

Masters of Masonry

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I interviewed the Barbee brothers, Willis and Alfred, in the 1980s, when they were in their late 70s, but were still building rock walls, chimneys or brick foundations. I learned straightaway that they were also outstanding teachers. Their classroom was the construction site: Their tools were blueprints, trowels and mortar. The lesson: Learn to ply your trade better than your teachers.

"I told a worker to ask himself, 'Does this work please me?'" Willis told me back then. "I told them to be patient and if they put a little love into the work, the days would go easier."

At 7, Willis hauled bricks for his grandfather, Tony Strayhorn. The Barbees' parents died when they were young, so Strayhorn filled that void. Willis laid bricks, but added other skills. "I particularly liked plastering ceilings and building sidewalks," he said. After he first apprenticed in 1922, Willis worked as a plasterer and concrete finisher.



At 12, Alfred also worked with their grandfather, learning brick and stone masonry. In the first job, he helped their grandfather build a small rock dam across Morgan Creek near University Lake in Orange County. "We stood in waist-deep water; we poured the mortar dry because the water would help it set up," he said. Alfred laid bricks and rocks most of his life, with periods during the Depression as chauffeur, gardener and handyman.

Both brothers said their favorite project was the nine-room house built almost entirely of rock and designed by an internationally known architect. "When they gave me the plans," said Alfred, "I said, Oh, my Lord! Then I went to praying."

It took a year to build. During a walk-through of that house near Chapel Hill, home owner Robin Andrews said she marveled at their craftsmanship. "I can tell someone who is smart as a whip," she said. "I believe Alfred Barbee has an I.Q. of 200. He changed most everything about the house plans except the hole where the well is, and he wore out three blueprints."

The Barbees taught mostly skills young black men wouldn't likely get otherwise, in the Jim Crow South. They estimate they taught more than 100 men masonry or other related skills. In 1948, Willis taught Wilbert Jones to plaster. "I stuck it out and sent seven children children to college," Jones told me later. "Without the plastering trade, I wouldn't have been able to do that."

Another generation of masons on the way? I asked. Alfred quickly answered, his grandson, Ezra Barbee was plying the trade. "He's 28 and we can turn him lose on any sort of job," he said. "People know him and they call him. He's taking over."

Curious about the lineage of masons, I spoke to Ezra Barbee earlier this year. At 8, like others in the family he'd started working for his grandfather and later in partnership with his father, Alfred Jr. (In photograph, seated from left, Alfred Sr., Ezra Barbee; standing is Alfred Jr.) "First, I did all the dirty work," he said. When Ezra was ready, his grandfather started him building fireplaces.

Ezra, who is now in his 50s, said he'd had taught 10 men the masonry trade, but he readily admits it's hard to get people interested in the hard work, "the blood, sweat and tears."

Unlike his grandfather, who just laid brick or stone, Ezra and his father, Alfred Jr., added other construction skills such as plumbing and electrical work. "I'm mostly self-taught, because you never know what you'll need," he said.



The legacy of Alfred Sr. and Willis Barbee remains their work ethic, their pride in their workmanship and their willingness to teach others. I asked Ezra what was the most valuable lesson he learned from his grandfather. "I learned to be quiet, be a sponge, to observe and learn," Ezra said. "That carried over to other things, to all phases of my life."



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