

# flue-cured favorite

*Based upon events that were part of tobacco sale days during the early 1900s, the Wendell Harvest Festival is a celebration of beloved traditions.*

by Charles Blackburn Jr.

**W**ith its mingling of cultures, Wendell's Harvest Festival is as much about the present as the past. Regionally famous, the annual Harvest Festival in Wendell in early October is a thriving legacy from the days when tobacco was king. But how it all got started is a story worth telling. Locals will tell you that the first thing you need to know about this Wake County community is how to pronounce it. Named for American poet and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, the town has nonetheless long been known as WENDELL. "One of the Italian workers who built the railroad through the heart of town supposedly kept asking: 'When the h--- do we eat?' says local historian and antiques dealer George S. Pleasants, "which got run together into WENDELL. *Our State* founder Carl Goerch told that story in the magazine years ago."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GEORGE PLEASANTS, FROM BUILDING A TOWN: WENDELL, NORTH CAROLINA

Top: Traffic along Wendell's Third Street picked up on opening sale day for tobacco in 1916. Bottom: The Star Warehouse and later the Farmers Brick Warehouse were the scenes for the economically crucial Wendell Tobacco Market in the early half of the 20th century.



During the 1960s, the annual event expanded to include a variety of competitions and a parade, complete with a float for the winners of the Miss Wendell pageant that was sponsored by the Wendell Jaycee's.

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But Pleasants says there's a more likely explanation. "In the fall of 1906, when the Raleigh-Pamlico Railroad made its first stop in Wendell, the porters and conductors sang out 'Wen-DELL!' to let passengers know where they were." Somehow, that pronunciation just stuck.

As was true in many parts of North Carolina, cotton was the chief crop grown around Wendell in the early 1900s, until a disease called Granville Wilt prompted some tobacco farmers to pack up and leave Granville County to get away from it. "The disease was in the soil," says Pleasants, "and there was no treatment for it at that time. From this influx of farmers came the most important industry in Wendell's early history."

In his book, *Building A Town: Wendell, North Carolina*, written for the town's centennial last year, Pleasants says that the first tobacco warehouses were built here in 1907. This was the first tobacco market in Wake County to be opened outside of Raleigh. "Tobacco was a constant and critical economic element," he

says. "It helped to build schools, churches, and homes; educate children; and support local businesses."

Soon, a carnival atmosphere began to accompany the annual opening of the market as hundreds of people streamed into town. It was the one time of year when farmers had money to spend. "Whole families came into town on mule-drawn wagons," Pleasants explains. "In the early days, there was general concern among opening sale day

organizers that plenty of ice water be available. One year in the 1930s, a local café sold 7,000 hot dogs on sale day."

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#### Hit parade

"The Harvest Festival is based on Southern traditions and perpetuated by them, while allowing our citizens to experience and celebrate other diverse and unique cultures as well," says Frances K. Henderson, head of the festival for more than a decade.

One year her father, local tobacconist Jesse James "Jimmy" Henderson Jr., got Homer Briarhopper, of Grand Ole Opry fame, to play for opening sale day. That was the first time live entertainment became an integral part of the celebration.

As a child growing up in Wendell, Henderson remembers sporadic parades until 1964, when the annual event was expanded. The modern-

### if you're going

Wendell Harvest Festival  
October 1-2  
Held at the J. Ashley Town Square  
in Wendell.  
For more information, call  
(919) 365-6318, or visit the website  
[www.wendellchamber.com](http://www.wendellchamber.com).





No festival is complete without its music: Two perennial favorites returning for this year's event are Mojo Collins, left, and the Band of Oz.

## This year at the festival

Twelve months of planning go into the annual Wendell Harvest Festival, which draws upwards of 10,000 people. For two days, the Harvest Festival more than doubles the population of this neighborly, postcard-pretty town 12 miles east of Raleigh on U.S. Highway 64 Business. Featuring a parade, arts and crafts booths, food vendors, a classic car and truck show, a petting zoo, and rides for the kids, plus a 5-K race, this year's festival promises to be bigger and better than ever.

Entertainment has always been a major focus. Over the years, the outdoor stage at J. Ashley Wall Towne Square has hosted some of the best bands around, including The Tams, The Showmen, and The Coastline Band, which got its first big break here. Headlining this year are perennial favorites The Embers, as well as The Band of Oz and bluesman Mojo Collins.

The Embers started making music in 1958 when a couple of Raleigh high school kids began jamming in the gym during lunch. A few short years later, they were playing a concert with Ike and Tina

Turner. A 1963 live recording from a show at N.C. State University became The Embers' first album, *Roll Eleven*, and the start of a long recording career.

Today, drummer and band leader (for 46 years) Bobby Tomlinson says the newly released *Embers Beach Music Super Collaboration* CD, featuring George Benson, Cuba Gooding, and others, is creating a lot of buzz about this distinctive home-grown genre. "Wendell's Harvest Festival is one of our favorite venues," Tomlinson says. "We've been playing there for more than a decade, and it's a great family affair."

The Band of Oz, a Carolina beach band, got its start in the small town of Gifton when some grammar and junior high school guys formed a band called The Avengers. Since none of them were old enough to drive, one of their dads hauled them to gigs in a Chevy station wagon pulling a little red trailer. The addition of a horn section brought a new dimension to their music, and the band changed its name around 1970. In 1976, the group hit the road full time. Radio

airplay of its first single "Shagging" took the Band of Oz to a new level, and the 1982 hit "Ocean Boulevard" was voted Beach Music Song of the Year.

Not many people have performed with or opened shows for Fleetwood Mac, Janis Joplin, Santana, The Grateful Dead, The Spinners, and Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs, but Kitty Hawk bluesman Mojo Collins has done all of that and more. It all started at age five, when his grandmother taught him how to play her old Stella guitar.

While serving in the Air Force and stationed in Montana, he wrote music in his off hours for Initial Shock, a band that took him to the Fillmore West in San Francisco. Then in 1971, Collins moved to the Outer Banks.

To the delight of audiences of all ages, Collins still plays on. His folk, pop, classical, and contemporary Christian songs take him to colleges, churches, and schools, where his programs Flight of Magic, Dare to Dream, and Make a Preservation bring arts and education together.

day festival grew out of those parades and other market opening activities. "Wendell's downtown revitalization in the 1960s gave rise to the Old Fashioned Harvest Festival," Henderson says. "There were tobacco tying contests, tobacco spitting contests, and ladies on parade floats carrying big tobacco leaf bouquets. Anything to do with tobacco."

### International appeal

One year, the national organization Tobacco Associates filmed the opening for a promotional video at Wendell's Harvest Festival. "It was sent to 137 non-English speaking countries," Henderson says, "and carried a bit of Wendell with it, featuring Alphas Haswell telling a group of children about our farming heritage while waving a stick of hand-tied tobacco."

Henderson took on the job of chief festival organizer in 1989, and the nonprofit Arts Foundation

of the Chamber of Commerce was established to organize and finance the event. Grants from the North Carolina Arts Council and the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County, combined with corporate and local business support, allowed the festival to grow.

N.C. Agriculture Commissioner Jim Graham was grand marshal and opened the festival each year during Henderson's tenure. And one year actress Valerie Harper, from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Rhoda," was a celebrity guest. "We've had car shows, farm implements shows, pig picking cook-offs in conjunction with the N.C. Pork Association, and craftsmen from as far away as Maine and Hungary," Henderson says.

Past festivals have seen performances by Bland Simpson of Red Clay Ramblers fame, Rebecca and the HiTones, the Chuck Davis Youth Group, local National Hollering Champion Roby Morgan,

and the Senior Strutters from the local senior center.

But of all the entertainment, beach music has a special place here. "It's a locally grown art form," Henderson says. "The Embers have played here so many times, even they don't know exactly how many."

The Harvest Festival has taken on a life of its own, according to Ula Mae Life at the Wendell Chamber of Commerce. "But, essentially," she says, "what began all those years ago is continuing today."

The tobacco warehouses in Wendell are closed now, and the musical chant of the auctioneer is gone from those cavernous places. Gone too is that musty fragrance of flue-cured leaf that wafted down the streets.

"The Harvest Festival is better than it ever was," says Pleasants, "but I miss that sweet, pungent smell." 🗺️

*Charles Blackburn Jr. lives in Raleigh.*