

# The House, My Home

By Bill Sharpe\*  
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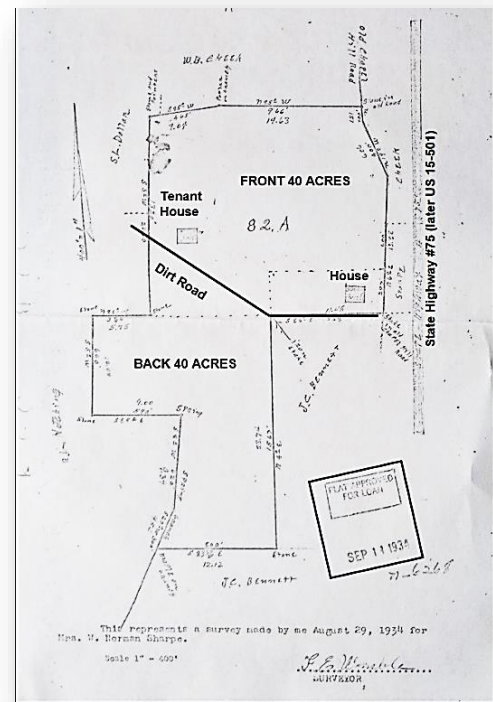
I lived in the same house from birth until I left for college. Yes, I was born there --with the assistance of Dr. Hooker and his nurse from Chapel Hill and my grandmother Sally Ferrington Sharpe. My mother was 42 and cared for afterwards by a local Negro woman. That was April 15, 1938 (Good Friday, I must add), but there were apparently heated discussions about what my name should be; cousins were calling me Butch. In June my mother decreed that I was William Norman Sharpe Jr. and should be called William by everyone. That lasted until I left home and, in a burst of freedom, became Bill.

It was a place to return for family visits and gatherings until my mother died in 1976. The last event there was that Thanksgiving when my father, my brother, and our families divided the furnishings before his move to Roanoke, Virginia. Thinking back on a different era, I want to document its history.

Most of what follows is based on records from my father, William Norman Sharpe. He visited us in Baton Rouge, LA in 1979, my first year at Louisiana State University. I recorded conversations by the pool with him and had them transcribed by my secretary (that would be a capital offense these days). That produced a 30 page 'Reminiscences' that taught me a lot about my family history and has served as a great resource.

## The Property

The Great Depression decimated the Sharpes in Burlington financially in 1929. My parents moved back to Chatham County—my mother and my younger brother with her sister in Siler City and my father and his mother with the Ferringtons. They needed a place to start over and bought 40 acres on what is now US 15-501 for \$1500 from Mr. Blake with a down payment of \$150. It turned out that it carried a hefty mortgage, so they refused to make any payments or improvements. Mr. Blake was so desperate that he traded an attached 40 acres to a Mr. Cole for his takeover of the mortgage. My parents couldn't pay, so they waited until the mortgage was foreclosed and got the entire 80 acres for \$1800 using a loan from the Federal Land Bank. It was created in 1916 and loaned money to farmers who were considered able to pay their debts. They offered loans to farmers at 4%, less than the 6% banks had been charging. I remember them celebrating the last mortgage payment in the late 1940s. The survey, dated 1934, is stamped "PLAT APPROVED FOR LOAN."



The back 40 acres were sold to RB Fitch in the mid-1960s; he developed it into POLKS LANDING—small single-family homes interspersed among the trees. The front 40 acres on US 15-501 were sold in 2005 and later developed into a commercial center named POLKS VILLAGE. The dirt road was simply that; sometimes in the winter it would be so muddy that the car couldn't get up the hill to the house and was parked down by the highway. It was up-graded to a County gravel road in the 1950s and finally paved in 1973.

The first sale finally gave my parents financial security to enjoy their last years. The second sale benefited my late brother's family and me. These sales are typical of long-held rural property evolution into commercial and residential developments, often over the protests of surrounding residents. Another example is the Ferrington Village six property, sold in 1974 after being in the Cole-Ferrington family since 1786.



### The House



These pictures were taken in the 1930s, prompted by a light snowfall. The first shows the original house in the center along with the dark building on the left that was an old kitchen. It was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier to build the kitchen separate from the living quarters because of the heat in the summer and

fire hazards.

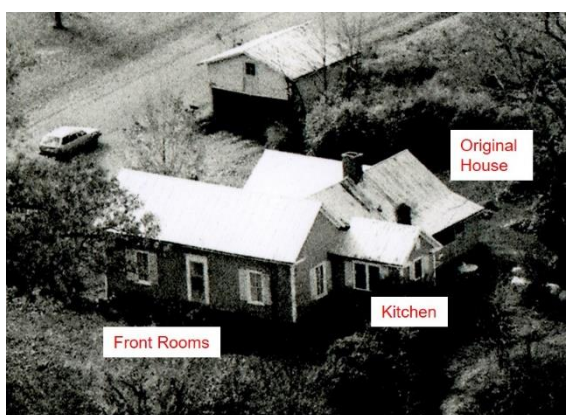


The second picture shows the two front rooms and porch that were added in the 1920s.

The original house was built in 1870–1880. It had a central double fireplace with two rooms on each side, a common arrangement at the time. One room was a bedroom and the other a living room. Meals would have been cooked in the separate kitchen and eaten there in the winter. I believe the separate kitchen was much older. Its back door was handmade and secured by a wooden lever falling into a wooden hook on the inside with a latch string through a hole to the outside.

The house was located 100 yards to the west of US 15 501. The old Hillsboro-Pittsboro road ran parallel to the highway and just outside the lower right-hand corner of the photograph. The well sits on the edge of that old road and was a welcome watering hole for travelers. It was a long way from the house, but a pump was installed to provide running water. The iron pipe swing set was installed by cousins from New York who would come down for long visits during the summers.

Below are aerial photos taken in 1985 showing the additions to the original house.



The front porch roof had a very low slope and was covered with wood shingles. They rotted, as did the rafters, and it didn't make sense to have a 6-foot-wide porch with no roof. My father, with the help of the New York cousins, tore off all of the front porch along with the gable. They then put a metal roof on both parts of the house. My father took what lumber could be used and built the kitchen that was an extension from both the newer front room and the original house. A small section of the back porch was enclosed to create a 'den' where he put his desk. He referred to himself as a 'Jackleg Carpenter' and regretted both the design and the construction. But, he got it done, and it made a huge difference. This all occurred in 1944 and 1945.

The kitchen was small and narrow with a window over the sink at the end; it just drained out into the yard. There was a small breakfast table against the east wall that had two windows offering spectacular views of the sunrise over Edwards Mountain. We had a large old wood stove with the firebox beside the oven and a 'warming oven' mounted above the stove top. My mother kept baked sweet potatoes in it for me when I came home from school.

A bathroom was installed in 1949. Prior to that, we lived as rural folks had for centuries—chamber pots, an outhouse behind the woodshed, and baths in a round zinc tub in front of the wood stove in the kitchen. The new bathroom was tiny, a toilet, sink, bathtub with



shower, crammed into the space beside the fireplace between the two rooms; it had two doors. This made an interesting traffic pattern between the two rooms—either through the bathroom or out the front door and over to the door in the second room. It was especially interesting when we had guests who were not familiar with the protocol.

A new bedroom was added on the front in 1953. It was small, but big enough for two single beds and a closet. The front porch was extended to 10 feet wide and enclosed at the same time. Both these changes made a big difference; my parents especially enjoyed the porch, even in the winter.

## **Some Memories**

I do remember playing with Lincoln logs in front of the fireplace in the evenings. I was always cautioned about the fireplace because children did sometimes stumble into the fire. I also remember my mother heating two irons on the floor in front of the fire and ironing clothes. I have a vague memory of the front porch, but an older neighbor told me many years later about playing in a pile of cotton that had been picked and stored on the front porch.

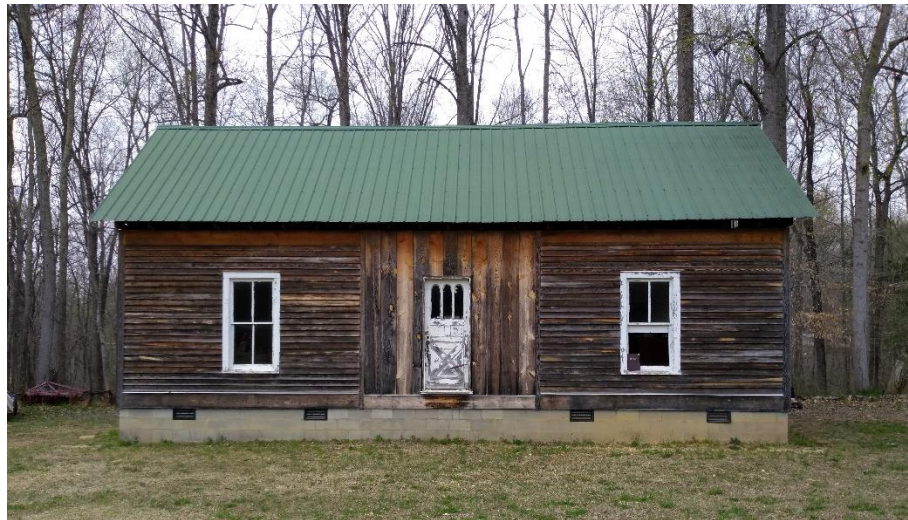
The kitchen stove, fireplace and the stove replacing it, were heated by wood. We would get slabs, the sides cut off logs, from a neighboring sawmill. Saturdays would be devoted to sawing them into 2-foot pieces with a circular saw connected to an old one-cylinder gas engine by a long belt. A slab would be put onto a wooden carriage, extended 2 feet past the saw, and pushed forward. One person did this, and the other held the piece to be cut and then threw it into a pile. Now this circular saw blade was about 3 feet in diameter with no shield or guard at all, a workplace situation that would make one of today's safety officers apoplectic. My job, starting about 9 or 10, was to catch the cut pieces. In 1947, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon after a light snowfall, my mother was catching stove wood and reached to brush snow off one before it was cut. She sliced off her three fingers just beyond her little finger. Although the fingers were found and taken with her to Duke, they were not able to reattach them. After they healed, they hindered her not at all.

The old kitchen was the bedroom for my brother and me. We would wake up on winter mornings, grab our clothes and shoes, and run barefoot across porch into the warm kitchen to dress. He left for college in 1948, and my parents moved their bed into the 'little sitting room' next to the kitchen. I moved into their former bedroom to make the old kitchen available to a veteran's family desperate for housing because of the crush of GI Bill students at UNC. The man, his wife and two small boys lived in that 225-foot square room with one stove, water from a spigot outside the back porch, and the outhouse. They lived there for two years, were glad to have it, and remained in contact with my parents for several years thereafter. I then moved back to the old kitchen, having it all to myself until the new bedroom was built. I built a Hollywood bed (no footboard) and would lie with my head on one corner reading a book on the floor.

## The End

My father moved to Roanoke in 1976, after my mother died. He rented the house for several years to young family he knew before turning it over to an agent. It was occupied for most of the rest of the time by a rather eclectic fellow (I never met him) who put sofas out in the front yard, built a small stage, and arranged musical performances that attracted a small crowd. The roof had always leaked at the juncture between the new kitchen and the original house, a result of my father's imperfect carpentry. It finally got so bad around 1998 that we could no longer get insurance on it, and I had to deal with a vacant house.

First, I had the well filled in with rocks. Old buildings were often burned as training exercises for firefighters, but that it been discontinued because of possible asbestos release. That forced me to a much better solution. I sold the house to Gary Oakley, a neighbor living at the end of Polk's Landing Road, who collects and restores old buildings. He demolished the original house along with the new bedroom, saving the lumber for buildings on his farm. Saving the "front rooms" section of the house, he tore the roof off, laid the rafters down so that the house could go under the power lines, and moved it up to a field behind his house. He restored the rafters, put on a new metal roof, and stripped the paint off. Gary tends to have grandiose ideas that come to fruition slowly. He has considered converting the house to a small B&B, a large workshop, or simply storage. He has built a large shed on the back where he stores to tractors and lumber. Nevertheless, my home can still be visited, which brings back memories.



*\* Bill Sharpe grew up in Chatham County, just up the road from where he now lives in Galloway Ridge. He left Chatham in 1961 and had a career as a Mechanical Engineering professor, but returned in 2010. He is currently pursuing his interests in local history and genealogy.*