

The eccentric Harry Wilks profile

By Jeff Louderback

Relaxing in a shiny leather chair - his outstretched feet resting on a cushioned stool - Harry Wilks admires the shadows that dance in the center of his spacious great room, where the late afternoon sun casts its glare through the mirrored-glass pyramid-shaped ceiling that majestically towers above.

The great room is the centerpiece of the Hamilton millionaire's one-of-a-kind home in the picturesque hills of Butler County. A retired attorney and real estate redeveloper, the 75-year-old Wilks built a 7,000-square-foot underground house on his 40-acre estate in 1989 and crowned it with a blue glass pyramid that rises 27 feet from the ground and a rectangular observation tower that serves as an aesthetic chimney. He decorated the interior with antiquities, some dating back to 2000 B.C. Then, longing to preserve the "unspoiled land" for future generations and save it from potential development, he acquired 220 surrounding acres and founded the Pyramid Hill Sculpture Park & Museum, an outdoor odyssey that takes visitors along one-way roads that wind through steep green hills, thick forests, picturesque valleys and colorful meadows - all dotted with sculptures.

Rising from the chair, Wilks walks down the wide hallway decorated with ancient art - a Roman bust here, an Etruscan burial urn there - and takes a visitor onto the patio which overlooks a white gazebo that sits by a sparkling lake where fountains shoot water toward the sky and Canadian geese swim with their recently-born ducklings.

Wilks discovered the land that is now Pyramid Hill while hiking. He bought it in 1987 and spent months clearing away the dense brush. "Every inch of that land was covered with honeysuckle, grapevines and anything else you can imagine when he first got it. To me, it was a jungle," said Bill Wilks, Harry Wilks' younger brother. "I couldn't figure out why he wanted it in the first place, and what he planned to do."

Wilks admits he did not have a formal idea for the property's future. He built the lake and gazebo, where he would sit and immerse himself in tranquility, absorbing the harmonies of singing birds and the sound of leaves rustled by gentle winds. One night, he saw a deer prance along the top of a natural ridge nearby, and the scene triggered a thought.

"What if I build an underground house that cut through one side of the ridge and came out on the other side?," he asked himself. He pulled out a note pad and started to sketch plans for a mirrored roof, entrances on both sides of the ridge and unique features like an expansive living room that would allow him to host social gatherings with ease. He sought a professional who could draw blueprints for his vision but attracted no interest. He approached his daughter Barbara, who owns an architectural firm with offices in Baltimore and New York City.

"I thought it was an interesting idea with a strong concept," she explained. "But I told him I couldn't do it (draw the blueprints) in the time frame he wanted because I was already working on many other projects."

The restless Wilks eventually found an architect and a respected contractor to build the house. Three days before the contractor was scheduled to start, he backed out of the deal. He was so concerned about the design that he couldn't sleep. Undaunted, Wilks decided to serve as the general contractor, hiring engineers to execute technical decisions and subcontractors to perform tasks he was not comfortable with.

The result: a bright and airy underground structure that amazes even the most skilled architects and contractors. "I wake up every morning, walk around the house and ask myself, 'How did you ever do this?'," Wilks said.

The home's main entrance is burrowed into the eastern flank of a natural ridge and is accentuated by mahogany-framed doors and a series of receding masonry joints. The front hallway, and the rear hallway which leads to the pation and swimming pool, are 12 feet wide. Light pours through the barrel-vaulted roof, illuminating the arrangement of sculptures that appear like a stately art gallery display.

Both hallways empty into the great room, where two steps descend into the massive space that is skylit by the pyramid. Masonry-block piers support the ceiling and create alcoves in each corner of the great room for television, library, kitchen and piano areas. "I can seat as many as 100 people in here without having to disturb the furniture," Wilks explains as he strolls by his 1924 Steinway grand piano.

On one side of the great room, Wilks pushes a button and a waterfall spills down a wall. On the other side, a fireplace is bordered by floor-to-ceiling wood shelves that hold antiquities and an assortment of Cincinnati's Rookwood pottery. An elevator leads to the top of the observation tower, where Wilks often watches the sunset over the Great Miami River. The tower, which is positioned behind the shorter pyramid, doubles as a chimney.

"I didn't want your typical chimney. I thought it would look out of place, especially since it would be sticking out of the ground," Wilks said. "The tower is aesthetically pleasing, and you can't tell it's a chimney unless you see the smoke."

As for the pyramid, Wilks wanted a feature that would characterize the exterior while brightening the inside. It is 38 square feet at the base, 27 feet high and features three thick panels of glass.

"Most underground homes are dark," he said. "I didn't want that. I wanted lots of light. When there's a thunderstorm, I have an excellent view of a spectacular light show."

Bedroom suites occupy all four corners of the house. Each bedroom features a marble bathroom and sliding glass doors that lead to the patio or porch. "Every room receives natural light," Wilks said. "You don't feel like you're underground."

Wilks listened to the opinions of three interior designers when the time arrived to decorate the home, but liked none of their ideas. Thumbing through the pages of National Geographic as a child, he was captivated by photographs of ancient art. He started attending auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's in New York City and enlightening his wide hallways and enormous great room with antiquities from the Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Etruscan civilizations. Some, like a sandstone mummy mask, are displayed on pedestals. Others, such as the partial wall from an Egyptian tomb, rest on the floor near live plants and trees.

"There's not a reproduction in here. Even the trees are real," Wilks said. "Although there's no way to know who the original owners of these antiquities were, it's fascinating to imagine what they were like and what the civilization they lived in was like."

Ambitious even as a child, Wilks sold newspapers on street corners when he was just 8. He had lots of friends, played sports and thought about how he could change the world.

"Harry and I used to daydream a lot. That, and play Monopoly for hours," said Bill Wilks, Harry's younger brother who played football and basketball at Ohio State University in the early 1950s before founding Wilks Insurance Agency. "At night, he'd often share his ideas for machines he'd like to invent. Our favorite was a contraption that, when you pulled a string, chocolates would roll down a chute and fall into your mouth."

Articulate and affable, Wilks was suited for a career in politics. At Hamilton High School, he was class president during his junior and senior years before graduating in 1943 and serving a stint in the Army. When Wilks returned, he attended Ohio University and Miami University and the University of Cincinnati, where he earned a bachelor's degree and a law degree in four years.

He was a successful attorney in Hamilton - earning recognition as Hamilton's Outstanding Young Man of the Year - and considered a run at public office. His aspirations aimed high. Not city or county commissioner. Not even state senator or state representative. U.S. Congress was his destiny, or so he thought. After meeting with political consultants, though, his mind was swayed. Family, he decided, was more important than accepting the demands associated with a high-profile role in politics.

Wilks earned his fortune in real estate and the stock market while he still practiced law. He bought dilapidated buildings in downtown Hamilton, renovated them and leased them to businesses. His efforts revived a downtown that bustled with activity when he was a child but had declined in later years. His shrewd decisions in the stock market further cushioned his bank account and helped him become a multi-millionaire.

To Wilks, hoarding his millions would be a travesty. Instead, he chooses to support causes that are dear to his heart. The sculpture park reflects Wilks' passion for art and nature. He also bestowed a \$1 million gift to Miami University's Hamilton campus. The money was used to found a lecture series that attracts well-known speakers and to provide full-tuition scholarships for years to come.

Wilks' name adorns the conference center at Miami-Hamilton, but the sculpture park that surrounds the immaculate Pyramid House is what he is especially fond of. When Wilks acquired 220 additional acres bordering his property, a sculpture park was not part of his vision. Like he did to the original 20 acres, Wilks hacked away dense brush until the land was passable. Friends were smitten by the rustic beauty and encouraged him to sell them two-acre tracts where they could build homes.

"I don't think land like this should be turned into housing subdivisions or shopping centers," Wilks said. "I knew I had to do something because I didn't like the idea of all my hard work being lost to development when I'm gone."

At the urging of a friend, he visited a sculpture park in St. Louis, which sparked the vision for the attraction he manages today. He built the network of roads, visited sculptors, acquired what he could and opened the outdoor museum to the public three years ago when he founded a non-profit organization to operate the attraction and forever save the land from suburban sprawl.

Trees, wildflowers, butterflies, and birds are plentiful here. The artwork varies in theme and appearance. Some sculptures are easily identifiable. Others require an investigation from the imagination.

Wilks excuses himself as he climbs into his golf cart. Before nightfall arrives, he wants to check one of the park's gardens and chat with the groundskeeper. Wilks is a busy man. He still has an office in downtown Hamilton, and he is on the move expanding the park's number of sculptures and adding antiquities to his home, which will be a museum upon his death.

"I could be on a beach someplace like Acapulco, but I'm not. I choose to work, and I'm even busier now than before I retired," Wilks said. "I expect to work until the day I'm carried out of my underground house and placed underground for good."

When asked if his final resting place will be on the beloved acres of Pyramid Hill, Wilks pauses for a moment and scratches his head.

"I've never really thought about that, but I can imagine the possibilities," he said with a grin. "Perhaps I could find a picturesque spot and commission an artist to create a sculpture for my headstone."

Another vision planted in his mind, Wilks pulls away in the golf cart and meanders down the one-lane road. No dream seems too outlandish for the man who shares his treasure in the lush hills of Hamilton.

"The time you have in every day is so valuable. When you lose a day, you can't get it back," Wilks said. "It's my intention to do something that is worthwhile and lasting. This house, and this park, is my way of doing just that."

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