



BIRDHOUSE WILLY
THE MAN BEHIND THE NAME
 by J. Peter Hvidsten
[Focus on Scugog](#)

There are many words to describe the man known about town as “Birdhouse Willy,” but a couple of the most fitting would have to be generous and compassionate.

And it may come as a surprise to anyone who’s experienced his sometimes gruff and crusty personality, that he began nurturing injured birds back to health when he was just a young lad.

“I always had the ability to see something beautiful in all birds,” he recalled in a recent interview when asked how he got the name “Birdhouse Willy”.

Long before he was tagged with this now familiar monicker Bill Barr was born in “the beach” district of Toronto’s east end. He was raised, along with his three brothers and one sister, in their Queen St. east home and attended Williamson Rd. Public School and Eastern Commerce High School.

“I wasn’t a good student. I didn’t like school,” Bill admits, leaving school after completing Grade 10. His early education came mainly from the street and when he was only 11 years-old he would drag his old wagon down to the local supermarket and deliver groceries home for shoppers for the princely sum of ten cents a trip.

It was during this time he was bullied by some of the bigger, tougher youth of the area. Wanting to avoid fights he acquired another wagon and hired an older, stronger boy to work for him. This put a stop to the bullying almost immediately.

Two years later Bill graduated to the next phase of his young business career, purchasing newspaper routes from other carriers for 25 cents a customer.

He ended up with between 35 and 50 customers, delivering newspapers for the Telegram, Toronto Star, Star Weekly and the Globe in a heavy canvas bag over his shoulder.

“I got up at 5:30 in the morning to deliver the Globe before going to school, then delivered the Telegram and Star after school,” he said. The Star Weekly was only delivered on Saturdays.

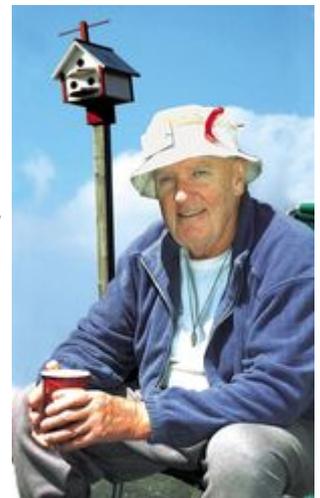
By the time he turned 16 years old, Bill gave up the paper routes and began working part-time for the T. Eaton Company in downtown Toronto, first as a messenger boy and later to a position in the sales audit department.

After leaving school he was offered a full-time position with Eatons working his way up to the position of adjuster in the furnace department.

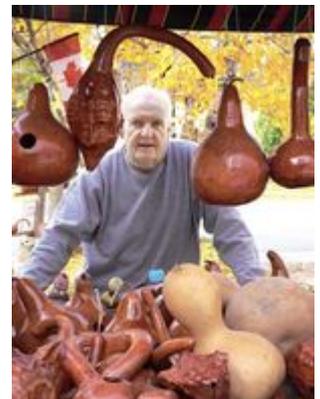
“I fell in love with furnaces,” he smiled, explaining that it took him out of the office quite a bit. But after about three years there he got his first big break.

At 26 years of age he was moved to the new Eaton store when it opened in Oshawa, as manager of the heavy goods department. Four years later he was called back to Toronto where he became part of a team planning the opening of the new Eatons store in Don Mills.

Next came a promotion to the sporting goods department where he became manager for Ontario. It was in this capacity that he made his first buying trip overseas to the Orient. This was also his last trip with the Eaton company, as the **Towers Department Store chain came calling and hired Bill away.**



William Barr, better known as "Birdhouse Willy"



Birdhouse Willy with some of his gourds.

But he has many fond memories of his days with Eatons and a friendship he developed with John David Eaton, the company's owner.

Bill first met Mr. Eaton on an elevator while going to the company coffee shop early one morning after his drive to work from Seagrave. After that encounter they met numerous times since they were both early risers, they often crossed paths in the morning.

It was during one of these encounters that Mr. Eaton told Bill since the company didn't have a pension plan that he should be vigilant and save his money. "It was good advice that I never forgot," he says.

He also fondly recalls a conversation in which he told Mr. Eaton about a man in Cannington who was selling his beekeeping operation. Mr. Eaton had his personal beekeeper pick Bill up at his Seagrave home, so he could take him to Cannington.

Mr. Eaton purchased the man's entire beekeeping operation and instructed his beekeeper to set up 12 hives on the Barr property in Seagrave. The hives resulted in an accident that almost took his life, after he was attacked by his bees and had to jump in his pond... but that's another story... one you can ask him about.

Bill's career could not have moved along so rapidly without the support of his loving wife Shirley, who he met while attending a couples club at the Bellefair United Church when he was only 16 years old.

"We hit it off pretty good and were married about three years later," he recalls, and adds that they just celebrated their 56th anniversary this past March.

Initially the newly married couple lived in two rented rooms of a house, with a shared bathroom. But when Shirley gave birth to twin boys, they moved into a larger apartment which had two bedrooms and their own bathroom. The apartment was in a four-plex and Bill agreed to manage the building for the owner, in exchange for reduction in their rent payments.

Of their five children, four were born in Toronto and their youngest after they moved to Port Perry in 1959.

It was after the move to Port Perry, and while with Towers stores that Bill did most of his travelling. As head purchaser for the company he travelled extensively, for six weeks at a time, throughout Japan, Taiwan, Korea and China purchasing sporting goods. He also spent many weeks a year in England, Germany, France and other European countries.

"I felt very guilty leaving Shirley home with five kids, but that was my job," Bill admits.

Bill's life took another detour in 1970 when Loblaws came knocking, **luring him away from Towers** and hiring him as their merchandise manager. Five years later his life took another turn, but this time it brought him closer to home.

In 1975 he along with his son Bob, opened the Stedman's store in Port Perry Plaza, ending 14 years of travelling from Seagrave to Toronto every morning - a daily 120 mile return trip.

During the 17 years he and his son operated the local store, they purchased both the Uxbridge and Stouffville Stedman stores. Then in 1989, at 58 years of age, he decided to retire, leaving the business in the capable hands of his son.

And this brings us back to "Birdhouse Willy."

It was while living in Seagrave on a beautiful three-acre property that his interest in birds was rekindled. He started out building birdhouses for himself, then people started dropping in asking him to build houses for them.

It was at this time his interest in Purple Martins was perked up by Eddie Michelle, owner of Birdseye Centre Cabin Park in Port Perry. Eddie had a number of Purple Martin houses on his property and Bill learned about the birds from him.

Back home in Seagrave, he continued to erect birdhouses around his property and pond, at one time having 25-30 houses on the property.

It was these houses that lured a young Seagrave lad, Brian Keene, to walk about a mile and a half to the Barr home on Simcoe St., just south of the Seagrave entrance.

Brian, came to the door one day and asked Shirley if "Birdhouse Willy" could come out and play.

Bill and Shirley's youngest son, coincidentally named Brian, said to his dad "that's the name you should use for your birdhouse business."

And so "Birdhouse Willy," was born and the name has stuck like glue for more than 25 years. As a loving gesture of inclusion, Bill refers to Shirley as his "Little Wren," signifying his affection for the special woman in his life.

Over the past 21 years, since moving to their Simcoe St. home in Port Perry, Bill can be found busy in his garage/workshop cutting and assembling houses for birds, bats and toads. A few years ago he also started selling gourds he purchases from Georgia, which he reminds us were one of the world's first birdhouses.

He also gives back to the community, having donated more than 1,100 units over the past two decades to dozens of organizations and groups for prizes and projects.

He's served as a director and president of the Scugog Chamber of Commerce, was vice president of the Central Seven Association (now Community Living) and a member of the Seagrave United Church and Oddfellows Lodge for almost half a century.

But it's his "Birdhouse Willy" activities that have made him a household name around this community. And his dedication to Purple Martins can be seen in both Birdseye Park and Rotary Park where he has erected and maintained birdhouses since 1986, at no charge to the community.

So the next time you run into a big man with a crumpled white hat, stain splattered shoes and t-shirt walking along the street... just say hello to one of Port Perry's unique characters, "Birdhouse Willy."

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