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12-9-2020

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Recommended Citation

Clark, J. B., "Truth Seeker and Storyteller: Curtis Wilkie Retires from UM" (2020). *University of Mississippi News*. 5296.

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Truth Seeker and Storyteller: Curtis Wilkie Retires from UM

Veteran reporter, longtime Ole Miss journalism faculty member served as conscience of the campus, mentor to many

DECEMBER 9, 2020 BY [JB CLARK](#)



Curtis Wilkie relaxes at his home in Oxford. The acclaimed journalist, author and educator is retiring from the university after nearly two decades as a faculty member and mentor to many. Photo by Logan Kirkland/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

OXFORD, Miss. – When Curtis Wilkie left Mississippi for the East Coast in 1969, he did it with a promise that he would never return. Half a century later, the **University of Mississippi** journalism professor is putting a period on his career in the same place where it began: Oxford.

The Summit native and Ole Miss alumnus (BA 63) reported on and wrote about a range of characters from racists and murderers to United States presidents and Middle Eastern revolutionaries. Yet through a career that led him from the Mississippi Delta to the White House, Wilkie never failed to seek out the humanity in each of his sources.

Wilkie chuckles with humble reservation when asked about his legacy ahead of his upcoming retirement. But one of his closest friends and former colleagues, UM Chancellor Emeritus Robert Khayat, said Wilkie has served as the conscience of the university, the state and, at times, the nation.

"I would say Curtis served as a reminder of the truest course that we could take, even though we may not agree with it – we may not support him in it – but he was steady," Khayat said.

Decades after a bitter departure from the South that raised him – even though Wilkie rejected much of the Southern way of life – he returned for the friends, football and shared humanity he'd left behind. Back in Oxford, he taught and inspired generations of students, published what many consider to be a masterpiece of reporting and helped cement the **Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics** as a national leader in free speech and political discourse.

In His Own Words: Wilkie hopes his legacy is one of progress



A Legacy Rooted in the South

Wilkie's legacy was built on national campaign trails, international conflicts and revolutionary wars, but

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Civil Engineering Professor Receives Most-Cited Paper Award

OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

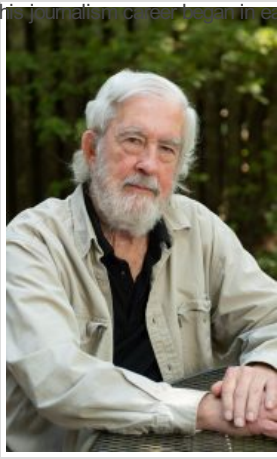
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Ole Miss In the News

Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to



Curtis Wilkie

...journalism career. He didn't get his earnest when he wrote about the riots that broke out on campus in 1962 after the enrollment of James Meredith.

After making a name for himself covering the civil rights movement in the Mississippi Delta, Wilkie took a congressional fellowship in Washington, D.C., in 1969. He then covered Richard Nixon's presidential campaign for The News Journal of Wilmington, Delaware. Wilkie and his fellow journalists were immortalized in Timothy Crouse's "The Boys on the Bus."

His next opportunity was due, in part, to his Southern drawl and Southern blood. Wilkie joined the Boston Globe staff in 1975, and as the paper's resident Southerner, he was assigned to Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign, which is where he met fellow journalist Charles Overby.

"The people looked to him for his insights, but also looked to him to have a good time with," said Overby, chairman of the Overby Center and former CEO of both the Newseum and Freedom Forum.

"Covering a presidential campaign is a little like going to camp, and so he was a camp leader.

"That's when I first got to know him; he was nice to me. I was younger than him, but he knew I was from Mississippi and he was helpful, and I looked up to him."

Wilkie covered presidents from Carter all the way to George W. Bush. He covered the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and conflicts in Somalia and Romania. He spent time with PLO leader Yasser Arafat while under siege from Syrian fighters near Beirut.

North Toward Home

On his journeys, Wilkie befriended some of the South's most important writers, including the likes of Willie Morris, author of "North Toward Home" and "My Dog Skip," and Richard Ford, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Independence Day."

As he continued traveling the globe and covering its most powerful decision-makers, Wilkie began receiving calls from Morris, who recently had completed his own journey from New York back to Mississippi.

The calls, which began as late-night practical jokes, always contained the same message: "'It's time for you to come home, boy,'" Wilkie said, remembering Morris' calls. "'It's time for you to come home.' It was something we talked about. He was a lure."

That's when Wilkie moved to New Orleans, where he'd dreamed of living since he was a child in Summit.

"I grew up in south Mississippi and so I was family with New Orleans and always had a dream of living in the French Quarter, so damn if I didn't decide to do it," he said.

He spent many weekends in New Orleans, caring for his ailing mother. In 1993, he was invited to watch Ole Miss play Georgia by childhood friend and Ole Miss classmate, Jackson attorney James "Butch" Cothren, and his wife, Pat.

"I had a ball," he said. "I saw a lot of people I knew who I hadn't seen in years and I was genuinely glad to see them."

In His Own Words: Hear Wilkie talk about making Oxford home again

https://news.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CurtisWilkie_ComingHome.mp3

Wilkie felt like things were a little better than when he left, and he felt like people were a bit kinder.

Soon, Wilkie established the Boston Globe's Southern bureau and became a full-time resident of New Orleans, making the drive north to Oxford more often than he'd ever imagined.

Watching No. 10

In 2001, Wilkie's sports fandom finally got the better of him and he moved back to the city he swore to never return to so he could closely watch Eli Manning and the rest of the Ole Miss Rebels football team. He ultimately joined the journalism department's faculty full-time in 2003.

"I think that's one reason he could come home," said Rick Cleveland, sports columnist for Mississippi Today, a nonprofit news organization based in Jackson. "He can watch Ole Miss in person and the Red Sox on cable."

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That year, Wilkie and Manning put a period on one incredible story, only to begin writing an even more impressive one.

Not long after his arrival, then-Chancellor Khayat wanted to find a way to honor alumnus and Pulitzer Prize-winner Overby's career in journalism. That effort culminated in the establishment of the Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics.



"(Charles) got Curtis, and he and Curtis have been like that," Khayat said, holding his fingers together, indicating their bond. "Curtis was a real contributor to the quality of the journalism department and to the student experiences."

Curtis Wilkie (right) discusses dynamics of the the 2012 presidential election with longtime NBC News journalist Tom Brokaw at an event hosted by the Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics before that year's first presidential debate. The debate was held just days later at the Gertrude C. Ford Center for the Performing Arts. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

Overby and Wilkie officially opened the center in 2007 and since have worked to make it a bastion of free speech, journalism and civil discourse.

"When I was a student at Ole Miss, I had my eyes opened to the larger world, largely through the outside speakers who came to Ole Miss," Overby said. "As I thought about the thing the Overby Center could do, I thought of that very thing, to bring people to campus that would allow students and the citizens at large to get to meet these people up close.

"Curtis agreed with that mission. Curtis, as I am, is a big believer in civilized discourse. He has helped me from day one in promoting smart, civilized discourse among people who don't necessarily agree."

Civility in disagreement, and in the face of criticism, is something Wilkie has been known for his entire career.

"One of the lost skills in modern journalism is the ability to disagree agreeably," said Sid Salter, award-winning political reporter and chief communications officer at Mississippi State University.

"Curtis is a real master of that. He can ask piercing questions but ask it in a nice way and accept the answer in a nice way, and he doesn't make the mistake of letting doing his job become personal.

"I think that was one of Curtis's skill set, that he knew how to disagree agreeably and how to talk about difficult things in a way that still allowed his humanity to show through. I always admired that in him."

What He Leaves Behind

Ronnie Agnew, former executive editor of the state's two largest news outlets and frequent guest and panel participant at the Overby Center, said Wilkie's legacy is one of truth.

"Curtis is a truth-seeker," he said.



Curtis Wilkie tells stories from his illustrious journalism career, which has included covering United States presidents, Middle Eastern revolutionaries and a whole range of memorable characters. Photo by Logan Kirkland/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

Agnew never worked directly with Wilkie, but as executive editor of Mississippi Public Broadcasting and former executive director of the Clarion Ledger, he has hired many journalism students – some from Wilkie's classes – and admires his friend's work in creating, promoting and teaching journalism.

Wilkie turned down a job at the Clarion Ledger in the 1960s because of its history of racism, and Agnew was a leader in acknowledging that past and moving the newspaper forward.

"He knew the days when the Clarion Ledger really did not acknowledge there was a civil rights movement," Agnew said. "And he would balance what he knew, because he was there – he lived it, he saw it – with the change that he saw in me and the things we were trying to do to really modernize the newspaper and make it a newspaper that, frankly, cares for all people."

But no matter what words they use to describe his legacy, most of those who were influenced by Wilkie trace it back to a time when he graciously and openly offered up his vast experience and knowledge as a recourse to them.

Wilkie is still adding to his printed legacy. He has written five books – four while at UM – with a sixth to be published spring 2021, all of which are in some way intimately tied to his experiences as an Ole Miss student and reporter during the civil rights movement.

"Dixie," his memoir of growing up in, leaving and then returning to the South, starts with the trial of the murderer of civil rights leader Medgar Evers and the riots following Meredith's admission to the

university. "The Fall of the House of Zeus" is an intensely Oxford tale that follows the rise and fall of famed trial attorney Richard "Dickie" Scruggs.

His sixth book, "When Evil Lived in Laurel," will take a look at the Ku Klux Klan and the group's activity in southern Mississippi.

A Gracious Colleague

Journalist and author Ellen Meacham, who has been a student and fellow faculty member of Wilkie's, said that no matter her role, he always treated her with the same respect.

"I just remember how thoroughly professional he was in treating me like an equal colleague," she said. "When he said something was good, he meant it, and that was very affirming to me."

It was in his classrooms and the Overby Center where Wilkie brought the full force of his reporting career to bear. Journalism icons, such as Tom Brokaw, were a common guest in his classrooms and programming.

Cleveland remembered being impressed with how focused Wilkie's students were.

"I've actually come up there and gone to some of his classes, and what's really obvious to me is the respect that his students have for him and how there's not anybody looking at their cellphones or doodling," Cleveland said. "Everyone is locked in on Curtis when he talks because they know he knows."

Even outside academic settings, colleagues remember Wilkie as someone who was always imparting wisdom and advice, whether he realized or not.

Donald Cole, who retired in 2019 as assistant provost after more than 50 years at the university, said Wilkie filled a role left open by Cole's ailing older brother.

"We'd just be talking, and at the end of the conversation, there would be a few things that would be good, good advice," Cole said. "And Curtis wouldn't stop and say, 'Here's some good advice.' He would just be talking, but I would leave with good advice and that would be my brotherly advice."

As a part of honoring his service to the university, the **School of Journalism and New Media** is promoting a scholarship endowment in his name.

"Much of professor Wilkie's career has focused on the coverage of politics and issues related to social justice," said Debora Wenger, interim dean of the school. "We thought it only fitting that part of his legacy would focus on supporting students pursuing our new political and social justice reporting emphasis within the school.

"We want to ensure that the kind of work that Curtis championed all his life will continue here in Mississippi and far beyond."

The endowment has been made possible in part by the Cothrens, who took Wilkie to the Ole Miss-Georgia football game in 1993. Follow [this link](#) to contribute to the Curtis C. Wilkie scholarship endowment.

The Centrifugal Force

Wilkie said there was always a sort of "centrifugal force" pulling him back to the university, not unlike the force that he saw pulling the South's old ways into the future.

Wilkie's great-grandfather was a member of the Lamar Rifles, UM students who left school to fight in the Civil War. His grandfather was chief of the university's police department, and his mother attended the university as both an undergraduate and graduate student.

Though none of Wilkie's three children attended UM, his daughter, Leighton, married Ole Miss graduate Campbell McCool, and Wilkie's grandson Merrick McCool, and granddaughter, Morgan Wilkie, were in the final class he taught on campus.

"It's very much part of my DNA," he said of the school. "I was simply drawn back, even though I sort of rejected it and moved away."

In His Own Words: Wilkie says Ole Miss is in his DNA

https://news.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CurtisWilkie_DNA.mp3



Curtis Wilkie (right) speaks to Ole Miss students on the last day of classes before his retirement. His students, friends and family members surprised him with cookies and guest appearances to celebrate his final class. Photo by Chi Kalu

Wilkie said he's happier here than anywhere he's lived.

"I have loved being in Oxford," he said. "I love the community. I love the people here. It's home. I have done something I never thought I'd do, and I've loved being on the faculty at my alma mater."

As he packs his desk and retires a few blocks away on the Oxford Square, Wilkie hopes that he has been a part of that force pulling the South, the state and Ole Miss forward.

"I would just hope that I have been helpful in some way with the kind of transformation of the school – from what it was when I was a student," he said.

In Their Own Words:

Charles Overby says Curtis brought the power of his Rolodex to bear on the Overby Center

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Don Cole says Curtis was the University of Mississippi's Columbo

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Ronnie Agnew has seen Wilkie's legacy in the students he's hired

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Ellen Meachum still remembers how Wilkie affirmed her writing

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Rick Cleveland says Curtis is a loyal friend

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Sid Salter remembers Curtis's advice for covering Presidential conventions

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