

Ronald C. Wilson - A Tribute

By Mark Banker, Ph.D. '73

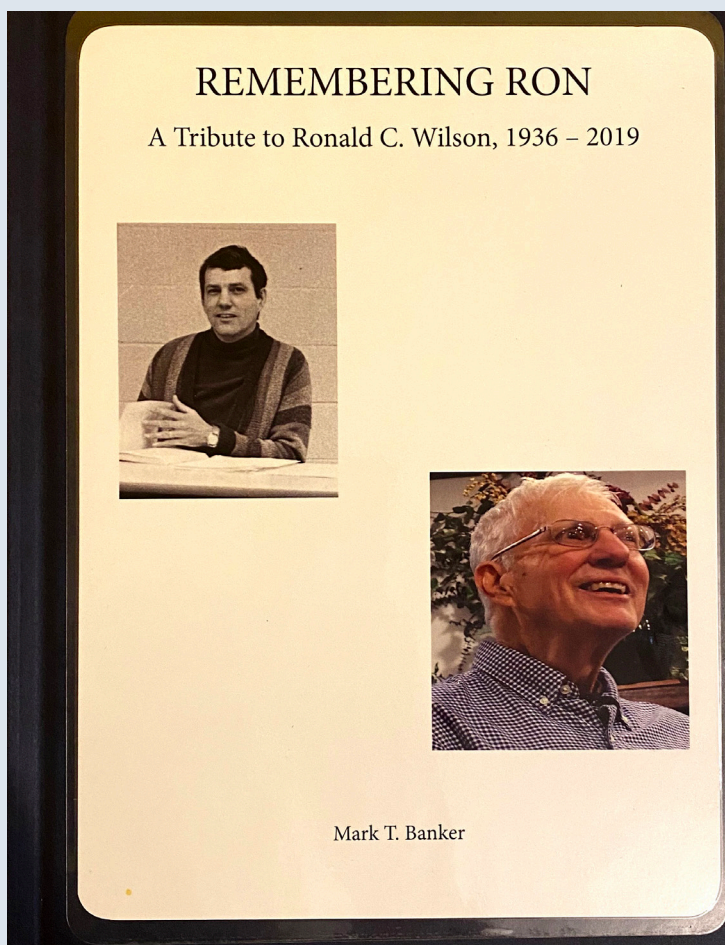
Editor's note: Mark Banker, Ph.D. '73 is a retired history teacher. He graduated from Warren Wilson in 1973 with a degree in History and went on to earn his Ph.D. in History from the University of New Mexico. Banker and former College President Reuben Holden co-wrote the most recent Warren Wilson College History book A Centennial Portrait in 1994. After long-time Professor of History Ron Wilson passed away in 2019, Banker wrote this personal tribute about the History Professor whose career at Warren Wilson spanned four decades.

Author's note: After I composed this extended tribute to Ron, I decided to create a book format for his wife, Pat, and their children, Robin and Kell. With the help of my local UPS Store, I produced copies of Remembering Ron: A Tribute to Ronald C. Wilson for them, the Alumni Office and College Archives. It is eleven pages and includes photos that highlight important events and moments from his life.

Several of Ron's former colleagues and students have requested copies, and perhaps some of the rest of you might also be interested in such. Should more than 50 individuals want a copy, UPS can produce them for \$15/book. Any number of copies less than that will be \$30/book. The US Postal Service can ship copies anywhere in the US for just under \$6. Shipping abroad will be slightly more expensive.

*If you would like a copy, please notify before October 15th at: **MTBanker1951@gmail.com** and indicate if you are willing to pay the \$36 charge – should the number of requests be less than fifty.*

Depending on your responses, I will by November 1st email interested parties and request payment by check (either \$36 or \$21) to me. Thereafter, I will order copies from the UPS Store with hopes that they will be ready before November 15. I will mail copies from my local Post Office. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by e-mail.



My first encounter with Ron Wilson was unforgettable. It was the first day of class for Warren Wilson College freshmen in late August 1969. Ron's *World History* course was scheduled for a mid-morning time slot in the classroom just to the right of the half-flight of stairs at the entrance to Carson Hall.

For perhaps the only time, we as a class arrived early and attentive... but also anxious. Many of us represented Warren Wilson's long-time Appalachian clientele; others came from an array of U.S. states and the four corners of the world. By default, we were truly a *world* history course, and by Ron's careful design that vision became more real than any of us could have imagined.

As Ron came through the door that morning, he bumped into a set of maps. With impressive athletic agility, he regained his balance, caught the maps before they crashed to the floor, then offered a nervous grin that put us all at ease.

Even casual acquaintances recall that smile. But we who were fortunate to know Ron Wilson well deeply appreciate his genuine humility, good nature, and the wisdom he generously shared. And yes—his reassuring smile.

Except for the Fall Semester of 1971, when I studied in Mexico City, I enrolled in at least one course with Ron every semester of my undergraduate years. After the *World History* survey, that eclectic array of courses included *Regional Geography, Britain Since 1714, Europe Since 1914*, and two provocative semesters of *Western Political Thought*. Regretfully, my semester abroad coincided with Ron's signature *Ancient History* course. This regimen reflected Ron's intellectual breadth and challenged students to confront history's broadest themes and most elusive questions.

Curiously, this unpretentious historian without a doctorate inspired my ambitions for a Ph.D. Still, my route to that destination was far from direct.

Fifteen months after graduating from Warren Wilson, I was nearing completion of an M.A.

at the University of Virginia when a last-minute vacancy opened in the Warren Wilson History Department. For the next two years, Ron and I were colleagues.

Two years later, Kathy Forbes '75 and I were married in the College Chapel. Just weeks after our wedding, Kathy and I moved to New Mexico—where I planned to gain state residency and pursue a Ph.D. Both of us quickly fell in love with the Southwest and found rewarding teaching jobs. Finally, after finding a mentor whose breath of interests, wisdom, and kindness mirrored Ron's, I entered the University of New Mexico's (UNM) Doctoral Program in History full-time in 1982.

My father's unexpected passing in 1986 coincided with completion of my UNM dissertation and brought me home to East Tennessee. For the next 29 years, I taught at the Webb School of Knoxville, where my Warren Wilson and New Mexico-shaped world view and insights from Ron prodded and often provoked my typically privileged and gifted students.

Beyond history, Ron and I shared a deep love for baseball. We attended our first Asheville Tourists game together when I was an undergrad. During summer trips home from New Mexico, I scheduled my visits to Warren Wilson to coincide with Ron's plans and the Tourists' home schedule. That tradition became regular after I returned to East Tennessee. Ron and I probably attended at least 50 games together. Still, we were a bit of an odd couple. Ron excelled at the sport; I did not. As spectators go, he was a lifelong Cincinnati Reds fan, and I began cheering for the Braves as a first grader—when they still called Milwaukee home.

Still, baseball's methodical pace offered a backdrop for us to converse about mutual interests and concerns. We could be attentive to action on the field, discuss the fortunes of our favorite teams, delve into an array of history-related topics, and reflect on the latest

political developments and what was happening at Warren Wilson—all in nine innings!

When Ron's health declined, our routine adjusted. After a meal out, we would return to his Swannanoa Valley residence and carry on our regular banter over a televised game.

After my retirement, I occasionally shared with Ron essays and books that explored our mutual interests. His responses to the equally provocative *Baseball as a Road to God* and *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* revealed a mind that was as sharp and curious as when we contemplated the world's most influential thinkers in Carson Hall a half century earlier.

My last visit with Ron was in June 2019. Ron applauded the Braves' fortunes and lamented those of his beloved Reds. But we also shared dismay for our nation's polarized paralysis and dearth of leadership.

More positively, we applauded the determined efforts of Dr. Lynn Morton, Warren Wilson's first woman president. They reflected, we agreed, a theme critical to Warren Wilson's surprising history. More broadly, that history validates an essential—often misunderstood—premise about the human experience that I first glimpsed under Ron's tutelage.

Ron was born May 2, 1936 in Cincinnati, Ohio. His parents, like many Cincinnatians of the era, had in-migrated from Depression-wracked locales in rural Kentucky. His father was raised in coal country and had little affection or desire to return to hardscrabble Appalachia. On the other hand, regular summer visits to his maternal grandparents' farm in the more productive Bluegrass region nurtured in Ron an appreciation for rural life.

After excelling in baseball in high school, Ron signed an athletic scholarship to pitch for the University of Cincinnati. Future Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax had just departed for major league stardom, and—much to the fascination of future Warren Wilson students—Ron filled Koufax's spot in the Bearcat's pitching rotation.

Baseball aside, Ron found the study of business at the University of Cincinnati uninspiring. Thereafter, a brief stint at a Church of Christ seminary in Cincinnati proved more disappointing. Finally, in 1957 Ron transferred to Georgetown College in Kentucky, where he found a major equal to his interests and met his future wife.

Ron and Pat Stegler married on February 20, 1959. After Ron served for a short time as a secondary level teacher, he and Pat ventured to the Great Plains where Ron enrolled in the Master's Program in History and Political Science at the University of South Dakota. Even then, Ron's innate curiosity and characteristic breadth of interests were apparent.

That may explain why the specialization that would, no doubt, have accompanied pursuit of a doctorate did not appeal to Ron. Fortunately, a small Presbyterian-related two-year college in the North Carolina mountains was looking for a generalist and hired him in 1961.

Warren Wilson College's story—both before and after Ron's arrival—was as circuitous and unlikely as the path that led Ron there. Founded in 1894 as Asheville Farm School (a Presbyterian mission school for Appalachian boys), its campus was nestled in western North Carolina's beautiful Swannanoa Valley. After flourishing for a generation, a prolonged depression, changes in the region, and fissures in the Presbyterian Church threatened the Farm School's very existence. Adjusting inherited principles to new realities became a reoccurring—and essential—theme in the school's unlikely history.

Fortunately, in 1925 an Appalachian native son whose formal education began in an East Tennessee mission school and culminated with a doctorate from Columbia University convinced Presbyterian officials to reimagine, rather than close, Asheville Farm School. A decade later, the Farm School gained national and global renown as a model of John Dewey's vision of progressive education. A distinctive

three-sided emphasis on academics, work, and service was Asheville Farm School's primary legacy for the future Warren Wilson College.

In 1942, with global war raging, mission officials consolidated several schools onto the Swannanoa Valley campus. With the awkward name "Warren H. Wilson Vocational Junior College and Associated Schools," the institution gained a high school division and welcomed female students for the first time. Soon, however, further changes in Appalachia and the Presbyterian Church converged with dramatic national and global developments, and the school again reimagined itself.

In the invigorating post-World War II era, a dynamic Dean-President duo proposed even bolder changes. President Arthur Bannerman and Dean Henry Jensen envisioned a four-year, liberal arts college on the mountain campus that would retain the three-sided emphases from the Farm School. But to prepare their traditional Appalachian clientele for life in a rapidly-changing, increasingly interconnected world and at the same time address pressing global needs, they proposed to bring students from the far-flung Presbyterian global mission fields to their mountain campus. For the next three decades, nearly a third of Warren Wilson's students came from abroad.

This was the distinctive program that welcomed Ron Wilson in 1961. The vision resonated with the young professor, whose take on history and personal philosophy celebrated a common humanity. Still, Ron responded to the four-year plan with characteristic caution. By the mid-1960s, with the four-year transition underway, Ron felt pressure to pursue a Ph.D. Then in his 30s and as a young father, he resisted that path and contemplated employment elsewhere.

Fortunately, he agreed instead to complete advanced courses in history and political science for three consecutive summers at the University of Cincinnati. That effort offered further evidence of his diverse interests and

complemented his Warren Wilson course offerings. In the fall of 1968, Ron gained tenure and became Chair of the History and Political Science Department.

The following year, the College became independent from Presbyterian oversight and graduated its first four-year class. But there was little time for celebration. Without direct Presbyterian funding, Warren Wilson would have to find students and financial support in the competitive college market. Coupled with the retirement of its two long-time administrators soon thereafter, the College in the 1970s faced another critical juncture of adjustment.

Assessing a teacher's influence is, to be sure, subjective, and Ron's low-key nature complicates that process. Sometimes overlooked in a faculty with an ever-increasing number of Ph.D.'s, Ron always enjoyed appreciation from his students. One need only overhear alumni at a Warren Wilson Homecoming to appreciate that Ron's influence was as wide and deep as his understanding of history.

More students, no doubt, enrolled in the *World History* survey that I took in the fall of 1969 than any other of Ron's courses. Under the original four-year core curriculum, it was a freshman requirement. Later, as the College experimented with more innovative curricular models, it was a popular elective.

The course, no doubt, evolved as Ron gained new insights and encountered ever-changing student audiences. Still, its primary emphases changed little over the years, because Ron himself was ahead of his time. In the era of the "Western Civilization" survey, Ron borrowed from brilliant historian William H. McNeil and devised a sweeping course that was more appropriate for Warren Wilson's global student body than the traditional Euro-centric model.

Doing justice to such a broad historical sweep in two semesters was, at best, a

daunting and selective task. But, as my notes from the course reveal, Ron balanced a coherent political narrative and uncommon insights into religion, the arts, and other human endeavors. He also effectively incorporated audio-visuals into his lectures and discussions. This global, cross-disciplinary, creative approach is now the norm in World History courses. But it was rare at the time.

Students who pursued other majors often remember Ron's *World History* survey fondly. It taught them that history is much more than memorizing dates and offered an approach to knowledge essential for an informed citizenry. For History majors, who took upper level courses with Ron and other members of Warren Wilson College's superb History Department, that course was foundational and prepared us to become teachers and pursue advanced degrees.

Ron's essential role in a unique Great Books course also deserves mention. With his encouragement, faculty from all fields selected personally influential books that ranged from classics to discipline-specific tomes. Thereafter, Ron arranged one-on-one discussions between those instructors and students attracted to their selections. For Ron, this approach thwarted artificial disciplinary boundaries and narrow specialization, and it emphasized a broader, more holistic educational vision.

Of course, teaching has never been a Warren Wilson professor's sole responsibility. During Ron's early years, he and Pat chaperoned social events and attended student activities. More vexing for Ron was a Board of National Missions requirement that teaching faculty complete a "tenth month service." Spending the month of June supervising a work crew or completing some other obligation unrelated to his teaching duties provoked Ron to uncharacteristic chagrin.

Later, after the four-year college transition, Ron more willingly assumed duties as the College's tennis coach. That (unpaid!) position kept Ron physically active and enabled him

to interact with students whom he otherwise might not have known. His success earned him membership in the College's Athletic Hall of Fame.

Far more essential—though only appreciated belatedly—were Ron's low-key contributions to Warren Wilson's remarkable transition from a mission school with strict *in loco parentis* policies to an innovative liberal arts college with a decidedly liberal reputation. As the College's leadership evolved from "old school" to a more hands-off approach, Ron modeled integrity and agile adaptation. Even when he clearly shared many of the views of his increasingly more liberal colleagues, he was a voice of respectful, reasoned moderation.

Ron's familiarity with Warren Wilson's distinctive past and history's broader contours equipped him well for that moment in the College's history. Aware that history is never static and that the popular notion that "history repeats itself" invariably deceives and disappoints, he championed informed, creative, yet realistic decision-making. During one moment of uncharacteristic rancor in the late-1980s, his contributions to deliberations about the College's long-standing tradition of shared governance soothed nerves and gained widespread respect from busy peers.

Ron's historical insights also influenced impressive scholarly accomplishments. But between his personal modesty and the College's frenetic pace, they never gained the recognition they deserved. A generous sabbatical policy unencumbered by publish or perish demands enabled Ron to probe deeply into topics of personal interests yet relate them to challenges of his own historical moment. In an array of unpublished essays completed in the 1980s, Ron reflected on Machiavelli's imprint on Hitler, lessons drawn from *Oedipus Rex*, and the effects of Thomas More, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and less-well known thinkers on republican experiments in the United States and elsewhere.

Ron's deep interest in governing and the histories of ancient Athens, Sparta, and Rome came together in the manuscript *Ancient Republicanism: Its Struggle for Liberty Against Corruption* published by Peter Lang Press in 1989. Reading Ron's insights into the ancient origins and tribulations of such political traditions as popular sovereignty, the rule of law, federalism, separation of powers, and "economic democracy" in the winter of 2020—as the United States endured erratic leadership and experienced the first shocks from a raging pandemic—made me wish I had not missed his *Ancient History* course back in 1971 and that Ron and I might have just one more conversation.

Given that opportunity, I would no doubt probe Ron to reflect further on his assertion that modern (i.e. American) republicanism's greatest failing is inadequate attention to "the needs of an emerging world community." As terrorist threats, trade-generated inequities, climate change, and now a frightening pandemic make globalization's darker effects more apparent, Ron's prescience is impressive. He would, no doubt, modestly credit his provocative and relevant insights to Warren Wilson's experiment in multiculturalism and broad educational vision.

At the end of another sabbatical in the spring semester of 1992, Ron reflected in-depth on Alexander the Great's considerable achievements and failings. But his summary report also revealed much about Ron himself. Although word processing was by then widespread, Ron hand-composed the manuscript's 50-plus pages in impeccable printing and wrapped up his thoughts with characteristic candor. "I have written these essays for my own edification and pleasure and have found the exercise thought provoking and informative." "Fortunately," he wryly concluded, "I did not have to complete them for any publisher or classical scholar."

Two years later, Ron was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy. Heeding his physician's

advice, he retired from teaching at age 60. Still, several defining traits enabled Ron to forestall a presumed imminent passing and find purpose and fulfillment in his remaining 18 years.

Ever the athlete, Ron remained physically active, walked daily, and enjoyed gardening. He also remained intellectually alive and resilient. While his loves for history and baseball persisted, he revisited old interests and ventured into new ones. Drawing from a faith that had ebbed yet matured, Ron read the Bible in its entirety. Aided only by a college-level math text, he taught himself calculus, learned to do quadratic equations, and found satisfaction in math's objective reality. For Ron's curious mind, these paths may not have been as divergent as they appear. My inkling is that they countered, yet improbably complemented one another. More broadly, the insights they nurtured may have both countered and complemented the more subjective emphases of Ron's life-long engagement with the humanities.

Family and a small circle of friends contributed to Ron's resilience. To complete a personal bucket list, he and Pat in retirement traveled to locales they had not previously visited. Eventually, they saw all 50 states and took in at least one distinctive, typically quirky site off the beaten tourist path in each.

They also became grandparents and visited regularly with their children's families—Robin's in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Kell's in Norris, Tennessee. Ron particularly enjoyed regular Friday morning meetings with a growing group of Warren Wilson College retirees at the McDonald's in Oteen, North Carolina. Over coffee, they brought diverse perspectives to free-wheeling conversations about broad philosophical matters and the issues of the day. At this gathering the week before his passing, Ron offered an extended discourse on the Gospel of John and reflected on historical and popular misunderstandings of its fundamental message.

I will close where I began, with a few final thoughts that reflect my personal appreciation for Ron Wilson. As in our baseball loyalties, Ron and I as historians and teachers were quite different. He preferred ancient and European history. I am primarily a New World scholar with a more modern focus. Ron was a gifted discussion leader; I never adequately mastered that gift. His classroom persona was low-key; mine is not.

But those differences obscure more notable similarities. Neither of us ever expected students to memorize dates or master random facts as trivia. Instead, we urged students to connect those proverbial dots, develop a sense of chronology, glimpse history's broader contours, and ponder its most essential, enduring, and elusive questions. The emphasis on history's "big picture," its "shades of gray" and distinction between "capital 'T' Truths" from lesser verities that several generations of students learned from me, I learned from Ron.

I also strive to emulate Ron's honest acknowledgment of his own subjective views. Yet, like Ron, I temper that potentially debilitating self-awareness with wariness for shallow, opportunistic certainty. Like Ron, I find idealism alluring—but naïve. Aware that fear and cynicism are malignant, I choose to retain a humble faith, heart-felt convictions, and belief in timeless Truths that I know will forever elude me.

Ron, as he helped me grasp the history of Warren Wilson College, also led me to glimpse that the most appropriate metaphor for historical memory is neither roots nor anchor, but ballast. For individuals as well as institutions, knowing from where and whence we come provides stability and equips us to navigate history's uncharted waters and incessant churning.

In this tumultuous spring of 2020, may Ron Wilson's wise, kind, and humble example reassure us and be our continuing counsel.