



Wilson's Mills Oral History

Tony Southerland

Interviewed on May 13, 2025

Introduction

Anthony "Tony" Southerland, born in 1948, has spent over seven decades watching Wilson's Mills grow, change, and find its rhythm. At 77 years old, his recollections offer a heartfelt glimpse into the character of the town—its people, progress, and perseverance. His stories bring to life the town's rural roots and offer thoughtful insights into how the past continues to shape what lies ahead.

Life on Southerland Road

In 1954, when Tony was just six years old, his family moved to what was then called Southern Road. The move was made possible by a remarkable gesture of community: a neighbor, Mr. Robert Powell, offered to loan Tony's father the money to buy a farm. "He came to Daddy and said, 'I found you a farm. You and Joyce go look at it and if you want it, I'll loan you the money to buy it.'" That spirit of neighborly support has stuck with Tony his whole life. Eventually, the county renamed the road Southerland Road—appropriately so, as both ends were anchored by Southerland family farms. Today, Tony and several members of his extended family still live on that same land, maintaining the family's strong presence in the area. "If you pass Vincent Road, you're on our farm," he said. "My son lives on the left, my daughter on the right, and our driveway is just across from them, back down into the pines."

Wilson's Mills Stores

Tony's family entered the local business scene in 1966 when they purchased Wilson's Mills Supermarket, later to become JD's as it's known today. "My parents had three kids that wanted to go to college and that store was extra income to help make that happen," Tony explained. The store, built in 1950 by Fletcher Burgess, was small but essential. "I'm not sure what was 'super' about it because it was just a little bitty thing," he laughed. Yet it met the community's needs at a time when trips to town were rare and carefully planned. "Gas cost 20 to 25 cents a gallon back then—you were counting pennies to make sure you had dollars." Tony spent many summers helping at the store during college breaks. "I'd sit on a drink crate outside to draw in customers. You didn't have flashing signs—you just did what you could. Sometimes you'd go 20 or 30 minutes and not even see a car go by!"

Wilson's Mills School

Wilson's Mills School, later known as Wilson's Mills High School, played a central role in town life. The school served students from first through twelfth grade and was a hub for both education and community gatherings. "Farming and the coming together of the community happened in the churches and it happened in our school. Those were the two most important things," Tony said. He recalled how invested families were in their children's education. "Nothing—literally nothing—could happen at that school and parents didn't find out about it." One of his earliest school memories was a second-grade field trip to the Pepsi-Cola bottling plant in Selma, an experience that left a lasting impression. "That plant is now an antique business, but I still remember that trip clearly." The school gymnasium, still standing today, was the town's gathering spot on game nights. "It would fill up on Tuesdays and Fridays. Everybody in the community came out to cheer on the team."

Other Events & Locations

In its heyday, Wilson's Mills was home to at least five stores including a farm supply store operated by Dwight Youngblood, a cotton gin, a bagging company, and an oil company that later became Suburban Propane. Tony recalled one store where he and his brother got haircuts as boys: "The barber didn't have a real chair—just set a box on a regular chair for us little kids. It was 25 or 50 cents for a haircut. If you went to Mr. Luke Capps, who had a proper barber shop and chair, it cost a quarter more." These businesses served the day-to-day needs of the community and were close enough that most people walked to them. There were also political rallies, including visits from big-time candidates during campaign seasons. "It was a small town, but a busy one."

Our Community

Tony is deeply appreciative of the leadership and community pride that has shaped Wilson's Mills. "Our town leadership has done a good job. It hasn't been easy, but they've had a passion for this place," he said. He believes strongly in maintaining connections with neighboring communities like Selma and Four Oaks. "We treasure the things that used to be, but we can't lock in on that. We've got to go forward."

What Lies Ahead

As Wilson's Mills continues to grow, Tony hopes future generations will be just as intentional about building community as past ones have been. With the new high school and community park opening, he sees opportunity. "That community park will be the place where people will make memories they'll talk about 50 years from now." His advice is simple but profound: "We shouldn't isolate ourselves from our neighbors. We need to find out who our neighbors are and let them find out who we are. We'll all be better for it."