

Jasper Newton Wilkinson, Hope Natural Gas Company Official
by Dorothy Davis

The papers of Jasper Newton Wilkinson reveal how nineteenth-century Harrison Countians made the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. Wilkinson was born on a farm, worked as a farmer and a groceryman, studied civil engineering, surveyed privately and as Harrison County surveyor, and did pioneer work in the oil and gas fields in Harrison and surrounding counties.

Jasper Wilkinson was born January 22, 1841, on a farm above present Hinkle Lake near Bridgeport, the son of Jesse Hinkle and Mary Ann Preston Wilkinson. Jasper Wilkinson's great grandfather Joseph, along with two brothers, had come to Bridgeport from Winchester, VA, in 1772. Each brother took up 400 acres of land, that of Joseph being Godfrey Hill which is now part of the Faris farm. Joseph's son William was grandfather of Jasper Newton Wilkinson.

J. N. Wilkinson worked on the family farm and at the age of twenty entered Monongalia Academy in Morgantown from which he graduated in 1865 with a degree in civil engineering. He visited for a month at the home of an aunt in Iowa and then traveled to Arcola, IL, where he found work surveying to define section lines in Moultrie County. In the fall of 1865 he returned to Harrison County and helped his father farm for three years.¹ In 1868 J. N. Wilkinson bought a store in Bridgeport and on April 30, 1868, he married Annie Barbee Heflin, daughter of Nathan E. and Mary A. Heflin in a ceremony conducted by A. J. Garrett. For his work the marriage record gives "merchant."²

Late in 1868 he ran for county surveyor, was elected, and served one four-year term.³ At the end of the term he must have decided to establish a private practice in surveying. He got out of the merchandising business which may have proved unprofitable. An account book extant in 1990 shows many bills owed Wilkinson who in 1875 and 1876 paid justices and constables a total of \$35.25 in 15 different suits he brought in an attempt to collect from debtors.

In 1875 Wilkinson kept a neat record in pen and ink of every cent spent each day. He paid 50¢ each round trip to Clarksburg, \$30.17 for self and estate in taxes, 50¢ at various times for cigars, \$1.50 for expenses to the fair in Clarksburg, \$23.90 for a trip to Wheeling "and board self", \$1.00 for a subscription to the Baltimore Sun. He paid \$1.50 each week to Ellen Shingleton, probably domestic help. In the grocery line some of the items he bought were flour, sugar, syrup, beans, salt, beef. He listed calico, cotton, "cap and shoes for Guy [his son]" He bought coal in \$9.00 carload lots. December 31, 1875, he totaled cash paid out: "Whole amt. \$891.52; amt Recd \$888.96; Deficit = \$2.55. Dec. 31, 1875, 9 o'clock at night. J. N. Wilkinson." The \$888.96 he received came from surveying. Although there were jobs that brought in \$30, \$90, \$59, the average paid by individuals was in the \$5 to \$10 range.⁴

Wilkinson kept a record in 1887 of the cost of repairing the house he bought on two acres of land in 1868⁵ in north Bridgeport on the inside of the front cover of the pocket-size ledger which held income from surveying as far away as Ritchie County, where he received \$49 for fourteen days of work in October 1887. When he had a day free from surveying he worked on the house in the period from July to November 1887 and always entered his wages as part of the cost of repairs: "2 days taking off plaster, self and Guy \$3.00" The total cost of the repairs to the house was \$213.40.⁶ By 1887 J. N. Wilkinson was learning that a growing family is costly. Entered now as money paid out is "Anna, Bessie, and Irma hats and dresses \$10.00; Guy's pants and hat \$3.35; Bessie's shoes \$2.50." And each week he wrote in the ledger "cash for wife" after which follows a sum anywhere from \$1 to \$5.⁷

The extraction industries and the building of railroads in Northcentral West Virginia made Wilkinson's skills in demand. First Johnson N. Camden hired him as civil engineer and put him in charge of surveying the coal lands which extended three miles from either side of the West Fork River between Clarksburg and Fairmont. Then in the fall of 1888 Wilkinson signed on as civil engineer with the South Penn Oil Company of Pittsburgh and in 1890 the company made him superintendent of its operations in the West Virginia District to supervise the company's title-rights pertaining to land holdings in the state. He surveyed the "forty-five-degree line" which would play a basic role in oil and gas development in Pennsylvania, New York, and West Virginia. He located the first well drilled in Doddridge County.⁸

The Hope Gas Company had its inception in the idea that by purchasing gas from Standard Oil Company's oil producing affiliates and enlarging pipeline and transmission capabilities, a wholesale gas market would be feasible. Gas circa 1890 was largely wasted as shown by the fact that the value of gas produced in West Virginia in 1890 was \$5,400. By 1900 gas produced in the state was worth \$2,059,032. The Hope Natural Gas Company, which was not incorporated in West Virginia until Dec. 17, 1898, early joined with the South Penn Oil Co. and the Union Gas Co. to meet problems of gas supply.⁹ When the Hope Gas Co. asked J. N. Wilkinson June 6, 1911, for the dates he and each of the nine men working under him started work with the company, J. N. Wilkinson replied that he began working Oct. 1, 1889, and that his son Guy C. Wilkinson began working February 25, 1890.¹⁰ Wilkinson may have begun work when the South Penn Oil Co. still was officially in charge of gas distribution. Both companies were affiliates of the Standard Oil Company.

J. N. Wilkinson's long and varied experience and constant observation made him an expert in his time. He secured and managed leases, work that took him up runs and hollows all over Northcentral West Virginia. He kept a carbon copy of each of the letters which went in a steady stream to the office of the Hope Gas Co. in Pittsburgh. Excerpts from two letters directed to J. B. Corrin in Pittsburgh show the value to the company of Wilkinson's knowledge of West Virginia people:

Bridgeport, W. Va. July 4, 1905

Dear Sirs:

The ___ farm 87 acres in Grant District, Doddridge County, W. Va., near Clover Dale P.O. and west from the ___ farm, is now loose, having expired by limitation. ___ wrote me wishing to know if we wanted it as other parties who are leasing from the Philadelphia Gas Company had been to see him. As the South Penn had the farm for some time, he will not lease it to anyone unless we do not want it. ___ is a personal friend of mine and I have written him not to lease it until I hear from you. Please let me know if you want it. This was South Penn Lease No. 37125 and was last paid Feby. 6, 1905.

Dear Sir:

_____ will not sign and acknowledge paper sent out by you. He says he had been offered \$50 some years ago to sign the lease which was nothing and which he refused at that time and he knew they would come back to see him sometime and now that they had come they would have to come to his terms, etc. He failed to state any terms, but said he would study the matter and write when he got ready. From the way he talks and acts he will demand "boodle" and quite a lot of it. I know him well. He is an ugly character to do business with as I tried to induce him to join in lease when I took it about 8 years ago, and could get him to do nothing. ¹¹

During the first decade of the twentieth century Wilkinson was a very busy man. One page from the pocket account book he carried in 1906 shows the demands of his job:

January		
Mon. 22	SL [eeping] & B [oard] Clarksburg	\$ 1.00
	Livery hire to Tichenals	2.00
Tues. 23	SL & B Salem	1.00
	Postage Stamps	1.00
Wed. 24	SL & B Wheeling	1.50
	Breakfast Pittsburgh	.75
Thur. 25	SL & B Grafton	1.50
	Telephone .50 Telegram .25	.75
Fri. 26	1000 R.R. Book	20.00
	Din[ner] Parkersburg	.50
	SL & B Clarksburg	1.50
	Postage	.72
Sat. 27	Din Weston	.50
	SL & B Grafton	1.00

Early in the century Wilkinson was interested in investing in coal lands. In the front of the pocket account book is a list of notes due in 1906, each one crossed out and noted "Paid by J.N.W."

Due May 25	Savings Bank, Grafton	\$ 5,000
Due May 31	Citizens Nat'l Bank Philippi	3,000
Due June 2	Empire Bank	900
Due June 8	Grafton Banking & Trust	3,000
Due July 9	Empire Bank stock	2,000
Due Aug. 1	Grafton B&T	1,000
Due Aug. 28	Union Nat'l	2,500
Due Sept. 2	Empire Bank	650
Due Sept. 7	R. T. Lowndes	1,000 ¹²

The decade brought its woes. Of his five daughters two died. Nellie Virginia died of tuberculosis May 8, 1907, at the age of twenty-nine: ¹³ Mary Bessie, who had married Curtis L. Lyons of Wallace, died in 1909. This left Jasper and Anna Wilkinson their son Guy C. and three daughters: Anna Heflin, who at the age of 23 had married Wilbur Gaines March 21, 1899 ¹⁴, Irma Newton who married Leroy H. Martin, and Edna who did not marry.

A camaraderie existed among the officials in the early days of the Hope Natural Gas Co. Wilkinson had written J. B. Corrin April 8, 1910, that the typewriter in the Bridgeport office had about played out, "and we will either be compelled to hire one or have one sent by your company. The old machine I purchased new about 10 or 12 years ago and paid \$102.50 for it. I have worn it out in the service of the South Penn and your company." ¹⁵ April 11, 1910, J. B. Tonkin replied:

Mr. J. N. Wilkinson
Bridgeport, W. Va.
Dear Sir:

John Corrin and I held an indignation meeting after Church was out yesterday, and decided that you had been very unjustly treated for the last 10 or 12 years in regard to typewriters. However, we could not see our way clear to give you a second hand typewriter as requested, but instead have ordered a new model No. 10 visible Smith Premier shipped to you from Pittsburgh, which I trust will arrive in good shape. It occurred to me that possibly if your old machine is worn out, we could trade it in for you on this purchase, and I have arranged with the Typewriter Company here to give you the regular price for such second hand machines as an allowance on the new one, in case you desire to dispose of it. If you do, you can ship it to the Smith Premier Typewriter Company, Pittsburgh, Pa., and I will mail you a check for whatever they allow us.

Yours very truly,
J. B. Tonkin
Treasurer ¹⁶

July 12, 1910, Wilkinson bought for \$500 from Charity Johnson lots 11 through 20 on the corner of Newton and Orchard streets in Bridgeport. ¹⁷ He built a palatial house of white brick with wide verandas opening on both Newton and Orchard streets at 2121 Orchard Street. Don Higinbotham, who as a child, visited Miss Edna Wilkinson, remembers in 1990 an aged man at the house and that the family kept large collie dogs behind the cast iron picket fence which encloses the property. Higinbotham said the collies were good watchdogs. He knew if he leaned against the fence as he stood on the sidewalk outside that he would be nipped. ¹⁸

On New Year's Day 1913 while he copied papers for the company in the Bridgeport office, J. N. Wilkinson suffered a stroke of paralysis. Wilkinson was seventy-two years old. The company paid him a pension and he retired to his home to be cared for by his wife and daughter Edna. Jasper Wilkinson must have had a remarkable recovery. Extant is a "Diary" for 1915 in which he kept account of money paid out for each day in 1915 in the same neat, sturdy handwriting he used to keep a similar record in 1875. In the same book is a record of the weather for each day in the year and a notation of personal happenings in the day. The following is a selection of diary entries for 1915:

February

- Mon. 8 20 above at 8AM & cloudy continuing all day with light snow flurries all day 22 above at night. Guy went Ritchie County courthouse.
- Thurs. 11 32 above at 7AM cloudy and continued cloudy all day & warming up to 50 above at noon & 52 above at night. Sim S. Lang was buried at 2 1/2 PM today.
- Fri. 12 54 above at 7AM & cloudy all day with light rain in afternoon. Took cow to Willis' bull.

December

- Sat. 11 12 above at 7 and clear 34 at noon and cloudy 34 at 5 and cloudy. Guy died at 9AM. The star of my life has set.
- Sun. 12 24 at 7 & cloudy 42 at noon & cloudy 42 at 5-6-7-8 and raining gently. Quite a lot of people have been here today to see poor Guy's body.
- Mon. 13 34 at 7 & snow and cloudy 34 at noon & night began snowing at 1 and continued until nearly night. The saddest time of my life. Guy was buried after noon today. Large crowd.
- Tues. 14 22 at 7 & cloudy 22 at noon and at 5 & 6 snow storms at times all day. Very disagreeable & cold.¹⁹

Guy died December 11, 1915, of organic heart trouble brought on by hyperthyroidism. He was forty-four years old and had not married.²⁰ Wilkinson first had kept an account of the weather for sixteen days in January 1907 in the front of his expense-account pocket ledger for that year. Among his papers are also records of weather for every day in the years 1916, 1917, 1923, 1927. He kept scattered records of weather in the years 1924 and 1925.²¹

Early in 1917 the Hope Natural Gas Company informed Jasper Wilkinson that the \$95 pension he had received each month since July 1913 would be cut in half. Wilkinson wrote a letter addressed to his friend J. B. Tonkin. Excerpts from the letter read as follows:

Bridgeport, W. Va. Feby. 21st 1917

Mr. J. B. Tonkin, Treasurer
Pittsburgh, Pa.

My dear Mr. Tonkin:

On my last visit to the Pittsburgh Office in 1912, Mr. Pew, among other things, asked me how old I was and I told him I was 71 years old, Jany. 22nd 1912. He remarked, "Whenever you feel like quitting work, we will retire you on a good big pension of at least equal to half of your salary." . . .

I continued in the service of your company until incapacitated by a stroke of paralysis Jany. 1st 1913 at the office while copying papers on the typewriter to send in to the Pittsburgh office; and your company continued to pay my salary of \$200 per month until the June following after which I have been paid \$95 which I expected would be continued from what Mr. Pew had told me. For many years previous to my connection with the Hope, I did a vast amount of work for the South Penn. . . and during their prolific operations in Doddridge and Tyler Counties, I worked almost night and day in good weather and bad leasing and buying royalties for them; and after the entrance of the Hope Gas Co. into the gas fields of West Virginia, took charge of the leasing and buying royalties for both companies and was only paid the same monthly salary although doing double work . . . During my long service every lease or royalty obtained went direct to the company no matter how valuable while some others, looking well to their own interest, betrayed their trusts by framing partnerships with outside parties who took leases and bought royalties under another name and thus became wealthy and independent . . . I remained true in every trust imposed and kept my honor untarnished; and now after passing my 76th milestone, am notified that the little allowance in my old age is to be cut in half for the balance of my days . . .

By strict economy I have saved a few thousand dollars, a good part of which was expended before my sickness in helping my faithful wife and only son build a house in which to pass our declining years and then to be the property of Guy and our faithful daughter who has remained single and at home to take care of me since my affliction. The house may have caused the impression that I am wealthy and well fixed when I am not. The old house had become so much dilapidated that we were compelled to either build a new one or rent.

In the year 1902 myself and two partners took up a few thousand acres of coal in Barbour County, I paying the others for doing the work and taking none of my time from the Company. In 1906 we sold said coal to Col. J. M. Guffey who paid us back the money we had paid on the field and the expenses, but the profits amounting to \$15,150 he induced us to take a three months' acceptance for; and which we had to renew from time to time until Col. Guffey formed what is called "The West Virginia Company" and issued bonds covering all his indebtedness and gave us \$15,250 in bonds to secure his notes to us . . . The cashier of the Citizens Bank of Philippi, W. Va. sent out last fall a circular letter stating that he was authorized to buy and had the money to pay for those bonds at 58¢ on the dollar; and as no interest had paid on the bonds or notes since 1910, we sold. . . .

Will you kindly take the matter of reduction of my annuity up with my other two friends there, Mr. Pew and Mr. Corrin, and have a conference with the official who called your attention to it and give him my views as to the reduction; and then if he sees proper to act as the board of directors dictated, the matter will have to end there. But I feel that

my past services rendered to both branches of the Standard have certainly been more valuable than those of the common laborer. If my dear boy Guy was living I would not care what was done and whether anything was given me or not as an annuity by any company, because he would see that I was cared for; but God in his Providence saw proper to take him away and the loss to me and my wife can never be repaired. Of course I will try to get along some way; but a continuation of past treatment by either branch of the Standard, or by both together, for that matter, would make me feel more like my past faithful services were not entirely forgotten, but to some extent, at least, appreciated . . .

Very sincerely, your friend,
J. N. Wilkinson ²²

According to the Wilkinson account books kept after 1917, Wilkinson's pension was left untouched. Each month he entered Hope \$95 at the top of the money paid out. The pension plus royalties from oil and gas investments, dividends from stock in banks, and interest from savings accounts supplied cash flow for expenses, which usually averaged \$150 monthly, for the late years of Wilkinson's life.

J. N. Wilkinson was a director of the Empire National Bank in Clarksburg and of the Bridgeport Bank. He affiliated with the Presbyterian Church while he attended school in Morgantown. He joined the Independent Order of Odd Fellows in 1865 and the Knights of Pythias later in life. ²³

Jasper Wilkinson died at his home in Bridgeport of influenza about 7:00 p.m. on September 23, 1936. He was 96 years old. ²⁴ Funeral services were conducted by Reverend Wesley L. Chevront, pastor of the Bridgeport Methodist Episcopal Church with burial in the old Masonic Cemetery in Bridgeport. Wilkinson died without knowing that his wife Anna had preceded him in death November 15, 1935. ²⁵

FOOTNOTES

1. The Telegram, Clarksburg, WV, Sept. 24, 1936.
2. Harrison County, WV, Marriage Record, Vol. 5, p. 53. The marriage record gives 25 the age of the groom; 19, the bride. Twenty-five does not jibe with the birth date of the groom.
3. Dorothy Davis, History of Harrison County, p. 86.
4. Ledger 1867-1877, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
5. Harrison County, WV, Deed Book No. 52, p. 336.
6. Ledger 1867-1877, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
7. Ibid.
8. The Telegram, Clarksburg, WV, Sept. 24, 1936.
9. Eugene B. Thoenen, History of the Oil and Gas Industry in West Virginia, pp. 105, 112-13.
10. J. N. Wilkinson in a letter to John B. Tonkin, June 23, 1911, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
11. Ibid., July 4, 1905, Nov. 12, 1906.
12. Account Book, 1906, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
13. Harrison County, WV, Register of Deaths, Vol. 4, p. 212.
14. _____, Marriage Record, No. 10, p. 25.
15. J. N. Wilkinson in a letter to J. B. Corrin, April 8, 1910, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
16. J. B. Tonkin in a letter to J. N. Wilkinson, April 11, 1910, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
17. Harrison County, Deed Book, No. 188, p. 33
18. Don Higinbotham in an interview July 31, 1990.
19. Diary, 1915, J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
20. Harrison County, WV, Register of Deaths, Vol. 5, p. 230.
21. Ledgers and Diaries, 1907, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1927. J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
22. J. N. Wilkinson to J. B. Tonkin in a letter February 21, 1917. J. N. Wilkinson Papers.
23. The Telegram, Clarksburg, WV Sept. 24, 1936.
24. Ibid., Harrison County, WV Register of Deaths, Vol. 11, p. 278-B.
25. The Telegram, Clarksburg, WV, Sept. 24, 1936.

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- Davis, Dorothy. History of Harrison County, West Virginia. Parsons, WV: McClain Printing, 1970.
- Harrison County, WV, Deed Book, No. 52, p. 336; No. 188, p. 339; No. 205, p. 221.
- _____. Marriage Record, Vol. 5, p. 53.
- _____. Register of Deaths, Vol. 4, p. 212; Vol. 5, p. 230; Vol. 11, p. 278-B.
- The Telegram, Clarksburg, WV, September 24, 1936.
- Thoenen, Eugene D. History of the Oil and Gas Industry in West Virginia. Charleston, WV: Education Foundation, 1964. ⁴
- Various letters, ledgers, diaries, account books in the Jasper N. Wilkinson Papers in the possession of the Harrison County Historical Society, 123 West Main Street, Clarksburg, WV.