Biography of Jack Wilson Sr.

By

Pat Valdez

History of Wyoming

Chris Plant

Dec. 2,1986

Biography of Jack Wilson Sr.

He is a husband, a father, a former Sweetwater County Commissioner, and a retired employee of FMC. With an air of pride he will announce that he is a Democrat and a Catholic, because he hasn't found anything better. Although he says he may have made some mistakes he is not ashamed. His name is Jack Wilson Sr., a native of Wyoming, born in Gebo, on August 29, 1917.

Gebo Wyoming, located twelve miles North of Thermopolis, was at that time an active coal mining camp with a population of 1500 to 2000 people. However, at the present time there is only one remaining house with occupants. Like most coal camps it was a company run town. There were 500 rank and file union members who were making up to $600.00 per month "which was fantastic" for the time.

Schools in Gebo were built and operated by the coal companies. They had multiple rooms and "were very good", with the people who went there being "well taught", according to Jack. As a young student in Gebo, he thought his teacher, whose name was Miss Penney, was several years older than she actually was. A few years ago, when the students from Gebo had a reunion he learned that she was in a rest home in Iowa, and was surprised to hear that she was still living. He thought she should have been "at least 102 years old, when she was really less than 80".

Jack's mother, nee Agnes Lynch, was of Irish descent, and his father, who was a Scot first came to Cumberland Wyoming, originating in Pennsylvania and Kentucky respectively. The coal mines led them to Gebo in 1910. When Jack was four years old his father died, leaving his mother a widow with seven children. Originally there had been

eight, but one boy, Robert was run over by a box car and died at a young age. The oldest boy, Clarence, was a deaf mute who communicated with the other family members in sign language. Although Jack said his mother was not a strict disciplinarian, "she would let things go to an extreme, then go to an extreme herself to try and correct it".

Two of the children had left home to be on their own, and Jack was ten years old when their mother remarried. Two years after that the family moved to a farm near Glendive Montana. Jack graduated from the eighth grade in a small country school there, but was unable to attend high school. His step-father who "took a dislike" to him would not pay for his room and board in Glendive; there was no school bus or other means of transportation from the farm to town. However, his determination to go to high school was not to be deterred.

When Jack was fourteen, his brother Clarence came to Montana for a visit, and the two boarded a freight train going to Gebo where their grandmother resided. They had problems during the night hours trying to communicate in sign language, but arrived safe and sound after four days. Jack remained with his grandmother and went to high school there until three months before graduation. At that time he got into a dispute with a teacher and had to finish in Thermopolis, where he graduated in 1936.

Upon graduation, at eighteen he went to work in a coal mine in Gebo where the coal seam "was pitched from 19 to 22 degrees", meaning that he worked in an area that was only three and one half to four feet high. Much of the time he worked on his knees. There were no mechanical loaders and the coal was loaded with a number two coal scoop. During winter months the miners worked seven hours a day, five days a week, but in summer months when the need for coal was not as

great they were lucky to work a couple days a week.

Two years later Jack moved to Rock Springs and went to work in an independent coal mine in Blairtown for a brief period of time where the seams of coal were also about four feet high. Independent mines were those that were not owned by Union Pacific, as most were at that time. He eventually went to work at Reliance for the Union Pacific Coal Company where the coal seams were all of nine feet high. The U.P. had a bonus system that allowed the men to make money over and above their paychecks.

> "For every ton over 25 tons, per man, per shift they paid 25 cents to be divided between the people on both shifts. It amounted to about $3.00 per day and the company did not take anything out of that money. A thirty dollar bonus check every ten days was terrific money and sometimes more than their paycheck"

The mines in Rock Springs provided a full time job during the winter, and during the summer months Jack did construction work, oil field work or whatever he could find. The miners would pay off the bills during the winter that had been charged during the summer at the company store.

The company store had meat, food, clothing, and even furniture; whatever a person wanted to buy. The company store also doled out the paychecks and took out what was owed before people recieved their pay. Some people never did draw a check, and according to Jack, "the same type of people that abuse credit cards now, did the same at the company store then". The company also had their own doctor and provided medical care. It appears that the company store took a profound interest in the men while keeping them loosely tied in a way that kept them working for the company.

It was also during that era when companies were interested in

music and baseball. Jack said, "if a guy could play baseball or play a musical instrument he had himself a job". This was true in both the Gebo and Rock Springs area. Many "prominent names in Green River came to this town to play baseball for the Union Pacific". Although he could not think of many off hand, he did mention that Mike Mayor, a former sheriff was one of those who came here to play ball. Along with baseball and bands there were other forms of entertainment.

In 1937 Rock Springs had gambling and prostitution with each gambling place and house of prostitution being required to pay a fine every week as an accepted procedure. Gambling was done in the back rooms of pool halls. Popular games of the day were Pan, a game similar to Chinese Fan-Tan, Black Jack, (Twenty One) and Crap. Jack said, "the big time gamblers played Barbut, a game of Greek Origin". Prostitutes operated in an area near the now existing Belmont Bar, and most had a madam, one of whom fancied herself as a poet. Her name was Willie Mae Hunt. Jack recalled one of her poems which proved to be somewhat poetic, and typically bawdy. A man named Cat Willis was the "head honcho pimp" for the prostitutes. Jack was not sure, but he thought the girls were required to have a medical examination every week when they paid their fines.

An overall picture of Rock Springs from Jack's point of view, during the thirties and forties is that it was a town filled with hard working miners and plenty of places to blow off steam and have a good time when they were off work. Prostitutes and gamblers were accepted by residents and the fines they paid every week contributed to the economy of the town.

Rock Springs was where Jack met Catherine Sadler who he married in 1938. They were married in Manila Utah by a mormon bishop at the

bishop's house. Getting married in Manila was a common practice among people living here then as they had a five day "cooling period", and a blood test in Wyoming. However, in Utah it was easy to get married right away. During their courtship and early years of marriage their main source of entertainment was going to Saturday night dances. They lived in Rock Springs until 1947 when they moved to the plant site that is now FMC, at the request of the company.

Jack got a job as master mechanic for the company that preceded FMC, and the company requested that he live on the site in one of the houses that were there. The other house was occupied by the mine superintendent for a short time, but his wife could not take the rugged way of life, at which time they moved off the site. However, Jack and Keenie (nickname of Catherine) said they "rather enjoyed living there", for the five and one half years. Their fourth child was born while there. Jack built a corral and bought a horse to keep the oldest boy occupied. There were other memorable incidents that happened while there including a blizzard.

In 1949 this area struggled through a terrible blizzard which kept Jack and his family snowed in at the job site for ten days. The roads were closed and they ran out of groceries, but they found out that the railroad was open and trains were able to run between the plant and Green River. A train engine and caboose were loaded with groceries and a new crew to relieve those who had been there for the ten days.

Transportation between the mine and town during that period of time was an old army truck that was covered with canvas which was used to haul the men back and forth. In 1946 Zanetti began a bus service, and from that arose the bus service that exists now.

When Jack was a young man he tried to join every branch of the service there is, but was not accepted because he had bad vision, and a piece of glass in his knee. The glass in his knee was a result of an auto accident when he was a youngster and "as a matter of fact is still there". Then "believe it or not, in 1945 they drafted" him and by that time he did not want to go. Regardless of the bad vision and the bad leg he was supposed to go into the service on August 29, his 25th birthday. "They had dropped the atomic bomb on Japan on the 14th of August", but because he was married and had children he did not have to go.

When the refining plant was built and put into operation in 1953 the company again made a request for Jack to move; this time off the site. They rented a house in Green River and later bought a house on the South side of town. However, he continued to work at the plant.

FMC employees were organized union members from the beginning, with Jack being the first charter member and recording secretary for union meetings. People were brought in from many different places to work in the plant. Many of the miners came from other States that were beginning to shut down the coal mines, such as West Virginia. Technical people with a soda ash background were brought in from Chicago, Syracuse, and cities in California. After several layoffs at the local Union Pacific coal mines the local people began to seek employment at the trona mine. For a while Green River had two groups of people, those who were associated with the trona mines and those who were coal miners for the U.P Jack said that each group "was somewhat clannish at first", but eventually got together and united the town.

When asked about politics and party affiliations Jack told me that he is "a democrat and a Catholic, strictly because no one has shown me anything better". He told me that in years gone by Sweetwater

County was a solid Republican county where "Democrat was a nasty word". He ventured a guess that it may have changed due to a large population of working men. He said it could also have been due to the policies of Herbert Hoover, and the workers who were in support of Franklin Roosevelt.

Jack became involved in politics when he ran for County Commissioner against Willis Heikes unsuccessfully, but was later appointed to finish the unexpired term when Mr. Heikes died in 1974. Jack held that office until 1985. During the time he was in office he met and became acquainted with several Wyoming politicians. Some of those were Teno Roncalio, Gale McGee, Cliff Hansen, Stan Hathaway and our current governor, Ed Herschler.

He recalled meeting Teno while at a meeting in Casper, after which they were visiting in the parking lot. They found that Keenie had locked the car with the keys in the ignition. With a coat hanger and some expertise they got the car door opened in a few minutes, but it proved to be a memorable incident.

Jack said he thought "Teno was probably one of the best politicians we've had", and that he was responsive to all the people. He also felt the same way about Cliff Hansen and Stan Hathaway.

Jack told me a little yarn about wearing the same coat for six years, in relation to his first meeting Gale McGee. The first time McGee ran for office he came to Green River and brought a photographer for publicity purposes. McGee arrived at the FMC bus stop to meet the men and talk with them on their way to work. Jack arrived at the same time, with the photographer taking their picture as they shook hands before entering the bus. Six years later the same scene was repeated, with McGee running for office again, and Jack said he was wearing

the same coat in both pictures.

In the 11 years between 1974 and 1985 as county commissioner, Jack felt that his most rewarding and best accomplishment was the elimination of the old hospital, and the building of the new one. He felt that the thing Sweetwater county lacked the most was medical care and admits taking advantage of the boom situation to get the job done. The number two priority was recreation, resulting in the new fairground complex. He thinks the commissioners addressed those two problems very well, in spite of the fact that they were done against the advice of the "so-called experts".

In order to get more doctors who specialize to come into the area the commissioners created a policy to grant interest free loans to establish a practice. The results were many new doctors. Before the boom Green River had only two doctors and two dentists. Rock Springs had five, including Doctor Yedinak who according to Jack was "an outstanding surgeon" But due to the great and sudden rise in population, from 22,000 to 41,000 there were not enough doctors to care for the people. He thought the interest free loans and the new hospital took care of the problems and also feels that we have excellent medical care now according to the size of the towns.

Although the boom is over now and the area is experiencing a less than bountiful economy, Jack looks at it as a leveling off period with businesses going back to a medium level. He thought Green River and Rock Springs experienced a lot of problems that we don't have now and described the boom as a helter skelter life style. He also thinks some of the human services that sprang up during the boom are not as effective now and no longer necessary.

He mentioned the volunteer information referral service that started out on a volunteer basis, with a few thousand dollars budget and has now expanded to a multi thousand dollar agency. He thinks the same services could be just as effective with a phone call and not nearly as wasteful to the taxpayers.

When I asked Jack about the Sixty Minutes television program that was done about Rock Springs he became adamant in saying he thought "it was a completely staged affair", and he did not think it did justice to the people of Sweetwater County. He thought that a program of that type had no business delving into the personal affairs of Mayor Paul Wataha. He said ninety percent of what was shown was "staged with very little truth in it". He couldn't "get over the guy going in the alley with a can of beer, and when he came back out he still had the can of beer in his hand" However he did say that "maybe prostitutes and pimps had gotten out of hand". He suggested that there are probably more prostitutes "in two blocks of Salt Lake City or one block of Washington D.C. than there are people in Sweetwater County". He couldn't understand why a program with the "supposed stature of Sixty Minutes would elect to persecute a town the size of Rock Springs", and thought that much of what they aired was "an out and out lie". He did think crime was up during the boom because of the type of people who are drawn to a town where a boom is going on, but that the quality of life has improved in Sweetwater County now.

Besides being a county commissioner, Jack was employed at FMC for 36 years, beginning in 1947 and ending with his retirement in 1983. During that time he helped design mining equipment and has several patents to his credit. He helped design the continuous miner and was involved in the designs that would increase the safety of the miners.

He was the one who started cabs on mining machines, one of which recently saved a man's life in an accident in Colorado. He did not get paid for his designs or patents, but got rewards from the company. He worked underground for 20 years as a master mechanic, and eventually became the plant and mine maintenance superintendent. At that time he was taken out of the mine and to the surface where he retired.

One of Jack's best memories of Sweetwater County was during the years he was commissioner when "we paid off the joint powers loan that had been incurred for the hospital, in order for us to again retain control of the members on the hospital board". He is very proud of his commitment to, and the work done in connection with the building of the current hospital.

When asked about his thoughts on the current gubernatorial campaign, he said, "Mike Sullivan is a very good man, and Pete Simpson is running on his name". He doesn't think either of them will be able to help the ailing economy in Wyoming for a while, and said the boom-bust economy is a fact of life in Wyoming and is unavoidable.

The biggest change in people during his lifetime is that they are not as creative as they once were, and they feel that they must be entertained mechanically or other, in his opinion.

Jack and Keenie Wilson have five children, sixteen grandchildren, all of whom they are very proud; being a father and a husband has been his priority in life. His thoughts for future generations is to "Be yourself".

Jack grew to adulthood in Wyoming without the aid or help of his father who died when he was four years old. His determination has provided him with a good and long career in the mining industry. He maintained an interest in other people's welfare during the 11 years he was county commissioner, and the best interests of his family as well. He also did what he could to insure safety for miners. He is active in the B P.O.E. and F.O.E. and can be found cooking breakfast on any given morning at the Green River Eagles Club. He has led an interesting and productive lifestyle and has many stories to tell that may well be spiced with his own firm convictions.

Pat Valdez

NAME: Jack Wilson Sr.

PRESENT ADDRESS: 681 W. 2nd No. Green River, Wy

1. Present profession or occupation: Retired

2. Occupations followed in the past (give dates): Maintenance Man and Supervisor 1946 to 1981

3. Date of birth: Aug 29, 1915 Place of birth: Gebo, Wyo

4. Date of moving to Wyoming: —

5. Full name of parents (give mother's maiden name)
John. Wilson Agnes Lynch.

6. Names of brothers and sisters (and to whom married):
Clarence Deceased. James. Deceased, Nellie Deceased.
Mrs. Charles (Agnes) Walker - Mrs Frank (Edith) Peterson.
Mrs Curtis (Margkarite) Burrell

7. Schools attended (give dates):
Gebo, Wyo. Grade & High school 1923-1935
Thermopolis Wyo. High School. 1955-36

8. Places of residence in Wyoming (give dates):
Gebo, Wyo. 1917-1935. Rock Springs. Wyo 1938-1947
Thermopolis Wyo. 1936 1938 - EMC Land 1947-1953
Green River Wyo 1953 - Present

9. Military service (dates, awards, area served, rank, etc.):
None

10. Political offices held (give dates):
County Commissioner 1974 - 1985

11. Political affiliation:
Dem.

12. Religious affiliation:
Catholic

13. Marriage (spouse's name, date and place of marriage):
Catherine 1938 - Manilla, Utah.

14. Children (names, dates of birth, grandchildren, etc.):
John. 1939 - 4 children
James. 1945 - 3 children
Shirley 1947 - 4 children
Michael 1949 - 3 children.
Thomas 1956 2 children

15. List of clubs and societies of which you are a member:
F.O.E. Eagles 2350. Green River
BPOE Elks 624. Rock Springs