

Read the adventures of inventors, engineers, and photographers, and Thomas C. Willson. Growing up in Havertown. The finish is filled with adventures the author has had with her own photography life!

**Captured with Love and History:
Willson Way Photography**
By Kathleen M. McDevitt

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Historical Memoir



CAPTURED WITH LOVE
AND HISTORY



WILLSON WAY
PHOTOGRAPHY

KATHLEEN M. McDEVITT



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Print ISBN: 978-1-961265-66-0

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-200-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2026

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

McDevitt, Kathleen M.

Captured with Love and History by Kathleen M.

McDevitt

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Chapter 1

Gone Fishing



Vicam Stock Certificate



TCW

Fog early in the morning was so thick he could not see his waders or the water. Eventually, the fog started to lift, if only he was interested in clearing the clouds from his head. The only thing on Thomas C. Willson's head that day was how many largemouth bass he would catch.

Power brokers and trusted Wall Street Journalists claimed that 1929 was the year of optimism. These predictions enticed large and small business owners, as well as ordinary middle-class Americans to invest large sums of money, in many cases their life savings, into a promising stock market that was booming. Despite rumors of a downswing, the market continued climbing.

Willson Magazine Camera Company filed its final two patents. They would upgrade the design of the original camera invented in 1898 by Thomas Carroll Willson (TCW), who could be called the Father of School Photography. The less bulky design made the camera easier for photographers to carry as they traveled throughout the country to photograph America's school children.

The first patents were filed in 1918. The Philadelphia Company on Media Street was known as Willson Magazine Camera Company and referred to by family and insiders as "the plant". TCW was the owner and President. Once he saw the success of the smaller version of the school photography camera, measuring fourteen inches long by five inches high by three inches wide, he was inspired and envisioned an even smaller camera. His vision was for a mass-produced mini design to be used by the public.

TCW created a special prototype camera with measurements of five inches long by four inches high and three inches wide in a gold metal box. The design was with a small removal magazine (cartridge) that held the film in place. Inside the camera, the cartridge protected the film before and after exposure. Because he is an inventor, this project rejuvenates his excitement for the process. He created a new company for the mini

cameras, called Vicam, and invested heavily in the firm. Once the 35 mm film was exposed with pictures, it would be shipped back to the Willson Magazine Camera Company in the cartridge to be developed for a personal picture for the public with different presentations and packaging. It would be different than the school picture packages but the processes would be the same.

Does this sound familiar? This mini-camera style became immensely popular as the Brownie Camera by Kodak in the years that followed especially in the fifties and sixties. TCW visions and inventions were way ahead of the industry because of his magazine cartridge. Yes, there is more to this story.

Although known as the Father of School Photography, TCW was also well known and respected in Washington, D. C., and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania areas as a brilliant inventor, photographer, and manufacturer.

While living in Washington, D.C. in 1892, at the early age of fifteen, he was offered an opportunity to work as an apprentice in a photography studio. The position at Boyce Portrait Studio, known for their portraits of the Presidents, was too good to pass on. It was there that his love for photography took root.

Close to the studio, TCW found a room and a roommate in a boarding house on Rhode Island Avenue in the Northwest section of Washington, DC.

Charles F. Jenkins, known as the **Father of Early Television**, formed a tight bond and friendship with the young apprentice. Jenkins was working on moving pictures that needed a large amount of thirty-five-millimeter film. He was instrumental in influencing TCW's aspirations to become an inventor. Jenkins encourages TCW to bring his vision of creating a camera capable of holding a large roll of film to life.

TCW tinkered with Jenkin's leftover thirty-five-millimeter rolls of film until he produced his first camera design.

The apprentice travels all over Washington, DC, and the surrounding areas on foot, on buses, and on trolleys. On his travels, he took pictures of tourists, parades, military camps, and football games. While working at the Boyce Portrait Studio, one of his responsibilities was to repair damaged lenses. In his spare time, he worked on improving the lenses for his own camera design.

A dilemma TCW needed to solve was the problem of light seeping through the large box camera. When

placing film into or removing it from the camera, light could ruin and waste unused or exposed film. To solve the problem, TCW built a light-proof box he called a magazine. The magazine is like what we would today call a cartridge, as it fits snugly inside the camera holding the roll of film.



Thomas C. Willson

Over the next six years TCW worked on his ideas and continued to photograph people, places, and things throughout the Washington DC area. During that time, he also invented a printer that would easily print multiple small photos, and that started him on the path to developing the Willson Way. He took photos of the students in an Alexander, Virginia school. This sparked an idea for a practical use of the large numbers of pictures in his long rolls of film and the printer capability. A seed had been planted for what we all know and recognize today as School Portrait Photography.

In 1898, Willson Magazine Camera Company was officially formed in Washington, DC. In 1901, President McKinley was assassinated, succeeded by Teddy Roosevelt, the Vice President, that same year. We believed TCW took photos of an attractive woman named Anna Elizabeth Ryan at the Boyce Portrait studio, and she soon after became his wife. In 1902, he moved his young bride and company to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the early years rolled past, he developed a photographic system to take pictures of students and prepare a package of photos to take home and share with family and friends. School Photography industry has presently been active with no signs of slowing down for well over a hundred twenty years. During the depression it slowed down and no doubt the recent pandemic stopped all photo shots during that time. I am sure it was hard on that industry with so many virtual classes. Today, it is back in full stride with annual school photos filling frames ever year.

Around 1928, George Eastman, founder of Kodak, heard about TCW's latest patent filing. Eastman paid TCW a visit and offered to buy his patent for the camera with the film magazine inside. It was big news for the company at 60th & Media Streets. The excitement went around the city. However, TCW wanted to market the

gold metal camera, under the Vicam Company name. He rejected Eastman's offer. This was TCW's newest invention. With investment money in the bank, and the capability to mass-produce the camera, he was on his way to another huge success.

The crash happened on an ordinary sunny day in October, also known as Black Tuesday, when the stock market crashed investors lost billions. The results were devastating. The crash was just the beginning of the Great Depression that affected the whole country and the world economy with a flood of monetary loss. Many victims jumped out of windows or committed suicide by any means rather than facing life. Without financial means, the struggles were real. People would go without money, food, a roof over their heads, or jobs after the crash. Children and young adults were forced to give up on their education and go to work if it could be found. It touched everyone and families were distracted, displaced, and destroyed by hardship in the aftermath. The devastation affected everyone.

TCW was no exception. The inventor had invested heavily in the market for his next venture. Like so many other companies and individuals, he had lost his fortune and investment capital marked especially for this newest camera.

He lost over \$100,000. In today's market, that amount would be an estimated \$1,522,105.26. Vicam Company and his personal fortune were lost. TCW like so many others, lost all interest in life. Fortunately, he did not harm himself, he just gave up and showed little or no interest in the businesses he had worked so hard to build. The latest camera of his dreams did not happen. Decades later, the similar Brownie Camera became the camera to have from Kodak.

During this time, my father, Thomas C. Willson, Jr., (TCW, Jr.) was in high school and spent most days after school at the plant. After the crash, his father's interest was not the same for a long time and he continued a downward slide. TCW spent less time at the plant. The company was crashing into flames. No one was buying school pictures during the depression. The plant struggled to stay in a profitable place.

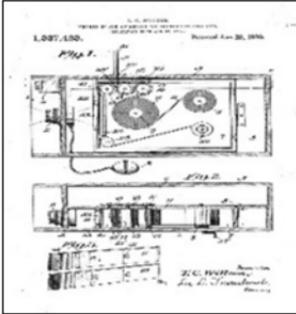
To save the family business, my father, TCW, Jr., at the early age of seventeen, who had spent most of his high school years working at the plant, knew exactly what was happening. It broke his heart to see his father's energy and ambition evaporate. He was given far more responsibility than a young man should have had. TCW, Jr. was spending more time running the business. My Dad's dream was to become a veterinarian for horses. After graduation from high school, he gave up his

scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania for veterinary school for large animals. The Christian Brothers at West Catholic High School in Philadelphia helped him attain the scholarship and although he was grateful, he now had to support his parents in a reversal of roles.

In 1932, my father, wrote an instruction booklet with his father titled, **School Photography Simplified, "The Willson Way."** He designed it to be more instructional for photographers to take the pictures and for school administrators to better understand the process. It was valuable information for the traveling school photographers trying to build their businesses during the depression. He tried to get his father back in the game, get the old excitement back in Grandpop, who was only fifty-five years old. The son's efforts were fruitless when it came to his father. All TCW wanted to do was go fishing.

Chapter 5

The Apprentice – Birth of School Photography



1920 Patent



**TCW with son Scott Willson
Philadelphia Catholic School**

At age of fifteen, Thomas C. Willson, Sr. (1877-1955) (TCW) left his roots on the Eastern Shore to seek his fortune in Washington, D.C. With a growing interest and a letter of introduction, he walked the streets of the city looking for a job. How many days have passed, who knows? Did he sleep in the park or on a bench? Then one day TCW walked into the Boyce Studio and was hired as an apprentice in portrait photography. What a challenge must it have been to find work and a place to live at such an early age or was his time for adventure?

Portrait photography, also known as portraiture, is a type of photography aimed toward capturing the personality of a person. Using effective lighting, backdrops, and poses creates excellent results. A portrait photograph may be artistic, clinical, or present a photographer's creative image.

As a young apprentice, TCW was fascinated with the entire process of portrait photography. He learned to develop large glass plates and contact printing. Glass plates are coated with a solution of collodion (cellulose nitrate) and soluble iodide. In the dark room, the glass plate is immersed in a solution of silver nitrate. The glass plate was wet when exposed to the photos, then the exposed glass plate is at once developed and fixed in the liquid solution.

He enjoyed his work and learned everything he could about the portrait process from the large box camera mounted on a tripod to the complex lens he learned how to repair. He had a mechanical edge, a natural engineer, and he was not a farmer.

After searching for a most of the day for a place to stay, TCW found his way to a boarding house and met Charles F. Jenkins. Jenkins had quit his job as a stenographer to devote all his time to inventing his "motion picture box." To keep his expenses low,

Charles had moved into a boarding house on Rhode Island Avenue in NW Washington D.C. The young man, TCW, who had just secured an apprenticeship position at a local studio, matched all Jenkins requirements for a roommate.

TCW and Charles F. Jenkins quickly became friends. Jenkins, ten years my grandfather's senior, became a respected mentor and lifelong friend in pursuing both their dreams of invention and adventure. Jenkins started experimenting with movie film and working on his invention, the movie projector he called "The Phantoscope." The Richmond Telegram reported on June 6, 1894, that Charles Frances Jenkins invited his friends, family, and newsmen to his cousin's jewelry store in downtown Richmond, Virginia to view the first film projected in front of an audience. The motion picture was a vaudeville dancer doing a butterfly dance, which Jenkins had filmed himself in the backyard of his Washington boarding house. I am sure his new roommate, TCW, was right there helping him with the filming in the backyard and supported him in attending the show. This was the first showing of a motion picture using 35 mm film with electric light before a live audience. It was also the first color film shown since Jenkins painstakingly colored each frame by hand.

In 1897, Charles Jenkins was presented the prestigious Elliott Cresson Gold Medal for Scientific Achievement for his invention, the *Phanoscope*. He was chosen for this honor by the Franklin Institute & Science Museum, which is the center of science education and research located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It is named after the American scientist and statesman, Benjamin Franklin, and houses the Benjamin Franklin National Memorial. Founded in 1824, the Franklin Institute is one of the oldest centers of science education and development in the United States.

So did TCW join Charles Jenkin on the trip to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? I think so, and I think TCW attended the presentation of the award and was hugely impressed with the City of Brotherly Love. It was an industrial city, and who wouldn't fall in love with the Franklin Museum if you were an engineer and inventor? It was then the year 1897.

Jenkins was generous with his new friend and roommate and gave him reams of undeveloped 35 mm film for TCW to work on his own camera and ideas of invention.

TCW was driven by interest in the long lengths of film in the DC rooming house. He worked on his small box camera, adding a functional lens. At least it was

much smaller than the portrait camera he used at work in the studio. He designed a box compartment inside the camera to create a safe way to remove and develop the film without exposure. Once the camera was perfected, he spent his spare time roaming his new city taking pictures. Following the horse-drawn carriages from one depot to another became a favorite pastime. As he got to know the drivers, he was able to photograph the passengers who were mostly tourists. After developing the film and printing the photographs, he returned and sold them to the passengers.

He would cover football games and army camps to perfect his method of taking pictures. How many pictures could he take at a time? Five hundred photos on one reel. The next weekend he would sell the finished products to his customers. He worked on new ways to market his pictures. He was always looking for opportunities to market his business. He continued to work on perfecting the proficiency of his cameras, and next he worked on inventing printers that would work efficiently with large rolls of film.

Earlier on, my Dad talked about him photographing the children in a school in Arlington, Virginia. It was at this time that a seed was planted, and he recognized that this would be an efficient way to photograph school children. I am sure he told my father about this because

my Dad mentioned it in his letter. The idea of school pictures as a business may have formulated at the time and over the next several years, he worked on developing a system.

In 1898, at the age of twenty-one, this seasoned inventor, self-taught engineer and photographer opened his own business, the Willson Magazine Camera Company in D.C. He was a manufacturer of cameras, printers, and projectors. The projectors were for Charles F. Jenkins.

It was a turbulent time in Washington; the President had been assassinated and TCW did not want to start a family there. He remembered how impressed he was with the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. He married Anna Elizabeth Ryan. He moved his new wife and newly formed business to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He located his company at 60th and Media Street in the Overbrook section of the city. TCW manufactured the cameras and printing apparatus at this location along with projectors and many other products. He had over fifty-five inventions.

I am sure that schools hired him to take pictures in the Philadelphia area before the system was perfected. He worked on his Willson Way System to create a profitable business with repeat orders.

Sometime between 1910 and 1917, a principal named Mr. Larrabee, from Easton, Pennsylvania, called Willson Magazine Camera Company, asking for Mr. Willson. He asked if TCW would photograph all the students in his school and to create an index card with picture attached so he would know each student in his school. Willson negotiated with the principal and asked if he could create a package of finished photos for the students to buy. According to the article in the *Studio Photography* dated May 1979, titled the *History of School Photography*, the negotiations took a year before reaching an agreement.



Thomas C. Willson, 1926

Willson Magazine Company agreed to provide one free picture of each student with the school administration for its records if the company could be allowed to sell additional pictures to the students and their families. They used Kodak 35mm film, perforated on one side, and head and shoulder contact prints. The cost was ten cents for one picture and fifty cents for the package of six photos. The company already has the

cameras and sophisticated printers to streamline the process. He fine-tuned this program and created the Willson Way System for School Photography, thus creating a new industry that is still relevant today.

In 1918, the first two applications for patents were filed, one for a box camera and one for printing apparatus. The first two patents were approved in 1920. It was during this time that photographing schoolchildren became more popular. Thomas C. Willson Sr (TCW) trained his own photographers and sent them out all over the country. He trained the traveling photographers on how to take pictures with the single lens camera. They were taught how to approach schools and sell their product. They were to dress in suits and have professional manners.

After the crash in the thirties, two of my grandfather's ten siblings, Max Willson and Richard Bennett Willson III, became salesmen. They operated in different cities to grow the business, and to help my father, Thomas C Willson Jr (TCW, Jr.) get TCW, his father, back in the business. Richard opened a branch of Willson Magazine Camera Company in Cleveland, Ohio and Uncle Max would travel around between the two locations taking pictures and training new photographers. There were more offices, but I don't have any confirmations, just snippets of what my Dad

told me over the years. Uncle Richard inherited the Shirlee farm when their father died and after several years of disillusion with farming, he sold the property and moved to Cleveland.

Some photographers purchased their own Willson Way cameras and sent back the contents in the magazine, which was the film to be developed and then printed on paper. They learned to take photos and how to remove and return the magazine box back to the plant for developing without damaging the film. Back at the plant, the film was processed. The developing of the film, printing of the picture and the preparation of the school packages were then sent to the schools for distribution.

Once received at the plant, the process went something like the following: The magazine is received and taken to the dark room. The dark room is lit by special lighting for paper and there was red light for film. It has a desk to organize the unloading of the magazines. In the busy seasons, there are several magazines for developing each day. The technician must organize the magazines by date before the light is turned off, since almost total darkness is required with film. The technician opens the magazines in darkness to remove the film and uses a template to calculate the quantity of unexposed films still left in the magazine, if

any. Usually, the number of exposures on the film is numbered so it wasn't difficult to calculate the end of the exposed film. If there was enough extra film, it was put in a small film container to be reloaded into the magazine.

FILM Processing: On completion of the unloading of film, notes are made on the pad and outside of the magazine as to the amount of film to develop and how much film was left. The film exposed is now ready for development. It is removed from the can and reeled onto wooden racks, with the emulsion side outwards. To tell the difference, one side is shiny, and the emulsion side is milky looking.

The wooden racks could hold 10 to 15 film strips. Still in almost complete darkness, the cover of the developing tank is removed, and the racks are inserted in the tank. On insertion, each rack was agitated at least three to four times to clear any trapped air and to complete solution coverage. Depending on the age of the chemicals, the development time varies from ten to twelve minutes. Once the time elapsed, the racks were removed and hung on ceiling hooks to dry. Once dry, the next step of the process is started- printing the pictures.

PRINT Processing: The dried film strips are placed on the Willson Way printer. The designated number of exposures are printed on paper from each negative. The strips of paper are then moved over in the developer and upon development, are transferred to a bath where they are washed, and placed in Hypo Fixer, which is a solution, sodium thiosulphate that makes the image permanent. The strips of paper are fixed in the hypo for a period of twenty minutes and then removed. The strips of paper with the images, now visible, are dried by clipping on racks and weighted at bottom to prevent curling. Later, the photo paper strips are attached to a heating surface device, or strips are fed into a dryer still in photo strip form. After drying the photo strips of paper, they are ready to be cut into groups of ten. Next step is quality control, checking for imperfections, over or under exposure or blanks. Once this is done, it is time to assemble the photographs into packages to be sent out to the schools.

These developing methods are no longer used unless you are a hobbyist or Artist interested in the history of film. These processes were popular up to the millennium until digital cameras were perfected. The printing process is no longer used for school photography.

It has been more than a hundred and twenty years since my grandfather in 1898 invented his box camera with the magazine inside. In 2020, it was a hundred years since the first patents for his school camera and printer were approved.

In 1926, he filed another two applications for patents. These patents were newer and smaller versions of the earlier inventions. These new cameras made life easier for the traveling photographer. The equipment was compact and easier to use. In 1930, the final patents were approved.

The young man from Rock Hall, Maryland created quite a legacy for himself and his family. He returned often to his boyhood home to hunt and fish.

Note: Charles Francis Jenkins, known as the “Father of Early Television,” was recognized by his second award, *The Scott Medal* in 1913 by the Franklin Institute & Science Museum-Philadelphia. He was the founder and first president of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers (now includes television, SMPTE).^[3]

Chapter 12

Havertown, Pennsylvania



Aaron and the Shetlands

Haverford, Delaware County (also known as DELCO), Pennsylvania, United States, was founded by Welsh Quakers in 1681. It was named for Haverfordwest (*Hwlfordd*) in Wales. The land was purchased from William Penn. Haverford holds a special place in the middle of its borders. Its name is Havertown. It was named Havertown by the Post Office on January 1, 1946, just a couple of months before I was born on March 10. The zip code is 19083, the phone area code is 610, and the exchange used to be Hilltop 6.

West Chester Pike was a country highway with trolleys running to and from 69th Street to West Chester, Pa, in 1895. The hub was in Llanerch for the trolleys, although I couldn't picture it until someone said it was

located where the new Kohl's is located on Township line and West Chester Pike. Now I can picture it. The trolley I remember best and used the most was from 69th Street to Ardmore with stops in Brookline, Oakmont, and many other little towns on its way. The West Chester trolley stopped running in the late 1950s. And the Admore Trolley lasted till the end of the sixties. After the trolleys stopped, Cars and trucks took over the highways and byways.

After the trolley tracks to West Chester were removed, Randy Barringer on a beautiful thoroughbred and me on my pony rode up the center, that was dirt and grass. Randy was a true horsewoman, who later raised Arabian Horses. Her family had a farm on West Chester Pike called Double Trouble Farm. I can still remember running from a bull in one of the paddocks.

The Grange Estate entertained the Revolutionary War figures George Washington and General Lafayette in the 1770's. It was also known as Maen-Coch and Clifton Hall. It is a historic mansion built by Henry Lewis Jr. in Havertown. Parts of the residence are incorporated in the carriage house. It is often used for major events, celebrations, and is open for tours.

There are many famous people who have lived and passed through Havertown since its beginning. I am

addressing the ones I familiar with. My favorites are my Father, Thomas Carroll Willson Jr. and my Grandfather, Thomas Carroll Willson Sr. I hope to see these two on Jeopardy someday soon!

Today in 2025, we have Jason Kelse, and his beautiful family. He was the star of the Eagles when we won the 2017 Super Bowl after 57 years. Jason and Kyle can put a smile on anyone's face, whether it be fundraising for Autism or showing up to give a non-profit a boost. Jason and his brother, Travis, have a podcast together, and it was recently announced on the podcast that Travis asked Taylor Swift for her hand in marriage, and she said YES! It rocked the world!

The Irish in Havertown, PA

The history of the Irish community in Haverford Township unfolded in three key waves: during the 19th-century mill era, the early 20th-century railroad expansion, and the post-World War II suburban boom.

The earliest Irish influence dates to the early 1800s, when Dennis Kelly was born in Ireland in 1779. He emigrated to Philadelphia in 1806. After years of hard labor, Kelly became a successful mill owner, operating a large complex along Karakung Creek. He succeeded in establishing a major local industry. It

was Dennis Kelly who brought the first Irish Catholic settlers to what had been a predominantly Protestant area. By the 1860 census, Irish workers were well represented in the mill workforce. Creating both community spirit and religious commitment, Kelly purchased land on Eagle Road in Havertown and donated it for the construction of the township's first Catholic church. Dennis Kelly donated land to Bishop Conwell for a parish church and cemetery. The church was built in 1825 and named for Saint Denis, a martyr and the first bishop of Paris, who was also Mr. Kelly's patron saint. This was very close to the Old Haverford Friends Meeting, founded in 1683 on 235 E. Eagle Road in Havertown.

The second major influx of Irish residents came in the 1920s with the development of planned neighborhoods like Brookline, Merwood, and Oakmont, all located in Havertown. By 1927, the Annunciation Church with a grade school from first to eighth grade was established on Brookline Boulevard. In the same year, Sacred Heart with a grade school was built on Manoa and West Chester Pike. This offered Irish Catholic families a strong sense of community and faith as they settled into suburban life.

The third wave emerged after World War II, marked by the rise of suburban housing developments. New

brick homes in neighborhoods like Chatham Park, Paddock Farms, and expanded areas of Manoa and Lynwood attracted many Irish American families. With the high numbers of Irish in Havertown, it shaped the township's cultural and religious identity for generations to come. Because of Havertown's large Irish American population, it has a well-deserved nickname. It is "the 33rd county," a reference to the thirty-two counties of Ireland. Wikipedia, St. Denis History.



Woodleigh, the Centerpiece of Paddock Farms

We never called it by its formal name of Woodleigh. The house was our home and the center of Paddock Farms. The land was purchased in 1886, and the house was finished sometime between then and 1898. Around the same year, Thomas C. Willson, Sr. invented his cameras and was busy creating an industry.

The house was built in Haverford Township, Delaware County in Pennsylvania. The twenty-eight

rooms, including the third-floor apartment, eight bedrooms, and five additional rooms in the basement. The main stairs were wide, beautiful, and oak. They flowed into the living room. It gave it the status of a mansion. A second sets of staircase came into the kitchen There were four full bathrooms and two half-bathrooms. Fifty-two windows of various shapes and sizes provided natural lighting. We had four fireplaces throughout the first floor, standing from the floor to the fourteen-foot-high ceilings. Only the living room one was used for our Christmas Stockings. The dining room had solid cherry wood paneling covering seventy-five percent of the walls. Beneath the dining room table, there was an electric step button on the floor which the master of the house used to summon the servants or was it the butler back in the day? The two flights of stairs, front and back were both frequently used depending on your room location. Originally, the house was heated by coal and was changed to oil in the early forties. The large closet in the main reception hall was very warm because it was located directly above the heater in the basement. The closet had several secret panels on its back wall.

A hundred yards away from the mansion, there was a large English carriage barn with a fully functional apartment on the second floor. From time to time, the

apartment was rented or used as housing for hired hands and a few cowboys from Cowtown Rodeo. In addition, there was a large equipment barn detached from the carriage barn next to the chicken coup. The barns were surrounded by small pastures, and paddocks for our horses and ponies.

The first owner was Frederick C. Paddock, who purchased the land from George Draydon in 1886. George Draydon was a real estate broker and lawyer. He sold most of the land in Delaware County, according to the old records at the county Courthouse. In 1901, Mr. Paddock sold the mansion with forty acres to a large family, the Morrisons. The Morrisons raised their family on the farm. The children grew, married, and moved away. Mr. and Mrs. Morrison rented out the property and took a trip to Europe for an indefinite period in the twenties.

The renters of the mansion were gangsters and turned it into a “speakeasy” during Prohibition in the early twenties. When the Morrison’s were informed of the many raids on their home, now the local “speakeasy,” they returned immediately from Europe to boot the villains out. The couple planned and executed extensive renovations to the house. As part of the renovations, the Morrisons sealed the room formerly used as a “drop room” to hide money during speakeasy

raids. However, years later, everyone who visited Woodleigh knew it as the “Secret Room.” Was there money still in the hidden room? That was always one of the many curiosities about Woodleigh of Paddock Farms.

In 1938, Mr. Morrison, now a widower, sold the property to H. Dwight Diestel, a relative, for one dollar. At the time of the sale, the property still had the original forty acres. In 1941, the property was purchased by Bettina Paddock Blake, another relative of the first owner. She lived there for a brief time with her family.

In September of 1945, Mrs. Blake sold the property to my father and mother, Thomas Carroll Willson, Jr., and Margaret T. Willson. There was an exception for five acres where a small house sat on the edge of the property on Paddock Road. The thirty-five acres, including the big house and the barns, were purchased for \$16,000. My Mom and Dad moved in during January of 1946, with two little girls, my older sisters, Anne Elizabeth, and Margaret Theresa. They moved into Woodleigh at Paddock Farms with the address at 214 Hillcrest Avenue. I was born on March 10, 1946, at Bryn Mawr Hospital in Bryn Mawr, Montgomery County, with the given name Kathleen Willson. My parents packed blue clothes to bring me home since they were sure I would be a boy. My three brothers followed:

Thomas Willson III, Edward Charles Willson, and Jeffrey Michael Willson. We were all exactly two years apart, except for Jeff; he was late by a year. My Dad was listed as a self-employed inventor, photographer, and manufacturer. Today, he would be called an entrepreneur. His company was located at 1395 Lawrence Road in Havertown. It was across the railroad tracks, less than a mile away from the house, three and a half miles by car. Willson Magazine Camera Company began with its founder at the helm in 1898 in Washington, DC. TCW Sr. moved the company to Philadelphia in 1902. After forty-three years at 60th and Media Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dad moved the company to Havertown, Pennsylvania in 1945. He dropped the magazine in the title and the new name was Willson Camera Company.

In 1952, TCW Jr sold a part of Paddock Farms to Haverford Township under the condition it would be used for a park that bordered our property. As a result, Paddock Farm's address changed from 214 Hillcrest Avenue to 221 Colfax Road. Later that same year, he sold another parcel of land that went from Colfax Road beyond Paddock Road to a builder. The builder bought the original five acres that had been separated when my Dad bought the property, and the little house was moved

to Wayne on Lancaster Avenue. These changes reduced the Paddock Farms property to five acres.

In the fifties, the Farm was a hub of activity for family, friends, and neighbors. Neighborhood-organized recreation was centered on Paddock Farms with Easter egg hunts, Fourth of July parades and decorated bike contests with games and prizes. At Christmas time, a Paddock Farms sleigh was used to haul Santa and his helpers through the neighborhood. If it didn't snow, Dad attached rusty old iron wheels to the sleigh so Santa could roll through the neighborhood.

We raised Shetland ponies as a hobby. Shetland Ponies are from Shetland Island in the north of Scotland, nicked name Shelties. They may stand up to 42 inches (107 cm). Shelties are short, stocky, and good for riding children.

In the early fifties, pony rides were available every Saturday. Children from all over Havertown and beyond came to Paddock Farms to ride the little Scottish ponies. Horses and riders, ponies and carriages competed for ribbons in many various categories at the Rose Tree Horse Show, County Fairs, and 4-H clubs.

From plans and a good helping of imagination, TCW Jr. refurbished a beer wagon and built a

stagecoach in the large carriage barn. The wagon and the coach, pulled by two pairs or four Shetland ponies, were used to advertise local businesses such as Gimbels Department Store, Edwards Shoes, the new Manoa Shopping Center, and the Falcon House in the nineteen fifties and sixties.

Mr. Willson, along with some friends, built a boat in the barn. On its virgin voyage, the boat was lost in the Delaware River for three hours due to a faulty compass; however, it did not sink. Mr. Willson designed and built a kidney-shaped pool on the side of the property that bordered the township park. In the basement of the mansion was the Train Room, totally dedicated to miniature HO scale trains. The train's engines, with smoking stacks and loud whistles, followed the railroad tracks through a city, a town, a village, and a mountain area with the illusion of night and day. At Christmas time, the Train Room rivaled the "Secret Room" in popularity.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew about the Secret Room, and our house was once a speakeasy, and the Secret Room was a drop room. On rainy days, Mrs. Willson would let the neighborhood children in to look for the secret room. In fact, one time when the family was on vacation down the shore, local teenagers broke into the house in search of the elusive room to no avail.

TCW Jr. never disclosed the location and enjoyed letting everyone's imagination go wild in pursuit of the Secret Room, especially his own children.

In the sixties, three beautiful wedding receptions took place at Woodleigh and outside under tents on the lawns of Paddock Farms. The first wedding my was my cousin Julie and her husband Sammy Bruce. My two sister's wedding followed in 1966 and 1967. The house and all floors were opened to the guests, much to the delight of friends, neighbors, and guests. It resolved so much curiosity! I only remember my sisters' weddings which were a blast!

TCW Jr's father, TCW, lived with the family in his later years. Grandpop Willson lived with us off and on until his death in 1977. As explained earlier, TCW was an inventor and manufacturer of photographic equipment, cameras, printers, and projectors. TCW ran the family business, Willson Magazine Camera Company, later changed to Willson Camera Company, which was passed on to his son. The business moved from Philadelphia to Lawrence Road in Havertown in 1946, where it remained until 1967. My Dad semi-retired and moved to Ocean City, New Jersey in 1968. He opened a mail-order company, Willson Industries, on Tuckahoe Road in Marmora, New Jersey.

After the marriage of two daughters and the engagement of the third, Woodleigh was too big for the family. Oil prices skyrocketed, and Willson Camera Company lost its largest contract.

In 1966, Mr. Willson offered to sell the property to Haverford Township for \$35,000. The family hoped that the Township could preserve the gray stone mansion, with its beautiful interior and cherry wood panels, as a library. The possible purchase became a political nightmare for the Township, which eventually ruled against it. The Willsons were heartbroken when the township rejected the offer.

In January of 1967, Russell J. Bilotta and Michael Russo bought and took possession of the Paddock Farms property. Bilotta and Russo wanted to use the property for an apartment complex or a nursing home. The property was never secured. The mansion was not fenced in. Without fencing it left it open to vandalism. Woodleigh was empty for the first time since 1898. With no one to care for the property and no physical presence, it quickly fell into disrepair. Vandals destroyed the interior in a matter of weeks.

The property became a danger to the public. In 1971, the Township demolished the once magnificent home. A local civil group formed and fought the new

owners in the courts. After a long legal battle, the Township was ordered to buy back the property from Bilotta and Russo at an inflated cost of \$110,000. During the seven-year legal battle, local papers referred to the property as the “Wilson Tract.” Presently, the property is owned by Haverford Township and is an active recreation park, named Paddock Park.

Reference:

*Insurance Appraisal, Bernard Meltzer, March 28, 1947

The description of the interior is by the author who lived in the house from 1946 to 1967.

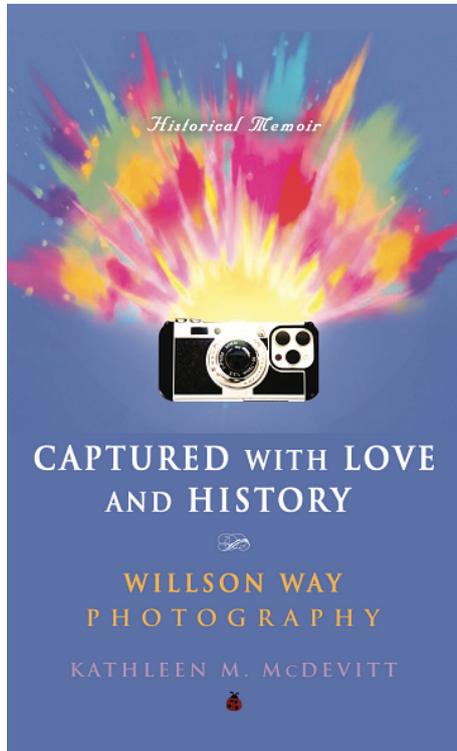
Several Deeds, Registered in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, 1898 to 1946

Secret Room’s exact location was shown to the author by Thomas C. Willson, Jr. in January of 1967.

Real Estate records: Russell J. Bilotta and Michael Russo

Studio Photography May 1979, Jack Renfro, *The History of School Photography*.

Wikipedia, St. Denis website



Read the adventures of inventors, engineers, and photographers, and Thomas C. Willson. Growing up in Havertown. The finish is filled with adventures the author has had with her own photography life!

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