

General Information:

Interviewer: Stoltenberg, Mark

Interviewee: Evans, Willy

Title:

When: December 1, 2023

Where: Twain Harte, CA

Transcriber: Lexi

Transcribed: 03/11/2024

Mark: Okay. Time is 9:15. Good morning. It's December 1st, 2023. My name is Mark Stoltenberg, and I'm sitting with Willy Evans, and we're at Willy's home in Twain Harte. Beautiful winter morning. We're going to talk today about the 1996 Sonora Pass Wagon Train Group. Willy was the inspiration and the instigator of the whole caper. So first I'm going to ask Willy, would you give us your full name and tell us when and where you were born?

Willy: Ruth Willene (Willy) Evans. I was born January 4th, 1932, in Picher, Oklahoma.

Mark: When did you arrive in California?

Willy: Well, my family, we came out in the Dust Bowl. And I guess that's why the wagon train always interests me, because it was a lot like that for me when we came out here with my family, and Chuck's family, too, as well, my husband.

Mark: Moving west. Well, it seems like it wasn't that long ago. It's 27 years now since the fall of 1996, when I first heard about your idea for putting on the...

Willy: Right.

Mark: ...wagon train the following year. So, can you give me some ideas of...? Tell us how you got started with the wagon train. What was [00:02:00] your inspiration?

Willy: Well, we had just finished mule days. And that was very successful. And, just a fluke, I said, "Why don't we do a wagon train now?" And that's how it started. I knew of one wagon train, which was Highway 50 [Placerville]. And they were still working it. So, I called Vi, who had been in charge of the wagon train forever. Probably from its existence. And she helped us so much. We used her wagon master, too, as ours as well. And so that's how we got started. It was just like I say, an idea, because I love history. And I always felt that our kids in

Tuolumne County needed to study more and learn more in school. They learn California history in the fourth grade. But when it comes to our county, we don't impress it that much. And so, that's one of the things, too, along with others that I just wanted to have. So, we did take students on the wagon train.

Mark: That was a plan from the start. I remember that, I was on the steering committee, and I remember we started meeting in the fall of '96 and it took a lot of time.

Willy: Right. We were very fortunate. We got a committee organized. We had a good chamber and a lot of our chamber members, they saw the vision, too. And so, we got the list of what we needed to do to form our wagon train. Actually, we ended up being the best organized wagon train. Because we were new. But, anyway, we started going down the list that we got from Diane. We had to get permits from the Highway Patrol. We had to get permits from the Forest Service. All of these things had to be in order before...

Mark: Caltrans?

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: Caltrans had to be notified of every...

Willy: That's right.

Mark: ...every day you're going to be on the road. Yeah, I remember those early meetings as being daunting. It was going to be a big job for a lot of people, but, I also remember that you had lunch ready for everybody there in the...

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: ...upstairs at Twain Harte Market. And there was a lot of laughing going...

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: ...on, too. And then, people liked each other from the beginning. And realized that if we needed help, we'd ask for help. And people were ready to.

Willy: Well, it's hard to make, I think, 18, 50 or 40, whatever it was, that type of a lunch. Like the beans and all this stew and stuff that they used to make on the trails.

Mark: You made it fun right from the beginning. And, even when it got hard, it was still fun.

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: So, take us through to... when did we leave Bridgeport? When did the wagon train leave Bridgeport coming towards Twain Harte? When did we leave Bridgeport?

Willy: Oh, we were actually nine days on the trail coming over the pass.

Mark: And we...

Willy: And so, we left... You know, what we encouraged all the wagon trains to do, masters and stuff, to do was to come up and get their horses accustomed to the altitude because it was still a lot different up here than it was down in the valley. Because the horse goes down all those mountains up here, over the pass here, they're down.

Mark: Yeah...

Willy: So there was everything like that...

Mark: ...I know there was a lot of concern about the welfare of the horses

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...and the safety of the wagons. That was something that was one of the variables that would only be found out by doing it.

Willy: Mm-hmm. True.

Mark: You could put it on paper and put it on the calendar, but actually getting it done, it was a very big leap of faith for a lot of people. Now, how did you collect the teamsters and the wagons? you just went out

Willy: Well, Diane, she gave me a list, gave us a list, of the wagon masters, of the different wagon trains.

Mark: Ok.

Willy: We went clear down to Santa Barbara, we got to Santa Barbara. And, you know, at the Sesquicentennial, too.

Mark: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Willy: That's another thing. When we started, we had no idea that the state was going to celebrate the Susquehanna Centennial. And so, it was a benefit to us. We were part of that group.

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: At that time.

Mark: You had an invitation from that moment on to be involved. So, as the summer went through... Now, just for the people that are listening, we spent Labor Day weekend at Kennedy Meadows.

Willy: Right.

Mark: But take us back before that to what led up through that summer of 1997, to where we gathered at Bridgeport and set out.

Willy: Well, every day we would try to go at least no longer than 19 days. And you can only go...

Mark: 19 miles?

Willy: ...19...

Mark: Miles?

Willy: I mean, excuse me, 19 miles, excuse me, I'm sorry. And so, we had to pick out spots that we could camp at and be able to use their property and a lot of that was Forest Service, but some wasn't, some was private. So, there was a lot of connecting up with people that had never done a wagon train over the Sonora Pass.

Mark: It was a daunting task. I remember you were telling me about, what was it, the first night that...

Willy: Yes.

Mark: Yeah. We were at Pickle Meadow.

Willy: We were about 19 miles or more out of Bridgeport for our first night camping and all the teamsters were sitting around in a circle talking about what to do and everything and, you know, what teamsters talk about. And this fellow just walked into camp, and he sat down, and he said, "What are you guys planning here". And "well, we're going to go over the pass". And he says, "I'd like to suggest something. Instead of going over the pass, to go up through the army base, marine base, up that way". And he says, "The road is better, and the horses will make better time, too. Going up the steep part with the asphalt like this, they can slip".

Mark: By doing that, you were avoiding the hairpin switchbacks...

Willy: Right.

Mark: ...over by Levitt, up above...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...towards Levitt Falls.

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: You avoided that. And how did the Marines react to that? Was that something, a plan that they were willing to help you with or at least allow you to go...?

Willy: Like I said, we don't even know who the fellow is to this day that stepped in. We say he was our angel, in a sense, you know. And believe me, these people that came across the desert had a lot of angels overlooking them too. So, we just took it as that. It was a blessing because it really helped with our horses and our team service, as well.

Mark: It was an exhilarating day. I was not there that day, but I heard from everybody that it was just a wonderful...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...kind of a...

Willy: It was exciting.

Mark: ...And also, again, you can write things up on your calendar and have all kinds of plans, but you have gotta adapt when you're faced with a change like that. And it turned out to be a good decision.

Willy: It was, yes.

Mark: And everybody was a part of that decision.

Willy: No, it really was a good decision because, just the horses alone...

Mark: I remember that night. The camp was... that must have been just below the pass...

Willy: ...Yes, right there. Close to the airbase, actually.

Mark: About 8,000, almost 9,000 feet. About 8,000 feet.

Willy: We were not that far off from the marine base.

Mark: Yeah. But up the hill, but high elevation.

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: And I think that was the night that the sheriff's posse came up to help with dinner?

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: I mean, the meals for that many people, you were serving how many meals each day?

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: How many people with the crew and the supporting groups, and then the people that brought dinner up...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...would bring dinner for their crew. So, you were asking people to provide dinner for 50 people?

Willy: Right.

Mark: About?

Willy: Well, another funny thing I'll tell you. We had to contact where we camped every night. Well, we had contacted PG& E. Well, come to find out after we get over there, we camped on the wrong side of the fence.

Mark: Was that the first night?

Willy: Huh?

Mark: The first night?

Willy: Yeah, and we said, "Oh, isn't this beautiful here?" And then, I forgot who it was. It might have been Ron. Coit? Yeah, Ron Coit. He said, "You know, I think we're on PG&E property here". And so, all night long we're waiting for some lights to come up the driveway. It never happened. And it was an adventure. We didn't know what we were doing.

Mark: Let's go back and tell me how many wagons there were.

Willy: We only had six.

Mark: Six wagons.

Willy: Six wagons.

Mark: But they each had passengers?

Willy: Oh, yeah, that's what we did. That's how we could go is we sold spaces for people that wanted to go on the wagon train, and they paid the wagon master. And of course we charged for the meals. We had a chef that came along with us and fixed our...

Mark: That was the...

Willy ...right.

Mark: Yeah, that was the chuckwagon trailer...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...kind of. Now, he did breakfast and lunch?

Willy: Yeah, well, we made our own sandwiches before we left.

Mark: Ok.

Willy: And usually left in the morning.

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: So we wouldn't have to light up a fire. But we had a breakfast fit for a king and dinner, too. So, everything was really well organized. And it was...

Mark: It was very well organized. And then, we had entertainment every night, and the entertainers all enjoyed coming to a captive audience, but a very appreciative audience. So, tell me about getting over the pass. That was the morning after that...

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: ...night up top, and that was going to be the toughest day.

Willy: Right.

Mark: I think everybody knew it. What do you remember about that day?

Willy: Well, you know, that whole thing on top of the pass has changed now, with just the whole arrangements, how they set it up. Because it was all wilderness then. And we just parked on the side like that. And there was no campsite as there is now. There might have been toilets, that's all. But anyway, it was breathtaking. What we would do, where the road was so steep for the horses to pull people on the wagon, we would take them ahead in a van to where we would be stopping.

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: The wagon masters, they would get up early and move their wagons up to the next spot, and then we would put our passengers on a van and take them up. They would go up. When we were on the regular 108, we had highway patrol. They had to be with us on the highway.

Mark: Yeah

Willy: And we had a lot of tourists stopping and singing and taking pictures of us and everything. It was really exciting.

Mark: Do you think they minded being slowed down?

Willy: I don't think...

Mark: I don't think they minded it when they saw what was going on. The wagon train was a real spectacle.

Willy: It was. They had never seen it. And, I mean, a lot of people used to travel over to Highway 50 to be part of it. And upper Groveland [Placerville]. They always did a wagon train over there, too. So, there's been a lot of wagon trains. I don't think... a lot of people were not into it, so they didn't know about it. And it's like anything, you want to learn about it, then you got to read up on it and find out what's happening. And I just cherish that time...

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: ...because it was so educational to me, and I love history anyway.

Mark: I think one of the things that I remember about the Labor Day weekend, of course, you came over the pass that day and down and into Kennedy Meadows, and up to the upper meadow was where we camped and stayed there for the Labor Day weekend.

Willy: Right.

Mark: And I did not realize how much publicity was... The [Sonora Union] Democrat [Newspaper] was doing great...

Willy: Oh, I know

Mark: ...and who else was...?

Willy: KKBN.

Mark: Yes.

Willy: They were out there with us too. Yeah.

Mark: And the people that showed up, most of them walked about the mile from Kennedy Meadows. They parked and walked in to see what it was like and stayed for, some stayed for dinner, some brought their own dinner, and some...

Willy: Well, you know, even the kids from the Marine base. They were lonely at night. You know, they were away from home. And they would come into our camp every night. We had to ask them to leave sometimes. And they would just hang around the fireplace because they wanted... like I said, they were lonely, and they were just kids anyway. But another thing, too... So, his water tank, he took it all over, over the pass. Some Marines did. That helped us a lot.

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Willy: Getting water. Because you need water for horses, for cooking, whatever. So, we had the wagon train and then everything seemed to just sort of go into place. Because we learned when we came over, we had rules but we [00:18:00] still had a lot of learning to do. And the kids, when we picked up the kids up there at Kennedy Meadows, that's when they joined us. And you, Mark, were in charge of entertainment. Every time we stopped somewhere we had entertainment. Storytelling, music...

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: ...dancing, and everything so...

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: ...we tried to...

Mark: And that Labor Day we had Sunday services with the...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...who was the fellow? The group that we had there for...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...Sunday services that played some beautiful gospel music.

Willy: I know. I mean, some of these people, they're still in the county, they're a part of it. Well, certainly like the Black Irish [Band], they were there...

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Willy: ...for us, too. And the Bunkhouse Boys down in Jamestown. So, it was an exciting time... because we all were in 1800 dress. I had the traveling clothes, if you want to call them that.

Mark: Yeah. And it was gaining momentum by the time we left Kennedy Meadows. Everybody knew when it was going to arrive in Twain Harte. And newspaper and radio, like you said, just...

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: ...were building the momentum and...

Willy: Well, Channel 3 came and filmed us too one day. It was on the air there on Channel Backroads, I think, at that time, might have been what it was called. But they were on the wagon train as we were coming out at the top of the pass.

Mark: How many nights did it take to get down? Do you remember what the stops were between Kennedy Meadows and Twain Harte?

Willy: Well, like I say, we had to plan out the time it would take us to get there. And then how many miles it was we could go, and that part was pretty easy, you know. And it was pretty easy to find a place for a wagon to, you know, to pull into and stay. We had our own toilets, had our own food, but the Forest Service told us, whatever you take in, you got to take out. And so that was one of the rules that you had to do.

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: And it worked out fine. We had people doing both.

Mark: And I think that Forest Service, Highway Patrol, Caltrans...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...everybody, once they understood that you were well organized and that you had done all the paperwork...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...they, you know, got right into the spirit of it...

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...and enjoyed it along with us.

Willy: And really, Mark, when things came up that wasn't really what we might have planned on, which they did, we just chucked it off. Well, it never was perfect on the wagon train, either. We're just living the life.

Mark: Just trying to get there.

Willy: Yeah, that's right.

Mark: Yeah. Well, I remember the day that it rolled into Twain Harte. Can you tell me some of the things that you remember? Were you riding on one of the wagons when they came in?

Willy: Twain Harte?

Mark: Yes.

Willy: Oh, gosh. Yeah, I was on the wagon. I was on the front lead wagon with, what was his name? I can't remember. Yeah. And I have to show you this because a friend told me that the shopping center up here was just packed all the way around. People were waiting on their knees for a sound. And when we started down from the hills and come down into the shopping center off the highway, came there, there were people crying. It was a very emotional time.

Mark: Yeah. Yeah, I think we all felt a great sense of accomplishment and relief

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...and, you know, just exhilaration. Had a big dinner planned for everybody that night, big celebration.

Willy: Yeah.

Mark: At Epperson Park and it just captured people's imagination. Yeah, it was a great idea and it turned out to be a great event.

Willy: Well, organizing the committee was good. And we had a great committee. And they all gave their time and money to put it on the road. And I just feel it's something they saw that was worthwhile to do themselves and that's why they stepped forward and was part of it. Because it was a big part, and people still talk about it today, that it was a big part of Tuolumne County. We had to go before the supervisors, we had to, everything was, we made sure everything was legal, because you don't do anything in Tuolumne County that's not...

Mark: Well, you don't want any surprises.

Willy: Yeah, right. We want to go by the law. We want to have our ducks in order before we go and present it. And that's what we did. And we had a great committee. But one of the things that I'm the proudest of all, of anything, is our history book. Our history book. I felt that we needed to record what we did. Because this is history, what we're doing. And we did, and thanks to Mike...

Mark: Lamazny

Willy: Right, him, and Joan, his sister.

Mark: Mm-hmm.

Willy: And Donna Peterson.

Mark: Yes.

Willy: And, oh gosh, I know there's more that worked on the wagon, in the history book. They did a wonderful job. They did a wonderful job. And we did repeat it at our 10th anniversary.

Mark: Yeah.

Willy: But we wanted to leave a record this was done. And that, the people that gave their time and everything to be part of it.

Mark: I think that on behalf of everybody that was on the committee, and everybody that had anything to do with that wagon train, I want to thank you for

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: ...having the great idea and having the will and the goodwill to make it happen.

Willy: Mm-hmm

Mark: I think everybody that was involved with it, everybody that was touched by it was happy that they had anything to do with it.

Willy: Mm-hmm.

Mark: And so, I thank you, Willy. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Willy: You know, we told you we brought kids over that had to write an essay to get to come over the pass and the thing I'm proud too of was them because it was a working wagon. And they had to get out and help with the horses, they had to gather wood and stuff like this, they helped with the cook. These kids were great. But during the team, we had a nurse on board, and we had a teacher. And they...

Mark: They had a horseshoer along.

Willy: Right. And they took care of the kids. They took them swimming, they did, during their daytime. And they had school. They did a lesson. A lesson that they would have done in the 1800s.

Mark: Oh

Willy: Yeah. So, we were very authentic in that way. We wanted the kids to feel it.

Mark: Well, I think having kids along made everybody be a little more on their better behavior

Willy: Mm-hmm

Mark: ...and it was fun. Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this and I hope that the listeners will enjoy it. And if they don't remember it, they will have learned of something that was a wonderful experience. Thanks, Willy.

Willy: Thank you, Mark.