The life of J. Ernest Wilkins, Jr. has been shaped by the society of his time and the racial experiences he encountered. Unlike many others, the childhood of Wilkins is not spattered with these issues. This may partly be the result of what we can assume were supportive parents. Both Lucille and Wilkins, Sr., received Bachelor’s degrees from the University of Chicago, Lucille in Education and Wilkins, Sr. in Mathematics. It can be assumed that Wilkins was encouraged by both of his parents.

Wilkins, however, did not escape discrimination based on his race. After leaving the University of Chicago, Wilkins became a visiting member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. Following this appointment, it was difficult for Wilkins to find a job at a research university. It is possible that this rejection was a result of racial discrimination in the United States at that time. Interestingly, although later in his career Wilkins began work at universities, he never was employed by one that was not primarily African-American.

Another experience that allows us to understand more about the obstacles and discriminations Wilkins faced as an African-American mathematician, was described by Lee Lorch, a Caucasian-American human rights activist, in 1947.

Wilkins was a few years past the Ph.D. ... He received a letter from the AMS Associate Secretary for that region urging him to come and saying that very satisfactory arrangements had been made with which they were sure he'd be pleased: they had found a "nice colored family" with whom he could stay and where he would take his meals! The hospitality of the University of Georgia (and of the American Mathematics Society) was not for him - he refused. This is why the meeting there was totally white.

Because of this encounter, Wilkins has never since attended a meeting of the American Mathematical Society in the Southeast.