

## Horton, Wilma: Raised in a Tent Show <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Wilma Horton: Raised in a Tent Show

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 3/9/2003. Copyrighted.  
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During the 1930s and '40s, the Rusty Williams Tent Show was a legendary traveling band of vaudeville and minstrel acts that brought delight to small towns all over North Carolina. Recently I had the privilege of visiting with Rusty Williams' eldest daughter, Wilma Horton, when she was visiting Durham.

Now retired and living in Myrtle Beach, S.C., Wilma toured in the tent show all her childhood, a different town and a different school nearly every week. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Wilma and her little sister, Billie, even hold the world record for most schools attended -- more than 260. It was sometimes a hard life, especially for a young girl, but Wilma told me that she misses it to this day. We talked in her and her husband's RV.



Wilma Horton. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission for the Horton story to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

My dad was born in Durham, and his father was a mill worker. His mother died when he was about 14 years old and after that he left home. Some sort of traveling troupe came through there and he joined them. I think first he joined as an actor.

My mother was a little piece of dynamite. She was a piano player in Pittston, Pa., for the silent movies. You know, "de la lump, de la lump, de la lump." Her father was a coal miner. And my dad came to that area and was showing there. She was a showgirl.

We played theaters first. Then at one point we were on a medicine show. And after the talking pictures came, we went into tent shows, and that is where I was raised, on tent shows. We were traveling to a different town every three or four days. We never stayed longer than a week or two weeks. Every time we'd go to a new town, we'd go to these little lots right in town. There wouldn't be too much town there, because there wasn't much town. We'd go to set up the tent and there were always men around, or young boys, who wanted to help so badly, and my daddy would hire them and give them a free ticket to the show. And we had what we called then "flunkies" who stayed with us.

Inside, the stage was elevated up on wooden horses, and they would set up seats for people to sit on, just plain boards. And in the early days one side was for the black people and one side was for the white people. We started out the show with a movie, and it was always a good bang, bang, shoot-'em-up that everybody loved. In the early days some of these people had never even seen a movie before! They had no theaters. A lot of people didn't even have a radio. Then we would have the vaudeville after that. We'd have jugglers and tap dancers and acrobats, and I remember Yodeling Sue played a ukulele and sang and yodeled. And, of course, my father was the star of the show. He did Rusty, which was a song. Mostly he did comedy skits and he always sang. There was no blaspheming, no cursing. There was just pie-in-the-face comedy -- you know, just silliness, just plain silliness. My dad would come out on stage and put his hands in those suspenders.

And, of course, my sister and I went on the stage at age 3. We just did little songs and tap dances, and I danced on skates, things like that. We would dress all up in makeup and we thought we were something! That was my life. We'd go to a new school every Monday morning and my mother would introduce me to the principal and get permission to go in. They were always very nice. The kids thought we were really celebrities, and, of course, the boys liked us. This was just after the Depression and a lot of people were very poor. I can remember lots of children walking to school without shoes, and there would be little children that didn't have the dime to get in. People would come and bring eggs or chickens. A lot of times my dad would catch little boys trying to lift up the side of the tent and trying to look in. My dad would say, "Now boys, just go right on in, " and he would lift it up and let them go in. That tells a lot about my dad. He was a very loving man. He was not an educated man, but he was a wise man. He understood people. He felt for people. He would never intentionally harm anybody: Whether it was white or black, it didn't make any difference to him. I never heard a prejudicial comment. We lived in a trailer that was pulled by a car. And we always had a cookhouse. Sometimes it was a tent with stoves and iceboxes and a table and benches, but later on it was in a motor home-type truck.

When it got really bad cold, we would go into winter quarters or go to Florida and show down there. One time we did spend three months in Siler City in an apartment. That was the longest I've ever stayed in one town until I got grown and we moved. When I was a girl, I looked forward to growing up and getting married and settling down and living in a house. That was all I ever wanted to do. I was not enamored with show business until I left it, and now I miss it very much. I don't know why.

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9 March 2003 | Cecelski, David S.

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