

## MY DAD

Lee Byron Willis    born November 8, 1898, died May 18, 1974    written by Jim Willis 2010.

My dad was born in Kit Carson County, Colorado, later, Burlington County. This was located near Kanarado, Kansas. The family had homesteaded at this location in 1897. Five of the brothers were born on the homestead. The first brother, Harry was born in Nebraska in Jan 1897, the last, Fred was born in 1904 in Kansas. The family lived in a sod house and homesteaded there and developed the property until the year 1903. At that time, they moved back to Kansas, where Fred was born. The house was very small. It was a sod house built of adobe bricks made right off of the soil of the property. The house had maybe two rooms. There is a photo taken of the homestead in May 1897. There are also other photographs, taken later, showing a barn and other facilities including a windmill. If Uncle Harry was born in Jan 1897, he was just a new baby when they moved to Colorado.

The family abandoned the homestead in about 1903 and went back to Kansas. But in 1910, they moved back to Paonia, Colorado. Grandfather, Albert Chrisman Willis, bought property in the east end of town and built his home there. It was the first house, and later it became the Newton resident. He also purchased land on the same corner across the street. This property later became property of his brother Lemuel, with his second wife Mabel Graham.

When the family moved back to Paonia, only four boys moved to Paonia. They were Dad, Frank, Ray and Fred. They were all of school-age and still under the care of parents. The other three boys were older and stayed in Kansas, mainly, Foster, Harry and Charlie.

Grandfather Willis, in 1912, bought land in Minnesota creek and built a home there and raised cattle. Later he bought land at the foot of Red Top Mountain and established a fruit farm, where the family lived. Me, and my two sisters were born at that location.

Dad had a cousin. Glen Tuttle. I am not sure how he fits into the family, but he would visit now and then and dad and Glen would tell stories on themselves. They told how they had rolled huge snowballs up against the front door of the grade school. They then poured water over them causing the doors to be frozen closed.

Dad played football and baseball. He especially liked baseball. He taught me to play catch. I believe I still have his baseball glove. At any rate, an event that Uncle Frank told me about much later in life and after my father was gone was that my father, near the end of high school, had been told by the principle that he was not going to receive his high school letter for football. I believe, because his grades were too low. This upset dad and he evidently punched the principal. Consequently, he was expelled and did not graduate from high school.

I do not know very much about his high school days, but I know that he was active in school. His two brothers were in school at the same time. After high school, there are some photographs in the family album, showing that he was somewhat an active person. There is a picture of him with some friends and an old automobile. It looks like it might have been a Hutmobil, but I don't know for sure. It also shows

him in a camping setting some time. I think he's sitting in a tub with all his clothes on and somebody's pretending to give him scrub down. I do know that one time he and I believe it was Uncle Frank, but it may have been Uncle Ray, went to Seaside, Oregon. There are a couple photographs taken of him on the beach. This had to be in about 1920, perhaps. And it's interesting, because the men all wore coats and ties. They even wore that type of clothing to the beach. So it's interesting to see them all dressed up at the beach.

He liked to go hiking, camping and fishing in the hills and mountains around Paonia. He told me of stories about hiking along Cold Creek, The Muddy River and Snowshoe. These all become the North Fork of the Gunnison River down stream.

He was about to be drafted for WWI. He registered for the draft on Sept 12, 1918. His draft card says he was 20 and he was born Nov 7, 1897. There was always a discrepancy in his birth date. When the draft was first started in 1917, the age was 21, but it was later changed to 20. So if he registered for the draft Sept 12, 1918, he must have been 20 and that means born in 1897. But he did tell me that he was drafted and was on the train in Delta, about 30 miles from home on November 11 when the war was over and they told him to go home.

Dad somehow went to Chicago and started working for Carson Pierre Scott, a Jewelry and department store.. His brother, Frank, worked for them, and in fact, stayed there until the end of his career. While dad was working in Chicago, he met my mother, Anita Boettcher. They had met at an unusual event such as at a racetrack and later they decided to get married and did October 13, 1927. They got married and moved to Paonia. The trip to Paonia was on the train and there are some photographs taken of mother in the lounge car on the Pullman on her trip to Paonia. It's interesting, because train travel was not very expensive at that time. I even speculate that the family may have moved from Nebraska to Colorado before they homesteaded, on the train, which would've taken them to Denver. Then they could have caught some kind of a stagecoach out to where they were having this big land push for homesteading. The homestead was rather interesting. I know there were hardships every day. In fact, they had oxen. They did not have horses. Also dad has told me, that for fuel and in the stove, they sometimes used buffalo dung. There were buffalo on the range close to that area. I went to visit with my father to the homestead in about 1974 and after looking at it I can see why there's nothing there now. The land just was not conducive for homes. At that present time it was growing some kind of green that looked like it was not even planted, but just growing.

My mother and father moved to Paonia. They moved into the small house on the fruit farm at the foot of red top. My grandmother had died before that and my grandfather had remarried a woman named Ida. The kids did not like her very well, according to my father and my mother, but my dad lived there on the farm and worked for my grandfather helping raise the fruit. There was a small house on the farm, where my mother and father lived and shortly after arriving there, my mother became pregnant with Muriel. Muriel was born January 7, 1929. My dad worked on the farm for his dad for a few years. Later, my father was able to obtain his own farm, and lived in a situation I believe we would call sharecropping. The same year Muriel was born, mother became pregnant with me. I was born the same year, December 27, 1929. I asked my mother many years later, what she thought and felt when she was pregnant again so soon. She told me that the last thing she needed was another baby, but I had turned

out alright. When taking care of the kids, she had to make her own diapers. She had to wash the diapers, and she had to hang them outside to dry. Many times it was cold and snowing and freezing and the clothes would freeze on the clothesline and would take some time to get them dry. And in that house, it was not an easy time to have kids, much less two that were in diapers.

The farm was across the road from the Griffin resident and I believe that dad tried to make a living there off of the crops selling them and having enough to eat on, turning some of the money over to the owner of the property. We later moved about a mile from there down close to the top of the mesa where you can see down over the town. Again this was a property owned by other people and we lived there for a few years. After that, my father had several jobs. I don't know what they all were, but in 1929, 30,31, the times were tough. He had different jobs, and I know one job was to work on a survey crew. He would go with the crew, survey streets, roads and highways so forth and not sure what but I was less than five years old at the time. He must have had several jobs but then sometime later, he got a job in town, in Fronk's grocery store.

Gene Fronk had the grocery store and dad went to work for him in about 1934, 35, or 36. He stayed there until after we were out of high school. We started school in the first grade. When we still lived on the farm out on the edge of the Stewart Mesa, I remember Muriel and me walking to school. It was about a mile, and it was usually quite cold in the winter, because it was snowing and we very, very seldom got a ride. If we got a ride, it probably was in a wagon, because there were very few cars around. I know, we started first grade there. So when we moved to town, we must have been about first grade or just the second grade, which would've been about 1935 or 36. While living on the farm at the edge of town(the Pullen farm), Muriel and I did something to irritate Dad. He got after us and we both ran as hard as we could down the hill with him after us. He caught Muriel, but not me. I came back a little later expecting to be punished, but he just wasn't a hard father. In fact I think he left most of that up to Mother. Later while living in the house across from the school, Muriel and I used to get into fights. In fact I had to take her down and sit on her to make her behave. In about the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we were really having a fight. And this time Dad stepped in and said, "Stop that right now. You are too old to fight like that." And we never did again.

Those days in the store were very good. He made enough money that the family was able to buy their first home. I believe the cost was about \$3500. We lived in that house until we went to college and in fact until my parents sold the house and moved to Denver. We lived in several houses in the town. Sometimes, I understand, my parents lived in these homes to essentially take care of them, while the owner was somewhere else. One place, I do remember was the Rovart packing house that had to be somewhere in about 1936. I do know that my Dad was able to buy his first car. The car was a 1934 black four-door sedan Chevrolet. We took many trips in the car, and even to Yellowstone national park. One thing my parents will remember quite well is that Muriel, Fern and I, would sit in the back seat. We would get along quite well, except something would start a fight and squabbling like all kids do at different times. I must say this was really the parent's second car. When we lived down the street from the Rovart residence in the house on the corner, there was a car in the garage that I remember. It seemed like it was jacked up on wheels. One day some men came and took the car away. I didn't know what that was all about, but the car was a about a 1929 or 30 Chevrolet. I later asked my mother about that and she said well, that car was being repossessed. Dad could not put enough money together to

make up the payments for it. And you can imagine, they must've been low at that time, but a few dollars was all it took to live.

While living in the Rovart House. I remember getting whooping cough, and it caused a side effect of the disease called St. Vitas Dance. That made me somewhat nervous. That kept me out of school for about a month and I had to be very quiet. My parents were very good to me and I know that at the time they probably even had to carry me around. I had that same thing recur when I was in second grade or it must've been the third.

We would take trips to different picnic areas. My dad's friends lived up to Snowshoe cabins, and they would ask us to come up and stay for a week or two at a time. We did and that was a good fishing area.

Dad was a man of small build. He was about 5 foot eight, and at the most never weighed more than hundred and 30 to 35 pounds. Later in life he had bad teeth, and ended up having a set of false teeth. I remember he was very miserable when he had all his teeth pulled, and until he was able to get his false teeth adjusted correctly. He also later developed a stomach ulcer at the time doctors did not know what they know today about ulcers, and probably half or three quarters of his stomach was removed. He was a quiet man but had a good sense of humor. And I only remember hearing one "dirty joke" that he told. It was at Muriel and Jerry's wedding. The wedding was in the back yard and many friends were at the house. The men were all together and were telling jokes. Dad contributed. Don't remember the joke or ever hearing another one of that type.

He made and taught us how to make raw potato sandwiches and radish sandwiches. For the potato you would take a raw potato, peel and cut it into slices, put it between two saltine crackers and that was it. For the radish sandwich, take two slices of white bread, butter one, cut the radishes into thin slices, put the top on and eat. That was always a special treat. We must have had those on Sunday evenings, because he did not work at the store on Sunday and was his only night off.

My Uncle Ray and Dad took my cousin Wayne and me fishing. Many times we would go up to Grand Mesa Lakes. They would rent a boat and the four of us would sit in a boat all day. Many times, we only caught two or three small trout. That was not enough for a meal for one family, much less two. So usually one family took all the fish home for their meal, but they traded off. I remember it was rather boring sitting in a boat all day trying to catch a fish. But today, I respect fishing much more, and I'm very glad I had that time with my Dad and my uncle and cousin to learn how to fish.

In town Dad walked to work every day. In the summer he wore a straw hat. Of course, I copied him and had to have a straw hat to wear. It was not far to the store where he worked. And almost every day he would come home for lunch. There really was not a good place near his work to have lunch. It was simply easier to come home. He always dug up the garden in the spring and planted all kinds of vegetables. Mom helped. They continued this later when they moved to Denver, but mostly it was growing flowers.

We lived in a town that had only coal for fuel. We had a coal stove and furnace. It was my job to keep this stoker filled, the coal bucket filled, and the kindling wood split and in so the kitchen fire could be

started every morning. I slept just off the kitchen. Dad would get up early to start the fire, and if I forgot the kindling, I would hear him while pretending to be asleep, "damn kid", but only about once did he make me get up so early in the morning.

Christmas time was very special. My parents did not have a lot, but they always seemed to know what the kids wanted and they also gave us clothes too. One year Dad got me a new basketball, but it was wrapped inside a wool Mackinaw, a coat that I really needed.

Dad bought me my first bicycle when I was about 12. It was an old one that a friend, Billy Graham, had for sale and it cost five dollars.. It was exciting for me to get it. I knew how to ride. But the bicycle frame was bad and the brakes did not work. But Dad with Al Moller got a new fork and parts and fixed it for me. It is the subject of a separate story.

Later on in high school when we participated in sports such as football and basketball. It was hard for him to attend games because of work. But whenever he could, he would come to the games.

Muriel and I both wanted to play instruments, in the band and orchestra. I played the coronet, Muriel the piano and violin. Parents saw to it that we were able to get the instruments we wanted..

My parents had parties with their friends. Sometimes they would come to our house, and sometimes we would go to their house. I remember when I was probably about I would say 14, they had a party at the house and served beer to their friends. My friend Sonny Quist was a couple years older conned me into taking a couple bottles of beer. We then climbed into the attic of our garage and sat there drinking the beer and assuming of course that no one knew what we were doing. I'm sure the folks anticipated that and they probably knew a couple beers were missing. They used to get together with friends to play cards with. I believe their favorite game was pinochle.

In 1939, Dad bought a 1938 Chevrolet. It was a four-door green deluxe car. We, that year, took a trip to Wisconsin. This was a very long trip in a car. We went to Kansas, Nebraska, all the way through Chicago Illinois, and a through Minnesota and Wisconsin. We saw a lot on the way. Dad's brothers were living in Kansas and Illinois. We had a chance to see all of his brothers staying with each for a night or two and as kids we slept on the floor. We also got to meet all of our cousins, except one or two. I remember staying on the farm of Uncle Foster's. I remember it so well because it had a windmill. When the wind was blowing, it would easily pump water, but when there was no wind, if you wanted water, you had to go pump by hand. It was fun to do and I was only 10 years old. We went on to Wisconsin, but on the way to Wisconsin, we went to the Black Hills of South Dakota, saw Mt Rushmore, and on through Minnesota, and into Wisconsin to see all of Mothers family and to see all the cousins.. And I remember on the way home we went to Chicago to see Dad's brother and my uncle Frank, Aunt Mae and Cousin Leonard. Leonard is about 10 years older and was about to get married. But another thing I remember at that time, Uncle Frank and Dad took me to see the Cubs baseball game and to the Brookfield zoo in Chicago. What an experience for these hillbillies from Paonia to see the big city of Chicago.

Dad was not a religious person, but his uncle Fred, my grandfather's brother, was a minister and his grandfather, John Willis, and great grandfather George Willis, were all Methodist ministers. Dad went to church a lot but never taught or preached religion, to his kids

Dad taught me to drive at age 14, and by the time I was 15, I was delivering groceries for him for the store. When the Highway Patrol was in town for a day, I could not deliver. At about age 16, he bought Frank Allen's old 1927 Star. It was a pickup truck. It was old, but it was converted to a double-decker open pickup so that grocery boxes could be placed and easily used to take groceries to people's homes. Later, I used that same car. I would take several friends to a very steep hill. We would then push it up the hill to get our legs strong for the football season coming up. It is a wonder the car did not roll back downhill over the top of us.

In the fall of 1946, Dad let me take our 38 Chevy to Gunnison to carry some of the football team. He trusted me. On the way home our coach, Ike Woods, was nervous about my driving and said, "where did you get your driver's license, Montgomery Ward". I never told him I was only 15 and too young to get one.

In 1947 carrying some of the basketball team home from Crawford, we had an accident and hit another car, badly damaging our Chevy. (I was driving). At that time parts were scarce and we had no car for several months.

In the summer of 1946, we took the car to Wisconsin again. This time Mom, Fern, Muriel and I were the passengers. Tires were very scarce, because it was right after the war. We had tire trouble. We got to Wisconsin and could only get used tires. Our Uncle Arnie got us two new tires. But to be safe we carried old ones tied to the back of our car. On our way home we went to Chicago to see Uncle Frank. We were surprised by our Dad. He came there to meet us. While we were there, he got a call from Paonia, from his boss, Gene Fronk. He told Dad that he had sold the store. Dad was suddenly without a job and it was quite a shock. When we got back to Paonia, he took a job working at the Somerset coal mine to support his family.

When we got back to Paonia, Dad had won tires at the Lion's Club new Cherry Day celebration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Dad became a member and was very active. He became a member of the town council in 1946-47. And he got me a summer job taking care of the City Park. It was a three block area that had to be mowed with a riding mower, watered with hoses and sprinklers and in the fall the leaves had to be raked by hand.

At this time Fern was sick and had lots of medical bills. Dad was working hard to make sure there was enough money to live on. Dad was working as a carpenter and setting shores and timbers in the mine.

I left home for college in Fort Collins in the fall of 1947. Dad and Mom took me to the train in Grand Junction. Dad was never one for giving hugs and kisses etc. But when, I got on the train to leave, he had tears in his eyes. I knew he loved me and I will never forget that day.

During the summertime, when I was in college, I would go home for the summer and took a job with a surveying crew for the Bureau of Reclamation. We went through Somerset every morning. One day, we saw a problem at the mine. We stopped to inquire. The cars taking the workers into the mine came loose and rolled down a steep hill and rails completely out of control. One friend from high school, Frank Penko, jumped out; the car ran over him and cut off his leg. But dad was okay. He never liked to work in the mine. When I was a senior in high school, all the male graduating seniors were taken into the mine on a tour. I'm not sure if they were trying to tell us that it was a good place to work or if that was not a good place to work. But I knew that I did not want to work in the mine.

I quit school in 1950 and moved to California with my friend Larry. Sometime after that, the parents sold the home in Paonia and moved to Denver. Dad got a tough job working at Gates Rubber Plant. After some time, he got a job at a small grocery store in Denver. He worked taking and filling orders. It had a large grocery delivery business. At the time they bought a home in South Denver and he worked and lived there until retirement, and until the end of his life. When they lived in Paonia, mom did all the housekeeping and the cooking. But when they moved to Denver, Mom went to work for Blue Cross and Dad started helping with all of the household work including cooking. I remember when he had cooked some apples and called it apple sauce and I disagreed and said it was stewed apples. Bu after all we were both correct. We had a hardy discussion about those apples.

Dad worked hard and had only about two weeks vacation each year. He started smoking when he was very young, probably in high school, or shortly after. I believe that shortened his life.

I was back in college until 1952 at Colorado A&M. After graduation I went to California and into the Navy. I got married while in the Navy in 1953. Dad and Mom came to visit us in Long Beach where I was stationed. We went to Denver many times to visit the family. Every summer we would get in the car, and after having kids, would drive from San Diego to Denver to visit the parents and family.

We started to send tapes back and forth in lieu of letters. Mom always had something to say. But Dad kind of had a problem saying very much and sometimes we just got a weather report from him. We have saved some of those tapes, and my son, Mark, took time to put some of those onto a CD. So we do have a record of his voice.

Dad retired, in about 1965 or 66. I moved to Hawaii in 1967 to manage a contract for our firm. Mom and Dad came to visit and stayed about a month with us. While there, Mark and Cheryl were very young, probably about ten and four, and we had a very good time. This was the first time Dad ever wore shorts. He also had a Hawaiian shirt, but it was probably the only one he ever owned. We have a nice photo of him, bending over a pineapple plant, with his Hawaii shirt and shorts. He was having leg pain problems at that time, and it was hard for him to walk much. We got to see the Don Ho show being recorded for TV while they were there.

We moved back to California in 1969. We built our home in 1971, 2856 Fallbrook Lane, San Diego, and Dad and Mom came to visit. He wanted to see our home in San Diego. His leg pain kept getting worse and I knew they did something to the sciatic nerve in his back to try to relieve the pain, but it did not

seem to do the job. We kept visiting Denver every summer to see the parents and let them get acquainted with their grandkids.

In 1974, dad and I went out to the old homestead in Burlington County. We got information from the county recorder's office to find the location. The property was over grown with just nothing. At the time, all traces of any buildings were gone. I could not imagine them having lived there and him having been born there. I have a picture that I took of him at that site that I keep on my bed stand.

He became more uncomfortable and was in the hospital. After that, he finally went into a nursing home where he died on Mother's birthday, May 18, 1976. The doctors had said it was because of arterial sclerosis. I saw pictures of his arteries. At the main artery branch to the legs, and where the arteries branch to each leg, there was a big clot. No wonder he had leg pains.

I quite often think of him, and especially when driving alone. It seems we just have a nice quiet conversation.

I miss him.