

History beneath the Oak

By Darren Shell, 2006

A Historical View of Old Willow Grove

This little story is about a special spot in the Willow Grove Campground. It is not as much a story, as it is a list of historical things that have taken place over the years in one location. It is sort of an assignment for those of you looking for a destination for a morning walk...or something to think about while in the pavilion at the park.

First, you need to find the place. The nicely paved road from the gatehouse to the boat ramp is where you will find campsite 69. It is just past the bathhouse on the left. To get a good prospective, I strongly suggest backing up to the picnic table and looking out toward the lake. Just in front of you is a giant oak tree that has seen thousands of people come and go. It has seen history, both good and bad. But, the *feel* here is wonderful. I have felt drawn to this spot even before I knew some of the things that have happened here. Here are a few bits of history.

The road that brought you here was once a wagon trail. It led from old Hwy 53 (behind you, far below the gatehouse) and the old town of Willow Grove, scattered out in front of you. It was a heavily traveled little road, mostly because of the Grist Mill. Jim Watkins operated his mill across the road on your right. His barn set just behind you, roughly where the bathhouse is. A fence surrounded the barn (and you) along the road, and also down into the creek to your left. Fifty yards in

front of you was the house of Vann Watson and his family. Far ahead and to your right, sat the Willow Grove Church of Christ. And everywhere, all around you is pasture...miles of it. From where you sit, you can easily see (in your mind, beneath the water) old Hwy 53 running from the swimming area, straight across the main lake, and over the hill directly in front of you. Both sides of the road were dotted with homes and businesses and barns. By now, you can begin to here the sounds of the old town. Your right ear hears the quiet grinding of the mill...your left hears a tractor plowing in the distance. Children are playing...horses are traveling your wagon road. Cattle are grazing nearby. The hum of life surrounds you. Welcome...to Willow Grove.

This doesn't sound like history, does it? That's because history isn't normally told this way. The rest of what I list here isn't as important as what you just read. Keep those thoughts in mind as you read. The rest are just things that happened. But, that *feel* is Willow Grove. That is more important...so very much more important.

First, the sad things. A couple of dreadful misfortunes have indeed happened here, history...good and bad. As I said earlier, the family of Vann Watson lived just in front of you (the boat ramp parking lot). Their cattle resided inside the confines of the fence around you. The cattle were sometimes led from pasture to pasture or from field to the creek to drink. The whole farming family helped in this task, and nothing was ever really thought of it...until one awful morning. Young L. V. Watson was asked, as usual, to walk one of the heifers to the creek. The family had not noticed that the young lad had been making a practice of tying the lead rope around his waist to keep the old heifer from tugging on the line and chafing his hands. No one

saw him do it. And, today was the day it happened. About half-way to the creek, a stray dog raced out of the fence row and startled the old cow. She bolted. The tumbling of a small child beneath her feet only worsened the ordeal. The poor old cow ran and ran...trampling and dragging young L. V. The whole family helplessly watched as their child was drug to death, right here in their own pastureland. The simple morning task of this child took his life...and the city of Willow Grove mourned. Schools were let out, and families prayed, and time in this little town stood still.

One other particularly sad thing occurred here just after the lake was made. The fence row (non-existent on your left) ran right down into the hollow. A small amount still resides beneath the waves, and nothing exists on land. But, none the less, it was there, and one poor lad found the twisted wire beneath the lake surface very early in this lake's history. While swimming in the little hollow beneath you on your left, the boy drowned. I don't know his name, but it happened. Let's move on to happier things.

After the turmoil of the summer of 1942, and once the people had moved on to their new homes away from here, there became a practice...or tradition...of a reunion. No one knows the exact time or year, but it all happened because of the 'going away party' that the Corps gave in 1942. It was partially a relocation meeting with the townspeople and extension agents and tax people, etc. But, after this first initial meeting before the move, it became apparent to many of the citizens of Willow Grove, that many of these closely-knit families may enjoy a reunion. Once a year since then, the old families of Willow Grove reunite in a meeting on the Sunday before Labor Day. Some are still bitter about the move, and some just love the

meeting for what it is...a reunion. One thing is for certain, every single one of them makes it, if they can. They are getting up in age now (2006), but all love that old town, and would move back tomorrow if they could. But, since the old town is long gone, its residents can only get together and reminisce.

Some of the men from Willow Grove decided that since a reunion would inevitably take place each year, they had better consider a proper location. You guessed it, right where you sit. They cut and planed some large boards and built a large harvest table. It sat nestled between these large oaks in front of you, and over the years, it became worn smooth by the numerous hands of the 'old town' people as well as the many campers now spending time in this special spot. Special places are special places...no matter what year it is. The campers came to love this spot as much as the townspeople. That's when things started hitting the fan.

It was the 1970's, and peace and love was sought, but less often found. It was a beautiful late summer day, and the once quiet and gentle shores of Dale Hollow had become a holiday vacation spot for both the everyday fishermen of yesteryear, and the countless recreational boaters of this cutting-edge hobby of 'boating'. The holidays of years before were becoming a chaotic and extremely busy three-day weekend. 'Placid' was no longer a term for Labor Day. It was now LABOR DAY!!!!!! So herein lies our problem. This warm late-summer day was filled with rowdy and sometimes drunk tourists. It seems that tourists love the same great spots that the rest of the world does. This wonderful overlook of Dale Hollow was great, with this fantastic old table with its long top was perfect for camping. Campers, friends, families, as well as the 'old towners' had lovingly worn its surfaces smooth. Countless initials were

carved into its special boards. Hundreds and hundreds of hand-made dinners and deserts had crossed its time-worn surface. And, here it stood for the world.

So it was Labor Day Sunday, and the residents of old Willow Grove had come forth for their once-a-year visit. Everything was going according to plan, except for one thing, those campers on that special spot. One can imagine, if it were you setting up numerous supplies and tents and gear, you would probably not be interested in up-and-moving for people you did not know. Well, a bitter argument ensued, and after a number of talks with the campers, the situation was explained, and those campers did finally understand the magnitude of what was happening. As with most arguments, nobody got down to the nitty-gritty before becoming aggressive and angry. The campers finally understood the situation, and of course moved their stuff long enough for the people of old Willow Grove to enjoy a few hours. The rest of the weekend went well, and this special spot enjoyed a few more hours of intense history.



THE WILLOW GROVE CROWD was estimated to have climbed near to 700 before the homecoming came to a close.

The next year, things changed. In return for the removal of that special table, the Corps erected the large stone fixture known as the Willow Grove Pavilion. Its huge fireplace and nice cooking facility with many large picnic tables was a wonderful amendment to the campground. The ‘old towners’ can now reserve their special spot in advance and insure their once-a-year reunion goes without a hitch.

The Corps was in the process of building pavilions in their parks anyway, but I am happy to say that Willow Grove got theirs early because somebody cared. Somebody in the Corps understood the magnitude to this deal, and carried on the tradition of at least trying to help those uprooted from their hometown. I will give the Corps that. Sometimes the civilian in me argues with big government, but I respect what the Corps has done for a hard situation here in East Clay County. I thank them for their contribution to the old town. Yeah, the government took their town. Yeah, it uprooted many wonderful families. But, this lake is here because of them. I make my living here and live my ‘living’ here, and I love what they have created. I did not endure that horrible year of 1942, but I did move with my entire family *to* here because of it. And I would give most anything I own to have seen this place during the transformation from land to lake. It must have been amazing.

So, now you know a 360 degree history of campsite 69. You know of the grist mill on your right, the fencerow on your left. You know why the pavilion behind you stands...because of the harvestable that once stood in front of you. You can remember who died here...but, more importantly...who *lived!*

But, before I leave you, I want to share my favorite thing about campsite 69. You have looked all around you...you've seen it all, haven't you? Or have you? Now look up. The giant limb over your head shows the signs of vibrant life on its bark. There are swelled places on its surface bulging beyond the norm. They are remnants. There was a time when a large swing hung from the boughs of this special old tree. Its chains have grown deeply into its bark, and no longer show the dangling wooden platform that entertained hundreds of Willow Grovians beneath its loving shade. It no longer shows the chains worn shiny with youthful hands. It no longer hears the chuckles of care-free children singing, while families enjoy a well-prepared meal on a hand-made harvest table. It no longer enjoys the *life* of old Willow Grove. But I hear it. I hear those chuckles...I see curly hair flowing in the breeze while being pushed on the swing...I hear life all around. There are campers roasting marshmallows, boaters coming to and fro. There is life beyond count. Old Willow Grove is here...and also the new. And that's what makes this place special. And, with or without that old table and swing, I welcome you to come see it...this simple little campsite...this porthole to the past...this wonderful little knoll near the old town...of Willow Grove.

