

# Remembering Wilson White Davis and the Eastern Blues

#1

## "The Other Side"

By Joe Boy Willis



June 16, 1930 –  
May 6, 2004

It has taken over a year since Wilson died on May 6, 2004. He was one of my closest friends, and sitting down to summarize a lifetime of cherished memories about a friend, mentor and person, who you would have been proud to call your father, has been both wonderful and very emotional.

Wilson is known for his knowledge and love of baseball; however, in addition to baseball, I also want to tell just a little bit about "the other side" of my friend. I have selected just a few memories to describe my appreciation for Wilson, not only for his contribution to my life, but for the contributions he made to countless others.

### **First, I would like to describe how Wilson used the fundamentals of baseball to teach the lessons of life.**

Those lessons have lasted me for more than 43 years, and they can best be described by the song that Anne Murray sings, called "**The Other Side.**"

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*Through each lifetime there are broad rivers to cross, and what if there's  
no life-line, and you are sinking or lost.*

*Just believe in your directions, and let your heart explore, because you  
can't reach new horizons standing on the shore.*

*There are mountains you need to climb, but the mountains standing in our  
way are only in our minds, and the risk of going nowhere is the greatest  
risk of all. So, just listen to the voices – I will catch you if you fall.*

*On the other side of doubt, is **faith**. On the other side of faith lies **strength**.  
The journey may seem endless when you know the road is rough, but on the  
other side of **fear is Love**.*

*Such a long time, I put my dreams aside. The tides have changed, felt  
dangerous, mountains seemed to hide; but, my*

*dreams are slowly fading as time went quickly by. So, I took a breath with  
every step, never knowing what I would find.*

*On the other side of doubt, is **faith**. On the other side of pain, lies **strength**.  
The journey may seem endless when you know the road is rough, but on the  
other side of **fear is love**.*  
~~~~~

My relationship and friendship with Wilson started around 1958 when he was my Pony League baseball coach. I was a young boy, eager for direction and described by some, as being poor and without a lot of financial means; however, Wilson saw a young man that was hard-working with a strong desire to learn and win.

I refined my abilities of playing the game of baseball from Wilson. I improved and learned the finer points of the basic skills of hitting, running, fielding, catching, throwing and thinking. AND most of all, I learned the “never say die attitude” from Wilson. He was the type of man that if he didn’t have the physical skills, then he would use his knowledge of the game to out-think his competitors, and would use his drive and “never say die attitude” to win. He showed extraordinary leadership skills by creating an environment for each member of his team to be successful, and an environment that was fun to play and learn. He was an exceptional leader.

That baseball training served me well. It aided me in getting an athletic grant to go to college, and helped me throughout my playing days in high school, college and with the Eastern Blues of the Seashore League.

As is the case for any young boy, the lessons that I learned, and needed to learn, during that particular time in my life, was that the meaning of life is not merely the state of things as they are, but the vision of what they might be. This important lesson was taught to me by my Pony League baseball coach.

Wilson thought he was teaching the finer points of baseball, and he was; however, for me, he taught that what you envision being, often enough, is tomorrow’s reality. I learned there are broad rivers to cross, and things will get hard and tough, but you have friends and team members that will back you up. AND they will catch you if you fall.

There was one game in particular that I remember that displays the “never say die attitude,” and brings out the true meaning of Yogi Berra’s saying that “it ain’t over ‘til it’s over.” As background, it was summer time, and I was working with my uncle to earn money by catching clams. In those days we used our feet to stomp the clams and our hands to dig them up. We had been clamming since 6:30 A.M. that day, and we filled the skiff about 4 P.M. and headed back to Alton Willis’ fish house to unload our catch. I was in a big hurry since we had a baseball game that night. I had been waiting all week for that game. My uncle’s boat was just pattering along, it seemed like it would take forever to get the dock.

But, I finally made it home, changed clothes and walked about four miles (from the middle of the Island to Straits) to Doug Damren’s house. His dad, Danny, drove us to Beaufort for a 7 P.M. game with Newport. The game started, and by the third inning, we were trailing 12 to 2. Even though we had a loyal following, most of the spectators were from Newport and they were booing us non-stop. However, no fights had broken out, yet. But it was getting intense. Since I was the catcher, and closer to the spectators, maybe I was a little more sensitive to the comments. It was looking bad (*brooooooad river!*) at that moment in time.

That’s when the Newport coach called time out to talk to the umpire and Coach Wilson about calling the game, especially since it was getting late and the score was somewhat out of control. Mad also about the abuse we had been taking all night, Wilson turned to me and asked if I wanted to quit? I knew what he was thinking - that I would never quit - and I said, “no, we don’t have anywhere to go, and that I believe the game was getting ready to turn in our favor – these boys look tired.”

Wilson turned to the umpire and said, “Mr. Ump, we want to continue playing, we think we have them right where we want them.” The rest is history. Although we had some major hurdles to cross that night to get to victory, there was one thing that I have always remembered, in the seventh inning, I got a hit knocking in a run or two, but the front part of my sole of my right shoe came off, and through the embarrassment, Wilson taped my shoe up with some medical tape while I was still setting on first base bag. Elmer Dewey Willis, the next day bought me a brand new pair of spikes. From that point forward Mr. Willis was a hero to Wilson and certainly to me.

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We went on to beat Newport 15-14 in 7 innings. That game ended after midnight, but the lesson I learned, I have never forgotten. You can't quit when it gets tough, that is when the work just begins. Another lesson learned was that if someone has faith in you that you will gain strength to always do the best you can.

*On the other side of doubt, is faith. On the other side of pain, lies strength.* I am thankful for the person and for those lessons that I learned growing up and how those lessons touched my life, at the right time, making a huge difference. What great lessons to learn and from what a great communicator!

**Next, I like to talk about the Eastern Blues and its team members, a topic that Wilson and I must have discussed more than a thousand times.**

I really got to know Wilson as a friend in the fall of 1973. I had a proposition for him. You see, a number of us older baseball players, including some of the high school players that I had coached at ECHS, wanted to start a Downeast baseball team. A number of players were ready to sign up, all with very unique personalities. It was very important to me that we get Wilson to manage this team. I didn't know anyone else that could accomplish this task. Knowing the players, managing this team would be a challenge for the most seasoned veteran.

I spent days putting together what I thought was a bullet proof sales plan, and of course with various fallback positions. First, there were a number of reasons/goals why we wanted to create the adult baseball team. The goals that we came up with were as follows:

1. To help get the parents involved regaining the spirit and interest in sports that was in the county in the old Tidewater baseball days.
2. If successful, it would help in providing our children an important outlet for learning and developing the skills we had learned growing up.
3. And perhaps the main reason was to re-live our playing days, our "Field of Dreams."

Second, we had to come up with a name. I loved blue fishing, so I came up with the Blues or the Eastern Blues. Third, we fine-tuned the administration, financing elements of the plan, and that we would utilize the old Smyrna High School baseball field with its gorgeous background of pines to play on. Now was the time to go see Wilson.

Since I hadn't seen Wilson for a long time, I got Sterling Hancock to go with me one Sunday afternoon, to discuss the plan with Wilson. I was nervous not knowing what to expect, and because of his unique skills in managing a wide range of personalities, I felt getting him to be our coach would be critical to our success. I was confident I had a comprehensive plan – a sales plan that any top executive in the country would have been proud to present.

He invited us into his house and we had no longer sat down, when I said "Wilson, we have a proposition for you that you are going to like." I may have said a few more things, and maybe I presented all of the reasons for creating the team, but the next thing I remember after I said ball, was him asking what we were going to call the team. I said I had been blue fishing with Braxton Piner, and we were thinking of calling it "The Blues or The Eastern Blues." He said he liked Eastern Blues as a name, and WE HAD A MANAGER.

Looking back, I believed he would have paid us to manage that team. I sure was glad I was prepared, but in this case the preparation was an over kill. Boy, did he do a great job as Skipper of The Eastern Blues! AND Boy, were we lucky! AND boy, I am glad we had a vision of what could be, AND boy, I am glad that we asked Wilson to guide us.

The Eastern Blues were organized in 1974 as part of the Seashore Baseball League. The Eastern Blues were arguably one of the best adult baseball teams Carteret County ever produced. All the team members were from the Eastern part of Carteret County. The Eastern Blues were the regular season champions for 1974, 1975, 1976 and 1977. For 1974 and 1975 seasons, the Blues won 33 regular season games before a loss. From 1974-1977, the Eastern Blues record was 65-9.

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As part of the Eastern Blues for the 1974, 1975 and part of the 1976 seasons, I can truly say that was the most enjoyable and fulfilling time I can remember. The camaraderie, friendships and brotherhood experienced during those years will be forever remembered.

Originally, we had three goals for creating the Eastern Blues, and under Wilson, we exceeded our wildest expectations. We not only got to re-live our “Field of Dreams” and regain the spirit and interest in sports that was in the county had in the old Tidewater baseball days; but also, Eastern Park was established – a place for our children to play. Wilson and Crawford had been looking for land, and it was Alton Paul and Kenny Lewis who mentions the land in Smyrna was for sale.

It was through Crawford’s and Wilson’s hard work with the County Parks and Recreations, Neal Lewis, to convince the County to buy the land, and it was Wilson, Crawford, the Eastern Blues’ team members, Alton Paul, Osborne “Oz” Davis, who design of the field, James Paul Lewis filled in the ditches with his front-end loader, and others who help do most of the manual labor in creating the field and paid for the dugouts and chain link fencing.

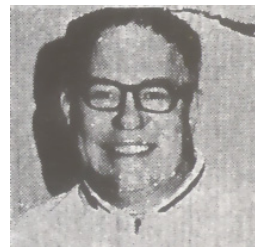
For Wilson and the Blues’ baseball team members, the greatest joy of all was, on a Saturday afternoon in 1976, seeing our children and your children playing a girls softball game, a little league game and a Babe Ruth game being played all at the same time. We had reached our goal!

As the Anne Murray’s song describes, that *through each lifetime there are broad rivers to cross, and what if there’s no life-line and you are sinking or lost. Just believe in your directions, and let your heart explore, because you can’t reach new horizons standing on the shore.*

*On the other side of doubt, is **faith**. On the other side of faith lies **strength**.*

#### **QUOTES: Sturgis Lee Hedrick:**

(Sturgis did an outstanding job in documenting the Seashore League for 1975 and 1976. He was the legendary baseball sports writer for the Carteret County News Times. Prior to retiring to North Carolina, he wrote sports for the Buffalo, NY Evening News, and after serving as Captain in the Army, he wrote sports for Buffalo Evening News again for seven years. He was sports director of WEBR radio stations in Buffalo and became sports director of a radio station in St Louis, Mo.; and worked as sports director of three stations in Houston, Texas.



The following are some of the quotes from Sturgis Lee Hedrick, The Carteret News Times Sports writer for the Seashore Baseball league, who served, before his death in 1977, in that capacity from 1974-1976. Through his efforts, he is primarily credited for the success of the Seashore Baseball League. Here are some quotes from a few of his many stories:

- 1974 - *Wilson wages psychological warfare. He keeps firing up his hitters with his first base war cry: You’re better than he are.*
- 1975 – ...*The Eastern Blues, Managed by Wilson Davis, stand aloof as such vulnerable targets. The other league members don’t easily forget last year’s non-stop victory march by the Downeast Blues.*
- 1975 - ...*Wilson, the boy wonder of the Tidewater 1946 league, now has the Blues 23-0 in the Seashore League.*
- 1975 - *Week end and week out, they play like a team of heroes.*
- 1975 - *But, let’s face it, boys and girls, this team of Blues can hit. They can also field. AND Run. AND play ball.*
- 1975 - *SURE, THE Eastern Blues can be beaten. But yesterday wasn’t the - day. The Salter Path Braves mishandled the Blues like they haven’t been mistreated this season. And yet, when the sand dust had cleared and the crowd had subsided, the Down-easter had done it again.*

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- 1975 – *They mesmerized Salter Path, 11-8, before the largest crowd ever in Burnetts Field, the Home of the Braves. SURE, THE Eastern Blues can be beaten. All you have to do is:*
  1. *Outplay an accomplished and deep roster of talented baseball players.*
  2. *Catch them on an off-day away from that Pandora's Box they call "Home of the Eastern Blues" in Smyrna.*
  3. *Pick a day when Dallas Wayne Arthur has a weary left pitching wing from hurling ten tense innings the day before.*
  4. *Get them when power hitters like Joe-Boy Willis and Crawford Pigott are out of the lineup, and when No.2 pitcher Richard Arthur has a hurling right arm too sore to throw, and*
  5. *When the Blues' No.1 hitter, Kenny Lewis, has to turn pitcher and bat and field with a broken left hand.*
  6. *Out pitch them with one of the most poised and stylish athletes in the Seashore League, Big Jack Daughtrey, 6-4, 200 pounds, Washington and Lee immortal, class of 1959.*

*MANAGER Otis Pittman's Braves did all this yesterday before close to 500 dumbfounded fans. How do they do it, these undefeated, defending champion Blues? After all, the Braves did everything but win.*

*But what Pittman's fire-eaters didn't do is conquer the mystic Downeast myth. That, without a doubt, ranks as Skipper Wilson Davis' great bonus weapon. His rivals want so badly to beat the Blues that they wind up beating themselves.*

*A GUY FEELS sort of strange, calling yesterday's drama (right out of David Belasco) the fiercest game of the year. We can only suggest you ask somebody who saw it happen.*

All through his life Wilson never gave up on anything he set out to do. He kept learning and working to improve himself, give to his community and provide for his family. He spent time in the Navy, owned a home and horse farm in West Virginia and worked in the newspaper business a long time, eventually owning "The Eastern Weekly". He started several successful businesses including the Crossroads Store at Otway and Eastard Variety on Harkers Island.

At the peak of his working career, he was in a tragic car accident coming from West Virginia that killed his wife Martha, and almost killed him, but he fought with EVERY fabric of his being to walk and work again, and he did. No one ever saw him give up.

When the Horses of Shackleford became threatened, he fought for them too, and was one of the founders of the Foundation for Shackleford Horses that today helps take care of the wild horse herd on Shackleford Banks.

Wilson lived what he coached ... "Work hard – Don't give up."

### **Next, I would like describe my conversation with Wilson his last night.**

On May 6, 2004, the night that he died, I was attending a tradeshow in Laguna Beach, CA and I called him, about 6 P.M., from my cell phone. He was in a panic and he wanted me to make an emergency call to his friend that was taking care of his horses. He wanted to make sure Sally, his daughter, was on her way to the hospital.

I made the call, and called him right back. I had been with him during a few tough times when he thought he wasn't going to make it, BUT that night was different. He was a little more depressed and anxious. He felt the time was close. He wanted to make sure that I got a copy his Eastern Blues' scrapbook that his mother had created during our playing days.

BUT, as we had done on so many times before, it wasn't long before we began talking about his family – Larry, Sally and Billy, and his grand children. I asked if he had heard how Mack Pigott was doing after he had his knee surgery. He hadn't heard, but we discussed the story, again, about the time he and Mack went to Washington to see Satchel Paige, who was pitching for the Indians, pitch against the Senators. He told me how he got stopped by a policeman for making an illegal turn across the medium. He told me in every detail how he tried to talk the policeman out of a ticket. AND he did. I could see him now bending his head, looking at him with his eye rolled, and the policeman not understanding a word he was saying. The policeman got them headed in the right direction and let him go.

He went on that night to discuss many of the details of that Satchel Paige game, as if it were yesterday. Then we discussed how we missed Snowball, and about them growing up and how much they had in common. AND then, we got around to the Eastern Blues.

As always, we discussed every player both how they were doing, and about how much we enjoyed the playing days with the Blues. We talked about Dallas Wayne Arthur and how “he could throooow heeerer hard.” We talked about Manley Gaskill, and how he always wanted one more grounder.

We talked about Crawford Pigott and how he rather be hit with a pitch, than get out of the way. We talked about how valuable Butch Saunders was as a batting practice pitcher. We talked about if he had heard from Richard Arthur, Dale Lewis, Braxton Piner, Ronnie Fulcher, Brad Piner, George Zurenko and Carroll Hill lately. We talked about Kenny Lewis and Milton Scott and how strong competitors they were. We talked about Tony Hancock playing with the Blues in 1976 and 1977.

We talked about how Randy Grady did an outstanding job at catching. We talked about the time Paul Damren hit one across the road off of John Turnage at Eastern Park. Man, that boy could hit! We talked about how we named Fred Nelson - “Cool Head Fred.” We even talked about how talented Joel Hancock was and how he could have done anything he wanted to do. We talked about how Rodney Kemp was born on the wrong side of the bridge, and should have been a Harkers Islandman, rather than from Morehead. We talked until he felt better.

We then talked about some of our most loyal Eastern Blues Fans - Rudolph Dowty, Captain Tilton, Truman Davis Everett (Peck) Fulcher and Oldman Guthrie of Tusk. They always sat under the shade trees, on the benches, at the Smyrna field.

Wilson used to say you had to be 70 or older to set in those “private-benches.” That was our skyboxes. He always talked about Rudolph Dowty and how he could say, “Throooooow her harrrrrd Dallas! Yooouu’re betttter than he are.” Wilson, loved to say that, and don’t doubt he believed it.

We then began to talk about May 31, 2002, the last time he and I went to Cape Lookout. We spent the whole day talking about growing up at the Cape. After lunch - a can of beans, cheese crackers and a coke - we went over to where Jim Miller Willis, my grand father, had his fishing camp about 150 feet or so south of the Coca Cola House. We went to the location and found some old broken glass from the remains from where the camp had been. Boy, there were a lot of memories growing up in that fish camp. I told him about the time the mosquitoes had lifted me out of the boat one night and carried me 100 yards to the camp. He laughed and said, “Yes, there used to be some big ones, it helped keep the ding batters away.” He laughed.

I asked him, the next time he went to the Cape, to take a picture of the Mural - on the wall of the Coca Cola House for me, which he loved and which expressed so much history for him. He said he would. By this time, I had arrived at a restaurant in Laguna Beach, overlooking the harbor which was full of sailboats. I said, Wilson, this is a beautiful place, but it’s not like sitting in your swing, on the porch at the Coca Cola House, over looking the Hook of the Cape. He said, “No, there is nothing that pretty.”

My cell phone battery was about to go, and it seemed liked he was feeling pretty good, so I said, “Wilson, I have enjoyed talking to you as always. I want you to know that I love you.”

I got the call the next morning, while I was driving back to the airport in Orange County at 8 A. M. It has taken me over a year to bring myself to say good bye, and I am still reluctant.

That night, Wilson made me feel that he was in a place in his life that we all hate to think about, but is inevitable. Anne Murray’s song best describes, that feeling for me - *Such a long time, I put my dreams aside. The tides have changed, felt dangerous, mountains seemed to hide; but, my dreams are slowly fading as time went quickly by.*

*So, I took a breath with every step, never knowing what I would find. On the other side of doubt, is **faith**. On the other side of pain, lies **strength**. The journey may seem endless when you know the road is rough, but on the other side of **fear is Love**.*

Wilson was the ultimate big brother. He was humble, hard working and dedicated to what he loved. Sturgis Hedrick described Wilson by writing in 1976, ... *Most of his rivals in the Seashore League consider Wilson a complex personality. Merely keep in mind his passionate love affair with baseball and his burning desire to win and you have rubbed off the outer coating of basically a single-minded guy.*

So to my coach, mentor, big-brother, Coach Wilson I say, "Thanks for all of the help you gave me and for all of the wonderful memories that I will never forget. I was only one of many lives that you touched, but I sure am glad I was one of them." I have crossed many *broad rivers*, and sometimes without an oar, but somehow I have gained strength from those simple lessons of life that Wilson, as Sturgis put it, ...*basically a single-minded guy*, taught me. Wilson needed something greater than himself to get up every morning, and he used what he loved, baseball, to help people like me.

Wilson, our Manager, has joined our other beloved friends – Crawford Pigott, Dallas Wayne Arthur, Manley Gaskill, Fred Nelson, Butch Saunders, Tony Hancock, Mack Pigott and Snowball Gaskill. Man that sounds like a foundation for a pretty good baseball team! I can hear Wilson right now saying, "Throooooow her harrrrrd Dallas! Yooooou're betttter than he are." AND Manley saying, "Hit me one more."

Thanks for the memories and for being there for us. We love you, Wilson! I will always remember the conchs that Earl and Annie Willis fixed for us that lasted us for three days. AND I will always remember the bushel of crabs that Brenda Pigott cooked for you, Crawford and me. Boy, they are some fond memories!

AND that is "The Other Side" that I knew.

## **Bruisin' Blues**

Joe-Boy Willis  
March 28, 2005

Wilson called us the Bruisin' Blues,  
maybe because we weren't the  
ones to lose,  
And maybe, because our team fought as one.

Either way, we never knew when to quit,  
we fought to win  
you see, we were bought up that way.

Sturgis said we played like heroes,  
week end, and week out.  
To us we were just playing  
to have fun.

Sure the Eastern Blues  
could be beaten,  
but  
with pitchers like Dallas Wayne and Richard Arthur, George Zurenko,  
Brad Piner, Butch Saunders, Rick Heal and catcher  
Randy Grady,  
and  
power hitters like  
Crawford Pigott, Kenny Lewis, Braxton Piner, Fred Nelson, Carroll Hill,  
Paul Damren and Joe-Boy Willis,  
and  
with fielding from the likes of Manley Gaskill,  
Dale Lewis, Milton Scott, Ronnie Fulcher and  
Tony Hancock,  
Sure the Eastern Blues could be beaten, but yesterday wasn't  
the day,  
because they were the Bruisin' Blues.

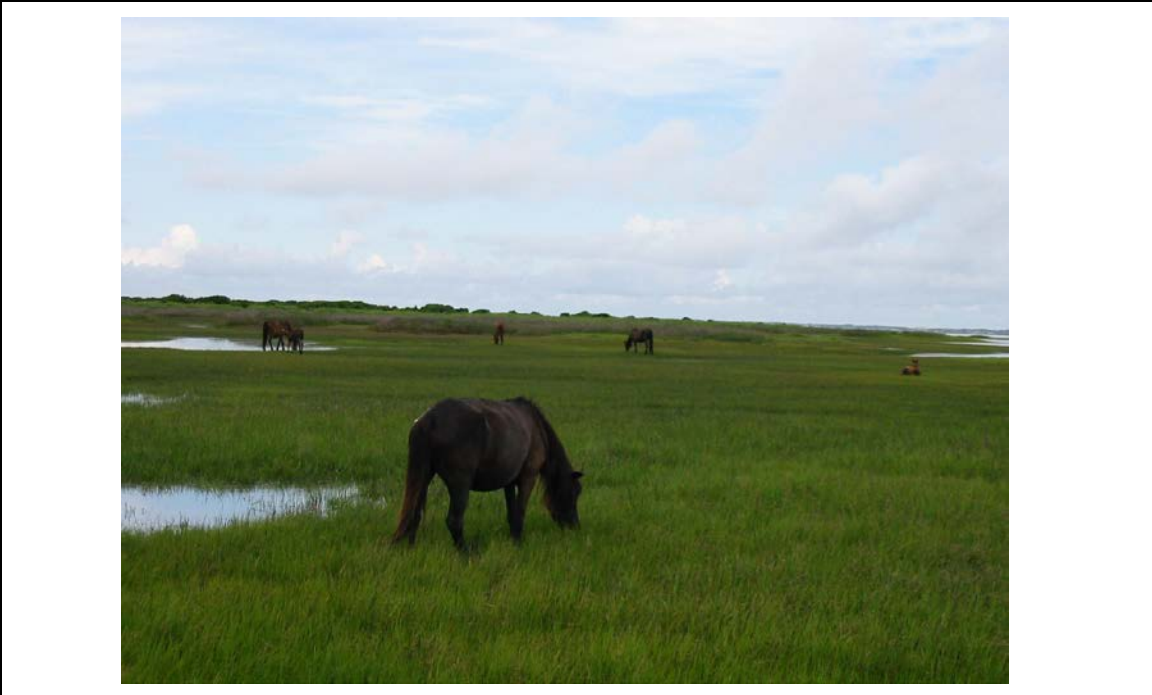
Wilson was said to be complex,  
when it fact he was a simple man  
with his love for baseball  
matched by his burning desire to  
win.

Wilson has gone on  
to be with our old friends  
and I am sure he will start a new team,  
And maybe, he also will call it the Bruisin' Blues.



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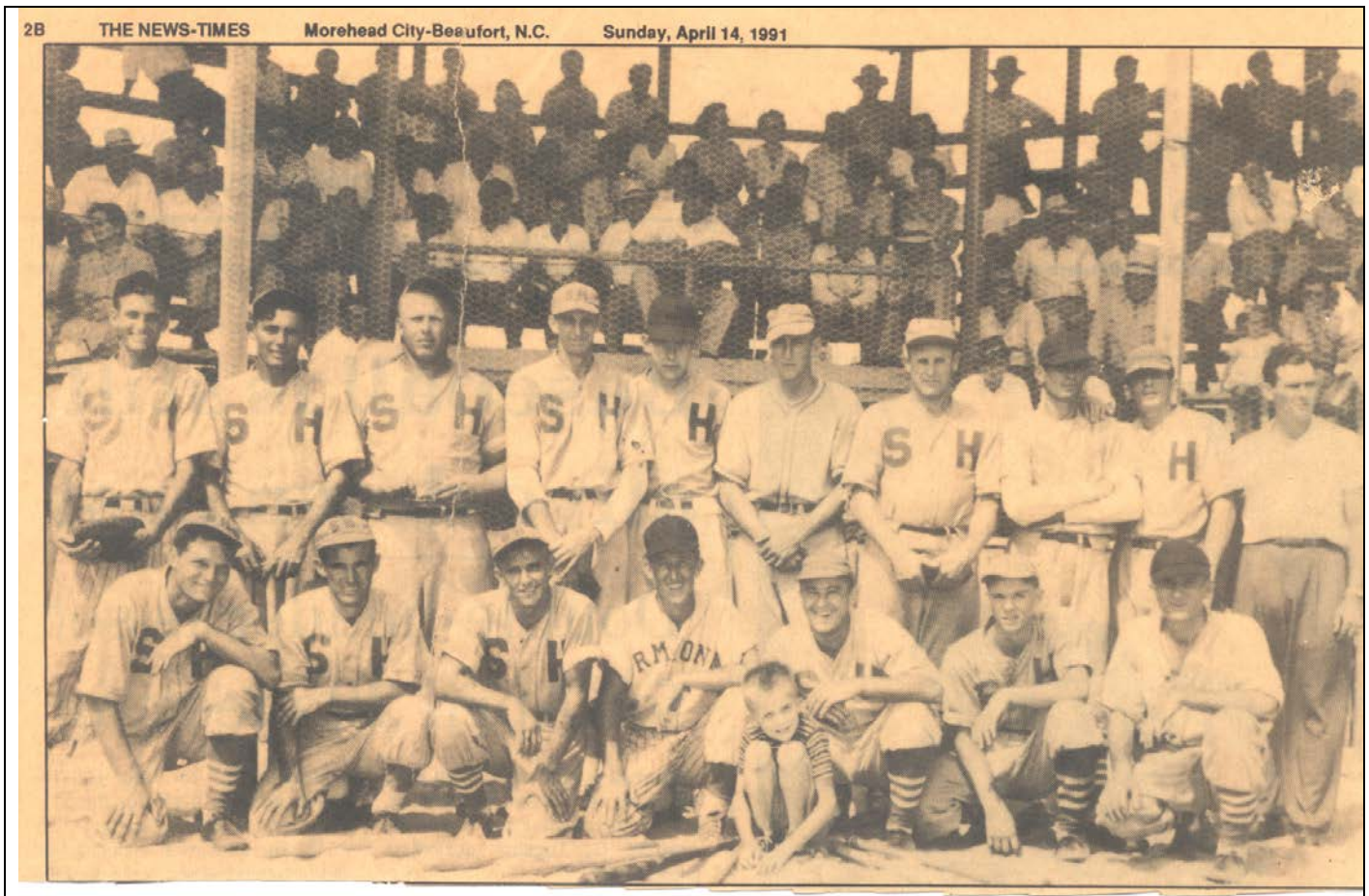
**May 3, 2002 was the last time Wilson and I visited Cape Lookout and Shackleford Banks. Wilson was one of the founding members of the Foundation for Shackleford Horses. He loved the Cape and the Horses.**



**Pictures Continued From Page 9**

**Wilson was a player on the 1948 Tidewater League - Straits – Harkers Island Team**

(Standing) \_\_\_\_\_, Delmas Willis, "Tookie" Willis, David Chadwick, Wilson Davis, \_\_\_\_\_, Lee Hawkins, Snowball Gaskill, McCarvey Guthrie, William Chadwick, (Kneeling) Herman Gillikin, David Yeomans, "Mo" Willis, Henry Willis, Lee Hawkin's son/bat boy, \_\_\_\_\_, Mack Pigott, Linwood Hancock. Photo courtesy of Genevieve Long



**We Honor Those That Have Gone On Before Us *Continued from page 10***

**Butch Saunders**



**Crawford Pigott**



**Fred Nelson**



**Dallas Wayne Arthur**



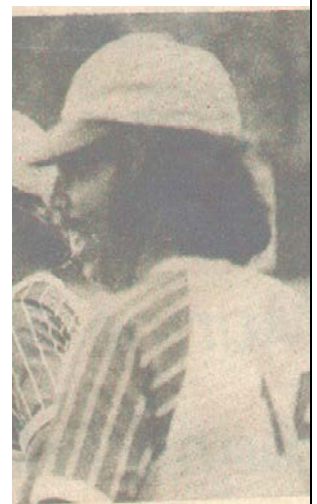
**Manley Gaskill**



**Tony Hancock 1964  
Soph.**



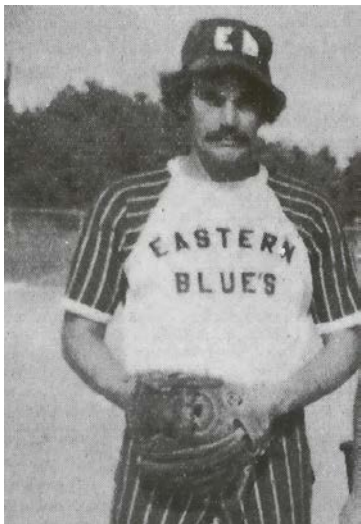








**Wilson Davis**



List of the Eastern Blues Players (1974 – 1977) Continued from Page 11

<p><b>Wilson Davis - Coach</b></p>	<p><b>Crawford Pigott</b></p>	<p><b>Joe (Boy) Willis</b></p>
		
<p><b>Dallas Arthur, Ronnie Fulcher and Randy Grady</b></p>		<p><b>Manley Gaskill</b></p>
		
<p><b>Dallas Wayne Arthur</b></p>	<p><b>Milton Scott, Brad Piner and Kenny Lewis</b></p>	<p><b>Braxton Piner - 1960 Smyrna High Junior</b></p>
		

List of the Eastern Blues Players (1974 – 1977) *Continued from Page 12*

<p><b>Dale Lewis</b></p> 	<p><b>Richard Arthur and Joe (Boy) Willis-</b></p> 	<p><b>Kenny Lewis</b></p> 
<p><b>Paul Damren</b></p> 	<p><b>Fred Nelson</b></p> 	<p><b>Tony Hancock 1964 HS Soph.</b></p> 
<p><b>Braxton Piner # 8 and Randy Grady #6</b></p> 	<p><b>George Zurenko</b></p> 	<p><b>Carroll Hill 1960 HS SR</b></p> 

**Note: Rick Heal -1974 (Pitcher) not shown**