

# 54 years back Wilbanks' career of 'lowering ears'

By BARBARA BROWN  
Reporter

The new electric cash register sits in the corner unplugged and unused. But the 1939 register sounds like a telephone from the same era, rrrring up another sale.

Haircuts are \$5. That's five rrrrings — one for each dollar. But when A.A. Wilbanks started cutting hair at the Northgate Barber Shop in 1937, haircuts were 35 cents. Wilbanks is the oldest barber in Brazos County, but that's the only thing old about him.

"I'm 88-years-old," he says, "just middle-age you know."

Wilbanks has spent the past 47 years lowering the ears of Aggies and growing old with the University.

"When I came here, there wasn't a paved street on the campus," he says. "The only brick building at Northgate was the one on the corner that Casey and Sparks built for their drug store (where Campus Photo is). All the rest of the shops were just tin shacks. There was a sidewalk, but the street was muddy as a hog pen. That was just yesterday though."

The barber shop, which is sandwiched between the Tailor Shop and the University Frame Shop on College Main, also reflects a mixture of the old and the new.

All the original fixtures are still used. The sinks, cabinets, mirrored wall and cash register have survived the half-century in good condition.

Newer things have been added through the years. The wall opposite the mirrors has been paneled and nine waiting chairs — 10 if you count the seldom-used, hair-dryer — are lined up against it. Three large maroon and white trash cans sitting under the sinks have thumbs-up "Gig 'em Aggies" symbols painted on them.

Four barber chairs are in the middle of the tiny 12-foot by 27-foot shop. There is just enough room to squeeze by and get a magazine at the back of the shop before sitting down to wait your turn.

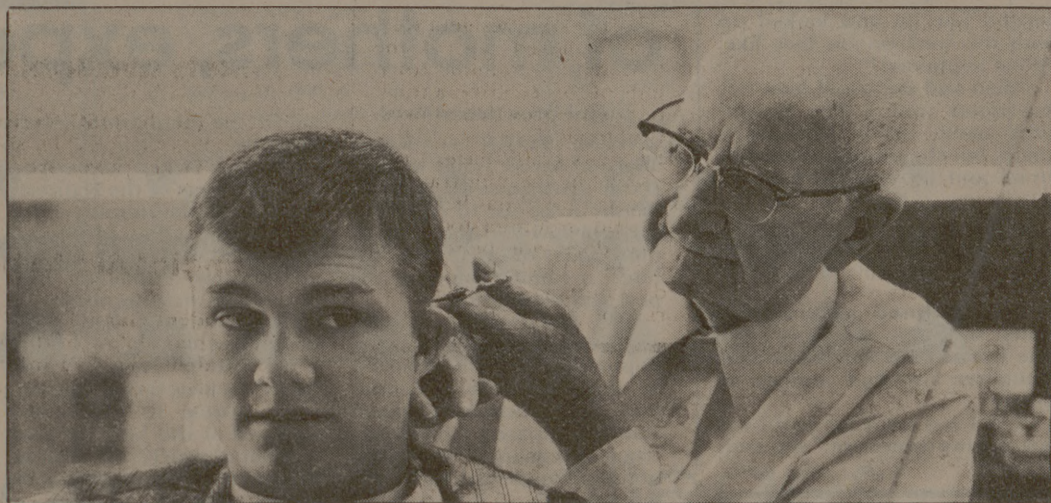
"I come here because Mr. Wilbanks really knows how to cut hair," says one cadet. "Just because we have short hair doesn't mean it has to be butchered, and 'some people' can really butcher."

You'll find Wilbanks behind the third barber chair. An amused leather honing strap hangs from the right side of the chair. He doesn't use the strap anymore. He has changed to the straight-edge razor with replaceable blades. But the leather strap still hangs there, a monument to days gone by.

The years of practice are evident as Wilbanks begins to cut.

His steady right hand guides the electric razor from the nape of the neck upward and around the ears while he tilts the customer's head with his left hand. (A little shorter for cadets, please. Even shorter for freshmen.)

The whirring of the razor stops and in one swift move Wilbanks puts it down and returns with scissors and a large black



A.A. Wilbanks cuts Johnny Blalock's hair. Blalock is a senior agriculture economics major from New Braunfels.

Photo by Dean Saito

comb that has several teeth missing.

He clips, clips, clips away until he's satisfied with the length and shape.

Occasionally he looks up from his work to comment about the weather or the latest happening around campus, but he usually saves conversation for between cuts.

He turns around to the sink behind him and puts the shaving brush in the mug to lather.

"We bought new electric latherers," co-owner Hector Garcia says, "but Mr. Wilbanks still uses his old shaving mug." The old green shaving mug is held together with silver duct tape and masking tape, but it still gets the job done.

Wilbanks tucks a paper towel around the customer's aproned neck. Then he lathers the back of the neck and around the ears and sideburns.

With the straight-edge razor he neatly shaves the lathered area. No nicks, no cuts.

He wipes off the lather with the paper towel and pitches it in the Aggie trash can. He picks up the scissors and comb to double-check for any stray hairs.

"There's a gray hair up here," he tells the customer. "You'd better quit worrying."

After satisfying himself, Wilbanks turns the customer's chair toward the mirror for approval. Then he unties the apron and gives it a snap to get rid of the hair.

The customer, who is writing a check, says to Wilbanks, "I have my address, phone number and I.D. number on here. Do you need anything else?"

"Yeah," Wilbanks answers, grinning, "put your shoe size on there."

Another customer enters the shop. The street noises tempo-

rarily drown out the latest Duran Duran single coming from the radio that looks like it's seen better days.

"He knows the boys like to hear that kind of music," Garcia says, "so he puts the radio on the rock station."

Alton Abraham Wilbanks is a native Texan, born Nov. 12, 1895, in Tennessee Colony (near Palestine). He was the fifth of 11 children in a family of seven boys and four girls.

He joined the army in 1917 and fought in Germany and France.

He proudly displays the Purple Heart he received after being injured in the war. The medal sits in a frame on top of the portable black and white television, which is on top of the safe in one corner of the shop.

One cadet notices the medal and questions Wilbanks about it.

"I just failed to get out of the way," he explains modestly. Then he adds with a grin, "I zigged when I should have zagged."

Four cadets' interest increases and they gather around to hear more. One asks Wilbanks what really happened.

"The same shell that hit me in the hip shot off another guy's leg next to me," he says. "I was a machine gunner on the front but, I don't think I'll apply again."

He graduated from barber college in Fort Worth and moved his wife and daughter, Peggy, to Bryan in 1930. He worked at another barber shop for seven years before going to work at Northgate.

"I was making \$20 to \$25 a week and we rented a five-room house for \$12 a month," he says. "Things have really changed."

He was the equipment manager for the Texas A&M foot-

some really great stories, but he'd better not.

Wilbanks works 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday. On weekdays, four other barbers alternate working with him, but on Saturdays he runs the shop alone.

"He's very dependable," co-owner Garcia says. "Some people say we should let him go but as long as he wants to work he'll have a job. He's become kind of a tradition around here. A lot of grandfathers send their grandsons in to get their hair cut by Mr. Wilbanks."

As the day progresses, more and more hair clings to the barber's light blue shirt, navy tie and navy slacks.

He sits down for a much needed rest. He has been working since 8 a.m. It's 3 p.m. and he hasn't sat down once all day. He hasn't had lunch or even a drink of water. But he never complains.

"I'm just especially busy today," he says. "I usually have time to eat a sandwich."

When he's not working, Wilbanks says he "goes neighbor-

ing" because he's not fond of a lonely house.

Wilbanks says he likes being in public and getting to visit with people.

He keeps an eye on the door as he talks. When another customer enters, he stops mid-sentence and says, "Got to go to

work now. . . . He hops up and quickly moves behind his barber chair. "Have a seat sir. How are you today?"

Business before pleasure? Watching A.A. Wilbanks, it's easy to see that his business is his pleasure.

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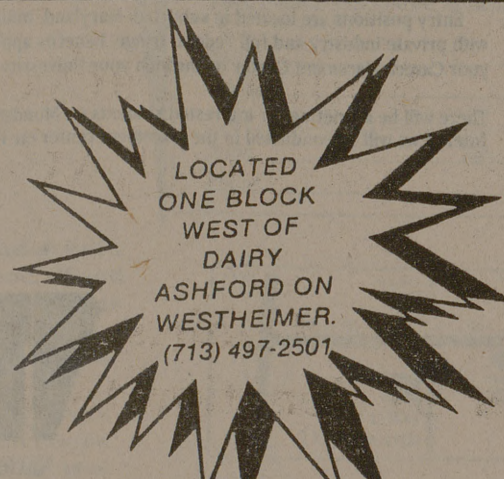
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