

Soldier Returns from War and Attends Wilson College

By Dianna C. Heim

Bob Harrison's gentle and humorous take on life bolsters his belief that he's been at the 'right place at the right time' and that one of those 'right places' was Wilson College.

Maturing on the cusp of World War II, the Chambersburg native turned 18 in March 1945. Local high schools were permitting young men to 'accelerate' through their courses so they could enlist earlier, which Bob did as a U.S. Navy hospital corpsman.

"The war in Europe was almost over and the focus was on Japan. We were getting ready for an invasion, which would have been very bloody," he recalls. Bob and his fellow corpsmen were outfitted with Marine gear to serve on the battlefields with the U.S. Marines.



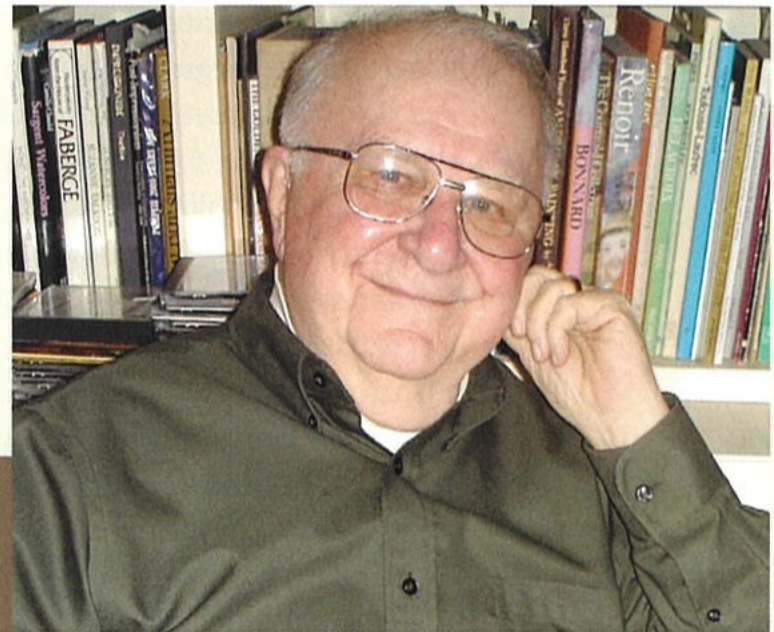
Pictured are GIs who attended Wilson College after World War II. Harrison was absent when the photograph was taken.

Stationed in San Diego when the war with Japan ended, he was discharged in September 1946, after 19 months of service. “I felt very grateful and blessed that I had hit it (enlistment) at the right time.”

With the GI Bill available to him, Harrison was pleased to hear Wilson College would open undergraduate placements for male veterans. “I’m not sure I was ready for Wilson. I had pretty much coasted through high school. I often wonder what I would have done with my life if the war had not been going on at the time (after high school).”

*“Wilson prepared me...
It re-awakened a love
of learning...”*

Bob Harrison has on his book shelf *Reading and Dating Roman Imperial Coins* by Zander Kalwans.



Becoming one of the first 23 men to attend Wilson in the fall of 1946 was “quite a shock. To go from an all men society, where we didn’t see women, to an all women society felt very odd at first,” he remembers. Several of his male classmates saw action overseas. “(If his classmates suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder), they didn’t talk about it much. They must have swallowed it and moved ahead.”

“Wilson opened a whole new vista on the world to me,” he remembers. “My parents had not gone to college, not finished high school. Wilson allowed me to meet people I would not have met otherwise and taught me to study. I thought Wilson was wonderful, far better than I expected. The faculty was really good and strict, but you wanted to please them.”

Bob recalls the men had their own “clubhouse” behind the present day Prentis Hall. “It was a little stone building and we gathered to play poker, smoke... and some of us even studied,” he says, smiling. “We were a lot freer than the women at the time. I guess coming from the service, we didn’t believe the faculty members were gods incarnate. You know if a faculty member or a house mother told a student she should do something, she usually did it. That wasn’t the case with the men.”

His favorite professors were Wren Jones Grinstead who taught education and John Negley Yarnall who taught English. “They really sparked my interest in learning, in composition and speech.” He also enjoyed classes with history professor Elizabeth Frances Rogers and psychology professors Edward and Sarah Ferrell Anderson.

He chuckles when he remembers biology professor Edith Grace White. “She was about to teach the women about the gentler aspects of biological reproduction, and she sent me to the Stewart Library to look up nonexistent books. She didn’t want me in the classroom when she taught this.”

The men ate lunch daily at the Park Avenue Luncheonette, then part of the pharmacy, and later fraternized at the library. “We would study in the evenings there and even met some of our dates there, too,” he adds with a smile.

One date was another ‘right place at the right time’ moment

for Harrison. Admissions staff **Ruth Redding Leitch ’28** had encouraged him to meet a petite, brunette, French major. “That’s when I met the love of my life,” he says. **Ruth Frances Juillerat ’51**, later known as Françoise, married him in June 1953.

After his freshman year at Wilson, he continued his studies at Gettysburg College, graduating in 1949 with a degree in economics. “Wilson prepared me for Gettysburg, just superbly. It re-awakened a love of learning in me.” Harrison went on to a varied career. He was instrumental in the success of two regional radio stations and a television cable company. He also established the marketing department at a local bank, where he was trust officer and vice president.

He also became a historian. His column, “On This Day in History,” covered hundreds of historical events and was published in the Chambersburg newspaper. He broadcast the column as well for more than 15 years and gathered 50 of his favorite columns into a self-published book. More recently, he has portrayed Benjamin Franklin and appeared in full costume at local Chambersburg events.

One of the couple’s two daughters became a Wilson woman, **Emily Harrison Weir ’77**. His beloved Ruth passed in 2005.

Looking back, Harrison believes “in that short time, Wilson was very good to me. I am a firm believer that a big part of your education is the people you meet during your time in college and who then steer you toward future opportunities,” he says. “Wilson did that for me and changed my life.”