



Silas Allen
2011 recipient of the Holman Award

**Allen takes the N.C. building code to its last frontier and guides
Big Sweep cleanups of his beloved lakes**

By Tom Bennett

Silas R. Allen has outlasted four Cherokee County managers and four health department directors. He is the only chief building inspector to have persisted in the position and firmly placed his stamp upon it here in the farthest western county – the last in North Carolina to embrace the state’s building code. It’s a milestone that the codes which make homebuilding safer now are in the 25th year in this 147-year-old county, one never eager to accept government regulation.

Allen alone commands the respect and has the people skills to modify the behavior of large, strong men. He has brought them an astonishing new fact of life that has hit them like a thunderclap. And here it is: You have to get approvals to build structures.

The General Assembly knew it was going to be a blow to the people of the western mountains with their independent ways. So the solons timed the 1977 North Carolina building code to go in incrementally until at last it became effective in counties of 25,000 and under population (like ours) on July 1, 1985, during the Reagan presidency.

A home near us is a 1947 bungalow. It is in a pleasant cove alongside a trickling stream, well down in a floodplain. Its environmental arrangement was that a straight pipe directed waste right into that stream. Then the waste traveled 100 yards through a culvert under a state road and into a well-known local creek that is a tributary of the Hiwassee River.

The floor of the bungalow, swollen by the moisture in the ground below imparted by many snows, eventually bucked up so there was a visible hump. You could have put a marble on the crest and it would have rolled to a wall. The moisture problem rendered the bungalow uninhabitable within the lifetime of the original occupants. And that for the most part could be a typical pre-1985 Cherokee County home that was constructed during hard times. These homes were built in stages, just enough at a time to accommodate the increased number of new family members.

But now, after Silas Allen joined the building inspection department in 1992 and was formally named its director three years later, contractors are licensed. To build, they have to have permits that are up to date. On a day rife with meaning for the Cherokee County economy and the future quality of life in safe homes here, Allen or another inspector will visit the building site. Often the inspector will help the contractor adjust the building plan for the better. Once that critical step has been taken, the inspector (in a move not cheered by arborists, I imagine) will nail an inspection record poster to a tree. This placard represents the arrival of modern construction techniques to the farthest point to the west in North Carolina. The work commences and each subcontractor's task is inspected and if it passes muster, it is approved.

The sites now are stabilized so the floors won't buckle with age. They have electricity and safe water. The septic tank and its drain field are properly placed by trained sanitarians working for the county health department. The road has runoff control measures such as relief culverts and sediment traps. The work progresses until at last a certificate of occupancy is awarded. 266 such certificates have been issued in Cherokee County by Allen's department just within the last twelve months. How has quality of life here improved, and has safety and well-being of families increased, because of his work? It's impossible to measure.

Silas Allen has done a lot with a very little for many reforms of land-use planning remain to be done here in the county. But for now there is a particular area of his work that shows how he is a homegrown product with the homespun touch, yet also possessing technological skills from his days as an Air Force technical sergeant.

In 2005, North Carolina showed a lot of foresight when it reached a technical agreement with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for our scientists to make updated, enhanced floodplain maps. Then Silas Allen and the other county flood-control managers employed the new Light Imaging and Detecting Radar altimetry and its sophisticated related software called ArcGIS. This permitted them to interpolate all the information in the Tarheel state's first-ever accurate Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMS). It qualified property owners here for affordable flood insurance from FEMA. This could save North Carolinians millions of dollars a year in premiums for a product otherwise commercially prohibitive.

Since 1996, Silas Allen has been Cherokee County's coordinator of the annual "Big Sweep" cleanup of the trash in our lakes as part of the North Carolina Big Sweep and Clean & Beautiful campaign of the Department of Transportation. "We're in our fourteenth year and I'm very proud to be able to do it," Allen said.

In a typical sweep in October 2009, there were 102 volunteers to board the armada of private boats in what you could call Admiral Allen's volunteer navy. We fanned out from the Hanging Dog boat ramp of the Tusquittee Ranger Station of the Nantahala National Forest. Working just

from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., we picked up from coves of Lake Hiwassee that are chronic traps of trash from mile 6 to mile 9.5. We bagged just over eight tons of household litter and other waste.

In 2010, the Allen navy worked farther west in Lake Hiwassee just above the 307-foot-tall dam. At this point, particularly disappointing aspects of the trash are big chunks of floating docks that have broken apart at marinas and private sites and the parts now careen around in the churn of the lake. A photo of Silas Allen and his fellow Building Inspection Dept. worker Susan Hersh with a boatload of these big Styrofoam pieces illustrates what problems these pose. Allen expects that with the pounds that are to be collected during this year's Big Sweep set for September 24, 2011, the fourteen year total will be well over 150 thousand pounds.

"The number one citation issued by Fish and Wildlife game wardens is littering," Allen said. "Sports enthusiasts and fishermen are not the ones fouling the water. People now are carrying nets in their boats to pick up litter as they fish. The others around them see that being done, and they start doing it, too. Allen is a firm believer of "Cleanliness breeds cleanliness."

Allen recalls how he first began the Big Sweep cleanups in the next great impoundment of the Hiwassee River upstream called Lake Apalachia. However, the litterbugs in the two lakes unwittingly have an unfortunate partnership. "For Lake Apalachia to be kept as clean as we can get it, we have to clean Lake Hiwassee so what's in it doesn't come through the spillway to Lake Apalachia."

The Tennessee Valley Authority brought science to these mountains. A child born in the aftermath of that would naturally come to understand how large machines move dirt. He would not be put off by engineering and would appreciate the benefits of limited, thoughtful government leadership in people's lives.

For 57 months, the 307-foot-high Hiwassee Dam, closed in 1940, was the tallest dam in the eastern United States. Then it gave up that distinction in the record book to the 480-foot-high Fontana Dam that was closed in 1944. The families living here and working on these marvels of concrete gravity took a lot of pride in them.

Edward and Nell Allen and their nine children lived, as their forebears had done, in the rural Camp Creek community of northwest Cherokee County. Edward was a laborer employed by TVA on the Hiwassee and 1943 Apalachia dams. When the fifth child, Silas was born in September 1946, his father was employed by the Department of Defense on the further development of the atomic bomb and they were living in Rockwood, Tenn., near the Oak Ridge Laboratory. Later they returned to Camp Creek.

Silas graduated from Hiwassee Dam High School. In the U.S. Air Force in 1965-69 (all of his service was stateside), he reached the grade of E-7 technical sergeant and worked on aircraft-engine testing including those of the B-52 bomber, F-4 Phantom and KC-135 tanker. "Testing those engines took a toll on my hearing," he recalls.

After his discharge, he took a civilian job with Lockheed Corporation in Marietta Ga. building the C5-A, the largest military transport plane ever. Realizing after a couple of years that he was not that happy with repetitious assembly work he took a week vacation to visit with Pratt & Whittneys Research and Development Center in West Palm Beach Fla. With his experience, was hired on the spot. After terminating his employment with Lockheed he returned to Fla.

where he partnered with others to perform endurance testing on newly developed internal combustion engines. Engines used in SR-71 spy plane and other not yet labeled engines would soon be used in aircraft that were yet off the assembly line.

As that job closed, Silas moved to Greenville, S.C., and a job with the aerospace firm Ling-Temco-Vaught. This was the luckiest move he made because as a member of a bowling team representing the company, he went to a bowling alley and met what turned out to be a fellow LTV employee, a beautiful young woman named Bobbie Williams. She had a lot of experience around the waters of the Earth, too, because her father was in the Navy's submarine service, and she was born in Hawaii while her dad was stationed there. Silas and Bobbie later were married.

Together they moved to Las Vegas where Silas joined a brother of his in a company building custom homes and apartments. In 1980, Silas and Bobbie came home to Camp Creek here in Cherokee County where he continued as a builder of custom homes.

“I started with the (Cherokee County) Building Inspection Department in 1992. I did the duties of a department head and was the one they called on to testify before the commissioners between then and 1995, when I was made the chief inspector.”

He is a charter member of the board of directors of the Hiwassee River Watershed Coalition, which was formed that same year. “I remember we had our first meetings in a water pumping station on Mining Gap Road in Towns County (near Lake Chatuge),” he recalled.

He and Bobbie, his wife of thirty-seven years, enjoy these lakes in their 18-foot Ranger bass boat with its 150-horsepower Mercury XR4 engine. They have two horses, the 32-year-old mare Penny and her offspring the gelding Lucky, who was born on Friday the 13th.

“Every day I hug the horses and feed them,” Silas said. “It’s a heck of a responsibility, owning animals that size.” but they are my stress reliever. I clean up behind them, feed them and clean up again behind them and I don't get mad. I love it.