



Edgar A. Wilson

**Edgar Arthur “Hut” Wilson** was born April 14, 1924, in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada. His family brought him to the US in 1925, settling first in Detroit, Michigan. The family was in Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1930, and by 1935 had moved to Fort Myers. Edgar graduated with the Fort Myers High School class of 1942. He was interested in architecture from an early age, working on his first serious project at age 14 – a renovation of space to house his father’s new restaurant. His commission was a Model A Roadster.

Edgar served in WWII as a lieutenant in the infantry. While he was in Europe, he fell in love with the church architecture he saw there, which inspired him in his later career as an architect. He cites St. Paul’s Cathedral, London, as his personal favorite among the great church buildings.

After the war, he earned a BS degree in Mechanical Engineering from Texas A&M, followed by Bachelor of Architecture degree from the University of Florida in 1949, where he graduated along with his future colleague and partner Martin Gundersen.

He was registered as an architect with the State of Florida in 1949. After working for Richard E. Jessen in Tampa, during which time one of his projects was the Fort Myers High School, he began his own practice in Fort Myers in 1951. One of his first designs as an independent was the modernist Fort Myers Fire Station at Central Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. In that same year, Edgar married a local Fort Myers girl, Kathryn Bartleson. Unfortunately, there was little or no work to be had in southwest Florida in the early 1950’s, so Edgar and Kathryn went to Salzburg, Austria where, courtesy of the Marshall Plan, Edgar practiced as an architect until 1954. His son, Edgar Jr., was born there.

After Edgar and family returned to Fort Myers from Austria, he and Martin Gundersen joined forces to form Gundersen & Wilson, Architects. In 1957 their business office was at 2312 First Street; later they moved to 2037-B West First Street. But, although they were in partnership and influenced each other’s work, they often operated separately, each catering to the types of buildings that interested them. For example, while Edgar designed many Catholic churches, Martin concentrated more on private homes and commercial buildings. Edgar’s passion for church architecture did not diminish with age, and in the latter part of his career about half of his creative activity involved churches.

Fort Myers architect Joyce Owens, writing about the significance and creativity Edgar’s work in her News-Press columns, says:

Churches were his true passion. He designed at least 17 ...

Wilson was a master of ecclesiastical designs ... For two of the Catholic churches designed 17 years apart ..., St. Cecilia (1966) in south Fort Myers and Church of the Resurrection of Our Lord (1983) on Cypress Lake Boulevard, he rejected the trend to build large hall-like spaces and, instead, adhered to more traditional church plans. Nonetheless Wilson clearly positioned them, inside and out, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In sharp contrast to the lavish and ornate Catholic churches of the past, they are simple and unadorned.

Zion Lutheran Church on Winkler Road ... is a large hall but the ancillary buildings, the walkways and the bell tower – gently abstracted elements of conventional church design – are stunningly handsome.

Other significant landmarks – either in partnership with Martin Gundersen or on his own – include the Lee County Administration Office Building (a fine example of mid-century architecture), the Sanibel School, the U.S. Post Office Building on Fort Myers Beach, and numerous houses, including several of his own, on Hill and Grove Avenues in Fort Myers.

His churches alone position Wilson as an architect exemplifying great talent and showcase his humble ability to create extraordinary places and spaces.

The Gundersen-Wilson partnership ended amicably in 1978, but the close friendship between the two men continued. Edgar stayed on at their office at 2037 West First Street, and Martin moved to a one-story building about a block and a half away. Edgar had his own firm until 1985, when he partnered with one of his associates, Mike Sheeley. When Sheeley set out on his own in 1992, Edgar teamed with another associate, forming Wilson Moore Architects. In 1998, he established the Wilson Design Group, working there until his retirement in 2001. Kathryn died on May 26, 2008, and Edgar died the following year on February 19.



Edgar & Kathryn, 1990s

Edgar's obituary, from the Fort Myers News-Press of February 23, 2009, reads as follows:



Edgar, 1999 (photo: Garth Francis)

The physical being of Edgar A. Wilson, 84, passed on Thursday. However, his architectural works and spirit will live on long beyond all of us. Edgar was born on April 14, 1924 in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada.

Preceding him in death were his parents Robert Giles Wilson and Rebecca Dubois Wilson. Also preceding him in death was his wife, Kathryn and sister, Rose Marie Duffield. Surviving family members are: Truman D. Wilson, brother; Giles G. Wilson and Edgar A. Wilson, II, sons. Grandchildren are: Edgar A. Wilson, III "Trey", Matthew Robert Giles Wilson, John Patrick Hart Wilson and Katie Marie Wilson.

Edgar attended Fort Myers High School, Texas A&M and University of Florida. Edgar served in WW2 as a foot soldier in the 103rd Infantry. He was awarded a field promotion to lieutenant. After the war under the Marshall Plan, Edgar practiced Architecture in Salzburg, Austria. Upon completion of his service, he returned to Southwest Florida where he practiced Architecture for fifty years. Projects that are representative of his career are: Church of the Resurrection, St. Cecelia's, Bishop Verot, Fort Myers Country Club, Cypress Lake Country Club and Farm Worker Village. His wife, Kathryn was with him every step of the way.

A funeral Mass will be held for Edgar and Kathryn on Tuesday, February 24, at 10:30am for family and friends at the Church of the Resurrection.

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Edgar married Kathryn Louise (Bartleson) Sanders, of Fort Myers, on September 1, 1952. Kathryn was born September 7, 1925, in Fort Myers. They had two sons: Edgar Arthur, Jr. ("Eddie"), born 1953 in Salzburg, Austria, and Giles Gerald, born 1956 in Fort Myers. Eddie graduated with the Fort Myers High School class of 1971. He married Melonie J. Hart, and they have two sons, Edgar Arthur "Trey" Wilson, born 1989, who graduated with the Fort Myers High School class of 2008, and John Patrick Hart, born 1990. Giles married Candice Clovice (Couch) Gill on July 24, 1993, in Osceola County, Florida. Giles has two children, Matthew Robert Giles, born 1989, and Katie Marie, born 1996.



Kathryn (Bartleson) Wilson

Edgar's parents were Robert Giles Wilson and Rebecca Dubois. Robert was born on September 1, 1893, in Almonte, Ontario, Canada, of Scottish and Irish ancestry. He was 5 ft. 8 in. tall, with dark brown hair, and light blue eyes. He fought in WWI. Rebecca was French-Canadian; she was born on June 23, 1896 in Aylmer, Quebec, Canada. Robert and Rebecca married on February 2, 1921, and they lived in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada. On August 29, 1925, with \$200 to their name, they entered the U.S. at Detroit, Michigan, by ferry from Sault Ste. Marie. They were planning to join Robert's uncle, Raymond Wilson, in Detroit, and intended to stay permanently in the U.S. By 1930, they were living in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Robert was working as a superintendent of a chain store. By 1935, they had moved to Fort Myers; they were living on McGregor Blvd. and Robert was working in a liquor store. In 1945, with Edgar in the Army, the family was living at 3900 Avocado Street, and Robert was a mechanic.

Robert and Rebecca had three children: Truman Dubois, born in 1921; Edgar Arthur, born in 1924; and Rose Marie, born in 1926, all in Canada. Truman graduated with the Fort Myers High School class of 1941, and married Jessie Wilma Finch on September 26, 1944. She was born July 3, 1924, in Pueblo, Colorado, and died February 1, 2011, in Fort Myers. Rose Marie married Richard L. Duffield, originally from Muskegon, Michigan, on August 23, 1954 in St. Francis Xavier Church, Fort Myers. She died on March 1, 2001 in Columbus, North Carolina. Robert died in February 1956, and Rebecca died on June 12, 1987, in Fort Myers.

Edgar's grandparents on his father's side were Robert Henry Wilson, born July 7, 1845, and Esther Jane Oakley, born July 1855, both from Ontario, Canada. They married on December 19, 1883, in Arnprior, Ontario. He was a blacksmith, a Presbyterian, and a widower; she was a Roman Catholic. They had five children: Mary Gertrude, born May 5, 1887; James, born 1888; Catharine Hilda, born December 11, 1891; Robert Giles, born September 1, 1893; and Valarie Raymond, born July 4, 1895. His grandparents on his mother's side were Charles Henry Dubois, born October 9, 1850, and Adele Didier, born January 6, 1858, both in Quebec, Canada. He was a carpenter. Both were bilingual in French and English. They had seven children: Harry, born about 1878; Albert, born September 24, 1879; Cordelia Catharine, born May 18, 1889; Alice, born December 25, 1891; D'Artagnon, born January 26, 1894; Rebecca, born June 23, 1896; and Leon Arthur, born November 3, 1898.

Kathryn's parents were Thomas Porter Bartleson, born August 14, 1902, in Jacksonville, Florida, and Vera Geraldine Carson, born August 23, 1900. They married on June 14, 1921, in Fort Myers. Thomas came to Fort Myers in 1919 and became manager of the city's gas and water department. Later, he was manager of Southeastern Gas Corp. Thomas and Geraldine had two children: Thomas Porter Jr., born September 2, 1923; and Kathryn Louise, born September 7, 1925. By 1935, Thomas and Geraldine had separated, and both later remarried, Thomas to Maude Elise Willis West, and Geraldine to Harold Phillip Vesper. Thomas died on June 16, 1957, and Geraldine died on December 16, 1986, both in Fort Myers.

Kathryn's grandparents on her father's side were Charles Warren Bartleson, born October 16, 1867, in Grand Chain, Illinois, and Lura Alice Pound, born March 16, 1873, in Vienna, Georgia, on December 17, 1889. Charles was a wholesale grocer. They married in Milledgeville, Georgia on December 17, 1889. They came to Fort Myers from Jacksonville in 1919, and Charles founded the Fort Myers Wholesale Grocery Company. He became one of the city's leading business men, and was city commissioner. Charles and Lura had seven children: Charles Warren Jr., born December 16, 1891; Lura Irene, born September 26, 1894; Joseph Warren, born May 28, 1897; Thomas Porter, born August 14, 1902; Fred Durant, born September 19, 1904; John Douglas, born February 8, 1910; and Mark Freeman, born November 6, 1912. Charles died on January 10, 1929, and Lura died August 14, 1964, both in Fort Myers.

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The Gundersen-Wilson partnership was responsible for many buildings in South Florida, particularly in the Fort Myers area. Some of their projects include:

- St. Cecilia Catholic Church, Fort Myers
- Church of the Resurrection of Our Lord, Cypress Lake Blvd., Fort Myers
- St. Leo Catholic Church of Bonita Springs
- Cypress Lake Country Club, Fort Myers
- American Department Store, U.S. 41, Fort Myers
- Al's Appliance Store, North Fort Myers
- Lee County Courthouse Annex (now Lee County Administration Building), Fort Myers
- Boardwalk Caper Condominiums, south Fort Myers
- John Scanlon Fort Myers Lincoln-Mercury dealership, south Fort Myers
- Fowler Street Shopping Center, Fort Myers
- Key Estero Shopping Center, Fort Myers Beach
- Lee County Juvenile Detention Home, Fort Myers
- Myerlee Manor condominiums, Fort Myers
- Pewett Center, south Fort Myers
- Sanibel Island School
- Surfside Motel, Fort Myers Beach
- Tropic Isles Elementary School, North Fort Myers
- U.S. Post Office Building, Fort Myers Beach
- Coopers and Lybrand Building, West First Street, Fort Myers
- Inter-County Telephone & Telegraph Building, Lee Street, Fort Myers
- Numerous local churches
- Numerous local schools
- Numerous high-rise condominium buildings, Fort Myers Beach
- Numerous single-family homes, many on Grove Avenue, Fort Myers

Edgar Wilson and Martin Gundersen tended to work both as a team and on separate projects. The following are descriptions of some of the buildings which either were Edgar's alone or which, as Gundersen-Wilson projects, bear his stamp:



#### **Truman Wilson Residence, 1949**

The house at 1322 Plumosa Drive, Fort Myers, was designed by Edgar for his brother, Truman D. Wilson. It has 3,926 sq. ft., 1 story, 2 bedrooms, 1 ½ bathrooms, and a finished carport. A fireplace and a pool were added in 1983.

In 1949, Edgar Wilson was working in Tampa and just getting his start in architecture. The antebellum courthouse in Tampa was being torn down, and Edgar salvaged beams and rafters from the demolition and had them remilled. He used them in the construction of the Truman Wilson house. According to Joyce Owens, this house was the first in Fort Myers to have sliding glass doors.



#### **Edgar Wilson Residence, 1958**

This house, at 1569 (now 1599) Grove Avenue, Fort Myers, has 2,833 sq. ft., 1 story, 3 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, and a finished carport.

Edgar and Kathryn sold this house on August 24, 1971, to Byron M. and Earline B. Campbell, for \$29,700.



#### **Stewart Residence, 1958**

According to Stephanie Keyes, Edgar Wilson's house on Grove Avenue was used as the prototype for this house at 1239 Carlene Avenue, Fort Myers, that he built for William L. Stewart, Stephanie's husband's law partner.

The house has 3,686 sq. ft., 1 story, 3 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, and 2 finished carports. The concrete seawall along the canal was built in 1956.



#### **Jackson-Main Building, 1957**

This single-story office/store building facing Main Street, Fort Myers, was a Gundersen-Wilson project. The 8,697 sq. ft. building was renovated in 1980.

According to Patricia Mellor, "the building was occupied by good tenants almost immediately".



### Mellor Building, 1960

Also a Gundersen-Wilson project, this office building faces Jackson Street, Fort Myers.

It was built originally with 2-stories; the picture shows the renovated building with a third story and a façade designed by Mike Sheeley.



### Fowler Center, 1962

This commercial development, in the 2200 block of Fowler Street, Fort Myers, was planned by Bill Mellor as strip center aimed primarily at service-type businesses.

According to Bill's wife Patricia, he took his ideas to Edgar Wilson, and together they refined the plans.



The center consists of four 1-story buildings. They each have a canopied walk in front and a small overhead door in back, on the alley. The building sizes, starting from the north building, are 8,108, 8,228, 12,240, and 8,508 sq. ft.

According to Patricia Mellor, in the design of these buildings her husband Bill "called upon his knowledge of structural strength and much more that he had learned in his various engineering courses at college plus his experience in house building to come up with some original ideas which were the most cost-effective and practical use of material and of space. The row of separate buildings would be built to last far into the future with the lowest possible maintenance. ... Single units could be combined easily, and double units could be divided easily to suit tenants. There would be three-phase electric service, almost unheard of then. The buildings would be placed on the back of the lots leaving a large area for parking in front."



### Inter-County Telephone & Telegraph Company Building, 1961

This striking Gundersen-Wilson building, at 1520 Lee Street, Fort Myers, is now missing some of the telephone-themed façade decoration.

It has 5 stories and 151,070 sq. ft.



### St. Cecilia Catholic Church, 1966

Joyce Owens AIA notes particularly the church's "elegant curved roofs and large sweeping overhangs [which] were undeniably fresh and new."

Edgar built churches of similar design at least twice: one in Florence, South Carolina (St. Anthony's) and another in Minnesota.



### Chernin Residence, 1966

This house, at 1206 Plumosa Drive, Fort Myers, was built for Harry Arthur Chernin and Mary Charles (Acuff) Chernin. It has 6,331 sq. ft., 5 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a finished carport, a fireplace, a pool enclosure, and 140 ft. frontage on the Caloosahatchee. A boat lift was added in 1982.

According to Joyce Owens AIA, this is "an exceptional example of the Sarasota School". It was built using steel post-and-beam construction rather than load-bearing masonry, "which allowed for longer beams and permitted external walls to be made of glass for the first time". It has "an open floor plan, creating the illusion that the space inside and outside the house was nearly the same. The arrangement allowed for uninterrupted views all the way from downtown to the Midpoint Bridge. The house is bright and welcoming. Tall, extensive sliding doors let natural breezes ventilate and cool the interiors and allow the family who live there and their guests to easily enjoy an indoor/outdoor lifestyle. The low sloping roofs on this house extend well out beyond the walls to shade these openings as well as the high clerestory windows nestled just below the roofline at the top of the walls. Daylight is abundant, but direct sunlight is not. More than 50 years later, this house still manages to look incredibly modern."





**Edgar Wilson Residence, 1722 Hill Ave., 1973**

Now designated as 1702 Hill Avenue, this house has 2,244 sq. ft., 1 story, 2 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a finished lower level with open carport and open porch.

Edgar built the house on land purchased on October 12, 1972, from Clarence H. and Norene R. Kurth, for \$11,000



**Edgar Wilson Residence, 1714 Hill Ave., 1979**

Now designated as 1704 Hill Avenue, this house has 3,195 sq. ft., 2 stories, 4 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, a cathedral ceiling in the living room, and a finished garage.

This house was also built on land purchased in 1972 from the Kurths.



**Resurrection Church of Our Lord, 1983**

According to Joyce Owens AIA, in this church on Cypress Lake Boulevard, Fort Myers (as with St. Cecilia, built 15 years earlier), Wilson “rejected the trend to build large hall-like spaces and, instead, adhered to more traditional church plans.”



“Nonetheless, he clearly positioned them, inside and out, in the 20th century. In sharp contrast to the lavish and ornate Catholic churches of the past, they are simple and unadorned.”

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**Credits:** Ancestry, <http://ancestry.com>  
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Joyce Owens AIA  
Edgar Wilson Jr.  
Truman Wilson

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Photos of Edgar and Kathryn Wilson courtesy of Edgar Wilson Jr.

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