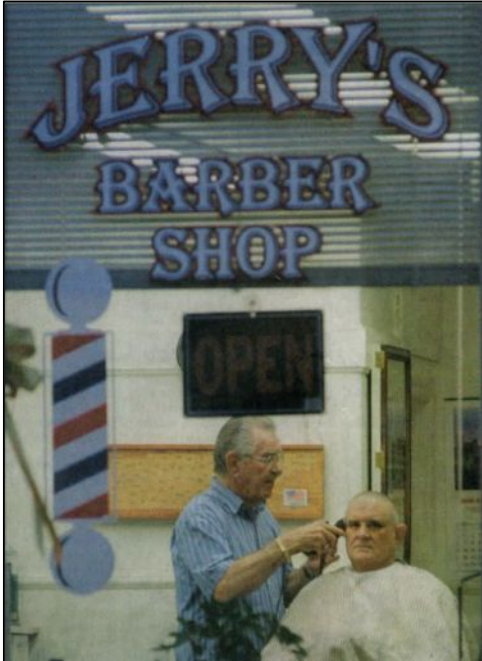


## Jerry's: a Cookeville institution

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Jerry's Barbershop on Spring Street just off the Courthouse Square in Cookeville is a throwback to the time when life was slower and men and women had different traditions about grooming.

A barbershop is different from a beauty salon -- or 'parlor.'

For one thing, you can't call Jerry Wilmoth for an appointment because his shop has no phone.

He doesn't wash hair or style it in fancy ways -- although he's trained to do both.

Customers walk in anytime between 6:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday or Friday.

Sometimes they can get a haircut immediately. Sometimes there's quite a wait.

But a haircut in a barbershop can take as long, or longer, than one in a beauty shop.

When we visited the barbershop at 4 p.m. one day last week, a grandfatherly gentleman was already in the chair. Next in line was another friend of Wilmoth's, then there was a rugged middle-aged cowboy-type with a battered Stetson-like hat who was fast asleep and a young father with his 15-month-old son and 6-year-old daughter playing with toy lizards and climbing onto the old-fashioned black vinyl and chrome chairs and sitting in the window to watch passersby.

In the next 40 minutes, while one customer was having his hair cut, two 30-something businessmen stopped in at different times, one through the front door, the other through the back door. Both took a few steps into the shop, saw the crowd, greeted Jerry and backed out to come back at a time less busy.

And a young brother and sister team popped through the back door while Jerry was working on the same customer.

They leaned against the side wall while they talked to Jerry.

The boy, about 8-years old, put his hand to his head and pulled up a handful of thick dark hair. "Mama said you were to cut a little off here," he said.

Jerry greeted the two as old friends and sent them back to their mama, telling them to tell her to send them back a little later or maybe the next day.

"I love it up here (near the Square)," Wilmoth said. "I love the people just dropping by.

"I can see everything and everybody. And I have both a front door and a back door so I can't get hemmed in, but people can find me easily," he said.

## Lesson in life

Jerry grew up in Cookeville and learned one of life's important lessons early.

"I had a quarter in my pocket to go see a movie. It would get me into the theater to see a double feature and then I'd have enough left to buy a half bag of candy for three cents," he said.

"But on my way to the movie, I came across some men who were all looking at something on the ground. When I joined them, I saw that one man had a stack of toothpicks piled up like an Indian teepee.

"The man bet me 25 cents that he could change those sticks into a star by only moving one or two of them around.

"Well, it looked impossible to me. So I took the bet. Of course he easily changed the toothpicks and I lost that quarter -- and a whole afternoon at the movies.

"It's no telling how much that quarter has saved me over a lifetime. It stopped me from any thought of gambling -- both in the Navy and after the war.

"That lesson still hurts," he laughed.

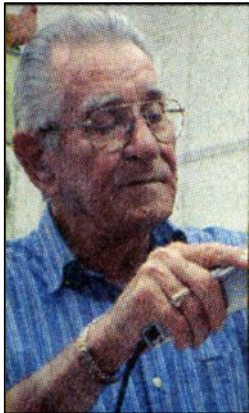
Instead of gambling, Wilmoth enjoyed raising little bantam chickens as a hobby and became a grown-up member of the Upper Cumberland Fancy Feather Club which shows their chickens at the Putnam County Fair each year.

In his spare time, he also helps his wife, Dean, with her annual Pacesetters Day celebration at the county fair.

But his main love is barbering.

## Barber school

Jerry's been cutting hair for 50 years, ever since the Korean Conflict when, as a 20-year-old, he enlisted in the Navy and became the ship's barber on the USS Piedmont.



When he returned to Cookeville in 1956 after his stint in the Navy, he applied to the Nashville Barber's College under the GI Bill and then got in line for the long wait to be admitted.

While he waited, he worked for a monument company, sandblasting, lettering and delivering the gravestones to cemeteries.

Then he worked as a shoe cutter at a factory.

And then, in 1958, the government finally gave him \$90 a month to pay for tuition, room and board to go to barber school.

"I paid \$45 a month for tuition and then \$40 for my room and two meals a day, breakfast and dinner," he said.

"But I didn't have enough for transportation or lunch. So I walked from 16th to Fourth and Church to the college everyday and I offered to cut hair for the Greyhound bus drivers' for free and was able to get lunch with the tips they left," Wilmoth said. A shave and a haircut in 1958 was 50-cents.

After his 1,000 hours of study at the barber college, Wilmoth returned to Cookeville to start his career. He began working for others, working first for Frank Adkins on Broad St. Then he moved to the East Side, and in 1965 he moved to Premier Place and opened his own shop.

He stayed there until 2000 when he moved to his current location and his small one-chair shop a few steps off the Square.

#### Styling vs. cost

For the 73-year old, cutting hair is almost a calling. Wilmoth can't abide the expense of salon cuts and he wants to have enough time to get a cut right.

"In the Navy, I had between two and three minutes to finish a cut," he said.

"How long does it take you to finish a hair cut now?" we asked.

"As long as it takes to get it right," he said.

"How long does it take him?" we asked A. J. Rice, one of Wilmoth's 'regulars' who was having his hair cut with clippers and his neck shaved with a straight-edged razor and lather.

"Thirty to 40 minutes," Rice said.

And how much does such a cut cost?

Seven dollars.

That's the amount that Wilmoth has decided is fair to both hair cutter and hair cuttee.

In the 1960's when long hair for men became fashionable, Jerry took a 13-week course in Chattanooga to learn new ways of hair styling and cutting.

When he came back, he tried to conform to the new standards.

"In the 60's and 70's a man's haircut became a girl's haircut," he said.

But what bothered him wasn't the gender confusion, but how the cost of haircuts skyrocketed.

"A 'style' won't last but about 10 days," he said.

"Then they began to add shampoos and styling in addition to regular haircuts.

"That meant someone had to keep coming back and spend \$10 or \$12 a pop for a haircut.

"I just couldn't charge what they were charging. I couldn't see doing that to my friends."

So he got out of the salon atmosphere and opened his little old-fashioned barber shop.

## Generations of clients

Men who came to him when he started barbering eventually began to bring their children to him. Those children have, in turn, grown up and brought a whole new crop of little boys needing hair cuts.

Jacob Angel, the 15-month old exuberant bundle of energy who was climbing chairs and tottering around the shop the day of the interview, is the fourth generation of Angel men who have had their hair cut by Jerry Wilmoth.

Jacob's great-grandfather, James Angel, started going to Jerry's in the 1960s. He introduced his son, Jim, and his grandson, Jonathan, to Jerry. Now the barbershop, and the barber, have become a family tradition.

Jake's first haircut was just a few weeks ago.

"Jacob was so easy!" Wilmoth said. "He was grinning ear to ear and happy as a lark.

"Sometimes the little ones get scared, then I won't use the electric clippers. I'll just cut very gently with scissors. Sometimes they'll quiet down with a lollipop. And sometimes it takes two or three suckers to get them through the haircut.

"By then their cheeks are so sticky their hair gets stuck and it looks like they need a shave!" he laughed.

Jacob's dad, Jonathan, remembered getting those lollipops when he was a kid.

"He used to have a display cabinet where Lance's Lollipops were right out front. I used to look at those lollipops every time I went to have my hair cut to decide which one I wanted," he said.

Jerry's haircuts start with a shaping with scissors and comb. Then the clippers are brought out to define the lines. And, finally, the customer's neck is coated in lather and Jerry uses a straight-edged razor to shave the neck.

Men go out of the shop looking dapper and groomed.

## Retirement?

Does Wilmoth have plans for retirement?

"I wouldn't know what to do!" he said.

So he continues to spend eight to 12 hours a day in the barber shop, talking to old friends who are long time customers and making new friends as passersby walk in. And on his day off, he goes to the homes of housebound friends who can't come to him anymore for a haircut.

"I've done their hair for years. I'm happy to go to their homes or the nursing home to give them a good haircut," he said.

And Jerry does the final honor to friends who have died by going to the funeral home to groom them for their final public appearance.

"The funeral homes began to ask me to come," he said. "These are always friends and it hurts. It tears me up.

"But what else could I do?

"I'm not myself for a day so after. I can't eat. But it's something I have to do," he said.

"I love to cut hair. And I love people. And as you've found out, I love to run my mouth. This lets me do all three all the time.

"I get a big kick out of people. I don't think I could do anything else.

"It's given me a good living and a good life."

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