

WILLIAM R. GIBBS - A BIOGRAPHY

by
Diana Ainscough

History of Wyoming - 24-122-01
Chris Plant
4-1-83

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In a little 3-room coal miner's house in Cumberland, Wyoming, on November 21, 1906, William R. Gibbs was born, the first of 8 children of Richard and Agnes McPhie Gibbs. Bill's father and grandfather were both coal miners and his whole life has been spent living in coal camps in Wyoming - Cumberland, Superior, and Reliance. Bill's parents were born in Almy, Wyoming, and his father's parents had come to America from Scotland and Wales.

Bill, his two sisters and five brothers, were born at home, attended by a midwife and doctor. Bill remembers the Superior midwife, Granny Higgins, attending several births at his house, at which time the children and his father spent the day at the neighbors, having been shooed out by the midwife, Dr. McDonnell, and his mother, amid pots of boiling water, sheets and towels.

In 1912, the family moved into a 3-room house at A-mine in Superior where Mr. Gibbs worked long hours as a mine mechanic. The house was located next to the schoolhouse, where Bill attended 1st through 5th grades, and his mother cleaned the room, which was located across from the boiler house. Steam pipes from the boiler house ran across to the school house, providing heat, and also many burns, since the pipes ran unprotected around the walls, a painful target for an unwary arm or leg. The family moved from A Mine to C Hill to a larger 4-room house, and later to D Hill, where, on a winter evening, Bill walked to the old house and back to retrieve his mother's new broom, wearing his only pair of leather shoes through the snow. In those days, rubber overshoes were scarce and Bill's big toes were frostbitten, healing after his mother rubbed them with snow.

There were five Union Pacific coal mines in Superior - A, B, C, D & E. At the foot of C Hill was E mine, which was a shaft mine, and Bill and his friends would sit on top of the manway at quitting time to watch the men come up, holding onto the tails of the mules for assistance. The men took off their carbide lamps, knocked out the sludge and sent the mules off to the barn on their own. Bill and his friends picked up the old carbide sludge, putting it into cans and setting fire to it, resulting in a loud explosion, and the loss of a few eyebrows. One boy lost a hand as a result of playing with the carbide cans, a sobering experience for his friends.

While in Superior, Bill worked on weekends and in summers for Fonce Bertagnolli, who had a livery stable in White City, Superior, and rented rigs and horses to people traveling to Rock Springs. The only other means of transportation at this time was to ride the coal train, which took a long time to cover the 20 miles between Superior and Rock Springs. Bill used to take out his pay by riding a horse into the hills on his time off.

In 1916, there was a diphtheria epidemic in Superior, and Bill's family lost little $4\frac{1}{2}$ year-old Richard to the illness. Because of quarantine restrictions, there was no formal funeral and Bill's parents had to prepare the little body in the house, fumigate everything with formaldehyde, and bury Richard in the Superior cemetery with only the caretaker present. At this time, Bill discovered the Chinese burial section of the cemetery, and he and his friends enjoyed many trips there after that, tasting the food left in little dishes as an offering to the spirits - stuffed dates being his favorite. During the time of quarantine, restrictions were enforced by a watchman who was supposed to see that the families kept inside their own yards, but Bill's dog, Runt, had other ideas. The watchman was afraid of the dog and Bill was often out of his yard, protected by Runt, until one day, long after the epidemic, the dog was destroyed because it was overly protective.

Bill witnessed an incident at A Mine when he was 8 years old. A Chinese miner got caught up in a mining machine - consisting of an 8 foot snout with a chain running around it, which would be sunk into the coal to the full 8 feet, and then pulled down with ropes, which would cause it to undercut the whole section of face - and was pretty mangled up. Bill's father and Rudy Prevedel, a fellow-miner, were able to free him, but he died and was cremated by his countrymen atop a bier of railroad ties behind the A Mine tippie in the manner of Chinese culture.

The Gibbs family moved from Superior back to Cumberland for one year during early 1917-1918, and then in May 1918 moved to Reliance, traveling in a big 8-passenger car called a HAL-12. The engine was about 4 feet long, and probably got about 4-5 miles to the gallon. It was the only car of that type that Bill ever saw. Bill had moved to Reliance about 3 weeks before school was out, having taken his 6th grade exams before leaving Cumberland. He spent much of his time reading, watching for wrecks on the coal car track, and trapping gophers. The coal cars went down on an endless rope from the top of the mine and would sometimes go off the track and cause a pile-up. The Union Pacific Coal Company would pay someone if they saw a wreck and pressed a bell which would shut the hoist down until someone came to fix it and start it up again. Bill spent many hours watching for wrecks and was rewarded for his diligence by the dozen trips he made to the company store with his slips to redeem for boxes of chocolates.

Trapping gophers was a good occupation - they were a menace to the gardens of Reliance, and it was not considered inhumane to trap and kill them. Bill would bait his old trap with spring and jaws on one side with oats or bread, and if the trap didn't kill the animal, he would bonk it on the head with a stick to finish it off.

Bill attended 7th and 8th grades at Reliance School and he and his friends

played many games to pass away their spare time - games which today kids would call crazy, Bill remarks. "Mumblypeg" was played with a 3-bladed pocket knife - one blade was pulled out at a 90° angle and the other straight; it was then flipped into the air, whirled around and on how it landed depended the points awarded. If it stuck straight up, that was best; if it tilted, only half as many; if it fell over, no points at all. Another game was played using an old broom handle - a 4" piece was sawed off and both ends sharpened, then laid on the ground. Then it would be hit into the air by the remaining piece of broomstick, and swung at, baseball-fashion, to see who could hit it the farthest distance.

Bill recalls that kids in those days didn't do really bad things - they were more mischievous than harmful, so didn't encounter too many difficulties growing up. He remembers in Cumberland how he and some friends would get handfuls of rocks and drop them on each porch through camp, running and hiding to watch the people come to the door to see who was there. One day, his friend, Hunter, suggested that they all drop their rocks on the porch of his house, and while they were in the act, his father appeared in the doorway, shotgun in hand. "I'll count to three and anyone that's still here, I'm gonna blast 'em." Bill reckons that the imprint of his foot is there to this day as he flew away from there, as Hunter's father fired into the air, making good his threat!

In Reliance, there was a big hay barn which stored feed for the more than 60 mules and horses that worked in the mine, pulling the coal cars up and down. Bill and his friends used to sneak in there and make tunnels and forts in the hay, which was against the rules. One day Bill's Dad caught them sneaking out and Bill rose two feet into the air on the end of his boot as a result. The boys often raided their mothers' larders and had cookouts in the hills - eggs, potatoes, fruit, and dirt - all enjoyed equally.

Bill remembers the home remedies that had to be taken every spring - all the family had to take a good dose of sulphur molasses for throat congestion and their cough medicine was Pinex and honey. The Pinex was an extract from pine bark and tasted very good when mixed with honey. Epsom salts was taken as a physic, usually mixed with orange juice or coffee, putting Bill off coffee to this day - however, that was still preferable to the alternative, castor oil. There was no remedy for a common affliction of coal miners, though. For years, Bill had heard about "Black Damp", thinking it was some sort of terrible illness - one day he was walking in upper camp and chanced to see two men laying on a front porch spitting up black stuff. "Aha, this is black damp", thought Bill, and ran home to tell his father. His Dad proceeded to explain that black damp is the term used for the exhausted air down the mine, air that had lost all its oxygen, which is poisonous and suffocating, and all that was wrong with those two miners was that they had been cleaning the loose coal dust from the slope and had breathed in too much, making them sick.

Bill graduated from Rock Springs High School in 1924, and having worked the previous summer for the Union Pacific Coal Company raking rubbish from their yard, was hired to fill an opening on the tipple. He could probably have gone to college if he had wanted to push for it, but he felt that since there were still 7 more children at home it would place too much of a burden on his father, and he was not willing to do that. During his 37 years with the U.P., Bill worked his way up from greasing cars on the tipple to loading cars to weighmaster. Then he worked in the mine office as payroll clerk, and when Reliance mine closed down in 1954 he was mine clerk in charge of the office. Bill feels fortunate that he never had to work inside the mine as his father and grandfather had - his grandfather had been a gas watchman, which was a dangerous job, requiring him to go into the mine to inspect for methane gas before any of the other miners entered. His father began working in the mines

at 11 years of age as a mule driver and worked up to gas watchman and, finally, mine mechanic. Bill describes his father as being a very short man whose lunch buckets cost more than his wages because he bumped the bottom of them on the ground as he walked and wore them out.

Bill remembers camp life with warm feelings. The people depended on their neighbors being able to help each other, since each community was complete in and unto itself. There was no help from county or government and each family was a part of one big family. The miners down the mine took responsibility for their fellow-miners' lives as if they were their own - each was responsible for the other, which is quite foreign to today's modern feeling. This feeling of responsibility carried over into camp life, as the neighbors shared one with the other. The company store made available all the necessary items and every family owed the store. Some men never drew a week's pay and when strikes would occur, the debt would grow deeper as people had to charge things they couldn't pay for. Some people had coupons for commodity items which they often sold for cash. Bill remembers always having enough to eat, although his father only made \$110.00 each month.

The women were kept busy with housework and cooking, and enjoyed social times during which quilting and fancy work would be done, but they didn't have much spare time since the washing took one whole day, the ironing one day, and the baking one day. Much sharing of ethnic recipes went on since at that time there were as many as 37 different nationalities around the Rock Springs area.

There was a Spanish family who lived in House #1 in Reliance, and they had many children. The father wasn't working much and they were very needy. One of their little girls got scalded and died, and Bill remembers his mother and another neighbor going to the house to prepare the little girl for her burial service - there was never a question of what their nationality was - rich, poor, colored - this had no bearing in coal camp life - if you had, you shared; if you were in need, someone shared with you. The thing that Bill

stressed was the full support that the people had for each other. A family in Winton, a neighboring coal camp, had stored up a great deal of food, and when the mines closed, leaving many people who were living up to their limit at the company store just cut off with no food or money, this man opened up his basement and fed many needy families. He wasn't working either, and he was soon out of food himself, but he shared with his neighbors. Bill feels that many of the ills of the world today could be cured by a return to the kind of life the miners exemplified.

As Bill grew up, he saw his parents and their friends enjoy a simple social life - the communities had dances at which their own musicians played, and basket socials, picnics, and sage-chicken hunts where they would haul the sage chicken in by the tubful. Community church services were usually non-denominational, held in the schoolhouse, and attended by all religions, but the Catholic Church members usually travelled to Rock Springs for their services. Bill's family are L.D.S. (Mormons) and always held their services and Sunday School at individual homes.

There was seldom any need to travel into town for anything - the local mine doctor, Dr. Fuehrer, lived in camp and could handle most things. Mr. Zueck ran a stage line from Rock Springs to Reliance which was a suburban-like vehicle with canvas sides and seats across. Peddlers would come to Reliance selling fish and Louis Metelko drove his Kissel truck loaded with vegetables to sell. Each family had their own vegetable gardens, but with the growing season so short, there was never enough to stockpile for the winter months. In Cumberland, "Cheap John" drove his white-top rig into camp, parked and opened his 2'x3'x5' fiberboard boxes to display clothes, hats, shoes, etc. and people came from all over camp to buy. Sears and Wards catalogs were well-used also, not only for ordering, but in the outhouse when they had expired. Bill doesn't remember ever using anything else - when the catalog was done with, it was nailed up on the outhouse wall!

Before the bath house was erected in Reliance, the miners came home every night and took their baths in the kitchen in a tin tub, filled with water which was heated in buckets on the stove. Soon, people began to build their own wash shanties in the back yards, complete with wood stove, so that they could take their baths outside and not clutter up the kitchen. These wash shanties were useful for other things, too - when sausage-making time arrived, the shanty would be used as a smoke-house, as the cooks would throw sawdust into the stove and hang the links on sticks over the stove, where it would smoke very nicely. Bill's favorite part in all this was to sneak in the shanty window and steal a stick-full of garlic sausage, along with some other hungry friends.

In 1928, Bill was called to serve an L.D.S. mission to the Pacific Northwest. After two years there, he returned and went to work in Salt Lake City, Utah for an electric company. On a trip to Reliance from Salt Lake in June 1930, Bill was involved in a car accident which broke his ankle. Dr. Fuehrer repaired the ankle, and Bill remained in Reliance, being re-hired by the U.P.

In 1931, Bill met his future wife, Darhl Draney, who had moved to Rock Springs in 1915, and after a year's courtship they were married in May, 1932. They moved into House #101 in Sand Camp at the North end of Reliance, where they hauled water into the house from a nearby hydrant box, until Bill dug a ditch and piped water up to the house. He and his wife then moved to House #110, a 4-room house with a nice yard, where they lived until 1945, at which time they moved to their present house, #136. Today, Bill and Darhl have been married 50 years, and are the parents of 5 children, 24 grandchildren, and 2 great-grandchildren. Their first child was born at home with Dr. Fuehrer and Darhl's mother in attendance, while the others were born in the hospital, at which time a week's confinement was usual.

By this time, entertainment was coming to Rock Springs because the railroad and highway systems ran right through the town, and Bill enjoyed the Pantageous Vaudeville, which was a traveling variety show; John Philip Sousa's marching

band; Bobbie Burns' comedy act, made up of local people; and many other local bands who played for dances at the Pla Mor Dance Hall (now Ace Hardware). The L.D.S. church provided much of their own entertainment and Bill and his friends had a dance club for many years, meeting at the Old Timer's Building, now the Civic Center.

Bill slowly modernized his house, digging a cesspool, piping in water and building a shower on the back porch. Each family fixed up their own gardens and every summer a garden contest was held in camp. Horace Ainscough (my late father-in-law) won the contest four consecutive times and was not allowed to enter thereafter.

Storage of food didn't present a problem since the families would hang their meat in a sugar sack on the shady side of the house and saw off a hunk when needed. Bill buried a box in the ground which was kept covered with a wet gunny sack and this kept foodstuffs cool. He recalls driving past Booker Street in Rock Springs where Amos Page usually had two or three deer hanging on his clothes line - it was obvious how well Page's were eating by the amount of meat gone from the line! People didn't worry about having their food stolen - there may have been a few scoundrels, but most people would have to be pressed pretty hard before they would steal.

Bill saw mining from pick and shovel days, with oil lamps, through the first mechanical conveyor; from the mule to the shuttle car, to the belt conveyor; from loading 40 cars a day - 2000 tons, to 2000 tons in 20 minutes. Through the years there were many accidents - cave-ins, blow-outs and freak accidents. Blasting was first done with black powder, then with gelatin, which was a stick $1\frac{1}{4}$ " around by 10" long. This was inserted 3" in a hole and covered with a dynamite cap, fused, pushed into the hole, tamped, and lit. Blasting became safer with the advent of the cap with wire included which could be set off by battery.

Reliance mine closed in 1954 and Bill transferred to Stansbury mine as material clerk and then to Superior as weighmaster, remaining there after the Superior mines closed in 1959 to bring the machinery out from the mine, and assemble and sell all the equipment. During this time, Bill acquired a double hernia, and after its repair, went to work as custodian for the L.D.S. church where he worked for 8 years until his retirement in 1971.

Throughout his life, Bill has been very civic-minded - he joined the boy scouts in 1932 and remains active in the scouting program today. He recalls a time when he was a scoutmaster, when he and his scouts nearly had to evacuate the neighborhood as they waterproofed their tents with melted Parowax and gasoline. He served on Lone Peak's Council in Colorado; Cache Valley Council in Logan, Utah; and was instrumental in setting up the Jim Bridger Council which presently serves the Rock Springs area. Bill still serves on the executive board today. Schooling and young people have been a deep concern of Bill's, and he served on the Reliance School Board, District #7 until it was absorbed by Rock Springs District #1, a total of 30 years. Reliance School today bears a placque honoring Bill, which reads, "In dedication to Mr. W. Gibbs for his unselfish devotion to children, education and the community. 1975."

Today, Bill puts much time into his greenhouse, where he raises orchids and other plants - he enjoys growing things and chuckles as he says that people laugh at an old coal miner raising orchids. Bill continues to serve his church and looks back on a history of teaching, serving on councils and secretarial work. He has always been busy and never without something to do. He feels no pressures of any kind and has nothing but the finest feeling about his life and professes sincerely to be a very happy man.

As this biography concludes, this vital, healthy, robust man, who attends a local spa regularly, points out a beautiful white orchid, the Snow King, whose perfume fills the room - somehow symbolizing the worth of the valuable contribution which Bill Gibbs has given to so many throughout his life.

NAME: WILLIAM R. GIBBS

PRESENT ADDRESS: 1305 MAIN, RELIANCE, WY. 82943

1. Present profession or occupation: RETIRED
2. Occupations followed in the past (give dates):
3. Date of birth: Nov. 21, 1906 Place of birth: Cumberland Wyo.
4. Date of moving to Wyoming: —
5. Full name of parents (give mother's maiden name) RICHARD GIBBS
AGNES McPHIE
6. Names of brothers and sisters (and to whom married):
See other side
7. Schools attended (give dates): SUPERIOR, WY - 1912 - 1917
CUMBERLAND, WY - 1917 - 18
RELIANCE, WY - 1918 - 1920
8. Places of residence in Wyoming (give dates): ROCK SPRINGS HIGH
CUMBERLAND, WY 1906 - 1912, 1917-18, SCHOOL - 1920-24
SUPERIOR, WY. 1912-1917
RELIANCE WY. 1918-1983
9. Military service (dates, awards, area served, rank, etc.):
NONE
10. Political offices held (give dates): NONE
11. Political affiliation: NONE
12. Religious affiliation: LDS
13. Marriage (spouse's name, date and place of marriage):
DARHL DRANEY, MAY 1932, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH
14. Children (names, dates of birth, grandchildren, etc.):

<u>DONNA GODFREY</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>FEB 18, 1933</u>	<u>WILMA SPENCE - NOV 17,</u>
<u>RICHARD GIBBS</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>MAR 18, 1935</u>	<u>1946</u>
<u>LAUREL MERHISH</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>FEB 28, 1937</u>	
<u>PATRICIA BURTON</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>MAR 17, 1943</u>	
15. List of clubs and societies of which you are a member:

Boy Scouts
School Board
Church
Library Board

Brothers: Martin Gibbs - Dorothy Sessions
Charles Gibbs - Douna Edmonds
Robert Gibbs - Rhea Bangerter
Two deceased

Sisters: deceased