

Life sketch of Hon. Edwin Ruthven Wilson (1827-1897)

** Includes biographical sketch, newspaper notes, obituary, and footnotes **

Contributed by: Larry Sullivan, sullivan@scrtc.com

Biographical portrait taken verbatim from Biographical and Historical Record of Adams and Wells Counties, Indiana, The Lewis Publishing Co., Chicago, 1887. Indented items, unless otherwise noted, are from The Bluffton Banner newspaper.

E. R. WILSON

Hon. Edwin Ruthven Wilson, a prominent and influential citizen of Wells County and member of the law firm of Wilson & Todd, was born in Fairfield County, Ohio, the date of his birth being 14 January 1827. His father's family came from the northern part of Ireland (of Scottish descent) and his father, John Wilson, was a soldier with General Harrison on the frontier and participated in the battle of Fort Meigs on the Maumee River.

His mother, Anna B. Geary Wilson, was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, removing with her parents to Fairfield County, Ohio, in 1800, where her family resided during the War of 1812. Our subject's grandfather Geary was a soldier under Washington during the Revolutionary War.

In the spring of 1840 Edwin R. Wilson came with his father's family to LaGrange County, Indiana, and there he attended the common schools for a time, and subsequently was a student for three years at Asbury University [now DePauw] at Greencastle, Indiana.

"Today is the day for festivities celebrating the incorporation of Bluffton as a city"
-- The Bluffton Banner, 12 February 1851.

He read law with ex-Governor Joseph A. Wright and began the practice of his chosen profession at Bluffton in the spring of 1851.

Coinciding with his start in legal affairs was a case preserved in local histories as typical of the old English "dusty foot" court system of justice common in mid-America at that time:

"In 1851 Detro and Brown were suspected of stealing a horse belonging to Daniel Miller.

They had taken the property into Ohio. "The vigilance committee got upon their trail, pursued them to near Dayton and captured the thieves with their plunder. They recrossed the state line, without the aid of a requisition, brought the captives to Bluffton, and on the day of their arrival they were indicted, tried, convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary.

"On the morning of the next day the sheriff started with his prisoners to Jeffersonville to execute the judgment of the court. It was claimed that this was done in obedience to that part of the law which declares that 'justice shall be administered speedily and without delay.'"

Edwin R. Wilson, noted as "an expert and aggressive young attorney," became a resident member of the bar in 1853. His brother, John L. Wilson¹, recently serving on the bench of the Court of Common Pleas in Warren County, Ohio, joined him in Bluffton early in 1854.

Edwin was elected [in 1854] and re-elected [1856] prosecuting attorney for the circuit extending as far north as the Michigan line, serving in that capacity nearly four years, and while so engaged prosecuted several very important criminal causes, noted among those being the case against William H. Logan for the murder of John Fryback in Wells County, and Keifer, Madden and Romial for the murder of Dunbar in a lumber yard at Fort Wayne.

"A debate last night between John Green, Republican, and Wm. Garver, Democrat, ended in a fist fight. Garver won" -- The Bluffton Banner, 22 October 1856.

In 1856 he was united in marriage to Miss Electa Case, a native of Springfield, Vermont, a cultured lady, who was employed as a teacher in the public schools previous to her marriage.

Mr. Wilson so well performed the duties of that office [prosecuting attorney] that, in 1858, he was elected circuit court judge for six years.

"During this period, the common articles of apparel consisted mainly of homemade items of linsey. 'Boughten' clothes were suspect. Women wore calico bonnets on their heads in the open air. Jewelry was rare, with a gold ring an ornament not often seen. Kentucky jeans were the main wear of men, with most material for all of copperas color. Judges, however, dressed 'in the dignity of their office.' This apparel included a silk hat, silk or satin vest, tall standing white collar, doeskin pantaloons and pumps, a low comfortable slipper" -- Historical footnote from an unrecorded source.

He served as circuit judge from January 1859 to January 1865, and when elected to the bench [at the age of 32] enjoyed the distinction of being the youngest judge in the state, presiding over the largest judicial circuit therein.

"The chief business transacted in the courts of this county from the years 1861 to 1867 inclusive was by some general divorce agents residing at Fort Wayne who operated for the Middle, Eastern and New England States and Canada. Divorces under the laws then existing were ground out by the half-bushel" -- historical footnote from an unrecorded source.

"Emma C. daught. of E. R. & E. Wilson -- died -- June 9, 1862 -- 3Y. 2 M. 7 D." -- Inscription on a tombstone at Six Mile Cemetery, southeast of Bluffton.

At the expiration of that term of office [circuit judge, 1865] Edwin R. Wilson was appointed bank examiner for Indiana, serving as such for two years. He removed to Jefferson County, Indiana, in the spring of 1867.

"The first railroad ties were laid in Wells County yesterday. A great crowd was in attendance with speaking by the promoters and music from the brass band"
-- The Bluffton Banner, 12 October 1870.

"Fourth of July celebrations were outshown last night by what was the most remarkably celestial display ever seen in the city, when lightning made the night bright as day"
--The Bluffton Banner, 1 August 1875.

In 1878 he was elected state senator for four years, and much important legislation came from his hand and enjoyed his encouragement and support.

"The first and only colored person was born in Wells County yesterday, a child of John Waterman, a colored barber -- The
--Bluffton Banner, 20 July 1880.

"J. J. Todd and Asbury Duglay began their recently formed law partnership today"
-- The Bluffton Banner, 30 July 1880.

At the end of his term as state senator in 1883, he returned to Wells County and has since then been actively engaged in the practice of law with Jacob J. Todd under the firm name of Wilson & Todd.

"Dr. J. C. Fulton held a farm auction and livestock sale yesterday, the first of its kind in Wells County" -- The Bluffton Banner, 2 September 1885.

Judge Wilson is a man of strict integrity, honorable in all his dealings and has by his genial manners made many warm friends, and is well respected throughout the community in which he makes his home.

(End of biographical sketch)

"For the first time in the history of Wells County, the Salvation Army last night turned its guns on the sinners of Bluffton" -- The Bluffton Banner, 23 January 1890.

"Dr. L. J. Wilson of Domestic lost the sight of one eye yesterday in an air rifle accident"
-- The Bluffton Banner, 25 October 1893.

"Attorneys E. R. Wilson and Levi Mock, Mort McAfee and J. L. Humphrey went to Decatur today where the motion for judgment in the McAfee case will be argued. Sharpe and Sturgis will go over this evening" -- The Bluffton Banner, 16 February 1897.

"Jim Corbett lost his heavyweight championship to Bob Fitzsimmons in a fourteenth round knockout at Carson City, Nevada" -- The Bluffton Banner, 17 March 1897.

Obituary in The Bluffton Banner, 18 March 1897:

EMINENT JURIST DEAD

Judge E.R. Wilson, Listed With the Wells County Bar for Forty-Six Years, Dies Last Night

No death in Bluffton for years created a greater shock to the community than that of Judge Edwin R. Wilson, which occurred about six o'clock last evening. The sad event was an utter surprise. Although Mr. Wilson had been ill for about a week, and his condition was critical at times, it was thought yesterday that he was better and would recover under the careful nursing he was receiving.

He grew worse in the afternoon and early in the evening death came to end his life which has been an honored one in its social, professional and home attributes.

Lagrippe added to seventy years of ceaseless activity was the disease that carried its victim away. Judge Wilson was taken ill about a week or ten days ago with the malady which affected his lungs. He has been bedfast almost all the time intervening and under constant care of his beloved wife and kind friends.

As a lawyer, Judge Wilson was ranked with the leaders of the Wells County bar. He was quick and alert as a practitioner, a hard student in the office, and although seventy years of age his ability seemed unimpaired.

The remains will be laid to rest in Six Mile Cemetery² beside those of their only daughter. Dr. Lawrence J. Wilson of this city is the only child living as the result of this union.

Notes:

1. John L. Wilson and Michael Karnes founded The Peoples Press in 1855. This newspaper, devoted to politics of the newly founded Republican Party, was one of the predecessors of the present-day newspaper, The Bluffton News-Banner. Wilson sold his interest in 1857, but continued to contribute to its news columns for several years. After the Civil War broke out, he declined a commission as major, but served for a while as draft commissioner. He is believed to have moved to Warren County, Ohio, in the 1870s.

2. Judge Wilson undoubtedly was buried in Six Mile Cemetery, as noted in his obituary, but the only stone marking the six-grave plot is that of his infant daughter Emma. The cemetery has no record at all of the Wilson burials. The judge's wife, Electa, died 30 June 1913 in Gary, Indiana, at the home of their son, Lawrence J. Wilson, and was buried there in Oak Hill Cemetery.