

## **“the Personal Histories of John and Gail Wilkie”**

### **FORWARD**

Sometimes, because of the way we tell “family lore” we misinterpret or misunderstand the lives of our ancestors. We hear the stories piecemeal and we hear them in the context of life today, rather than life as it was.

The lives of John and Gail filled most of the 20th century. Life as it was at their beginnings meant no automobiles, no airplanes, no general telephone systems, no general distribution of electricity and natural gas, no paved roads, no preservation of food stuffs other than by home canning, no trucking industry for widespread movement of goods, no antibiotics -antiinflammatories-vitamins-or sophisticated anesthetics, no television, no sound movies, no radio, and on and on.

John and Gail lived through five major wars: the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. John served his country in World War I as an enlisted man in the Navy. He saw his son go to Vietnam twice, and be posted and serve at sea in several Pacific areas. He saw his son-in-law, Glenn Watters serve in the Navy’s submarine service in World War II. John and Gail lost many of their friends to battle in World War I and the entire family was grieved to see friends and sons of friends lost in World War II. War and the effects of war directly effected the lives of most citizens throughout the 20th Century. One could not live without sacrifice and loss of loved ones and friends.

John and Gail spent almost their entire lives on the prairie in Wyoming. They watched the prairie change from an arid, barren land, windblown and treeless, to an irrigated fertile green and productive land with crops, trees, lawns, and scrubs. John and Gail and their parents before them left a definite, measurable legacy to those of who followed and live on the prairie today. How?

- John’s father, David first came to Wyoming to build houses for the Ohio Oil Company at Grass Creek, an oil field just north of Thermopolis. John was with him and worked as a carpenter on these houses. I am sure that some of these houses still stand.

- John drilled oil wells in Montana and Wyoming, but a telling contribution to others was to put the natural gas system in Powell. His further pioneered the oil refining business, which of course meant moving the products of refining (gasoline, kerosene, fuel oil, tractor fuel, and finally asphalt for paved roads) into many of the western and Midwestern states.

- Gail’s father, Waldo, or “Grandpa Teddy” as we called him put the telephone systems into Greeley, Colorado; and Red Lodge, Big Timber, and

Roundup, Montana. These communications systems, new in the early 1900's remain today.

- Gail, herself, ran the PBX telephone switchboard in Roundup, Montana and following marriage to John helped by cooking for John's drilling crew outside of Basin, Wyoming and further helped him in the Rocky Mountain Gas Company business office in Powell, Wyoming.

These contributions, taken in the light of service to others and growth of utilitarian things needed by others are quite significant. I think what is important is that they left things for others that were needed to improve life in a very personal way. Surely some of those things exist, used even today.

Another thing that is important to know about your Grandfather John is to recognize the importance of continual learning and growth in career during his life. He was a skilled carpenter, trained by his father. He was a graduate pharmacist and worked at that career in the Navy, rising to Pharmacist Mate 1st Class (a Petty Officer); and after marriage for approximately a year in Arizona. My sister Jean was born during that time in Phoenix. Finally, throughout his career in the oil business John became thoroughly proficient with working skills in oil well drilling techniques with cable tools, land leasing, natural gas distribution systems, refinery construction and finally personnel management and refinery sales. He was the driving force in putting the Ohio Oil Company's western refinery on the ground and getting it up and working in Lovell, Wyoming. He became an important advisor and consultant to Glenn Nielson when he did the same with the Husky Oil Company's refinery in Cody, Wyoming. John finished his career with the Marathon Oil Company (the renamed Ohio Oil Company) as their Western Representative, a public awareness position in Casper, Wyoming.

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In reading, their stories are not complete. Beyond, John and Gail:

- Lived in a gas company house at 412 N. Absoraka Street, Powell through "the War" while John commuted to work at the Lovell refinery. I finished high school in 1949 and at that time they made the decision to move closer to John's work.

- They moved to a company house in Lovell during the summer of 1949. During the fall of 1949 during a trip to Wisconsin, Gail contracted the Gulliene Barre syndrome and lost all of her motor functions including speech, walking, and arm movements. Close to death, she remained in the University of Wisconsin Hospital in Madison for about two months, and finally was flown home in a Marathon Company airplane to begin a long slow recuperation at

home in Lovell.

- In 1955 the decision was made to close the Lovell refinery and John and Gail moved to Casper where John worked in Marathon Oil's western headquarters office. Grandmother Hibbard who had lived with us since 1942 died in Casper in 1956. It was also during this stay that Gail had a recurrence of the devastating Gulliene Barre syndrome and was severely incapacitated a second time.

- John retired in 1958 and he and Gail returned to Powell to a new home they had planned and built. They remained in Powell until their deaths, John in 1980 and Gail in 1991. The retirement home at 355 W. 5th Street was sold in 1991.

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Finally, my most valuable memories of my mother and father are these: They had fast friends. They ate and played with them often. They loved to sing as Gail played the piano; they loved to play bridge and have a "dinner party" before the game; they loved to dance and the opportunities were frequent at the various lodge halls and school events in town; they didn't smoke, but enjoyed a good drink with friends; they liked to read and travel and do handicrafts such as sewing, needlepoint and knitting; they liked cooking, making desserts and candies and doing home canning. Life was no more simple, but more family centered and family productive and family dependent. My Dad and I hunted ducks and pheasants. Many fall mornings we would be down at Bitter Creek jump shooting ducks and walking ditch lines to flush pheasants. We always ate our game, bringing the birds home to clean for mother to cook. She was an excellent wild game cook. My Dad loved to trout fish and my Mom loved to be with him along the stream. They loved to go "to the mountains!" Being at Red Star (Shoshone Lodge) cooking, building fires, playing games and standing around the piano while mother played was their joy! Grandma Dahlem usually whistled the songs with us, sounding like a beautiful bird.

My folks were involved in many ways in many things social and community oriented. My dad sang in a quartet (Melvin Evans, Guy Dunlavy, and George Burke.) Again, mother played the piano for them. I can vividly remember them practicing before going off to the church to bury a friend or neighbor. John and Gail loved going to Masonic Lodge, Eastern Star and Shriner events, the Presbyterian church, American Legion meetings, Rotary Club and Rotary Ann events, school athletic games and the movies. What they loved most was people -- their neighbors, friends, and friends of their children. In Powell, few had more, and few had less, but most of all, nobody gave a damn. Your friendship wasn't weighed or scaled, but it sure was valued!

In their last years, no one could have been more faithful or loving than my mother, Gail, as she attended John who was in the nursing home some three blocks away from their home. For seven years, she spent some hours each day by his side, holding him, talking to him and loving him. Only a few times did he ever complain or have a desire to be home, and the few times she brought him home for a meal or a short stop he would repeat that he was best off where he was and doing the best for them both by being there.

When John died my mother lived on, not openly diminished by the loss of her best friend and lover of over 59 years. She did not try to keep John alive by talk or by incessant reflection. She had a life of her own and, again, her many friends, young and old were her strength and enjoyment. She lived fully and happily and was content to remain in her "home town" of some seventy years. Life on the prairie was her contentment and her place.

Her final illness, was an exacerbation of the same previous syndrome, Gulliene Barre, which she had suffered twice before. At the end, for a period of almost three years she was in the Powell Nursing Home, in the abiding care of ladies who had known her for years: Elaine Borchert, Mary Lois Heasler and Jeri Farmer. She was in terrible pain and incapacitated, so much so, that she was mainly bed ridden. If I can remember anything about her in that condition it was that she took so much comfort in a hand holding, a hair combing, an application of face lotion, or something as small as a glass of fresh juice or a small milk shake. The message was that love and life were worthwhile and that a moment with friends or family was really all there was to life.

John and Gail, my mother and dad, were liked and loved. They saw great value in others. Best said, my dad would walk across the street to say hello to a friend, and my mom would give a smile to all in the supermarket, even if she didn't know them. Their rewards were that the friends were glad to have a talk with them; strangers were happy to smile back in return. They were and are remembered as a loving couple; as good neighbors; as Wyoming "stock" - independent, self sufficient, but willing to go the extra mile for a friend and to be a friend.

They rest together in Crown Hill Cemetery, five miles east of Powell, Wyoming on a hill looking west to the wide Powell valley and the mountains beyond that they loved so much. God Bless them both!

Said with love, December 1998  
by their son, Noel Wilkie

