

Museum News: Ima Crozier Wilkinson

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

"I guess you Baptists still leave out the third verse?" That was how Ima Crozier Wilkinson always greeted me. At first I thought she didn't like me, and it took a while to realize that she had an impish sense of humor. Ima had the distinction of holding the organ bench at First Presbyterian Church in Sanderson for 73 years! That's right, you heard me, 73. And they sang all the verses and tacked an "Amen" onto every hymn, whether it needed it or not (my jibe at her!)

Being a fellow organist, I was rather proud of being a church musician for my paltry 50 years, but her years of unpaid service put me to shame. I, too, played *gratis* for many years, but when our brood numbered 5, I realized that there were churches that would pay for an organist's services, and as I always needed at least two other jobs to support my family, I began the life of what I lovingly call "temple prostitute," performing for pay.

But not Ima...she held true to the calling and never accepted a dime for her services, a point the preacher drove home at her funeral, then turned to give me a pregnant, accusatory stare. I was privileged to play for Ima's service, and as I sat there listening to the eulogy I thought of my friendship with her and how honored I was that she would kid me about Baptist predilections.

Ima was born on October 27, 1902, in Waelder, Texas, to William and Essie Crozier. She and Robert Sims Wilkinson were childhood friends, and they married, surprisingly, at First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi in 1921. I suppose she knew more about Baptists than I gave her credit.

Sims had come to Sanderson to work for Kerr Mercantile in 1920, and after their honeymoon they moved to Sanderson and spent the rest of their lives here. They raised two boys, James and Robert, and enjoyed the small town life.

In 1939 the current and popular county judge, G. J. Henshaw, lost his re-election bid. His replacement was Sims Wilkinson, who won office and re-election for the next 35 years, until narrowly losing the primary to Charles Stavley and retiring in 1974, the longest tenure of any of our county judges. Of note is the fact that after 1952 and until he retired, the county incurred no indebtedness.

Through the years, Ima served in her position at First Presbyterian Church, but also acted as accompanist for different functions at the school. She played for many graduation ceremonies. By her own tally she had played for over 50 weddings, and certainly, countless funerals. She also had a legion of music students through the years.

At a jury call break recently I listened to three Sanderson old-timers talk about Judge Wilkinson. They said he had the habit of whistling very loudly in the courthouse, and that you always knew when he was present. And, to this day, when things go "bump" at the courthouse, the staff giggle and say, "There goes Judge Wilkinson."

It was during Judge Wilkinson's administration that the Flood of 1965 occurred. They had lived for years on the bank of Sanderson Creek and had seen floods come and go, time and again. As the water rose above the 2-foot level, the Wilkinsons climbed up on the roof to wait it out. Future judge Dudley Harrison came by and offered to take them to safety, but they pooh-poohed the idea and said they had waited out worse floods than that. They did not realize how bad it was to get.

They lost their home in that flood and were forced to move high up on the hill on School Street. Years later I was tuning her Steinway studio piano and she pointed out the dirty watermark on the interior of her piano, the high water mark of the flood. She sent the piano back to the factory to have it rebuilt, but they did not remove the watermark.

Two of the highlights of Judge Wilkinson's administration were his work in supervising the rehabilitation of Sanderson after the flood, and his efforts in raising money for the construction of the medical clinic building. He guided the acquisition of the easements for the flood control dams that were constructed to prevent another disaster like the 1965 flood. And he, along with Sid Harkins, supervised much of the clean-up after the flood. In addition, he and Sid helped raise about \$48,000 for the construction of the clinic, a building that has been in continuous operation since its opening day.

It is hard to write about Ima and not include Sims, because they were a team. They were proud of their involvement in the church, where he served in numerous positions and as "yardman" for over 25 years, and their membership in the Masonic Lodge and the Eastern Star. Again, Sims served in multiple positions in the lodge, including treasurer for 38 years and Worthy Patron of the Eastern Star for years. They heartily supported each other in all their endeavors.

When Sims passed away in 1985 he was still working part-time at Dudley Motors. Ever the independent, Ima remained in Sanderson for another 12 years, moving to Brownwood in 1997 and then Houston in 2000 to be closer to family. She passed away in 2007 at the ripe old age of 104 years.

Ima and Sims Wilkinson were humble servants in Sanderson, through their long years of public service to the county and the town, and their long years of devotion to their church and their lodge. They gave of themselves in full measure, heart and soul, and brightened the lives of our citizens with their good humor and positive outlook. And although Ima liked to "get my goat" occasionally and put me in my place, I valued our friendship. You value that which is rare and precious, and Ima's friendship was indeed "a pearl of great price" to me.



Sims and Ima Wilkinson, public servants and loyal citizens.
Photos: Alice Evans Downie and *Terrell County News Leader*