

Homegrown Lake developer marks 25th year

By JOHN LAMBERT

The Willard Companies and Willard Construction of Roanoke Valley, Inc. are observing their 25th year in business.

The companies' founder, Ron Willard, grew up on a farm in Franklin County. He didn't know it as a youngster, but he was growing up beside what would become his passion in life--Smith Mountain Lake. Willard remembers when the water began covering the land, next door to the family farm. His father was a farmer and carpenter, who built everything from tobacco slides to the family residence.

As the land where he rode his bike as a teenager became inundated, Willard wondered what his future would be.

Since starting his construction company in 1973, Willard has been part of more than 1,000 transactions--land, multi-family developments, single family homes and commercial buildings--valued at more than \$250 million. He owns or has developed more than 2,000 acres at the Lake and is a leading figure in the homebuilding industry nationally.

After graduating from Franklin County High School, Willard became a laborer and soon moved to a carpenter's position for John W. Daniel Construction Company, which developed Highland Lakes at Smith Mountain Lake in 1966.

"I became fascinated with the development business," he recalls. "I had grown up with sawdust in my bloodstream. I wanted to hear the powersaws running and hear the nails banging. I enjoyed seeing all the parts come together."

Soon, he was promoted to superintendent and learned how to manage people and jobs. "The lessons I learned on the job and in correspondence school still help me today."

After working for a commercial builder in Roanoke, Willard had saved more than \$30,000 and decided at the age of 27 to start his own business. He remodeled homes, built restaurants, stores and even a doctor's office.

He became an active member of the Roanoke Regional Homebuilders Association. He traveled across the country and saw residential communities under development. Willard envisioned quality developments at the Lake he knew so well.

In 1976, he bought some land and the next year began The Waterfront, which is a 755-acre community with

all lots owned by Willard having been sold. In 1981, he opened the Lake's first golf course at The Waterfront.

During his travels for the homebuilders association, Willard developed a vision of the enormous potential for the Lake, referring to it as the "Tahoe of the East," after Nevada's famous lake. He made the

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*Ron Willard
Lake developer*



Ron Willard celebrates his 25th year with Willard Companies and Willard Construction of Roanoke Valley Inc.

comparison because of the size of Smith Mountain Lake, the quality of the water and the beauty of the mountains surrounding it.

With the success of The Waterfront, Willard turned his attention to a second upscale community, The Water's Edge, which opened in 1985. The 700-acre community features a golf course that was ranked number three in Virginia in 1992.

Along the way, Willard opened a real estate agency, Waterfront Properties of Smith Mountain Lake, Inc.

More recently, Willard developed The Boardwalk, a 100-acre Nan-

tucket style village in 1995. The "cottages" have sold with prices of approximately \$400,000.

Commercial development is rapidly following the residential growth. Willard himself has built three office buildings at Westlake Corner, which include his construction business and real estate offices.

"The area was desolate 40 years ago," he recalls. "Who could have dreamed all that has happened here?" Willard added that Franklin, Bedford and Pittsylvania counties have received millions of dollars in new taxes from the development at the Lake.

In 25 years, Willard's goal has

changed from "becoming a millionaire by the time I was 30," to improving the quality of life at the Lake. "This is where I live and work. It is my home. I love the Lake.

"What makes a difference to me now is to improve the life of people and this community through quality in everything I touch," Willard says.

Lambert is owner of John Lambert Associates, a Roanoke-based advertising and public relations firm.