

Who was Wilma Dykeman?

Wilma Dykeman was a native Ashevilleian. Her maternal roots wind back for generations in these mountains. Her father was a “Yankee” from New York state. From her parents, Bonnie and Willard, who read to each other in the evening, Wilma inherited her love of literature. It was their books that connected them to the world. Wilma once said, “From this little mountain cove we could reach out across space and time to know strange people and places and the intertwined evil



Growing up in Asheville, Wilma knew the Wolfe family. When asked if Thomas Wolfe's writing influenced her, she responded that it made her see the value of writing about local experiences. Wilma was 17 years old when her class at Biltmore College (which later became UNC Asheville) visited Thomas Wolfe at his cabin in Oteen. Wolfe's comment about Wilma: "That girl can visit here anytime she wants."

and good that awaited our innocence and our choices." These were the memories that influenced her life's path of writing, giving lectures, and traveling the world. Wilma was eternally curious, an independent thinker, a strong and confident woman, often tackling controversial subjects.



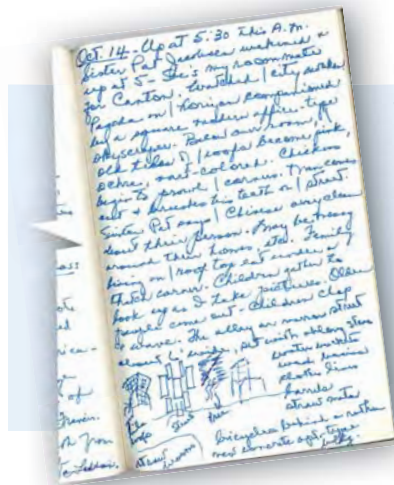
Wilma Dykeman (1920-2006) wrote 18 books. Her nonfiction works were pioneering endeavors into such fields as the environment, race relations, pollution, corporate greed, and birth control. In her fictional novels she wrote about the mountain people and how their history and struggles helped change America. She dismantled the stereotype of Appalachians being backward, instead portraying them as proud, independent, and resourceful.



Wilma was an only child so her mother sent her to Girl Scout camp to be with others her own age. This is a photograph taken at Camp Elliot, Old Fort, North Carolina, 1934 when Wilma was 14 years old. Left to right Helen Richmond, Wilma Dykeman, Evelyn Evans, Sara Elias, Sylvia Patla.



Julia Wolfe and her daughter Mabel introduced Wilma to her future husband, James Stokely, also a writer, whose family was in the canning business in Newport, Tennessee. Wilma and James felt an instant bond which led to a life of loyalty and commitment. As newlyweds they bought an apple orchard. They later wrote several books together. This is a picture of the Stokelys in their library at their home in Newport, Tennessee.



Wilma was a member of the first tour group to visit China after President Nixon opened the borders for Americans in 1976. This excerpt from her travel journal reads: "Oct. 14 - Up at 5:30 this A.M. Sister Pat Jacobsen wakened + up at 5 - She's my roommate for Canton. Watched the city awaken. Pagoda on the horizon accompanied by a square modern office-type skyscraper. Below our room, the old tiles of roofs become pink, ochre, vari-colored. Chickens begin to prowl the corners. Man comes out and brushes his teeth on the street. Sister Pat says the Chinese very clean about their person. May be messy around their homes, etc. Family living on the roof top eat under a thatch corner. Children gather to look up as I take pictures. Older people come out - children clap + wave. The alley or narrow street about 6' wide, set with oblong stone. water buckets, wash basins, clothes lines, barrels, straw mats, straw brooms, bicycles behind a rather new concrete apt.-type bldg."



Wilma lived near the French Broad River her whole life. As a child she lived on a creek outside Asheville which ran to the river. As an adult she lived with her family in Newport, Tennessee on the lower end of the river. Left to right: Husband James Stokely, son James Stokely III, Wilma and older son Dykeman Stokely.

Wilma valued individuality. Long before women's liberation she wrote and lectured using her maiden name. It was who she was and her husband Jim respected that.

Wilma met and knew many famous people through her travels, teaching, book research, speaking engagements and tenure as the Tennessee state historian (for 20 years). She liked to remind Vice President Al Gore that she changed his diaper while babysitting him once. Wilma was a Guggenheim Fellow and a Senior Fellow at the National Endowment for the Humanities and won numerous other awards throughout her life. Wilma Dykeman left us an incredible legacy through her literature, a challenge to make life better, improve our environment, and notice the small wonders that surround us.



Wilma Dykeman and Alex Haley, noted author of Roots and The Autobiography of Malcolm X.



Wilma and the Dali Lama at a luncheon at Berea College. (photo courtesy of David Stephenson)

