

Oral History of Helen McNeil Wilberg

Recorded and transcribed by Bernice Payne

Bernice: Tell us what your name is.

Helen: My name is Helen McNeil Wilberg.

B: Share with us some of your earliest memories of grandparents or what ever. Just some of the earliest memories that you have.

H: Well, I was born in Hiawatha. When I was about 2 years old we moved in to Salt Lake. I remember we had a big police dog and we moved in and we had only been there a day or two and this police dog ran out in the road and was killed. I can remember than. Of course I am a pet fiend. So that was one of my earliest memories.

B: What do you remember about your grandparents? And tell me there names.

H: Heber Alonzo Petty was my grandfather. Malinda Euphemia Lowery was my grandmother. And they were called Lon and Lin.

B: Where did they live?

H: Ferron.

B: What is the other side of your grandparents?

H: McNeil. I never knew my grandpa McNeil. He was killed or died when my dad was 3 years old. We don't know too much about him. My grandmother McNeil was very close and lived with us a lot as she got older. She practically lived with us. So I had the privilege of knowing my grandparents very very well.

Then during the depression my dad worked in Park City. I went to the first grade in Park City. Then the mine closed when the depression came and my dad was out jobbing around and so my mother and I moved to Ferron with my grand parents and so I went from 2nd to 4th grade in Ferron. My grandparents lived right across the street from the school house. I really had the privilege of getting to know my grandparents. Of all the grandkids, I was the one who really got to know my grandparents. Which I have always appreciated a lot. I really really do.

Then after the depression, my grandmother McNeil lived in Orangeville. We built a home in Orangeville.

B: What do you remember about the depression?

H: I remember that it was....well every one was in the same boat. So we as kids were happy as larks. But I remember my aunt putting cardboard in some of the boys shoes, in the bottom of the shoes. My uncle ran the farm. There was always lots of food.

My grandfather was a butcher and he took meat to Hiawatha and Mohrland at that time. So there was cash coming in. That was the only cash that was really coming in to my uncle's farm. He really helped out the whole family. We as kids, we didn't really know much different. Everybody was the same. But they talked about it a lot and it made an impression. They talk about it now, we might go in a depression. Unless you've been through one, you don't know what one is. I wonder how the kids would cope today. I can't even imagine how my kids would cope.

B: It's a little scary.

H: It is. Not for me. I'm not scared for me particularly, but they weren't raised like we were. So, I lived there during the depression. I went to school there and graduated from high school in 1943. We were the last graduating class from Castle Dale.

B: What kind of games did you play when you were little?

H: Well, the kind they all play. You all start out with hiding seek when you are little. Then we had jacks. We played jacks a lot. We had jacks tournaments. In the winter we'd make what's the circles? In the snow?

B: Fox and Geese.

H: Yes, fox and geese. We'd make our little angels. I feel bad. The kids can't use their imaginations any more. Really they don't even know how to talk very good. I'll call them (her grandkids) and I'll say, "How are you?"

"Good"

"Did you have a nice day? What kind of day did you have?"

"Good"

That's the only word they know. And you know we were lucky to have grown up when we did. We really were.

B: What were some of the conveniences that you enjoy now that you remember when they first came?

H: Probably my first convenience was my.....well I went to CEU, graduated from there and then went up and graduated from the BYU. Then my first year I taught in Huntington. I went over there and I taught 4th grade and I had wall to wall kids. About 40. And two little skinny books. I had just graduated from BYU and I thought I was the smartest thing walking around. Well.....I just thought I was the cat's meow. About 2 weeks into teaching 4th grade, I was totally humbled. By the end of the year I went over and told the superintendent I wasn't teaching school anymore. Then I got married and moved over here. Orson Peterson was the superintendent. He came and gave me this big pep-talk and I could teach two grades with only about 19 kids. Well, that sounded pretty good. So I went on with my career.

B: I think we probably didn't get your birthday.

H: My birthday is July 18, 1925.

B: And you were born in Hiawatha?

H: I was born in Hiawatha. I was a twin. My twin sister only lived a couple of hours. So that left me as an only child.

B: You never had any other brothers or sisters?

H: No, no. And really, as growing up, I didn't miss them....having brothers and sisters, because I was always with somebody. I was always sleeping at somebody's house or they were sleeping to mine. You know how you do. It is since I grew up that everybody has brothers and sisters that they associate with, and help them along and it is kind of sad when you grow up and don't have any. I miss that. So I am glad that Mack and Julie have each other.

B: When did you get married?

H: August 20th, 1948.

B: Can you tell me a little bit about that? How did you meet your husband?

H: Well, I had known him. He was from Castle Dale. He was 10 years older than I was.

B: His name?

H: Lamar. Lamar Wilberg. We got married in the Salt Lake Temple. Did you know Odessa? (Ciell and Odessa Jones) They got married the same day. I knew

Clell. He was from Castle Dale. But I didn't know her. We got married the same time. Clell signed our marriage license and Lamar signed theirs. She was always quite proud of that.

B: What were some of the things that you did when you were courting?

H: Well it was right after the war, so they had lots of dances. I mean dances. Not like they have now. There were Green and Gold Balls. They were really neat. We just really enjoyed them. We were just dancing all the time and hanging out.

B: Did you go over to the Wilberg Resort much?

H: No, I was too young. I never made the Wilberg Resort. A....this is an off shoot story. We lived here, Emma and I. (Emma Huntington) Our Green and Gold Balls used to be a big thing. Well, I went over to the "Harris's" (a dress shop in Price) and bought this lace dress. It was aqua blue...all lace. Oh it was the cat's meow. And so then she (Emma) went over and bought a red lace dress. Well, we just thought we were the bells of the ball. We've had more fun. We could write a book, Emma and I about our lives here together. Stan was older than Lamar. Well, Emma is 15 years older than me but we have just had some of the best, best times. But their birthdays.....Lamar's was the 10th of May and Stan's was the 11th. Stan was older, but oh.....we had birthday parties for them and we just had a good time.

B: You don't still have your blue lace dress do you?

H: No, I wonder what ever became of that. I'm not one for keeping things. But oh I remember, we just thought we were the bells of the ball. (chuckles and laughs) Even though Emma's memory is pretty poor all the time, but then at 95..... She starts to tell something, but then she can't remember. It really bothers her. But she give me enough clues that I can finish for her. And so we visit pretty good. But sometimes she has to give me clues on some of the nutty things we did.

She worked for Dr. Turman, and I taught school.

I took 5 years off and had Mack and Julie before I went back to teaching. And then I taught until I retired. So just 5 years off.

B: Were there some fads of the times that you remember? Songs or certain sayings?

H: I'd have to look up songs. A lot of songs came out. And I always bought them. Before I even got married. I have a lot of those songs.

B: Did you play an instrument?

H: I played the piano. I was a pretty good player for 2nd grade. I put on a lot of programs. When I taught down here, I put on from 1st to 8th grade for the whole school. I did a lot of those. Then I taught in Orangeville. I really enjoyed teaching in Orangeville because my mother was up there. I used to go have lunch with her every day. And then I knew everybody. It is still my second home. Still is. I enjoyed teaching in Orangeville, and then of course we came back down here.

B: How old were you when you started having your family?

H: Well lets see, I was 23 when I got married and I was 27 when one of them was born.....but which one. Probably when Mack was born. Julie is 2 ½ years older.

B: So you lived here in Castle Dale?

H: Yes, we lived in a little house up on the bench. Did you know Leah and Lloyd Wilberg? They both died the same time in an auto accident. Well, their home was right up there. They had a big home. There was a little white house in the back of theirs. We lived there when we were first married.

B: So then most of your husbands family lived up on the top of the hill then, the bench?

H: Yes, in a circle. Oh yes. Our home was a little white stucco. In fact, there wasn't even a bathroom in it. Lamar took what was a bedroom.....there was a front room and a little kitchen, and he took the bedroom and made a nice bathroom in it. He built these stairs and varnished them and I had paper.....oh it was leaves. I was so thrilled over that little house. It was our honeymoon house. I was more thrilled over that one actually than I was over this large house. Oh, I decorated it and it was wonderful and then I got my first electric stove while I was there and my first automatic washer...a Bendix. There was two that was out and this was a new thing. I remember I was so thrilled with this washer. I went to my club and I was telling them about this new washer and they said, "Well, it won't get your clothes clean." They picked my poor washer to death. (laughs) But I realized they were just jealous. But they did, they picked my poor washer to death.

B: Was this the club that Emma talked about?

H: Oh yes, our bridge club that we had forever. Now they are all about gone. Oh but I came home feeling so bad---afraid that I'd have all these gray ugly clothes to hang out.

B: Well, did it get your clothes clean?

H: Sure it did!! We even moved it down here to this house. They didn't have dryers then. But then they came out with dryers. But I'll never get over that. I was so proud of my new washer. It was just like my teaching when I got deflated. That was funny.

B: So you taught school. What did your husband do?

H: Well he worked at the mine. See he was killed at the mine. They were miners and they had their own mine. When I married Lamar, he and his brothers had a coal mine in Straight Canyon.

B: Is that up Orangeville Canyon?

H: Yes, and they worked there for a long time. Then they got a chance to open where the Wilberg Mine is now, to lease that. It was such a much better mine. They leased that and opened the Wilberg Mine. That is where they worked. Mack said, "I guess it didn't amount to much". I thought, "Mack, what did you say that for. We made a good living up there."

B: What did you husband do in the mine?

H: His brother Ken, Leslie (Less) Wilberg's dad, they supplied the old church down here with coal. They supplied the coal to people in town. That's what they did.

B: Then there was the accident? What happened?

H: Well, it was Nov. 14th 1964 and it had snowed. First snow. And of course Wilberg's--all they knew how to do is work. When I look back at it I don't know how I stood it. So they worked even Saturdays. One of them wanted to work Sundays but they didn't let him. He and Ken were going up to the portal on the tractor thing and they got about halfway up there and started to slip. They both jumped and Lamar put the tractor in the bank.... like he always told me when driving a car. He put it into the bank but it hit a rock and it came down on him. There was no rhyme or reason to it. It just came down. So I am a firm believer that you have so many days on the earth and when the last day comes, that's it.

So I was left to raise the kids here. And my mother.....she was really a God send to us. She helped raise the kids.

B: How old were the kids at that time?

H: Mack was 10 and Julie was 12. She'd just started Jr. High.

H: I taught and my mother took Mack to all the competitions. They even went to Salt Lake. He won the Fair competition up there. She carted him off to all the competitions. They'd come home with trophies and everything joyous and he was really bonded to his grandmother.

He'll come home even now and say, "I'll be back in a little while." And he goes up to Orangeville Cemetery to visit grandma's grave. He kind of likes cemeteries and he went up to visit Grace (Johansen). He likes cemeteries.

B: He started piano at a young age then?

H: Yes, he started....well, John and Yvonne (Jorgensen) lived right down there. There wasn't any one near. There was just us. Well, sister Rasmussen lived across the street. That was it. They (Jorgensens) had all these girls. So Julie and Mack played there a lot. But Mack was playing by ear when he was about 3 years old. I remember, I had an aunt that came down and she was quite a piano player and she'd sit in there with him and she'd tell him what notes to hit and they'd play little duets. But the first one I remember him ever playing by ear was Calcutta. Now that was long ago. And Julie took from Yvonne. She was a wonderful piano player. Mack must have been maybe 6 and he started taking lessons and it wasn't long until Julie quit. He passed her up and she wasn't going to take lessons any more. So she didn't. But she played the pieces and then he'd play them by ear. So I started checking on him and I'd say, "Mack show me where this note is." And he couldn't read them. So I called Yvonne. I said, "Yvonne, Mack can't read one note. He plays them. But he can't read one note. So there's no need for him to trail down there and take up your time."

"Oh", she said, "He's down here anyway, so let him come."

So anyway, I did and he eventually learned notes. He took from her until he was about Jr. High and then he started taking from Janice _____. (I can't remember)

B: So Julie quit playing all together? Did Mack sing too or just play?

H: Oh no, he never sang. Julie sang in the school plays and everything. Mack started taking lessons from Janice Sigard. (?) She was wonderful. She taught in the college. But she kept fussing all the time Mack was taking from her. She said, "Helen, I just can't teach to his ability. I can't. And he don't get down and practice like he should. I think you better get him another teacher." Well, I had a little tiff. I thought, "we are not going to get another teacher." Well, we were driving along and I said, "Mack, Mrs. Sigard doesn't want to take you for a student anymore." Well, he thought he was her top student. I said, "you won't get down and practice for her like you should and put in the time you should and so she told me we had to get a new teacher." And I said, "I'll tell you this right now, you either get in and start working for Janice Sigard or no more piano lessons." I had

my fingers and toes crossed. Well, I wouldn't have even known where to go unless up state and that was out. But anyway, he said, "OK." So he'd get up an hour, hour and a half earlier than Julie and I and he'd come in and practice. Then he got in high school, where he would never have any time to practice. But he and the dog would set in there every morning and have this educational music time.

B: So you and Julie woke up to piano music every morning.

H: Yes, at first, then it got so we could practically sleep through it. Then after that he went to Pollei. They are bosom friends. They bonded and are still bonded. Then every Christmas, when he'd come home, they had a room for him there and he'd go up and visit. Paul was teaching at the "Y" when Mack was still in high school and would go up for summer school. They bonded.

B: So he was quite a bit older than him?

H: Oh yes, but they got a picture of the group. Paul was very young, standing with this group of students and Mack was still in high school. But they bonded and are still to this day. So then he was student body president.

B: Did Mack accompany a lot of people?

H: Oh yes, we had kids down here all the time. While he was in high school, he played for the musicals. He had a bit part, I don't remember what it was, but then Grace cast him as Fiddler On the Roof. I was down to Curves and I had a gal come in from Huntington about a year ago and she started telling me about Mack as Fiddler on the Roof. Oh my they thought he was as good as the real Fiddler. Mr. Wilson said to me, "you didn't think Mack could sing did you?" And I said, "No, I'd never heard him sing." Not until he was in Fiddler. And that was the last time I heard him too.

B: What were the traditions that you had in your family?

H: Well, just off my head right now, I know we always had Thanksgiving and then in the summer, there were always uncles and things that came down. And there was always the deer hunt that they came to. And for pheasant season they brought their wives every year. We had a city down here. City relatives all the time. Every year they came, so I guess that was a tradition.

B: How about Christmas time?

H: We'd go up to Grandma Wilberg's on Christmas Eve and have a big dinner and they'd always invite my mother. We'd open the presents and everything. Then the

big Christmas tradition was you'd come home and at about 3:00 the kids would start wanting to get up. So that was probably the highlight of Christmas. We'd open presents and my mother would come down. Just a regular Christmas. But the highlight was going to grandma Wilbergs. Yes, and that was a highlight for her and it was a tradition for her and she looked forward to it all year.

B: What about the 4th of July?

H: We always had the Goddess of Liberty. We'd sing patriot songs and we always had the parade and horse races, games for the kids and we had our dollar. (chuckles) Such a wonderful thing. And Huntington has it now...the big do on the 4th. It is a wonderful thing to have something on the 4th of July.

B: Cleveland has the 24th.

H: It is really growing isn't it.

B: How long did you teach school?

H: 35 years. I only took that 5 years off to have my family.

B: And your mom helped you?

H: Yes, in fact she had Mack the year before he went to school. Naomi Wayman came. In those days you could get people to come in your house and clean your house and help with the kids. So she'd come in and do up the work and take care of Mack and I had to teach. I'd come home and have lunch with them and then go back to school and Mack'd go down for a nap and sometimes he would just be getting up from his nap when I'd come home from school. She was a great gal. She quilted. Infact, she had quilts up to the State Fair that she got prizes for. So Mack spent a lot of mornings underneath the quilts with Naomi quilting.

B: So when you had Julie, you said she was small?

H: Oh yes, she was 5 lbs. And Mack was almost 9 lbs. In those days, I was a little old. Now it doesn't matter. You can be in your 40's and 50's whatever and have children. Now you have me going clear back through things I hadn't even thought about. But it turned out great with my teaching. Julie went to kindergarten and Naomi took care of Mack. She came right here and I had lunch with them everyday. It worked out great. It was a good profession for a woman. You have summers off and vacation.

B: And then when the kids are in school, you are right there with them anyway.

H: Yes, I had both of them in school. I had to see if they had any brains or how smart they were. I enjoyed them. I didn't give them any favors. At least they tell me I didn't. I'm sure I didn't. That was the days when I taught two grades. So I had them 2 years. No, I didn't have Mack two years. He was in second grade when we moved to Orangeville. I had him in second grade. Wow, the years go by so fast.

Then Mack went one year to the "Y" and they all went on missions and then one boy was going to Japan and when he got his call to Korea, I thought that was a little worse than Japan. I said, "now Mack, you know you will never see a piano over there. There is no music there." But you know when they are 19 their mothers don't know anything. So off he goes and he never touched a piano for two years.

B: Did Julie get married?

H: Yes, she went to the "Y" and then she graduated and was doing graduate work and teaching a dance class and met her husband. She said the class was full and she told him the class was full. And he said he didn't care, he was coming in anyway. So that is where she met Mike.

B: He must have been more wanting to be with her than take the class.

H: So then they stayed there and went to school. She got her masters there and then they moved to California. All my grandkids are adopted. Which doesn't matter. They moved to California and finally adopted two little boys down there. Then Mack and Becky adopted. So Julie called them and had seen this thing about the Romanians. She wanted a little girl. So she got this bug and called Mack and Becky. The outcome was they went to Romania and Julie got a little girl and a baby boy and Mack got a baby boy and a two year old girl. So I have got 4 Romanian grandkids.

B: So how many grandkids do you have?

H: I have 8. Julie has 4 and Mack has 4. Anyway, we went through that. But we go back.....after he graduated from BYU, Dr. Woodward would always say, "now Mack, when I retire, you will be through with your doctorate and you will just be ready to step in and take my place. But I'm a pessimist and I said, "Now, Mack, people say a lot of things but you know it doesn't take them long to forget." But they kept track of Mack down to the University of California. He was down there on scholarships, it was an expensive school.

B: Is that where he got his masters?

H: Yes, and his doctors. So he was down there doing that and he made his living playing for the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

B: They pay for that huh?

H: Oh yes, they pay for it. In fact, the Methodists after he was there a year or a little longer, he became both the organist and conductor. They'd be up in the loft I could see his hands a waving. Mack would die if I gave you too much of his personal life, but anyway Becky was teaching at the "Y"...no she was going to the "Y". She was working on her masters in voice anyway, I thought probably the "Y" sent her down there. But I knew she had something to do with it. She went down and got acquainted with him and they ended up getting married.

Then the job came up as choir director for the "Y". They had resumes from all over for the job. They'd followed Mack and in fact I had one guy that was a composer and professor he told me that Mack was an all-around musician. But he had to come up and audition and all that and he got the job. Then, school started and he and Becky got married at Christmas time. I'll never forgive them. It was cloudy and foggy and I don't know how my mother and I ever got back alive. But we did.

Julie got married while Mack was on his mission.

Becky was from Phoenix. I think they got acquainted while they were at the "Y". Her parents are wonderful, wonderful people. She has one sister that is older. That's her family. So we don't have big families.

Julie got married in the Provo Temple. Mack got married in the Provo Temple. They got married in Provo in the summer, because the Manti temple was closed for cleaning. And Mack got married at Christmas time. And Manti was closed then for some reason. So he got married in Provo too. Which was okay. One of the professors that was a good friend married them. And I love Provo. I loved the "Y". I loved to go to the Men's Chorus. He brought them out. He brought the Men's Chorus down here. They were good.

The kids were babies. I loved to go up. I have a glorious time up there.

We were on our way up to the tabernacle and Mack had written something that was going to be performed and we stopped for gas and Mack said, "mother, I have something to tell you. I guess I am going to go as the associate director for the Tabernacle Choir, so we will be moving. Well, I went in shock. I thought, "Oh, no, no, no. I love Provo. I knew every place to shop. Every mall, every nook and cranny. Oh my goodness. I haven't been back to the mall since. So look at the money I saved.

B: So he moved from Provo to Salt Lake?

H: Well, he moved to Draper. And they had a new home built there. Well and then Draper got to crowded for him and had a huge house and a little lot. Houses right on top of each. He never went out of his house. They were Mormons all of them. But right across the highway...was the last frontier up there. They were building houses under every rock in Draper. And I love Draper. Now I don't know what it would be.

B: Did Julie stay in California?

H: No they moved back here and when their children started school. They didn't think California was a good place to raise kids.

Mack moved across the highway to Bluffdale. He's got a real nice home there in a beautiful subdivision. They have smaller lots there. But it's all landscaped. It is right there by the prison.

B: Isn't that right where they are putting that new temple?

H: Well, they were going to put a temple there, but I haven't heard anything more about it.

B: I think it is in the process. Oquihhr. Did Julie move to Salt Lake?

H: No she moved to Draper. They are really close. They are right there together. They eat back and forth and the kids love their cousins. They are all bonded to their cousins.

B: So you taught school for 35 years and then you retired?

H: Yes, I retired and then they called me.....I went to work over at the temple. I drove with Betty Bunderson first. I worked at the temple for 13 yrs. But it was time to quit. I enjoyed it, but the only thing that was the killer was the drive. Especially in the winter. We usually had 4 in the car and we would commute and we took turns so that you only drove once a month. But it was still a hard trip. You'd come home so tired. I worked over there that long and had a lot of partners. We had a home that we stayed in and it had a little apartment in the basement we stayed in. So I worked there and sit here now.

B: What do you do with your time now?

H: Well, I told you that all my stuff is still in the drawers. All the newspaper stuff.

B: So you need to make some scrapbooks? But you haven't started them yet?

H: I think I'll let Julie do them. Julie sells real estate. Maybe that can be her retirement project. I have pictures that Elizabeth (Hansen) took of Mack in high school and the piano and things. But I sit here and I think, "I am sitting here and I have no brothers and sisters. I'm an only child so my brothers and sisters have been cats and dogs. Those were my pets. I always had a cat and my mother loved animals. So we always had a cat and we always had a dog. When I got married we had a cat and we had a dog.

About 3 yrs ago, my cat finally died. It was sick and it was across the road. Mack was here, his wife had gone to California and I was going up with him and I said, "Mack go over and see if it is dead." I was praying she was. He went and got her and she wasn't. She was sick, so I just wrapped her up in a blanket and took her up and had them put her to sleep. That was sad.

But anyway, I thought...I am sitting here and I've got this big house, and I have knick-knacks from all over the world. I have been to Europe twice. And they are not a bit of comfort to me. So when my landlady in Manti had kittens, I came home with Izzy and Sadie. They are my comfort. They keep me company. They sleep with me. I didn't have an animal sleep with me, but they are spoiled rotten. They know every word I say to them. I'll say, "It's time for your treat," before we'd go to bed. One sits in this square and the other one in that square. And I had treats for them. That's the way I'd get them in when they'd go out in the summer, when they got a little older. I'd just say, "come on, it's time for your treats" and in they'd come. So we still have treats. And they are my comfort. Yes, they are. I talk to them all. And as soon as I start to talk, their ears go up. I don't know how much they understand, but they listen. But I have them right now and I'm doing good.

B: So how old are you now?

H: I'm 83.

B: Oh my gosh, you don't look anywhere near 83.

H: Well, I just had a birthday. July 18th. That is when Julie got married. Well, I've had good health. And that means a lot. I see people who are a lot younger than me and they aren't as good. But I go to Curves every day and that really helps me. I don't go to loose weight. Kathy Sitterud does my hair and so I heard about it long before it got established. I knew I had to go. I told Kathy I had worried about my weight all my life and I'm not going to worry about it anymore. But you need to get your heart rate up and going and the circulation going and they really play up exercise as much as they do weight. And it does help. Really, I can be dragging my tail in the mornings and icky as can be and I go down there and there are quite a few from Huntington that come over and work out down there for 45 min. And the whole world is different. It does something for you psychologically besides. So I push myself down there every morning. Sometimes, it is a mighty push. But I am fine after I get there.

B: And that makes your day better?

H: Oh my, you don't know how much better it makes you feel. And you know, you have a little arthritis and this and that, as you get older. But I am doing great.