

Sawtooth Interpretive & Historical Association
Oral History Project

Bonnie Stilwill, 2021
Transcribed by Susan Kim

So, just to start will you say your name, your full name.

Bonnie Stilwill, S-T-I-L-W-I-L-L.

Where were you born?

I was born in Challis, on a ranch.

When were you born? What's your birthday?

November 10th, 1932.

So, when did you first come to Stanley?

Oh, my uncle, my mother's brother, is Bill Sullivan and so I've been to Stanley a lot, and Redfish Lake. We always went camping or up to the dances, cuz my Great Aunt Anna Doring played the piano for all the dances. And then my husband, I think it was '61, he worked for the forest service, and the kids and I went and lived at Cape Horn for the summer.

Ok.

And at that time the Guard Station was only two rooms. So, the three kids slept in the... above the garage.

How old were your kids at that time?

Uh, they were probably... let's see Dina must have been, she's the oldest, she must have been 10, and then eight and then five or six.

Okay, did you work at Cape Horn as well?

No, just he did.

Just he did. And what do you remember about Cape Horn? What was it like back then?

Well, I liked it because the kids couldn't get in any trouble. There was no snakes and they picked flowers, and there was just a nice summer that we had. And I remember walking the fences with the kids and they loved to sleep up there in the top and they got to say, they opened all the doors and got to see the animals, the deer and the elk and everything from there. So, it was a fun year. And then I went back to Challis, and he was still working there, and then they needed a clerk. I did not finish high school, but I took the civil service test and I passed and so I got to work as the clerk...

Okay

...for two years.

And was that in Challis?

No, that was in Stanley.

In Stanley.

Uh, they had a two-bedroom mobile home behind the old, uh I can't remember what that building was, but it was only two bedrooms, but we managed with the three kids.

Mm hmm.

And then the three kids went to school in Stanley.

Ooh.

And the last year my daughter was the only eighth grader.

Okay.

But she enjoyed every bit of it. She enjoyed the little kids, and...

Good.

I think it made a better person of her.

Yeah.

She was very compassionate for little kids.

Yeah, do you remember what the teacher was named back then?

We had Phyllis... it'll come to me.

Okay, we can come back to it.

Yeah. There was two teachers. They were split.

Okay.

And one was Mattie Hansen for the little ones and then Phyllis Williams.

Phyllis Williams, okay yeah.

Yeah.

So, your daughter was eighth grade, what grades would your other...?

Sixth and then third.

Okay.

And then when uh, before we moved, she had to go to school in Challis for high school. And so, she would ride the bus and stay with my folks during the week and then go back up.

Gotcha. Heard about that bus ride.

Yeah.

Well, let's go back to your childhood. How long did it take, and how would you come in a car from Challis to Stanley? And what was that journey from Challis to Stanley like when you were a child?

Oh, of course it's a lot different than now because of the highways are different but it was exciting because we all loved to go to see Uncle Bill. And, of course Uncle Bill had kids, and my kids loved to play with them. And course, we knew the Williamses, cuz my aunt, well my Uncle Bill was married to the Williams.

Okay.

So, we were close.

Yeah.

But uh, no I remembered, and I remember many times mom and dad and my sis and I would, uh we'd go to Stanley. And one time we stayed all night at Robinson Bar in one of the cabins on the way home. And another time we just camped out. Made one big great big bed and...

Yeah.

... just camped out.

I love it.

So...

What did your parents do in Stanley, or I mean in Challis? What did your mom...

Um, different things. They, we had a grocery store for many years. And then they sold the grocery store and Dad went to work for the bank, Custer County Bank. Dad was a Burstedt. And the Burstedt had a lot to do with the bank. And then mother, she worked for the pharmacist one time and then she worked in the store. And they had take the store back, and then my husband and I helped in the store when they took it back 'til they sold it again.

Okay. What was your father's name, full name?

Adrian Burstedt.

And what was your mother's?

Helen.

Helen Burstedt, okay. And you went to school in Challis for some years?

Well, we spent almost three years in California after World War II.

Okay.

In fact, we left in 19... February the 4th, 1942. We put all our belongings in a car and Dad had some friends down there, and we went down and found a place, and Dad went to work for the shipyards.

Okay.

And we were down there for three years.

Okay.

And then we came back and that's when we went to work for a little while in the store.

Okay, okay nice. And so it was about that time that you would go visit Uncle Bill.

Oh yeah.

In Stanley. Tell me about Uncle Bill.

He was a rough and ready guy. He reminded me a lot of John Wayne. He was a big guy and uh he was one of my favorite people. And, uh, and then he would always come to see Mom and Dad and us in Challis, too. So, and, of course, he was an outfitter and guide, had lots of stories, lots of good stories.

Do you remember any of his stories?

Well, he took out Erle Stanley Gardner.

Okay.

And he took out... I can't think of the guy, he was a writer for a sports magazine. I can't think of his name, but...

Okay.

He had all original books of Erle Stanley Gardner, and his oldest daughter has those.

Oh wow, cool.

She lives in Yuma...

Okay.

Arizona.

What's her name?

Lois.

Lois, okay. Was your uncle, was he a fishing guide or a hunting guide?

He was a hunting guide.

Okay.

Hunting guide and um I was a... a good storyteller. And sing, he loved to sing.

Oh.

And we all, the Sullivans, all like to sing. And of course my grandma and grandpa was still alive.

Okay.

And that was William Sullivan.

Okay, okay.

So...

Were they in Stanley?

No.

Okay.

They had a ranch, that's where I was born, on one of their ranches.

Okay.

And then, they had a place up Squaw Creek.

Okay.

And then they worked for the forest service. They worked down on the Middle Fork.

Oh, wow.

My grandpa wouldn't fly, and so they had to go horseback in. And they weren't young either.

Okay.

When they did that.

That's so cool.

But they loved that.

Oh, I bet. Did you ever go up the Middle Fork?

No, I didn't. My sister was able to. I got married awful young.

Okay.

And so, I didn't...

Yeah.

...get to do that.

You had your own adventures.

Right, right. Yeah.

What do you remember Stanley looking like when you were a girl, or when you lived there, or what was the town like?

Well, it was a lot different. It was... I can remember they had a little service station with Juggy Niece. And then I remember when, uh well that was when I lived there. I'd go to Cole's, the hotel, and the kids could go, and, or if they were in school, and I played Gin with Mr. Cole...

Okay.

...in the afternoons. It was fun.

I love it.

And then, the Kasino Club at that time was run by Mary and uh, can't think of his name, Rukavinas.

Okay.

And I remember my husband and I used to go up and sit and listen to his stories. He had some good stories from when he lived back east.

And would you go to the Stanley Stomp and some of the social events?

Oh yes, and Anna played the piano.

Okay.

And I went, in those days us kids, when we were in high school, we'd just jump in a car and drive to Stanley. The folks didn't care you know, uh, because we were basically, safer you know.

Yeah.

And we'd go to dances up there and then drive home and we'd get home like 3 or 4:00 in the morning, but the folks trusted us.

Yeah. It was safe.

Cuz, it said in that one of the questions, did I know the Stanley Stomp. Yes.

Yes, you did. Any stories stick out from those times that you want to tell?

Well, I remember, and I was trying to think it wasn't the Ace of Clubs...Ace of Diamonds.

Ace of Diamonds.

It was the other one and they had a pot belly stove. And of course they had to have it on, you know. And we'd jitterbug around it and make it jump a little, so...

Fun. So, would that have been at the Pioneer Club then or the Stanley Club?

That don't sound right either. I saw that and I just can't remember what the name of it was.

Okay, that's okay.

Cuz it's not there now.

Gotcha. But it was somewhere near Ace of Diamonds.

Yeah.

In that area.

Right.

Kasino club. Were, was there gambling or any...

No.

Behavior.

Not when, that I remember. I'm sure there was, but...

Any fights or barroom brawls?

There was a couple of, you know probably drunk and bar fights.

Nothing, yeah.

I remember when I, my sister, she was just going with her husband to be and he was an Italian and he had quite a temper. But he was raring for a fight, but she got him settled down before it happened, but I was afraid it was going to happen. And then I remember years ago there was a fight between uh... and there was that that place down on the highway, what's the name...See when you get my age you have forget all this.

That's okay, we can fill in the blanks.

Yeah.

Mountain Village...

Tappen, Stan Tappen got in a fight with somebody, and it was just a knock down drag out.

Yeah. Rough. Yeah. You're far away from the hospitals and...

Right.

Help. Still today.

Yeah.

What was the music like at the Stanley Stomps, and at the dances your aunt...

Aunt Anna. And she could play anything. It was all, all by ear. And I have seen her where she has played, like three nights in a row, that she had to have bandages on some of her fingers.

So sore.

She played like Joanne Castle, on Lawrence Welk. I don't know if you ever seen that.

Yeah, amazing,

Yeah that's... and she lived to be 104.

Wow.

And she was playing her piano every day.

Wow. Did they live in Stanley?

No, they lived in Ketchum.

Okay.

They lived in Ketchum.

Over the hill.

Yeah.

Did you ever, when you were a kid, go over Galena Summit to Ketchum?

Oh yeah.

Do you remember what that journey was like?

Well, you know, I don't remember when first I went. I must be... because we also had, besides Aunt Anna that played the piano, uh Aunt Laura lived there. And Aunt Laura had a, she had a little motel.

Okay, in Stanley or...?

In Ketchum.

Okay. When you moved to Stanley with the forest service and with your husband what kind of wildlife do you remember seeing, animals and what were you seeing up there?

Well, we did... it was, that was one of the coldest winters that I've ever... it was 30 below, 38 below. And I remember there was 30 days that never went above zero. And we had heat in the office, which at that time it was only two rooms, and so the power would go off and so the heat wouldn't run because there was nothing to run the fan. And a couple times I spent in front of the fireplace in the ranger's house which is now the museum.

Yeah. I bet that was so cold.

Yeah, and one morning we... the mechanism in the door froze and we couldn't get out without... we had to...

How did you get out?

We had to pour some water and work around and try to get the door open. And then the kids in their bedroom, they said that some of the ice came right up through the nails or the... it was in there.

Wow.

It was cold.

That's very cold.

And you know, the kids went to school, the only time they didn't go to school is if the bus couldn't start. That's the only time.

Yeah.

And I've heard the teachers say that by the time they got the kids ready for recess it was time to start school again.

Yeah.

Cuz by the time you put all their clothes on and their boots and everything...

Get all bundled, ugh... Yeah, and I guess it's too far to walk to school from Valley Creek.

That's a far walk.

Yeah, because their school was the Quonset hut, there in Boise... or in Stanley.

Yeah, yeah, wow. Do you like to fish? Did you ever go fishing in Stanley or your husband or your kids?

No, I don't remember fishing in there. I do remember my son, he come dragging a... you know when the old salmon that come back to die... my son come bringing this one that he got out of Valley Creek. He thought he'd got the biggest fish in the world. Of course, it was just almost dead.

Yeah. Its life was ending.

Yeah. And one thing that we did in Stanley is, well I can't think of her name, but she's a noted celebrity and her husband, see I'd wish'd I'd knew, he flew those planes that that you pull, and they fly. What are those gliders or...?

Yeah.

Anyway, she passed away and they buried her in the Stanley cemetery, and they asked if my daughter, would we water. And so, she had a wagon and she'd go and water the flower on that grave.

Oh wow. She'd walk over from Valley Creek?

Well, you could walk right up because the cemetery is on our side of Valley Creek.

Yeah.

She'd just walk up.

Water it.

Yeah.

That's sweet.

Yeah. I wish'd I could think of her name.

Yeah.

But she was related to a wealthy family back East, yeah.

Was there a church in Stanley when you lived there?

No, they were just building that big church and my ranger, and his wife were Southern Baptist.

Oh, wow.

And, uh... but that's the only religion that we did. My kids always went before but there wasn't one in Stanley that I remember they went.

Yeah, not at that time. So, were there any town politics?

Probably, but you know I never paid much attention to it. I do know that when John F Kennedy was shot, it was real funny, I had left because I lived right next door and I told the guys I said I'm going to go and make some tea. And so, and I automatically turned my TV on when I went in, and it was shot. So immediately just went right back to the office. First thing Harold Wadley did, he went out and lowered the flag.

Wow.

Half-mast. It was just automatic.

Yeah.

I was surprised.

Yeah, quick.

But that was something that I always remember.

Yeah, you were... you never forget where you were.

Yeah and... Harold Wadley was... I'm so glad that he was my first ranger that I worked for. He was an exception. And he raised hound dogs, he had hound dogs behind.

Okay and he lived on site too?

Yeah, it was right behind the office, and I remember the chief of the forest service came for a meeting, and he come in and he said I'm so and so and he shook my hand. He said I come to see Harold's hound dogs.

Did you ever visit Custer or Bayhorse or Bonanza or those little towns?

Well, my great-grandmother had a boarding house in Bonanza.

Wow.

And my grandmother went to school in Custer.

Okay.

My grandma. In fact, when they were remodeling back in the '80s, they found some school papers and one of them was my grandmother and the...

Wow. was she...

She went to school there.

Okay. Was her family, were they miners? Is that why they lived up there?

My grandpa Dillon, I don't remember when he, if he was there or not. Grandma had the... alone. And then the story is when my grandfather, Will Sullivan, he run the stage from Mackay into Bonanza and Custer.

Okay.

And he fell in love with my grandmother and my great-grandmother didn't approve. And so, they ran away.

Oh.

Horseback. And they went down through where the Boyle Ranch was, I don't know whether anybody's mentioned that, and then they went in the Sullivan Hot Springs. That's where my great grandparents had the hot springs there. And my great-grandmother still wasn't happy with them for about 2 years until my mother was born. My mother was the oldest.

Okay.

And she was born up Squaw Creek.

Wow, wow. What was your grandmother's name?

May, May Hazel.

Okay. And what was your great grandmother's name?

Her name was Anna.

Okay.

And I don't think she had a middle name. Anna...her first, or maiden name was Bahm. B-A-H-M, they called it Bahm. And then she married Chris Dillon, he was an opera singer. He even sang with Caruso in San Francisco. And then when he passed away, then she married Silken, Otto Silken, and they lived in Salmon.

Okay, okay. Wow.

So, things like that happened back then.

Yeah. Deep roots all over. That's neat.

Yeah, it's...

When you... do you remember your grandmother when you were younger, I mean was she in the picture?

Well, I remember my great grandma. She lived with Mom and Dad. She didn't... not when... well I guess when there for a while before I got married, she lived with us, cuz she wouldn't live with Grandpa Sullivan so she lived with us and then she would go to her other daughter's, and she was in Gibbonsville. She was a postmistress, and her name was Lena, Magdalena.

Uh huh.

And then she spent the winters with Mom and Dad.

Okay.

And she just had her own bedroom. It was... my sister just idolized her she was with her.

Yeah.

But I was young and foolish and got married at 16 and...

Okay. Did you meet your husband in Challis?

Mm hmm.

Back then.

He came, his family were Greens, their names, and he, when he moved back, he'd just had two years in the Army and then he went to Challis high school for his last year and that's where I met him. I never had met him before.

Do you remember any big fires, wildfires in the Stanley Basin when you...

Not as much when I was working in Stanley, but when I was working at Yankee Fork, we had a big fire and they had the, the, what do they call it, the... everything was done right there.

Mm hmm.

And they had tents, and you know the food and everything. The headquarters was right there so I was right in the middle of it. When I was with the Boise National Forest, I had three kids still at home, and the administrative officer knew that and so he wouldn't (?) let me go out, but he let me go to the warehouse and work out of the warehouse.

Okay.

And so that was all I could do here on the Boise.

Yeah, stay closer.

Yeah.

When you were at Yankee Fork and they, that was where the fire base camp was, do you remember any of the firefighters or folks from back then that were...?

Well, it was real funny because one of the little firefighters, young, he worked for us in Stanley on one of the lookouts and here he was, he was with a crew from Idaho City. And I hadn't seen Walt(?) for quite a few years, it was nice to see him.

Reconnect.

So, it... the forest service, it's... they're all family.

Yeah.

It was neat, so. When I worked for Forest Service Aviation, I got to go back to Washington DC twice.

Oh, wow.

Two weeks at a time.

Wow. To the headquarters and...

Mm hmm. Yeah, I worked... one time the gal that I took her place, she came to mine, and spent two weeks in Boise and I spent two weeks there.

Neat.

And then the other time I went, I just went by myself.

Mm hmm.

But I also went with a gal from BLM, we went together.

So, when you worked for the forest service in the '60s, it was not yet the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, it was the Sawtooth National Forest.

Not yet. Another thing I remember on the Stanley we were the ones that made the fence, what do you call that fence?

Um, I know what you're talking about, yes.

Yeah. We're the ones that instigated that.

Oh wow.

And in fact the person and his son that did that was kind of related to Uncle Bill.

Oh.

So, that...

Brought him in and made the fence.

Yeah.

Do you remember elk hanging out around the...

The what?

Elk.

Yeah.
Yeah, they're still always in that area.
Always. And when I was there the hot thing was there.
The hot springs.
And we, at the time I was there, we bought the chlorine or whatever it is to clean it.
Okay.
Because it was used constantly.
Really.
And once in a while Frank and I would go over and, my husband and I'd, go over and use it but mainly just help clean. And I remember I had a 4H Club when I was up there and so we decided we needed some kind of a community... so we was going to clean the... Well, when I found out what they left in... And the other guy in that was helping me, we did the cleaning, we wouldn't let the kids go in cuz I can't believe the things people leave.
Ooh.
Around.
Like what?
Oh, like underwear and things that they had used to have sex and...
Gotcha.
And it was a mess.
Yeah, not for kids.
Yeah, no.
So, you were the leader of the 4H group.
Uh huh.
How many kids were in the 4H Club?
Oh, we must have had... they was school kids, I had more when I was in Challis but we must had about five or six.
Wow. What else would you do besides community service and...?
What else did they do in Stanley? I remember that in the wintertime that, I don't... that place burned down too. Wayne Whittle's (?). He had a bar and a restaurant.
Okay.
And we'd take the kids, and they could be in the restaurant part and then we be in the other part. We'd have... we'd eat and...
Mm hmm.
... have a few drinks and of course that was our entertainment. There's not much up there.
No. And that burned down his...?
Right.
Do you remember that, were you there when...
No, that was right after I left.
Okay.
So, I remember when I, when I was going to transfer back, the people in Upper Stanley had a little party for me.
Oh.

So nice. It was up at Cole's.

Okay.
No, I don't know what else we did. We made a lot of trips to Challis.

Mm hmm.
Stayed with my folks for a weekend.

Mm hmm. How long would that journey take?
It took a little over an... way over an hour.

Mm hmm. Yeah.
But it was, it was fun. I love the area.

It's beautiful.
My cousin Carolyn, that they're going to I think talk to, she lived in Challis, and we made many trips together. And a lot of the trips were bad coming over...

Wooh.
We wouldn't come over Galena. We'd come the other way. We'd have whiteouts and... but we made it always.

Good.
But...

Good.
That's just, I love winter or summer. It's beautiful up there, I don't care.

Even when it's 30 below zero? Still then? Good. Well, are there any other stories about Stanley or your time with the forest service that you can think of?
The one thing that really was when Kennedy died. I just couldn't believe that Harold Wadley went out lowed that... automatically. Of course, he was a marine and course he, after I transferred to Challis for a year and then I transferred to Boise. And I got a phone call one day from Harold Wadley and he said Bonnie, I want you to know before somebody else tells you, that I quit the forest service and went back into the Marines...

Oh wow.
...for my second time.

Uh-huh, yeah.
And then he wrote me a letter when he was in the hospital cuz he got shot.

Oh wow.
And he said one of those Vietcong, is that what they call 'em, shot him in the shoulder.

Wow.
And he told me that he was going to go back into the forest service and he and his wife were going to have, they were going to have, they had two boys and they were going to have some more children.

Okay.
And they had twins.

Oh wow.
So, but, and even now I hear from him and his wife.

Mm hmm.
And I've seen him off and on but in those years but that's since 1963.

Yeah.

And then when my grandson graduated from Moscow...

Mm hmm.

And I think it must have been around the... middle of (?) 2000 I guess, and Harold Gwen came.

Oh.

They didn't come to the graduation, but they came afterwards to see us all.

Nice. To the party. Good.

That's nice.

Good. Does your family still go to Stanley, your grandchildren or...?

Yeah, especially if the Braun brothers are going to play any place.

Mm hmm. Do you remember were the Braun Brothers around back then?

Well, I remember when I was in Stanley, they were still little boys. And I remember on one fourth of July they had made a sand box and they had hid money in it. And I had a picture of the four boys digging for money. And I remember I sent the picture to, what was her name, Muzzies wife?

Okay, I don't remember, but Muzzie's wife.

Yeah, and then of course I go to the boys, uh I have a chance.

Mm hmm.

But I know if they're down here, especially Kent my oldest grandson, great, my grandson goes.

Mm hmm.

And, I think more, well and I think his wife and Anthony, my second one, I think they like...

Yeah, like the Braun Brothers.

Yeah.

Good.

JoAnn, her name is JoAnn.

JoAnn.

I did crafts with JoAnn. JoAnn does a lot of sewing and she makes pepper jelly.

Oh yum.

And uh, but in Challis, I think, cuz I retired from the government after 37 years, 27 years.

Mm hmm.

And I decided to move to Challis and maybe help my mom.

Mm hmm.

And I was there for two and a half years, she didn't need me, and I missed Boise.

Yeah.

So I got me a job down here as a assistant manager for retirement.

Oh.

Apartment complex and I worked there for eight years.

Okay, nice.

And then my granddaughter had breast cancer and she was..., asked me if I'd be her caregiver.

Oh.

And she lived in Nampa.

Mmm.

And so, I retired from that job and moved to... and took care of her for three years before she passed away.

I'm sorry.

And she had four little boys so...

Whew... that's tough.

It was sad.

Yeah that's...

But it was something that I thoroughly enjoyed if you can understand...

Yeah.

... to be with her...

Yeah.

... every week and...

Special.

Yeah.

Mm hmm.

It was.

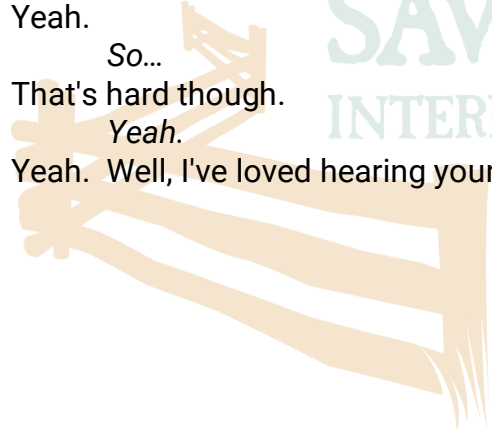
Yeah.

So...

That's hard though.

Yeah.

Yeah. Well, I've loved hearing your stories and talking to you. It's been so nice.



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