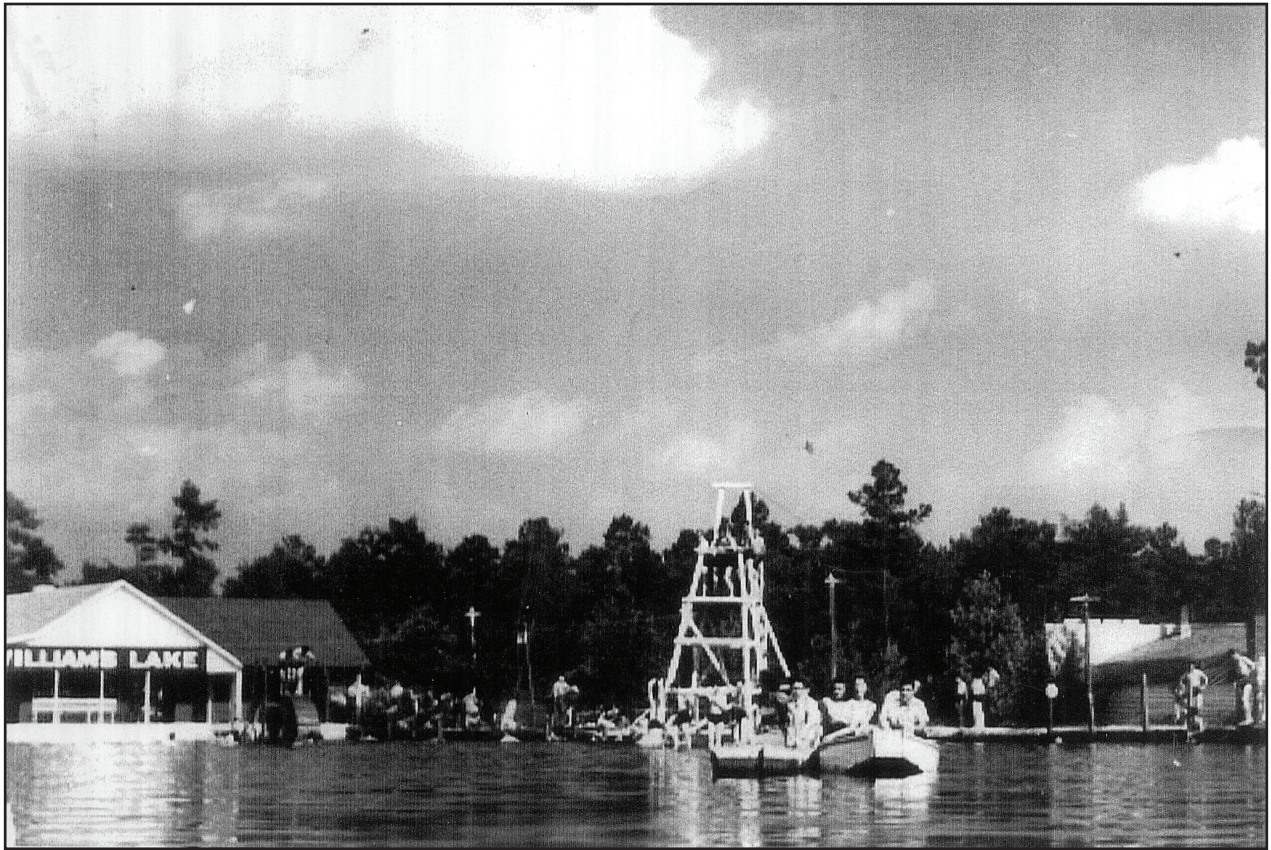
Williams and Daisy Jackson Williams was deeded the land where Williams Lake would soon be established. His grandfather Joel Jackson had once operated a grist mill on this same site, possibly as early as pre Civil War. Early-day millers enjoyed a privileged status, if one could persuade the court to designate their mill as a public mill, they could legally impound water on a neighbor's land. Indeed this early millpond did back waters up on neighboring lands. By the early 20th century the dam had long since washed out and the lake bed was dry, excepting the tannin stained waters of Caesar Swamp that ran through the bed. Yet, the original mill stones were still on site; mill stones have been known to remain in continuous use for more than a century.

Howard Hamilton, as an 11 or 12 year old boy, remembers seeing the fire and smoke as the dry lake bed was being burned off in 1932. The neighborhood volunteered to help with the cleanup: trees, stumps and shrubs were removed. The dam was repaired. The mill house was rebuilt; a new turbine water wheel was constructed by Mr. Edmon Smith and his teenage son Harvis. The original mill stones were once again turning, grinding corn into meal for the community. A mill site often grew into a community center, where scattered farmers would gather and trade news and gossip while they waited to have their grain ground.

The millpond was now restored and the swimmers came. The millrace of the earlier millpond



This aerial photo is from 1938. Williams Lake can be viewed as it was at this moment in history. (Photo courtesy of USDA)



This photo captures Williams Lake on a summer day in the 1940s. (Photo courtesy of Mary Williams Spell)

had been used as a swimming hole by neighborhood men and boys for generations. Now they would have a much larger swimming hole. At first only the men and boys came swimming; later the ladies joined in.

In the early fifties a charge of 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for children entitled one to swimming privileges for the day; you could use the dressing room and received a numbered tray to store articles of clothing in. Many of our readers will remember: the diving board, big slide, little slide and the play-pen for the kiddies. In the late forties, Vallie Wrench paid eight dollars to Clayton Williams; for season tickets (two dollars per ticket) for swimming privileges, for her four boys (Buddy, Kent, Pete & Peewee) at Williams Lake. When not chopping cotton, picking cucumbers or harvesting tobacco, most likely we were at the lake swimming.

A general store was built a few feet to the east of the mill house to serve the people that came to the lake and gristmill in increasing numbers. The store was completed in 1936 according to Lillian McArthur Williams, wife of Clayton Williams. The store was torn down within a few years (possibly because of the road being widened and improved).

Picnic tables and barbecue pits had been added

on the opposite side of the road from the lake; these could be reserved for special events. Many graduating classes: from Mingo, Clement, Plainview and Herring High Schools celebrated their graduation here with a cookout and dancing following. Farmers would reward their tobacco barn crews, at harvest's end, with a weeny roast and swimming at the lake. Church groups picnicked here and people from neighboring counties and towns came.

Before 1938 the pavilion was built which included separate dressing rooms for men and women; the focal point of the pavilion was the dance floor. The public asked for music. Mr. Williams responded by hooking a nickelodeon/jukebox to his generator; this was before the "REA" ran power lines into Mingo Township. In the earliest days square dancing and jitterbugging were popular on the dance floor. The lake opened on Memorial Day and remained open through Labor Day until the mid-sixties. Starting in 1965 the dance hall was open throughout the year.

A boat house was added sometime after 1938; rentals for pleasure boating or fishing were available to the public.

WW 11 being over and means of transportation improving; young people came in increasing numbers,

especially on weekends. Music and dancing were now in competition with swimming; many young folks inserted hard earned quarters into the juke-box for the privilege of selecting three songs. By 1949 Hank Williams and "Lovesick Blues" was a favorite; during the mid fifties "Rock Around The Clock" by Bill Haley and his Comets was a hit. Elvis' music would have its day at the lake. You name your music and it probably filled the rafters of the pavilion. On occasions a solo dancer or a talented couple would be given the dance floor, as spectators were awed by their quick steps. The popularity of Williams Lake spilled out of the neighborhood and into towns and villages beyond.

In one interview (while researching this story) the lady volunteered "my parents didn't allow me to go to Williams Lake." Many area churches and parents didn't approve of the "dance hall," so not all local teens had a Williams Lake experience. But, many teens found a way to participate in the dancing, regardless of church and parents. Students arrived at area schools on Monday mornings talking about their weekend adventures at Williams Lake.


By the mid sixties, Mr. Williams' health was failing and he could no longer manage the lake. Robert Honeycutt, who had been assisting Mr. Williams since 1957, became the manager in 1965. Honeycutt sensed that live bands were killing the jukebox business and set about to give life to his dream for the lake. The pavilion was enlarged and a bandstand was built. "The Williams Lake Dance Club" was organized and trendy bands were booked. The dance club was operated year-round and paid admissions of six or seven hundred people was common on nights when popular bands were playing. Local roads were clogged with weekend traffic; parking spilled over to the Williams' front lawn and along the shoulder of the area roads.

The lake's atmosphere was one of being young, happy and carefree and was the place to be on Saturday nights. People were packed wall to wall on many nights. During the fifties and sixties the old dance hall was jumping with life. "Williams Lake" became a byword of that era. Even today, when you are outside of Sampson County and mention "Williams Lake" there is a good chance that the other party will know exactly where it was.

Nationally recognized singers such as the Platters and Jackie Wilson (having appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and American Bandstand) performed in the "middle of nowhere" which was Williams Lake. Some other bands that were booked by Honeycutt:

WILLIAMS' LAKE DANCE CLUB


★ ★ ★
WEDNESDAY, NOV. 23rd 1966




**MAURICE
WILLIAMS**

— AND —

THE ZODIACS




THURSDAY, NOV. 24th




**THE
DAYDREAMS**

And The Mighty
TASSELS



SATURDAY, NOV. 26th



GENE BARBOUR

— AND —

THE CAVALIERS

COMING SAT., DEC. 3rd
EDDIE FLOYD & THE MONZAS
"KNOCK ON WOOD" "HEY I KNOW YOU"

BENTON CARD COMPANY, INC., BENTON, N. C.

Robert Honeycutt operated "Williams Lake Dance Club" from mid to late sixties. (Card courtesy of Robert Honeycutt)

The Drifters, Fat Boy, Billy Stewart, Mary Wells, The Embers, The Monzas, Gene Barbour and the Cavaliers, Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs, The Tams and many, many others. Mr. Honeycutt operated "The Williams Lake Dance Club" for nearly five years. After this high-point in the Lake's history, the end was in sight.

Eventually the music was quieted, the crowds ceased, decay set in and Williams Lake slipped into history. But, many cherished the memory still. Starting in late 1980 the Dunn, NC, Chamber of Commerce held commemorative "Williams Lake Dances" to remember the good times. Bumper stickers and T-shirts that read "Remember Williams Lake" were popular during this period of nostalgia.

Even today you might see an older person slowing their automobile as it passes the lake site, giving memories time to take shape; memories of youth, fun and good-times, all from an era past. So a Sampson County tradition came to an end.