



The Brothers Wages

by Mary Welch



They share the same last name and finish each other's sentences. When one becomes modest about his accomplishments, the other brags about And each is highly successful in his creative field.

Bill Wages is a noted cinematographer - perhaps the first in Atlanta to work in feature films and live in Atlanta. His brother Bob has headed up the respected Wages Design firm since 1979 - a feat of talent and survival.

Decatur, Georgia, in the 1950s may not have been a hotbed of creative activity, but it was in the Wages household. Their father was a printer. "It was a blue-collar household. Our dad probably had more urges to do something else, probably creative, but he returned from World War II and went to work," said Bill. "But at that time, printers were also designers and it was a lot more than simply doing a print job. I think we lived out his dream."

Their mother supported her sons' budding talents. "Well, she saw early on that we couldn't do anything else," recalls Bob with a chuckle. "So she and our father pushed us in what we could do."

That "pushing" included art lessons at the High Museum of Art, where their father took lessons with them. The elder Mr. Wages rented space from a sign painter named Mr. Crow. "That was when sign painting was an art," says Bob. "We would go to work with our father on weekends and hang around the paint bins and Mr. Crow would teach us things. It was great exposure to design, colors, and a love of the visual world."

Bill, who at 52 is three years younger than Bob, discovered his calling after buying a magazine during one of his weekly bus trips to downtown Atlanta. "We would go to the movies, and I was interested in making movies - not being in them. But I was in the seventh grade and every Saturday a bunch of us would go downtown. There was a photography store where Georgia-Pacific is today. In the window was a copy of American Cinematographer. I bought it. That magazine helped me define what it was I wanted to do with the rest of my life."

Again, their parents supported his goal. They bought him an 8mm movie camera, and he started making home movies that were a little bit more involved than those of the usual sort, with a family staring at the camera and waving.

His brother now takes over the story. "Bill wanted to get a shot of the car going down the driveway. Bill put the camera on the driveway and we had worked it so the car would easily clear the camera. Well, the transmission hit the camera and

there was a big crunch. Bill was in agony as the car ran over this camera." Bill, still wincing but laughing at the memory, admits he still has that camera.

While Bill fiddled with moving cameras, Bob flirted with pursuing music as a career before going to the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga as an industrial engineering student. Two years later, he realized that he "hated engineering." A technicality prevented him from transferring right away to Georgia Tech. So he bided his time as a transient student at Georgia State taking art classes.

After a second semester at Georgia State as a transient student, he ran into another horrible technicality. "It was in the midst of the Vietnam War, in 1969, and I couldn't enroll at Tech for another semester. So instead of enrolling full time at Georgia State, I remained a transient student. But being a transient student for two semesters in a row meant you lost your student status. Overnight I lost my student deferment and became 1A and eligible for the draft."

He resigned from ROTC ("I didn't want to go and be shot at as a second lieutenant") and cast his fate with the draft lottery. It worked - he was number 348 - and he continued at Georgia State, marrying in 1971 and graduating in 1972 with a degree in visual arts.

Admitting he looked "like a Boy Scout," Bob went to Tucker Wayne, where he was given a list of people in town to call. A new agency, McDonald & Little, was on the list. "I had a interview with Ted Burn, who was late. He kept calling to say he'd be right there. It was hours before he showed up. But I was hired for \$5 an hour, \$9,000 a year, and I was as happy as a lark."

He was the thirteenth employee of the agency that is still referred to as Atlanta's most creative shop. "I had never designed an ad in my life and the first week I was given a headline - 'Get Tough on Washington' - and told to design an ad for Sam Nunn's first senatorial campaign. It took me 16 hours to lay it out, and all it was was a picture, a headline and body copy."

He joined a creative team consisting of Ted Burn, Don Gill, Clyde Hogg, Tom Little, Ralph McGill, and Virgil Shutze. "I was the low person on the creative totem pole but I was given assignments that at other agencies would go to more veteran people." Among his early assignments was to come up with a logo for the new professional teams in Atlanta, the Hawks and Flames. Given a Tom Little headline, "The Iceman Cometh," for the Flames, Wages designed a logo that emblazoned the jerseys of Atlanta's first hockey team. "

It just amazes me the opportunities I had at McDonald & Little," he says. "I did my design work at night because during the day I was doing art direction. But for a kid just out of school to be given major assignments and to work with such high powered creative talent was something."

While his professional life took off, his personal life took a turn toward religion. "You certainly weren't going to find Jesus at McDonald & Little," he says with a laugh. So Bob and a few other Christians formed a Bible study class and then decided to start a creative services company aimed at the religious community called Graphic Truth. While the new company fed his soul, it did not exactly feed his family. After two-and-a-half years, he started freelancing and opened Wages Design in 1979. He quickly discovered he could not work out of his home but had no problem working out of Bill's. Wages Design moved into Bill's basement.

Bill, meanwhile, was on track toward his dream. Armed with a 16mm camera, Bill helped Bob with a school project by shooting and editing a film to the Simon & Garfunkle song, "Bridge over Troubled Water." Although still in high school, he took the video to a local music show, Music Explosion, on Channel 36. A forerunner of MTV, the show would feature films set to songs. Sometimes stars like Kenny Rogers would show up and they would shoot a video of him and his song.

The station liked the video and told Bill to film more. His compensation was 300 feet of film (about nine minutes) and free processing. Oh yes, he also was paid about \$25 a film. "It was so easy back then," Bill says. "There were no copyright issues, no releases. We just did it."

With a deal too great to refuse, Bill spent all his time doing videos - and his grades plummeted. "My fate was sealed," he says. He went to Georgia State, but with his father sick, he needed to work to pay for his education. He went to the Atlanta Journal and shot pictures for its Sunday magazine. He continued the newspaper job after graduation, while shooting low budget movies and hoping to break into the business.

"I was wide-eyed and did whatever job that came along - industrial films, whatever," he says. He tried not to shoot commercials because he instinctively knew he would be pigeonholed as a commercial director, which was not his goal. "I realize now that all my decisions were aimed at getting me where I wanted to go," he says. "It really was my destiny because I had a lot of resistance. A lot of

people said you couldn't be a movie cinematographer here in Atlanta. A lot of people still say that, and it's hard. I was really fortunate."

Whenever a film was to be shot in Atlanta, Bill would use his newspaper connection to go on the set and meet the director of photography. Such visits provided not only education and insight into the business, but also contacts and friendships that last to this day.

The brothers, now independent and working out of Bill's basement, made a major move by renting and cleaning up about 3,000 square feet of office space near a dairy on Briarcliff Road. Bob started making a name for himself as a designer, specializing in corporate identities and logos. "I would focus on identity solutions. I never gave options. I gave the client one solution and it was the right solution. There really weren't design studios in Atlanta at that time."

His big break came when the Marcus Group gave him design work for a young company called Hayes Microcomputers. As the modem company grew, so did the assignments. Eventually, the work became so sizeable, Hayes took it in-house. "The bottom fell out," Bob says. "We lost about 70 percent of our business. It taught me never to have one client make up so much of our business. We lived off savings until we got back on our feet."

After 10 years, he moved to the IBM Tower and solidified his reputation as a designer. Now at King Plow Arts Center with 14 employees, Wages has designed logos and other identity work for such top clients as Hardin Construction, Georgia-Pacific Papers, Cox Communications, and the Weather Channel. "When you design a logo, you're distilling the essence of a company."

He also was instrumental in forming an Atlanta chapter of the American Institute of Graphics Arts (AIGA), which helped establish a design community in town. "Up until then, we all were just doing our thing," he says. "There was an ad community, a production community. At the Ad Club meetings, the designers would all just be at the bar drinking."

Bill's career did not start as auspiciously as Bob's did at McDonald & Little. Bill decided that for family considerations he would not move from Atlanta, and he stuck stubbornly to his career plan. His first feature film, "Nightman," lost its funding and was never released. Desperate to get the picture made, he worked for free so he would have something for his reel. He worked on movies for nothing but the experience and contacts. "Thank goodness my wife is frugal," he says.

He tried to get a Hollywood agent but was told that they did not know how to sell someone who lived in Atlanta. He eventually got to shoot a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie, which was his big break. When he showed his reel to get the job, it had only two movie credits, but the director saw what he liked. Then a top Hollywood agent - a year after rejecting him - saw the Hallmark movie and called Bill back. The agent now wanted to represent him, although he admitted he still did not know how to sell him. "I had this Southern stigma," he says. "And it eventually worked for me because I became that guy from Atlanta. But for a long time, being the guy from Atlanta was a huge negative."

Slowly the work came in as more filmmakers starting shooting in the state for budget reasons. During one two-year period Bill shot five movies and never left home. But he has also gone around the world shooting movies. He has more than 50 feature and TV films listed on his credits, and he has worked with such stars as Sandra Bullock, John Lithgow, Danny Glover, Mary Tyler Moore, and Burt Reynolds. He recently met with Shirley MacLaine about a potential movie (and was advised to be as solicitous of her dog as he was of the actress). Among his film and TV credits are *Fallen Angel*, *Fled*, *I'll Fly Away*, *Love Potion No. 9*, *Buffalo Soldiers*, and *Gods and Generals*. Although Bill does not bring it up, brother Bob is quick to point out that Bill is the first Atlanta member of the prestigious American Society of Cinematography.

Both brothers look back at their creative ride with amazement. "I still can't believe that I have been able to work with such creative people and great clients from the very first day of being in the business," said Bob Wages.

Adds Bill, "When people ask me how I made it in the business, I tell them I don't really know. I really don't know. And, I'll tell you this, it's a crazy business."