CAP Oral History

Pam Stevenson (Q):

Today is July the 20th of 2004 and I'm Pam Stevenson and we're here at Sundance Farms near Coolidge and I'll let you tell me your name.

Wilbur Wuertz (A):

I'm Wilbur Wuertz.

Q: And tell me, when and where were you born?

A: I was born in Pierpont, South Dakota in 1923.

Q: What brought you to Arizona?

A: Well, the folks came and I came with them.

Q: Were you old enough to remember the trip?

A: Oh yeah, yeah.

Q: What do you remember?

A: We came in an old Buick car with wooden wheels and you know wooden wheels got to be kept wet or they dry out and they break. So four wheels, four boys so each one of us had a responsibility of keeping our wheel wet down. Howard didn't keep his wet down and we broke down outside of Coolidge and we've been here ever since.

Q: It's Howard's fault.

A: Yeah, but we're glad because Coolidge has been good to us.

Q: And what year was that that you came here?

A: 1929.

Q: What did you think when you first settled here near Coolidge?

A: Oh, I don't know, I enjoyed it, but we were kids you know – we didn't know. It was fun. Of course, it was October, it wasn't hot. We had plenty of things to do.

Q: What kinds of things did you have to do in 1929?

A: Oh gosh, of course went to school obviously, you know. But then there was plenty of things to do on the farm. You darn sure helped so all of us got out and worked.

Q: What were some of your chores on the farm?

A: Oh gosh, chopping weeds and milking cows and feeding cows. Of course, earlier like Howard said, we tried to farm with horses and that didn't work. It was just too hot for them. Dad soon got a tractor, so it wasn't too long, we learned how to drive the tractor. You did all kinds of things on the farm and there's plenty to do. And certainly there were cows to milk and all those things. We darn sure had plenty to do.

Q: You mentioned going to school. What were schools like here?

A: Oh they were, oh by the time – I guess the first school I went to was probably in Borree Corner, but then it wasn't long and they had a school in Coolidge. I obviously, they were reasonably good because we learned enough to get by and even make it into college, so obviously it was reasonable.

Q: How did you get from here to Coolidge to school?

A: Of course they had buses. But then we wanted, all of us wanted to play athletics, so of course the bus had already gone by the time we got through practicing so a lot times we'd have to walk home. That was quite a...that kept you in shape though.

Q: How far was it?

A: Oh, what five miles, Howard, something like that.

Q: How big of a school was it?

A: Oh gosh, it was small, I don't know. I think my high school graduating class was 35, I think, somewhere in that neighborhood.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: 1941. And in '42 of course went to the University and of course Pearl Harbor came and off to that war.

Q: So you went to U of A?

A: Yeah, I started at the U of A. And then of course after the war, I had the good sense to get out of the Air Force and go back to school. That was a good decision.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the war years.

A: Well, I was a pilot. I went into the Air Force, got through the cadet training program in several places and when I graduated in twin engine out of Stockton, the commander called me and said, "Well, we're going to send you down and learn how to fly instruments." So I went down to Texas A&M right by Texas' Air Force Instrument School learned how to fly instruments and went back. And for

several, quite a while, taught instruments, and then we didn't lose as many pilots as they had expected, so they started closing the training schools down. And then they sent me to B-17 school and finally B-29 school and then they dropped those big ones and the war was over and we got out.

Q: Did you ever fly and serve overseas?

A: No, I was an instructor here and never got out of the states.

Q: But you flew that B-29?

A: Yep, it was big enough to carry that big one.

Q: When you came back from the war, then what did you do?

A: Went back to school. We farmed a little bit, but then went back to school. When I graduated down at the University, I guess in 1949, I went to work for the University. I was a County Agent in Yuma County for a little while and then Maricopa County.

Q: What was your major in school?

A: Animal husbandry.

Q: Were you down at the Aggie House?

A: Oh yeah, where I borrowed $2500 in 1945 or '46 and made a down payment on the Aggie House and it's paid for now isn't it Howard?

Howard: That's right.

A: Now it's paid for. Of course we had closed up during the war, and then we came back and several of us got it going again. I remember borrowing money from Valley Bank and making a down payment on it. It's still going.

Q: Still agricultural down there?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: Do the Robys still go to school down there?

A: Oh yeah, if it wasn't for the Robys there, I don't think the Aggie House would make it. I guess we got the one Wuertz down there now but after that, I don't know, it's going to be a long time before we get anymore in, but the Robys, they're there.

Q: There's a lot of Robys.

A: Yeah, lots of Robys.

Q: Tell me a little bit about, you know; after you graduated, you were a County Agent?

A: Yeah, in Yuma County and then in Maricopa County and then about that time the University of Arizona had developed some acala cotton varieties. And then the Department of Agriculture had, well they...at Sacaton they did the breeding work for pima cotton. But about that time, a guy named Dr. Bryan down at the University of Arizona; it wasn't his responsibility for the extra-long sable cotton, but he just had a fascination for it, and he crossed some things that nobody else thought about doing and came up with Pima S-1, a new variety of pima cotton that really produced and had reasonable quality. So that seed needed to be reproduced and available for the farmers. So they set up what they called - they copied California with the Arizona Cotton Seed Distributors and I became the first manager and did that for, I don't know, six or seven years and finally, of course,

decided that I wanted to farm. By that time, Howard had gotten started farming, and we had a lake place down there and got my brother Vern going, and then Howard took it and got him going and they were nice enough to let me have it and I'm still farming it.

Q: Where is it that you farm?

A: Down by Pichaco Lake, just north of Pichaco Lake.

Q: How far is that from here?

A: Six or seven miles, just south of Coolidge by the Pichaco Reservoir.

Q: What do you farm down there?

A: Oh cotton, mostly alfalfa. With all the dairies around here now, alfalfa is our biggest crop. But I don't do much of the work, I just kind of fuss at them.

Q: You have seen a lot of changes in farming, I would imagine, since the horses that your dad had. Do you want to talk a little about that?

A: So many changes. First tractors, I can remember we didn't have enough money to buy the equipment to go on the tractor so Dad would cut the tongues off and hook it on the tractor so it would take a tractor driver and another guy on the mower or cultivator or whatever. Of course, it wasn't too long until we got equipment that mounted on the tractors. And gosh, now all kinds of things, you know, the drip irrigation that Howard pioneered and laser levelers and GPS's and modified...just you know whoever somebody put that bacillus gene in cotton so the worms won't eat it anymore, just amazing the things that have happened, not just in agricultural, by society as a whole.

Q: The machinery for picking cotton sure changed.

A: Oh yeah, when we first...before...I guess the first picker we got in 1949 or '50, I think we still did a little bit of hand picking in '49 or '50, but then the machines now are efficient. But one of the interesting things about how little things make a big difference, they tried that cotton picker and tried it and tried it, it really didn't work very well until finally somebody, and I don't remember who it was - I'm not even sure I knew – said hey you need to put a little water on that spindle. It made all the difference in the world. Made cotton pickers work efficient, but just that a simple idea that somebody needed to think of it, now it works. Cotton picking machines area amazing, amazing machines.

Q: They're probably a lot more expensive too.

A: Oh I know. But then look what it will do...I don't know what, one six-year-old picker, Howard, would do as much as 6,000 Chinese something like that. I don't know how many. It's just remarkable and of course in China, you know, they pick it by hand, but not us.

Q: They're several Chinese in China.

A: They do, that's right.

Q: I forgot to ask you that Howard said you had a story about how your parents came to Coolidge is different from his version.

A: I think I told you about the wooden wheels. That car we had, I think I already told you about the wooden wheels and having to keep them wet. Howard didn't keep his wet, broke down; we've been here ever since.

Q: So it's Howard's fault. I see.

A: And we're glad because Coolidge has been good to us.

Q: Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the water district, you got involved somewhat with the district...

A: The local district, like Howard said, CAWCD they contracted with the District, so our district here our local district is Hohokam Irrigation District. And three of us…I've been on the Electrical District that provides power for us. The pump water Electric District #2 was formed in 1923. Now I've been on that district, the board now, for 40 years I guess. Anyway, our Electrical District, we knew we needed a new irrigation district because electrical districts could just handle electricity and obviously we needed to handle water. So one, two of us, three of us that were on my district, formed the Hohokam Irrigation District and it's the one now that delivers water to us.

Q: You were actually part of forming that?

A: Yeah.

Q: When did you do that?

A: Oh gosh, in the early 70's, I don't remember exactly.

Q: So typically the two worked with CAWCD?

A: Oh yeah, CAWCD had to contract with the districts and we had to form one to make, you know, to have a contract with them and then we had to build the canals and all the systems to deliver it. We formed it sometime in the 70's.

Q: What's involved in forming an irrigation district?

A: Oh just lawyers but there are rules, you know, you just got to go through and get enough people. In our case, we didn't just go draw a big circle and say all of you that are in here are part of the district. We just advertised and told people who –

anybody that wanted to get into the district come and sign up. And the Soil Conservation Service in Coolidge helped a whole bunch. They provided...so people went in and so we did it by invitation and then later on a few people petitioned out, but we had enough acres, I don't know 25,000 acres or so. So formed the district and the contracts to get the water, build the canals, and hire the people to run it. The guy we hired to run the whole camp, he's still with us. We hired a good one.

Q: How many people does it take to run that district?

A: Oh gosh, I don't know what we have, probably five or six, not too many; somebody to turn and open the gates and close the gates and do the billing. The district can levy taxes to help pay for it, they have that authority.

Q: I don't think it would be popular?

A: Oh no, no but then we found we wanted water and that's the only way you're going to get it. You can't contract individually, you've got to have an organization to go do that and we haven't much – I won't say that some people didn't fuss a little bit about it but primarily no because they wanted the water.

Q: When did you first start getting the water?

A: Gosh, I don't remember for sure sometime – what Howard in the 70's? I don't remember. We've had it a long time now. I remember we opened up that connection to CAP and had the water flowed down. I've got some pictures of it, but I don't remember the exact date. When you're as old as me, you'll have senior moments. We remember everything.

Q: Talk a little bit about the electric power.

A: Well, you know of course back then in 1923 when ED2 was formed, we needed power to run our crops. And so a guy named Tony Van Wagenen, he was the attorney for the City of Casa Grande. Farmers didn't have any money so they said, "Tony we need to form a district because we need to get power. We can't afford to pay you now, but you get it set up, sell bonds, so we can build the lines and stuff and then we'll pay you." So he did, he formed a district called it ED1, but the court found something wrong with it and he had to go get Superior Court to say it's okay. But something was wrong, he corrected whatever they wanted him to correct and so there wouldn't be any tie up or anything, he called it ED2. That's why we're Electrical District #2. We furnish power...it's interesting now, we furnish power for more houses then we do farms as things have grown and it's going to be more, and more, and more. Like Howard here, I guess you're going to use ED2 power aren't you Howard?

Howard: Yeah.

Q: So it started out like a rural electrical district?

A: We were before then, because rural electrics didn't come until Roosevelt in the 30's, mid-30's. So we were way before that, 1923 they formed. And we copied California obviously they had electrical districts in the San Joaquin and probably Sacramento Valley. But anyway Tony, like I say, he got a copy of something how they did it in California and formed our district. And then we begin to...of course we get power out of Hoover, hydropower. And of course now with...you gotta buy power a lot of places.

Q: Originally you got power from Hoover?

A: Yeah, we still do that's our big, you know, that's our base and we buy it from Palo Verde and a lot of other places.

Q: You were talking about how that role at that Electrical District has changed then over the years pumping basically for the farms.

A: We furnish now power for a lot people. The law says, in fact we had a lawsuit with APS because we started serving other loads other than irrigation pumping and the court finally said we could serve. And we serve a lot of others besides just irrigation.

Q: There has been a lot of talk in recent years about the deregulation of the power, how does that affect a small district like yours?

A: Oh, it hadn't. They found out that deregulation wasn't all...thank goodness we learned a little from California and Arizona didn't do all that. Ours still works. Of course, we got Salt River Project, you know, they're one of the biggest districts and they've been a good example for all of us to follow.

Q: I've heard some of the irrigation districts have had problems with the financial issues and they've had to declare bankruptcy and things like that.

A: Oh yeah I guess, well I guess some of them have. We've certainly, we haven't. Salt River ran ED2 from 1923 until 1945 and of course we've got the power. In fact, we have 25-cycle power because Roosevelt generated, Roosevelt was 25- cycle. Do you know what I mean 25-cycle? You do. I'm impressed.

Q: Would you please explain it to me?

A: Well, I'm impressed. Anyway, the generators up there they weren't changed until after World War II.

Q: Why don't you explain it to me so it'll be on this tape?

A: Oh well, the cycle of alternating current and when its 25 cycle, it alternates 25 times and now 60 cycle it does 60 times. So you can't tell it. Well, yeah you could see those things flicker.

Videographer:

You wouldn't want to shoot film. When I first started shooting film and you'd get into 25-cycle and your picture wouldn't...

A: Oh would it.

Videographer:

Oh yeah, in other words sometimes it would depending on when you started the camera or you never knew and you couldn't see it in the view finder.

A: I never heard that before. See, I told you if I came out here I'd learn something. That had to be aggravating, didn't it?

Videographer:

It was very aggravating. When we went to video, it doesn't affect video but film because it ran 24. It's just a little off.

Q: Talk a little bit about how the economy of farming, farming is a business; it's not just something you do for a hobby, how has that changed everything?

A: Farms had to get larger because, like I say, a cotton picker cost several hundred thousand dollars and a combine and just pumps and stuff. So you had to have a reasonably sized farm. Of course that meant lots of finances; you had to borrow money and you know all those things. So certainly a business you see and it would be nice to know about how to grow crops but again how to market them. Of course we joined coops to help market, like we belong to Calcot, who markets our cotton. So we can do things together that we couldn't do individually, which

includes irrigation districts and electrical districts and co-ops and lots of...even government.

Q: Well, it seems like you think of farmers, as kind of just being out here like you say, on the farm raising costs, but most of you are actually real involved - on board.

A: Oh you bet, lots of us are. And part of our heritage is that you become a participant and help make things go. So all of us have done that.

Q: Did you ever get involved more with the CAP like your brother?

A: No, except for forming the local – I just encouraged them all I could but I was never actually involved. But then, like you say forming Hohokam to contract and build the system certainly was involved in that.

Q: So how did you become involved in city politics?

A: Well, our previous mayor is our local grocer Tom, he had done it for eight years. And he called and said, "Wilbur I'm not going to do it anymore and you've been in Coolidge a long time, you ought to do that." So I ran and won the first time and hadn't had an opponent since. So I'm going to do it two more years and then I'll be 83 by then, I think eight years that's quite...I'm going to quit. But it's been interesting.

Videographer: It's on the tape. You're going to quit.

A: I'm going to. Gilbert Lopez our vice-mayor, he's been on for a long time, been vice-mayor and he wants to do it and I'm going to get out of his way.

Q: Talk a little bit about the city of Coolidge and how you've seen it change since you came here in 1929.

A: There wasn't any Coolidge when we came. The only thing that I can remember was Foxworth Galbraith the lumber company was here because they knew the dam had been completed and they knew a guy named Jones had laid out a site for Coolidge. And of course, they knew Coolidge was going to grow so Foxworth had a lumber yard and they did. And they furnished materials for Coolidge to grow. But it started out slow, but still we're an agricultural town. And one of the things that really hurts us is the tax – you get taxes from industry. And we just got one little industry, we got an industrial park but only one...we're trying to increase that, but the advantages that we don't have; we don't have the main railroad, we're further away from 8 and 10 than Casa Grande and Eloy, so we're an ag town. Now people are coming, and they're coming because land is relatively cheap in Coolidge and that's why we're now finally...they've ran out of land everywhere, ours is cheap they're coming.

Q: So your tax base then is...

A: Ag, not houses, but not...our budget gets squeezed because you always got industry, you know, your property tax and the sales taxes. Sales taxes is our big, Wal-Mart helped us on that. A lot of people fussed about Wal-Mart, but again you can go buy a pair of Levi's in Coolidge now.

Q: I didn't know you had a Wal-Mart?

A: Yeah, we do.

Q: So that was probably a big thing.

A: Well yeah, and the taxes and the sales taxes is how cities live.

Q: In any city, you have to have certain services.

A: Oh man that's right; police the streets.

Q: You have crime in Coolidge?

A: Oh yeah, I guess every city but dope, marijuana, kids I don't know. I don't understand that, but darn sure it's there and a big problem.

Q: Did you ever think as a kid you just moved here you didn't think about it, but did you ever think Arizona would grow like it has?

A: Not really, of course again, we've got good climate, water now. And gosh, you have those places up in the northeast this year they had that winter. People don't want to do that and then what in Buffalo, New York, had snow and so this is a nice place to live and obviously people are coming. And I think even California, we're even getting a lot of Californians but there's what, 35 million people in California now. So we're going to get some of them. I hope we can keep it, I just hope we can keep it so it's still nice.

Q: What do you see as the biggest challenges for the state in the future?

A: Oh, I guess just seeing that growth in a reasonable way that we don't mess it up. We can keep a decent lifestyle and not pollute. I think we are a little bit more fortunate in this county than maybe Maricopa County because we get some wind that kind of cleans it out for us here. Where I think you get what – conversion layers and stuff in Phoenix – where you need rain but you don't get the wind to clean things out like we do. So we're fortunate in that.

Q: Did you get some of the summer rains like they do in Tucson?

A: Oh yeah, oh yeah, Tucson gets them first but we get them.

Q: What about water? How do you see the future for water here?

A: Well, thank God we got that CAP without it we...you know, we were pumping it and we were depleting it, I don't know whether you noticed, but if you go through Coolidge, the mesquite trees around the Casa Grande ruins – they're dead aren't they. Do you know why? We pumped the water down. Mesquite trees can go roughly 30 feet for water but we farmers pumped it down below that, except where they've been irrigated or in a wash along where the bark gets it but the mesquite trees out there around the Casa Grande ruins have died.

Videographer:

Sometimes from the air you can see ground shifts that have…

A: Oh yeah, where we've pumped the water out you bet, you're going to get some subsidence and you're going to have some cracks. And we've got them. However since CAP, thank God for CAP, you know since we farmers quit pumping so much and started putting on CAP water, why that water table has, oh it's even come up a little. Now with the river down and we're pumping more, I hope we don't overdo it. Gosh, I hope and pray it rains this winter and in the Colorado and the Gila. So if you got any connections to, whoever controls that, talk to him.

Q: In all the years you've been down here, I'm sure you've seen a lot of cycles of drought and...

A: Oh sure, oh yeah, we've seen Coolidge Dam up there run over, we've seen the Gila flood, but then there's more dry years. You know what Roy Rogers said about Coolidge Dam? He said, "If it's mine, I'd mow it." He came out here in about 1935 I guess to dedicate that and said "If it's mine, I'd mow it." So that's kind of how it is. The Gila watershed is just not a very productive watershed. The Salt and Verde, you know, they're lots better watershed 'cause over there in New Mexico they're just, there's times when it really rains, but then by and large it's not a very good watershed.

Q: Why did they build a dam there?

A: Well, I guess the Presbyterian Church was one of the big factors involved. Because they had what do you call it, Cook Christian Training Mission, out at Sacaton, but of course with no dam, the water in the winter time, it would rain, and water would come down the Gila and go out and dump into the Colorado and by the time June, July, and August, came when we needed it and the Indians needed it, it was gone. So they lobbied Congress to get Coolidge Dam built. In fact, I think, I'm not sure of this, but I think it's the only dam that the Bureau of Indian Affairs built, not the Bureau of Reclamation, and of course they still operate it. But half of the water was to go to the Pima Indians and the other half to white farmers. It was a combination deal. But we were certainly glad they got that dam.

Q: But it was designed for irrigation primarily?

A: And of course they had generators they thought...there wasn't enough water consistent enough and I don't think the generators work anymore. I think they just decided to get power other places.

Q: I think it was always like that, I know in recent years last 20 years or so, it was pretty dry.

A: But then there've been years where it run over. What '91 I think wasn't '91 when it flooded.

Videographer:

It had a crack in it, has that been repaired?

A: Yeah, they fixed that. The Safety of Dams did. Thank God they fixed that.

Q: In other years, I remember '79 or '80 where we had the floods…do you remember those?

A: Oh yeah, that's one of the reasons Painted Rock is down there now.

Q: Did those floods affect your farming?

A: No, not me. Some of them along the river but not us, we're far enough inland and higher.

Q: How do you see the future of farming in Arizona?

A: It's going to change. Howard here is selling his place for a master planned community, but he still farmed for a long time. I think in our Electrical District, our manager told me the other day we had nine dairies in our Electrical District, nine dairies. So obviously they're getting pushed out of Maricopa County and they're coming down here. And as we fill up, they'll probably go, I don't know, south to Eloy or maybe to Willcox. I don't know but right now we've got them and we got to grow a lot of alfalfa, that's why I grow more alfalfa than I do cotton. Because the dairies, those cows they need feed and they eat a lot of alfalfa. But alfalfa takes lots of water. Well, people talk about where are we going to get all the water for houses. Well, we farm an acre of alfalfa; I put on at least eight acre-feet. And an acre of houses uses less than two acre-feet so houses use a lot less water than farmers, unless you're on drip.

Q: People don't realize that.

A: Oh no, they don't and we need to keep telling the story. People realize, they just open their mouth when you tell them that…why would they know? They wouldn't know.

Q: Can you use drip on alfalfa?

A: You could I guess. I don't know. We don't. You got to be rich to have drip. Maybe that's how I got rich; I don't know which came first.

Q: What advice do you have for young people today that are looking at what to do with their life, choosing a career?

A: Of course I like agricultural, you know, but there are so many fields in agricultural now - lots of different fields so gosh marketing, development, and all kinds of things. The one thing that I'm sure of people are not going to quit eating or wearing clothes. I'm sure agricultural is here to stay.

Q: Are you still involved with the College of Agricultural down at the U of A?

A: Oh yes, I'm on several of their committees to help promote it.

Q: Are you involved with some of the students down there?

A: No, not right now.

Videographer:
Did your children, did they go to U of A?

A: Oh yeah, we wouldn't finance them going anywhere else.

Q: Are they in farming too?

A: Well, my daughter Laura she helps, she takes care of the cattle, and she helps on the farm. The other two help by spending the money. That's important too.

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