



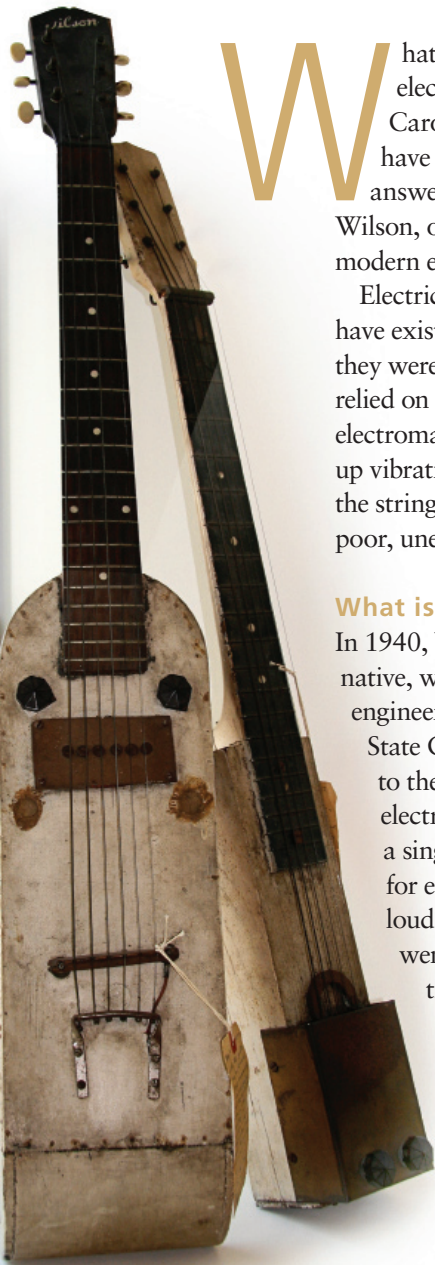
Tar Heel Treasures

Almost Famous

The history books may not reflect it, but a North Carolina State University alumnus is credited with creating the first modern electric guitar.

BY L. A. JACKSON

Wilson's "first" guitar (left) is flanked by a Hawaiian model he built.



What do rock 'n' roll, electricity, and North Carolina State University have in common? The cryptic answer is William Sidney Wilson, one of the fathers of the modern electric guitar.

Electric stringed instruments have existed since the 1920s, but they were acoustic guitars that relied on microphones or single electromagnetic bars that picked up vibrations collectively from all the strings. Both devices made for poor, uneven sound.

What is it?

In 1940, Wilson, a Yanceyville native, was studying electrical engineering at North Carolina State College. He had a solution to the inferior sound quality of electric guitars, reasoning that a single-coil magnetic pickup for each string would even the loudness of the strings. Wilson went against conventional thinking and figured that a large, hollow guitar body actually contributed to

unwanted feedback. He made his own version and entered it in the university's Engineering Fair. The skinny, odd-looking instrument was the hit of the fair and won first prize.

Patents resulting from academic research were uncommon in the 1940s, and Wilson took his ideas no further than the Engineering Fair. Gibson and Fender instrument companies later also discovered the advantages of individual pickups and the practicality of solid-body electric guitars, and both became rock icons.

Where is it now?

To his dying day, Wilson wondered what became of his odd-looking guitar, which until recently had been stored at N.C. State's Department of Physics. Now, the spotlight has been turned back on, and the guitar is on display at D.H. Hill Library on the university's campus.

L.A. Jackson strums and hums in Apex.

to know more

For a link to D.H. Hill Library's website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."