



# A top hat retires



*Lewis C. Wilson  
Building Dedication  
By Tom Dover  
(Mr. Wonka)*

## *Dirty Dozie in Glassland* *Written by Lewis C. Wilson*

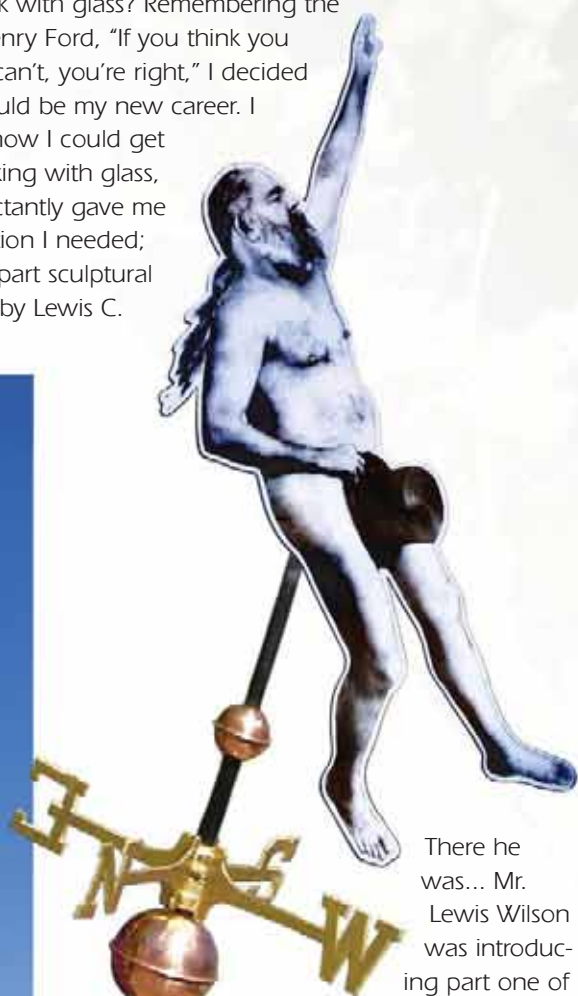
*I was walking in the deep woods one sunny day when I came upon a Small Wizard. He was almost in tears, mourning and grieving about something he had lost. It was a most pathetic sight. I asked him what he had lost and he said his "best colored glass. He had obtained it from a man called Henry, who was a wizard himself at making glass in the best colors. Not knowing what these colors were I helped the Little Wizard look everywhere. We found reds and blues and many other colors, but we could not find his "best colors. I asked him where he had actually found them to begin with, and he said in a mystical place called Oregon, where the Wizard Henry lived. I said, "Why don't we just go to Oregon and get more from him?" So we got on the Wizard's camel (don't ask me why a camel) and rode for eighty-two days. There was the Wizard Henry. The Small Wizard asked him if he could get some more of his best colors. The Wizard Henry said, "Yes, if you can find them. I did not have a clue where to look, but the Small Wizard asked me to pick him up so he could get close to the Wizard Henry's face. (After all he was small.) His index finger touched the Wizard Henry on the forehead. We had found the Small Wizard's "best colored glass. It was in the Wizard Henry's mind. So I went to Glass Alchemy and bought Indigo huster, aquatic curvial, silver strike three, and purple huster to make this bend.*





In late 1993, I was at a flea market in New York and came across a man (Blair Greene) with a torch set up at his booth. I was amazed so many beautiful, intricate items could be produced with nothing more than glass rods and a few simple hand tools. The fire was captivating, and I watched this man work for hours... It was the first time I've ever seen glass manipulated in a flame, and it was then that I was "bitten by the glass bug." I knew that this was my calling in life, and I had to learn this art form. I visited the flea market every weekend just to watch this man work.

At the time, I was a selfemployed full time air compressor mechanic and had no formal art training. Was it possible for me to learn how to work with glass? Remembering the words of Henry Ford, "If you think you can or you can't, you're right," I decided that this would be my new career. I asked Blair how I could get started working with glass, and he reluctantly gave me the information I needed; order the 5 part sculptural video series by Lewis C. Wilson.



There he was... Mr. Lewis Wilson was introducing part one of his video series.

Before the glass instructions even started, it was very entertaining watching him eat fire before he started working with it. I would sit in front of the television every chance I got with two pencils, and mimic every move I saw on the screen. Before I owned a torch, I was learning the most basic concept of glass sculptures. I frequently rewound the videos and listen to the concepts of proper seals, acute angles, and more.

After several weeks of watching the videos, I returned to the flea market to offer the glass blower \$100 to work on his torch for an hour.

He agreed, and I picked up a 6mm rod and went to work. The first piece I made was a dolphin, and the second piece was a horse. He didn't believe that this was my first time behind a torch, because my work actually resembled what I was trying to make. They were far from perfect, but they were "acceptable"... especially for a beginner.

The next day I ordered a glass blowing kit from Glasscraft. I practiced every night, and as I got better I decided it was time to leave New York and dedicate my full time and attention to glass working. I sold my business, and my wife, Elaine, and I headed for the woods of Pennsylvania. While I worked hard to hone my craft, I e-mailed Mr. Wilson several times with some questions. He didn't know me from a hole in the wall, but he was gracious enough to help me out when I encountered problems.

One day my wife answered the telephone, and she seemed a bit shocked. She said, "Lewis Wilson is on the line." Wow, this was like an altar boy getting a call from the Pope... or a 10 year old kid getting a call from Batman. I was in shock, and said "Hello Mr. Wilson." When he replied, "Hi Tom...you can call me Lewis," his soothing and familiar voice that I heard so many times put me at ease. I was still shocked that my mentor, and my hero, took time out of his day to call *me*! Honestly, I don't even recall what we talked about (again, I was in shock), but he was walking me through a few things that I was having problems with. This is the kind of person that Lewis is... always willing to help people expand their horizons.

I had the pleasure of meeting Lewis face to face in 2003, when he attended our 3rd annual *Art Glass Invitational* (A.G.I.). When I saw the back door of my house open up and he walked out wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt partially covered by his gray beard, I was shocked (again). What an honor it was to have my hero at my house! I couldn't resist giving him a big hug and a, "Thank you for being here."

He wowed our guests by doing demonstrations of his Indian Dancer series, a dragon, and experimented with dichroic bar to create a new line of glass bugs. He was gracious enough to give away every piece that he made here to guests and neighbors who supported our vision. After his visit, Lewis produced a set of DVD's from his 2003 Flame Off, and they were dedicated to 2 people: His hero, Bill Rasmussen, and me, Tom Doner. It was the greatest honor to be recognized by the man who provided me with the inspiration to a path that changed my life.

Fast forward to 2005: Thanks to the help of our new partner, Luke Gardner, we recently erected a new 3600 square foot facility that compliments our three existing glass studios in rural western Pennsylvania. This new building is a milestone for us in bringing the art of lampworking to the general public and to flame workers across the United States.

A building is nothing more than a space defined by walls and square footage, so it needed a "personality." If it weren't for the inspiration and instruction of a very special person, I would not be in the position that I am in today.



On Friday, September 2nd, 2005, during our 5th annual A.G.I., our new building was dedicated to my mentor and my hero, Lewis C. Wilson. A void was filled on the front of the structure when he proudly glued in the sign: "The Lewis C. Wilson Building." He was also presented with a key to the building, and a weather vane (made by Barbara Caraway) will grace the rooftop commemorating his story, "Dirty Looie in Glassland."

Lewis retired his trademark gray top hat, which will be on permanent display in the building that bears his name. Laminated photographs, newspaper articles, magazine covers, and letters from presidents and kings are also on display for all to see.

It is an honor to pay tribute to a man with such a colorful life and career. His daughter Jennifer calls him "The Forrest Gump of Glass"- From earning a black belt in Karate, to working on the Apollo 15 mission, to providing Monica Lewinski with a gift from Bill Clinton, Lewis Wilson has done it all. I treasure our friendship, and look forward to what he has yet to accomplish.

Thank you Lewis, you'll always be my hero!

Tom Doner

### From the top hat

"I have worked with glass for over thirty years. I hope that I have helped people be able to have a better understanding about working with glass. I have always just thought that sharing knowledge about glass would be better for EVERYONE working with glass. I like teaching and passing on how things are done.

I grew up with friends in glass that now have names that are recognized as the ones that have been around a while. They have taught at Pilchuck or Penland or Corning. We have become a group of dinosaurs that are known mostly because we have been here a long time. We have paid our dues. We may have been in a few magazines or museums.

Along comes Tom Doner, Mr Wonka. Nobody knew who he was. Most do not know what he has made in glass. Maybe he started as a pipe maker. Maybe a bead maker. He is truly the most unlikely hero from the new group of lampworkers out there. To me, new, is like working with glass for less than ten years or so.

Tom is unassuming and rather mild and reserved. He is the direct opposite of me in his approach to holding an event. His AGI has grown from a group of pipemakers to a dominant force of the most forward moving segment of the American lampworkers. He brings in sought after instructors and offers a uniquely weird venue to have people play and show off and share and thrive. He knows the thing that I have always thought was best for all people playing with glass. He knows that you must give and share and then you will learn and develop. Tom's AGI is an incredible gift to the lampworkers of this nation. We should all take a deep bow and say thanks to this very special person.

"Tom, in your short time with glass, you have paid big time dues. There are only a few words that I can say to truly give you the compliment that you deserve. So here it is. I consider you an equal to those that I have stood shoulder to shoulder with for over three decades. Tom, you are a dinosaur".

Lewis C Wilson- proudly flying naked over AGI

\*For more information on Lewis or the events he hosts, please visit his family's website [www.crystalmyths.com](http://www.crystalmyths.com).

\*For more information about The Art Glass Invitational, please visit [www.glass123.com](http://www.glass123.com), or call (724) 791-2100.

Photos below are from the Art Glass Invitational '05. Graal Bowl to the right was made by Robert Mickelsen. Photos below from left to right; Steve Sizelove, his goblet, Andrew Brown, his paperweight & Robert Mickelsen.

