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*The Wilmeth Schoolhouse at Chestnut Square*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

## The Starting Point for Education in Collin County

By Kristina Manser

**DRIVING ON** State Highway 121 heading north, you pass through Frisco into McKinney and then the huge modern highway turns into a little one-lane road: South McDonald. North Texas has become the epitome of growth and true to our reputation we do it big here. So, as I traveled down the narrowing road, I had time to think about our growth, from fields to highways and shopping centers. But wait, no one can forget about the schools here. Yes, the schools that help attract people to buy homes here. Take for instance, Frisco, in 1998 there was one high school and just two middle schools. Today, Frisco is the home of 25 elementary schools, nine middle schools and four high schools.

Growth. Opportunity. Education. Collin County has embraced these elements of success and capitalized on them. In this area we have become accustomed to the sight of expensive

cars, large homes with swimming pools and everything being new and the best. None of this would be possible without education - one important emphasis upon which this area has been founded. We each have our own worlds we hope will lead to happy endings, but do we really take the time to appreciate our history--our past? As a high school student nearing graduation from Centennial High School, I have never had any interest in how our schools came to be or how the educational foundation was built in this area, but now, my chance to learn has been presented.

Let's take a step back; well many steps back if you will. It is the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, 1845 to be exact, and the Wilmeth family is making its way from Arkansas to Texas. They are part of a caravan of people making the journey in hopes of receiving the gift of free land offered to

the head of each household who settles here. Joseph Brice (JB) Wilmeth is the head of the family. Mr. Wilmeth is a man of many trades - farming, blacksmithing and preaching the gospel, but he is also a man of persuasion. He convinced his wife, Nancy, and other members of his family and friends that they should all load up their children and belongings into wagons and make their way to Texas.

As history tells, they set out with eight wagons, but Mr. Wilmeth's second son, Jim, chose to make the journey on his own. Jim, at just 10 years of age, rode horseback the whole way as he drove 100 head of sheep. These sheep would later allow Mrs. Wilmeth, who was talented with a spinning wheel and a loom, to produce wool clothing and blankets for the family in the winter.

On New Year's Day 1846, the caravan passed Dallas, settled and began building cabins. They hoped to find peace

in Texas, but instead received warnings of impending attacks from Comanche Indians. Fear fueled them to abandon their new homes and head back northeast to Arkansas. That is until Mrs. Wilmeth put her foot down. They had not come as far as they had and built new lives just to return to the old ones. Two weeks later, what came to be known as the Wilmeth Ranch, was purchased for \$600. The Document of Purchase for the land, which was two miles north of the present-day McKinney Courthouse, was filed June 13, 1846.

We know the family brought sheep, spinning wheels, looms and a blacksmith outfit with them to begin their new lives, but JB Wilmeth brought much more than that. He brought education to North Texas. He brought books, including the Bible and others, and used them to build the foundation for his teachings. It was his belief that every

community needed two things; a church and a school. After he had finished the church, he began to build the school. He built a log cabin school for all the children in the area to come and be taught his lessons. This school is now recognized as the first free, public school in Collin County. JB Wilmeth's passion brought the inspiration of education.

Today Martha Carroll, great-granddaughter of Jim Wilmeth, has become an expert in her family history. Through old letters, pictures, diary entries and family stories she has come to believe it would be "a great tragedy, an insult, for us to forget the Wilmeth family, their lives and contribution and not have a deep appreciation for all they did for us and Texas."

A tribute to the family and the first free public school is a replica of the



*Time for school!*

*photo by Chris Fritchie*

Wilmeth Schoolhouse at Chestnut Square Historical Village in McKinney. The Village, which is supported by the Heritage Guild of Collin County, is a monument to Collin County's past. It includes a turn of the century chapel and many historical local homes and cottages that have survived the wear and tear of all these years. The Heritage Guild hosts events and offers tours for school children in first to third grade from Allen, Lovejoy, McKinney and Frisco. Martha Carroll has developed an appreciation for her family's impact and believes "children benefit greatly from knowing their heritage; I was deeply gratified when I learned of the Wilmeth School project in Chestnut Square." This important historical site brings the past into the present as it allows people to understand our roots. In class we are taught a specific

curriculum of math, English and science. In history we are taught the big picture but not always the specifics of our community.

The classroom is the setting for education, but not just what is taught in books and through lecture, but also through action, behavior and punishment. Standing in the Wilmeth Schoolhouse one may find interest in a comical sight - a lone stool in the corner with a dunce cap placed beside it. Ridicule just may be the harshest punishment of the ages. But, then again, there were always the wooden paddles to reinforce whatever rule needed to be clarified.

Nowadays punishment has taken a new twist in schools - inflicting pain within reason has no place in the classroom; instead the removal of privileges has become the bargaining chip.

When it comes to curriculum, learning has come a long way. The subjects offered in 1845 were limited due to opportunity, experience and ability. Technology has given people the ability to connect and learn from one another, whether it is from Frisco to McKinney or from America to China. This communication has created diversity, cultural awareness and new learning opportunities. Languages and new topics and discoveries have spread throughout the world. Today students can make the most of all these new ideals by controlling the direction of their coursework. Young men and women can learn a wide variety of languages, choose



it is today. The Wilmeth family continued teaching in their schoolhouse long after the passing of patriarch JB Wilmeth. In particular, his son, Jim, was an inspiring force. Being one who taught and also stopped whenever he could to learn, Jim was a gift to young minds. He became the teacher of the school where a wide variety of subjects were studied during the history of the school. From Latin to Greek, arithmetic, essays to penmanship, the school had it covered. Though he was not the only teacher that took the stage after JB, he was definitely the leader.

Beyond the typical studies of the time, Jim also took an interest in some controversial issues, such as the value of women. In a letter to his sister, Annie, he spoke of how women are not just meant to be domesticated wives or objectified. He advises her to be strong and always make her own decisions and use her mind. Furthermore, when the Civil War began, he was an advocate for women's suffrage. His thinking was that the female gender possesses much more virtue than that of the opposite sex and they would have never let the war occur in the first place. Jim was a man ahead of his time, as he welcomed not just the advancement of women, but also the rights of slaves. He exemplified the meaning of hard work and ethics as he worked along side his slaves and treated them as humans, not objects of ownership.

Next time you take a drive, don't focus only on your destination, but on the milestones you pass along the way. Whether it is a busy street with lights and stop signs or a dirt road with vast fields, see it for what it is. It is Texas. It is Collin County. It is our past. It is our present. It is our future. If you happen to be in McKinney and drive by Anthony Street off of S. McDonald, stop. Go ahead and take the time to learn about something old and it will become something new as you bring the past into your present. The value of education for us and for our kids as well as those to come is priceless.

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from honors and Advanced Placement courses and also choose electives that will give them a jump start on their careers.

When the Wilmeth family came to Texas they lived in an era where everyone was a neighbor and a friend. The group that survived that long difficult journey together became close-knit through social participation in work, church, politics and education. On many nights the Wilmeth Schoolhouse would host spelling bees. These events were not just a demonstration of intellectual virtue by the local students, but they also served as a means for a social gathering. Parents and members of the community would come together and enjoy a night

filled with dancing and music. Now, with cars and expansion, people are spread throughout the area for work and housing. No longer are our schools the focus of our community or the only option for entertainment. Parents and children can choose from a multitude of options - bowling at Strikz, catching a movie at AMC 24 at Stonebriar Centre, or playing a game at home. People have adjusted and grown along with the time. Community and extra curricular events are still held at local schools, but now development allows for other venues for fun as well.

The first free public school in Collin County gave people in the area the opportunity to make North Texas what