

# Wilford Lee

Hunter, Trapper, Fisherman  
1900-1976

by Terry Primas

Wilford Lee had the perfect job - for him. He didn't have what you and I would call a regular job. He made his living from the river and the woods. Wilford lived between Duke, in southwestern Phelps County, and the Big Piney River. I have been hearing stories and references to Wilford for years. He is remembered fondly by relatives and friends, even though he has been gone for three decades.

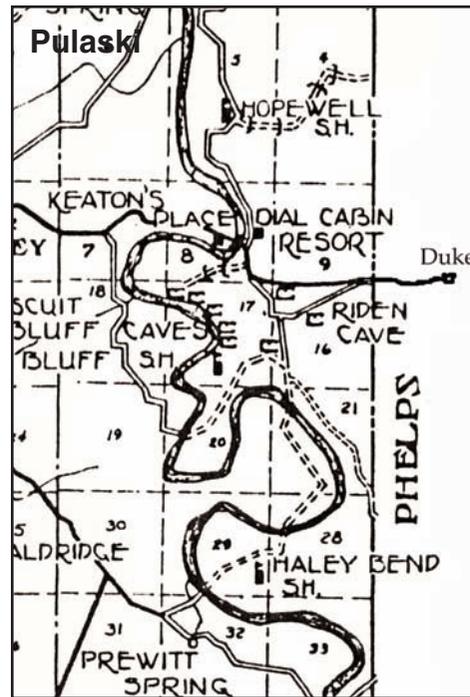
Wilford's lifestyle and backwoods-men skills also interested a writer from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. F. A. Behymer spent some time with Wilford during the summer of 1947, was duly impressed, and wrote a story about him for the paper. He wrote of the Big Piney River guide who "had spent all his years on the rivers and hills that hem him in." I'm sure Wilford would argue that it was the big city reporter who was hemmed in.

Wilford was born near Tuscumbia and the Osage River but his parents came south to the Big Piney when Wilford was ten years old. Wilford was introduced to fishing while his family was camping on the river at Miller Eddy and he watched members of the MoArk Hunting and Fishing Club. The youngster was fascinated by the sportsmen's skill. Wilford grew up honing his skills in fishing, hunting, and trapping.

As a young man, Wilford was driving a car with his sister Frances and brother Arthur aboard. They had a dozens of eggs to deliver to Rolla. They had crossed Spring Creek and were climbing the steep hill on the east side. Wilford reached down to downshift the transmission. Frances was sitting in the middle of the old small Ford. Her dress was wrapped around the gear shift. When Wilford tugged, the car came out of gear and started rolling backwards down the steep hill. The car rolled over an embankment and, although no one was seriously hurt in the accident, Wilford never drove again.

In 1917, when he was seventeen years old, Wilford began paddling. "Paddling" to Lee meant guiding summer tourists on float fishing trips. By 1947, some of these sportsmen had returned for fifteen years for Lee's guide services.

Wilford Lee fished right along with his clients, trying to catch as many or more fish than they did while doing all of the paddling. Reportedly, his



Wilford Lee's home area, or a good part of it, on a 1937 Federal Emergency Relief Administration (F.E.R.A.) Tourist Map of Pulaski County. Most of the fishing trips started or ended at Keaton's Place or Dial's Cabin Resort, near Ross Bridge on the Big Piney. The site of Dial's is still a resort, now Wilderness Ridge, and a log cabin from the 1930s still stands on a hill as you enter. It may be the longest continuously operated resort on the Piney. Keaton's Place was purchased by the Forest Service in the 1970s. Two of the one-room log cabins were moved a short distance downstream to what is now Rich's Last Resort.



Wilford Lee in the 1930s, posing for a picture, but probably thinking about going fishing. Courtesy of Mary and Larry Curran.

clients found that the competition spurred them to greater efforts.

The Ozarker fished a little different than most of his city sportsmen. Behymer, in his *Post-Dispatch* article, described his technique this way:

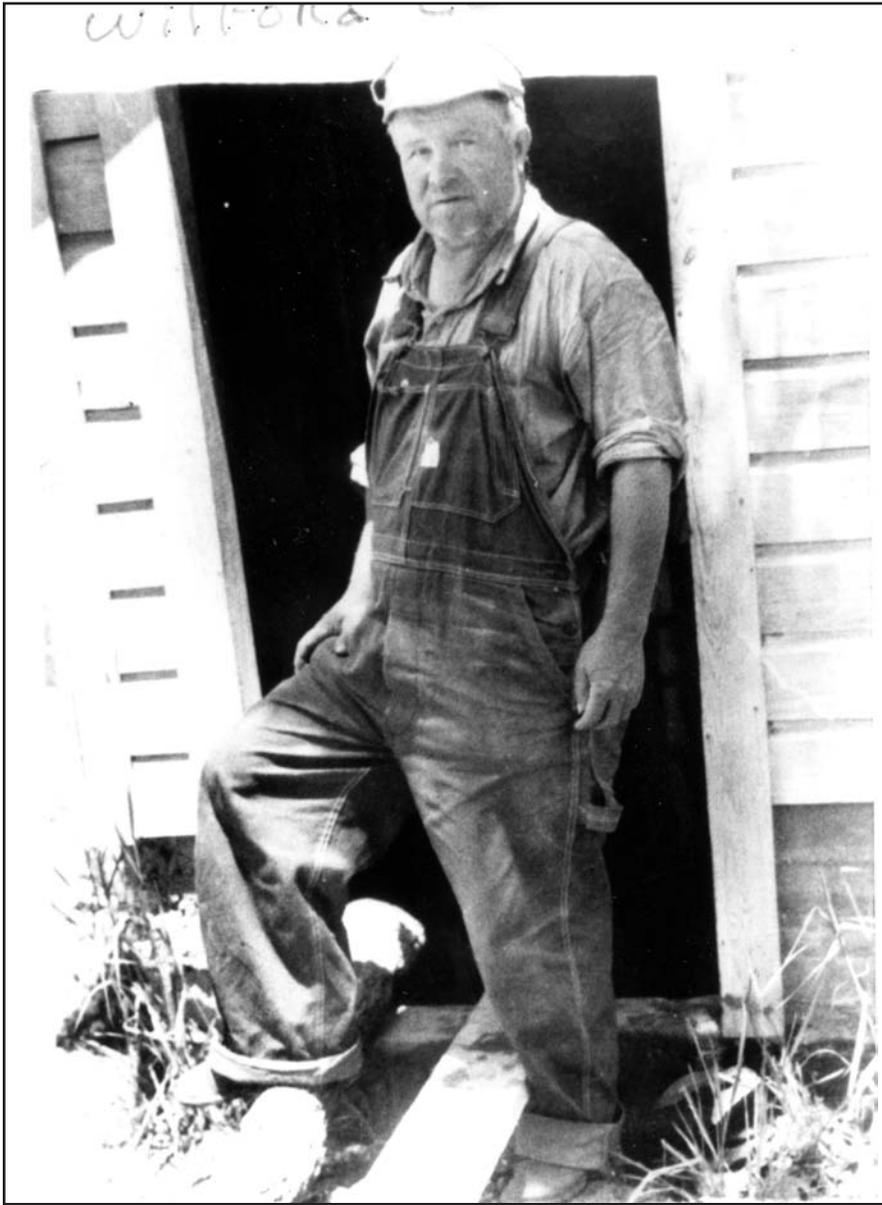
"Lee's specialty is fly-casting with a technique of his own. Most of the men on a float prefer plug fishing with the casting rod because they are not too good at "flyin' 'em," especially the way that Lee flies 'em. Instead of the quick cast that most fishermen employ, Lee casts and lets the fly drift as much as 25 feet. The generally accepted idea is that in flying you have to hook them on the cast or you don't get them. Not so, says Lee. To prove it, he gets as many his way as others get their way. He is mighty proud of that. It shows that he is a master fisherman. Last year he caught a four and one-fourth pound bass that way."

Wilford tied his own flies. He taught his nephews, Charlie and Larry Curran, to tie flies. Larry would be sent into the chicken pen to snatch feathers from the neck of roosters and certain feathers from guinea hens. He used fur from skunk and from the tails of squirrel and deer. Those flies he could land on a dime in the middle of the river.

Typical float trips were from one to three days, fishing about fifteen miles a day. Besides paddling the boat, the guide was responsible for knowing where the best fishing water was, having enough live bait when it was used, packing along enough ice for the sportsmen's favorite beverages, making up the camp on the gravel bar on overnight trips, and cooking the meals. Occasionally, a customer would want a real workout and float five days, the 85 mile trip beginning up the Big Piney at Dog's Bluff and ending at Jerome on the Gasconade.

These floats were made in wooden john boats, raked at both ends. Wilford made boats, too, often with his brother-in-law, Charles Curran. One summer they made three boats for Ed Keaton for use at his resort. They made seven or eight for Jesse Dial at Dial's Resort.

Charlie Curran of Duke, Wilford's nephew, can remember that as a boy he helped Uncle Wilford and his dad build some of those john boats. His job was to put six penny nails between the boards on the bottom of



Wilford Lee in his usual attire of bib overalls. Courtesy of Bill Ryno.

the boat to get the proper spacing. Spaced just right, the boards would swell up when put in the river and make a watertight bottom. Too much space and they would buckle. Not enough space and they would buckle.

Charlie got his first chance to paddle as a guide with Uncle Wilford when he was eleven years old. Two of Wilford's clients, Sam Moss and Jack Waters, wealthy big city sportsmen, came down to the Piney for a week float trip. Willie Lane, who guided with Wilford, was sick. Charley was given the chance to paddle Jack Waters and made four dollars a day. "Uncle Wilford got a lot more than that," Charley said.

In the winter, Wilford still plied the river but instead of fishing, he set his trapline. His 75 traps would cover four or five miles of river in the hand numbing cold of mid-winter. There were still mink, raccoon, muskrat, and 'possums on the river but the river otter was mostly gone. There was always the challenge of catching a coyote on land, along with fox and bobcat.

Charlie Curran told of his uncle's technique for catching live coyotes.

"When he'd catch a coyote in a trap, he'd take a buck brush or two hickory limbs, one in each hand, and he'd

lay down in front of the coyote where it couldn't get him, and he'd go to beating the ground [with the limbs] and just keep getting a little closer and a little closer and that coyote was so wore out and that's how he'd grab it and tie a stick in its mouth so it couldn't bite."

I wondered aloud why in the world Wilford Lee would want to catch a live coyote and Charlie explained.

"Well, he always had five or six fox and coyote hounds up until five or six years before he died. He belonged to a club, in the forties and fifties, with some guys over at Dixon and they went to all the big fox meets in Oklahoma and all over. He had one hound he called Streak and one he called Lightning and they were really good dogs. He had a bunch of blue ribbons and awards he's won. He'd catch those coyotes alive and he'd take them to those places and they'd run them."

Wilford Lee was very fond of his dogs. Charlie told a story about one time they were out in the woods hunting with several of them.

"He had a little dog named Ginger who, along with Streak and Lightning, were the three best dogs he ever had. I'd only seen Uncle Wilford cry twice. We were down in Lee

Holler right near here. When the army was camped in here [around Duke], they'd build wood bridges and roads as part of their training in the late forties and early fifties. We were down in that holler and the dogs were running hard and the old fox had come by us twice, under one of those bridges. It was built up and there was a little creek under it. It was in the winter time. Uncle Wilford got him a big old stick and he decided he was going to knock that fox in the head because they were worth about twenty bucks. He got that stick and we heard Lightning and the other dogs coming down the hill into the holler just the same way they had. Uncle Wilford got under the bridge and he told me to be quiet and I was standing above him. The fox went up over the bridge and the dog went under and he knocked that dog in the head and he thought he had killed it. He picked that dog up and he just cried. It got all right. I didn't tell him for years that I had seen that the fox come up over the bridge. I said I'd seen him cry twice. The other time was when his mother died."

Wilford Lee lived his bachelor life, married only to the river and woods, in a two room log cabin. There was no electricity, even when rural electrification came to Duke around 1954. There was an LP refrigerator and stove. Light came from a kerosene lamp. There was no running water. Every week or so, he might walk to the house of his sister, Ardelia Cur-

ran, and take a bath. Sometimes, his relatives requested it. Wilford lived the bachelor life that most young boys dream about.

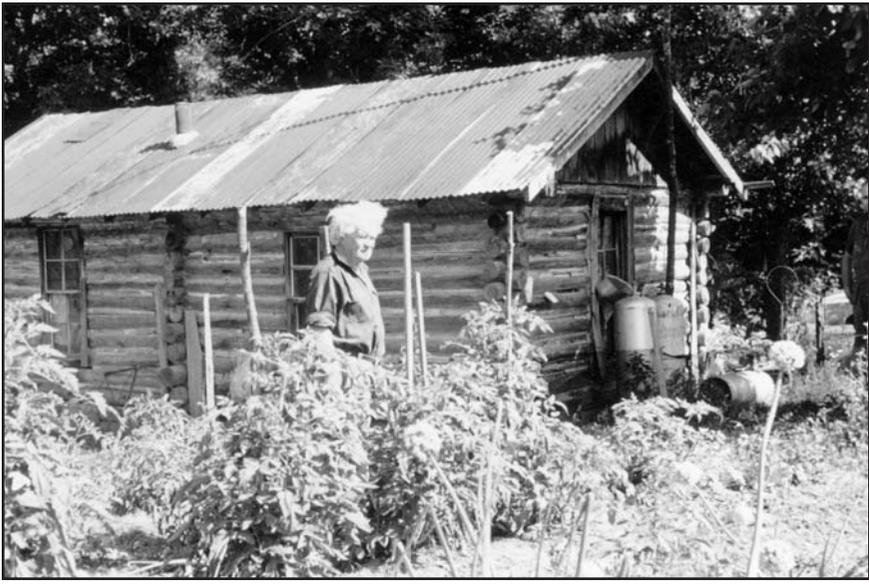
The bachelor wasn't much of a housekeeper, either. He spent days or weeks on the river and stayed with friends around the area. He stayed with Ben Pillman, down on Spring Creek, often. On one of those occasions when he was staying with Pillman, his sister, Ardelia, went in his cabin and gave it a good cleaning. Instead of being grateful, Wilford Lee was furious.

In his later years, some relatives and friends took him to fill out papers and secured some government assistance for Wilford, which he didn't want to fool with. A case worker visited his cabin and was appalled. She told him he had to clean up his house or lose his check. He listened for awhile and then said, "Lady, I'm going to tell you something. There's a holly log over there across the road. If I want to, I can make me a bed in that holly log and I can stay in it and I can do whatever I want to do. You can't come out here and tell me what I have to do with my house. You can just keep you check."

The assistance wasn't cut off but the first check that he got, he took to one of his sister's, Inez Ryno, for the years of washing his clothes. The next check he took to another sister, Ardelia Curran, for all her help. Neither sister wanted Wilford's money and told him so but he got indignant



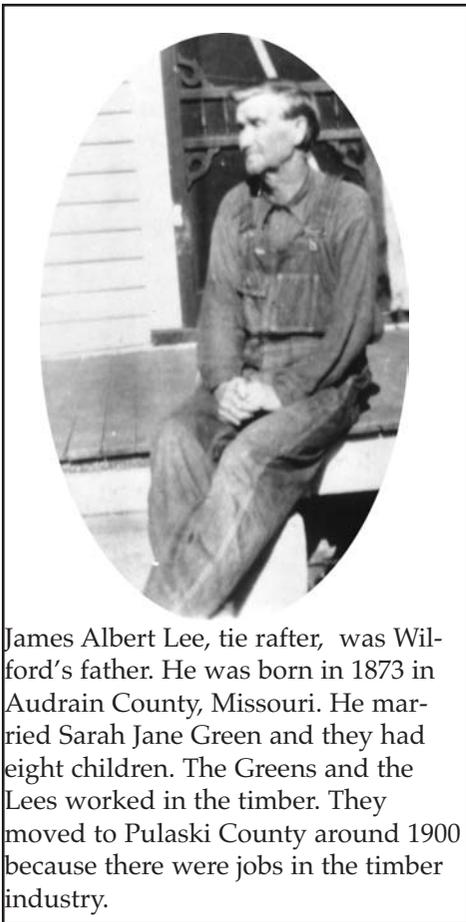
Wilford (right) with his good friend, trapping buddy, and guiding partner Willie Lane. They are displaying some of their coyote pelts. For several years, Wilford and Willie stayed in a rough cabin at Miller Eddy on the Big Piney River during trapping season in the 1940s. Courtesy Larry and Mary Curran.



Wilford Lee, in his later years, tending his tomato plants. The two room log cabin sat first near the end of Highway K, close to the Phelps/Pulaski county line. Around 1943, the cabin was moved a few hundred yards east. It attests to the strength of the log cabin that it wasn't taken apart. The cabin was set on large logs and rolled to the new site by a mule team. Courtesy of Larry and Mary Curran.



Wilford (left) and neighbor Willie Curtis show off their catfish catch. Courtesy of Larry and Mary Curran.



James Albert Lee, tie rafter, was Wilford's father. He was born in 1873 in Audrain County, Missouri. He married Sarah Jane Green and they had eight children. The Greens and the Lees worked in the timber. They moved to Pulaski County around 1900 because there were jobs in the timber industry.

Thanks to the late Bill Ryno, Charlie Curran, and Larry Curran, all of Duke, for their reminiscences about their uncle, Wilford Lee.

and insisted. They took the checks but figured ways to get the money back to Wilford by buying him clothes or food.

A trip to town was required about once a month to get the necessities: coffee, sugar, and Day's Work plug tobacco. To get these, Lee had to find a ride.

The closest Wilford came to a regular job was when they closed Fort Leonard Wood and a cattle company from Texas ran stock on the ranges. Wilford, along with other locals such as Herb Chambers, Chris Manes, Smokey Reagan, and Bob Morgan herded the cattle. We could add being a cowboy to Wilford Lee's résumé.

Seems there was a fondness that developed between the fisherman and his guide. Sometime in the early fifties, Wilford had prostrate trouble and became pretty sick; "couldn't make water", as they say. Since he had no regular employment with benefits, he didn't visit the doctor often. Sam Moss and Jack Waters, the big city sportsmen, packed Wilford off to Columbia for an operation and paid for it.

Wilford had his first stroke out in the woods deer hunting. Larry Cur-

ran came upon him, slumped at the base of a tree, near Peter Spring. This slowed him up some for awhile and he slowly improved. Wilford died of a heart attack on January 8, 1976 at the age of seventy-six.

Wilford Lee passed his knowledge on to his nephews, Charlie and Larry Curran. Although a harsh teacher

sometimes, he imbued a love of the outdoors in his nephews. Those icy cold days in January will find Charlie and Larry running their traplines, one up from Six Crossings and the other down, probably thinking of those early days on the Big Piney with Uncle Wilford.



Team and driver near old store in Duke, southwestern Phelps County. Taken about 1902, looking east. Identity of driver unknown. Courtesy of Bill Ryno.

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