

***IN MEMORIAM***  
**Billy Jack Scarbrough**  
**1934–2019**



Billy Jack (left, photo courtesy of Wyvona Scarbrough); Brian Scarbrough and shop (right, photo courtesy of Clay Tucker)

Where would the community of dendrochronology be if ready-made core mounts were not available? Certainly, some of us have the time and resources to make our own, but for those who can't, don't, or won't, there are the Billy Jacks of the world. Billy Jack Scarbrough passed away on March 14, 2019, at the age of 84. Among Billy's many occupations and hobbies after retiring from the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, he was a fine woodworker, mostly making cabinets and furniture for local use in his hometown of Perkinston, Mississippi. Once in the late 1990s, Billy was approached by scientists from the Harrison Experimental Forest station in need of core mounts for long-term storage. At the time, the Harrison station was driving comprehensive research of longleaf pine habitat in the southeastern U.S. Lynn Lott, a former employee at the Harrison station noted that numerous U.S. Forest Service employees cored nearly 20,000 trees throughout 14 states during the 1990s, and they needed as many core mounts as they could get.

Lynn contacted his friend Billy to make core mounts, but Billy was new to this process and

needed help with quality control. Billy sent mounts he made to Ed Cook at Lamont-Doherty for assessment, and after three renditions, Dr. Cook accepted the work. Billy worked with engineers to create a *very* custom router set for his mounts. High-grade tulip poplar is sent through the bits, then planed to create smooth surfaces. The mounts are high-quality, indeed! Although Billy is no longer with us to create the mounts himself, his son Brian has taken on that role, and his wife Wyvona still runs the business side of things.

Early in 2023, I had been here at the University of Southern Mississippi for more than a year, and I noticed my own lab was low on core mount supplies. I called Wyvona to place an order, and to my surprise, she remembered both tree-ring researchers who occupied the tree-ring lab at Southern Miss before me (*i.e.* Tommy Patterson and Grant Harley). Eventually we discussed how many mounts I needed and what they would cost. Later, she sent me an email with two invoices: one with shipping costs included, and one without. In that email, she let me know that I could probably come pick them

up for much less than it would cost to ship them. I jumped at the opportunity!

On a beautiful day in January, I made the 45-minute drive down U.S. Highway 49 from Hattiesburg. The shop is easy enough to find on Google Maps, but I used Wyvona's instructions anyway. There's something about exploring geographies with written instructions... Alas, I reached driveway to the *Custom Woodwork by Billy Jack* shop, an unassuming house with an attached garage and adjacent barn. Billy's son Brian met me as I drove up to the house and invited me into the shop. He showed me the *very* custom router bits, the pile of high-quality *Liriodendron tulipifera* lumber, the planer, and the shipping boxes. *I had heard about this place for a decade; how had it taken me this long to see it in person?*

Wyvona tells me that she still has records of all the sales they've made over nearly 30 years. The first customer was the Harrison Experimental Forest, followed closely by an order from Columbia University, the Lamont-Doherty Tree Ring Lab, no doubt.

She and Brian list off other universities as they can remember, "There's someone at the University of Alaska that always orders hundreds of feet of mounts. Do you know who that is? I don't know who that is." *I try to think who that might be...* The list grows longer, and Wyvona's final estimate is that since their first sale, they've sold to over 400 customers and more than 500,000 linear feet of core mounts, and Wyvona reminds me that she's here to take orders if needed!

Sometimes we forget the myriad of very small things that science requires. Most of us purchase core mounts every few years as we need them and never give it a second thought. But without that link in the production chain, the work would not get done. I thank Billy Jack, Wyvona, and Brian for sharing their talents and time to serve our community of dendrochronologists for all these decades.

—Contributed by Clay Tucker  
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