

Wilma “Billie” Garlett Provonsha

Interview by Detta Dahl

Q: What is your full name?

A: Wilma Lorene Garlett Provonsha but I’ve been “Billie” all my life.

Q: When and where were you born?

A: I was born January 3, 1929, at home, on a farm in southern Missouri, in the Ozarks not far from the Arkansas line.

Q: When you were born, what were your parents doing?

A: My father was a farmer; my mother was taking care of kids. I was the fifth child in a family of nine. When I was two years old I had spinal meningitis. I had to learn how to talk and walk all over again; I lost all my hair.

Q: You were two years old, do you remember this?

A: No, I don’t; I’ve been told. My mother used to dress me in my brother’s clothes. He was two years older than I and made me into a boy until I got enough hair so she could put a dress back on me. My father had made a tomboy out of me since I was born because he wanted a boy. I was supposed to have been “William” after his brother, Will and my mother had a brother, Will. Since I wasn’t a boy, I became Wilma and was Billie all my life. When I was born, my father only had one son and three other daughters, so I became a tomboy. He taught me to hunt.

Q: Did you help on the farm, and what did you raise on the farm?

A: Yes, there was hay, but mostly I just worked in the large garden. We raised our own vegetables and fruit trees and that sort of stuff. I did a lot of work taking care of that.

Q: Where did you go to school?

A: In a two room schoolhouse we walked to. There really weren't too many kids in either room. I remember spending quite a few days down in the cyclone cellar during cyclone season. We had a complete classroom set up in this big cellar that had a cement dome over the top. So when the skies were right, all of us kids would go down in there and we'd have our lessons there while we waited for the storm to pass.

Q: Did you have that kind of protection at home?

A: No, we didn't. We just went down in the cellar at home. We had a cellar and everyone had a cellar. We had lanterns and stuff down there.

Q: Do you remember seeing a cyclone? Did it ever hit your house?

A: Yes, but not when we lived in it. We moved to one house; our house burned down and I can remember that; then we moved to another farm house. It had been hit by a cyclone and one of the back rooms and the back porch had been taken off. I never lived in a house that was actually hit while we lived in it, thank goodness.

Q: When did you come to Moab and why?

A: My father's brother came to Moab because his two son-in-laws lived here. They were in the mining business and he told my father to come and he could get him a better job working in a mine. And so we moved in 1942 in the summer. I started school here in September of 1942.

Q: Where did you live when you first came here?

A: We rented a house from Amy Allred, which is up on 4th East and the corner of 1st North (399 E. 100 No.). The house has been all remodeled and changed around so it doesn't look the house I used to live in when we came.

Q: The original house is still in there?

A: I think so, from the way that it looks, but I haven't stopped and talked to the people since we moved back.

Q: How long did you stay there?

A: We lived there just a year or so and then we moved into the house down on 3rd East (280 S. 300 E.) that Mildred Campbell has now on the corner. It is still there. When we lived there, there was a big irrigation ditch that ran down across the front of the place. We had a footbridge to get across it. That's been covered in as have all the irrigation ditches in town.

Q: Did your father get a good job when he came?

A: Yes, he did. He worked in mining, different jobs; he worked in the copper mill in Lisbon, the old one for awhile; he worked in the uranium mill in Monticello for several years and he also did mining on his own with two partners.

Q: When he was a mill hand, do you know what he actually did?

A: No, I really don't. At that time we were only kids.

Q: Do you know the name of the mines he worked?

A: They were just small mines. He and these two partners would mine out the ore and haul it to the mill and sell it. Grover Cleaveland was one of the partners; Harry is one of his sons and I think he still lives here. Gay Brown was the third partner. The three of them worked together.

Q: Did they do well at this?

A: They did all right. My mother always worked, too and all of us kids always worked to make our own money. Nobody was rich but we had enough to eat. During the Second World War everything was scarce, we didn't know if we were (rich or poor).

Q: Was it hard to get supplies then in Moab?

A: Things were rationed; sugar was rationed and you were only allowed so many pairs of shoes and gasoline, you had to have coupons to buy gas. Sugar, flour and shortening and stuff you had to have coupons.

Q: When they were in mining were they selling uranium to the government?

A: They were selling to the mill and I guess the mill was selling the product to the government then.

Q: Was there any special gasoline allotment for working in uranium?

A: I suppose, I know in town, a lot of people that got their allotment for gasoline and didn't use it would take their extra coupons to the service stations. Then when someone needed to go to Grand Junction for a doctor appointment, there were always extra coupons that the station had. You could get them and it seemed to all work out. Everybody cooperated.

Q: Did people share their meat and grocery coupons?

A: I don't remember, we didn't have too much money to buy much meat. We had chickens, and somebody we bought milk from all the time. I can't remember now who it was.

Q: Your father taught you hunting in Missouri; did you do hunting here?

A: Yes, but I never went deer hunting with my father, here. He always had his own buddies that he went with here. He took my older brother, but me being a girl. After I started going with Harold, I went hunting with him. We've been hunting and hiking all of our married life.

Q: Going to school in Moab, what grade did you start here?

A: I started in Eighth grade. Even back then, Moab was about 50% Mormon and 50% non-Mormon so no one had a majority so we all got along pretty well. It was just a good bunch of kids to go to school with. Jimmy Walker was a little older than I, the same grade as my brother. With him hanging around with my brother, I became acquainted with Jimmy and we are still like a brother and sister, even after all these years. So many of the people have moved away that were in my grade.

Q: You finished high school here?

A: Yes I graduated from high school here in 1947. Harold and I were married in 1947.

Q: How did you meet Harold?

A: Through his sister who was a year older than I. She started telling me about Harold while he was still in the Navy. She said when he comes home, "I'm going to introduce you." So she did and that's what happened.

Q: After you were married where did you live?

A: At that time Harold and his folks were in partnership at Pack Creek Ranches, the Upper Ranch and the Lower Ranch. After we were married, I moved to the ranch with him and he ran the ranch. His dad had a gas business here in town. Harold took care of the cows, we had about 300 head of cows all the time and we'd have calves which we'd sell off. We raised a lot of hay.

Q: You cooked for the crew and what were your duties out there?

A: Yes, whatever it needed. I went with Harold to ride when I could and took care of the garden. Anybody who showed up at mealtime, I fed them.

Q: Where did you shop?

A: To Millers in Moab.

Q: How were the roads?

A: It was fifteen miles from the lower ranch to Moab. It was graveled road. Usually it was quite passable but you had to drive down through Pack Creek. If it was flooded, you just stayed on the other side. We had pickups. Ann was born in May and that next winter when she was a baby, we were snowed in at the ranch for about a week before somebody came to see about us. The truck wouldn't start. The tractor had something wrong with it so we couldn't get it over to get the truck started. We were just there and we must have a foot to 18 inches of snow. Of course, we had plenty of food and we were all right, but no telephone.

Q: Was it just you and Harold at the ranch?

A: During the winter it was just us, but in the summertime we had someone that came and did the irrigating on the hayfields and helped with the chores around the barn and

stuff. Then when we started haying, we'd get extra help. We did as much as possible ourselves.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: We have three. They were all born in Moab here.

Q: Was that at the old hospital?

A: The old one, before Allen Memorial was built. When Ann was born they kept me a full week. For the others, I guess it was five days for each of them. Quite different from what they do with women now.

Q: Were you living at the ranch for all of them: when did you leave the ranch?

A: Just Ann was born while we were at the ranch. They sold the ranches in the fall of 1949. We bought a small place in town and moved in to town that winter. We sold to Musselman and he started the dude ranch there.

Q: Do you ever go back out there?

A: Yes, we drive out and still wish it were ours. We tried to get Harold's father to sell it to us when he wanted to sell. He said, no, he wanted to sell it all or keep it all; the partnership was not working out too well. He would show up a three o'clock in the afternoon and just complain about what wasn't done.

Q: What was your house like in town?

A: It was an old house. When we moved in, we'd haul a load down in the daytime and get it unpacked and put away. Then we'd go back to the ranch at night until we finally got everything moved so we could come down and stay. The first night Ann woke up and

started crying. I turned on the lights and there were cockroaches everywhere. That floor was literally covered. It was horrible. We started fighting cockroaches and finally got them thinned out so we would just occasionally see one outside. Man! That first month down there was terrible.

Q: Did you have city sewer and water?

A: Yes, it was really good until the boom started hitting and then everything had to be increased. When I moved here in 1942, there were only about 1,200 people in Moab. Everybody knew everybody. Even when we moved down from the ranch there were probably not more than 1,300 – 1,400 in town.

Q: You were in town a year or two before it really hit? How did that change your life?

A: It changed everyone's life. It was quite an experience to live through that boom. I would wake up in the morning and I'd pull the curtain and look out the window at the front lawn. It was nothing to have a car or two parked at the curb and bedrolls thrown out on the lawn and people sleeping on the lawn. When they woke up they would ask if they could wash with water from the hydrant outside. There was no place for them to rent. I felt sorry for them.

Q: How long did that go on?

A: Ann started to kindergarten in the old school. Originally I went to school in the building with the City offices now and all the way from kindergarten through high school was in that building. It stayed that way until our oldest daughter went to kindergarten in that building. Then, maybe she went in first grade to Helen M Knight, the first elementary school that was built. Then they built Southeast, which they call Red Rock now. That was closer to where we lived so she switched up to there. And then back to the

old high school for her junior high and then they built the new high school which is the junior high now, and she graduated from it. So she hit all the schools.

Q: You had Ann and two more? Where are they now?

A: Ginger is our second daughter and then Susan, the youngest. Ann lives here in Moab. Ginger lives in Keams Canyon in Arizona; her husband is a lab technician in the big Hopi Indian hospital there in Keams. Susan is a registered nurse and lives in Hawaii. She has been there several years and she keeps wanting us to move there. She lives on the island of Kauai, but it is only 35 miles across. It doesn't take very many minutes to hit the ocean anyway you drive. It's a beautiful island. You drive around and you see bananas growing beside the road and orchids in the trees. But I feel too enclosed. When we lived in Arizona, we would drive 35 miles just to the grocery store.

Q: What schools did Ginger and Susan attend?

A: Ginger started at Helen M Knight; then when Susan came along she started at HMK also. Then they all switched up to the other one after it was built.

Q: When Ann started school, was that during the boom?

A: She started school before the boom or about the time it started.

Q: Do you remember the double sessions?

A: Yes, they experienced that. Susan was supposed to start kindergarten one fall. The year before she would cry and want to go to school with her sisters. I would say no, but next year you can go to kindergarten, but next year there was no kindergarten. No place for it. That's when I learned to not promise anything I couldn't guarantee.

Q: What was Harold doing while the kids were going through school?

A: When we moved down from the ranch, he started working on the movies that came in and prospecting on the side. He did some mining. During the uranium boom, he kept prospecting with some partners. When they were building the uranium mill out here on the river, he took training in Grand Junction. He worked at the mill when it started operating and worked there about eleven years.

Q: How long did you live in Moab?

A: From 1949 until we moved to Arizona in 1969, we were here about 20 years.

Q: Did you live then in the house on 4th East?

A: We built a new house then and moved out of the old one. We built three houses and our house. During the boom, we built eight apartments on the other side of our house and rented those. At one time we had eight apartments and four houses that we rented. I did the work on most of those while Harold had his job and the kids in school. It was quite a busy time. When they decided to start the museum we were in on that.

Q: What did you do to help start the museum?

A: Not much on the start-up. I was just a member, but Lloyd Pierson was the first curator. When he was assigned to another area and left Moab, Ross Musselman came to visit me. He said the board was wondering if I would take over as curator of the museum. I told Ross, "I'm flattered but there is no way I can consider taking that now. I have three apartments coming up vacant and I'm going to have to paint. The kids have got some things to do and Harold's Dad and Mother were gone on a three-month trip. I was taking care of their mail. See if you can't find somebody else. I just don't see how I could possibly do anything before two or three months from now when things calm down a little." Well, when we got the Times Independent the next week, Ross Musselman had announced that the board of directors had decided that Billie Provonsha was the new

curator. That's how I became curator of the museum. I kept the job until I resigned when we moved to Arizona in 1969.

Q: What did you do as curator?

A: Everything. I was in charge of all the exhibits. Virginia Fossey was the only paid employee. I had to see that she kept it swept and dusted. I put the exhibits in. If someone brought something I had to get her set up for cataloging it. There was all the correspondence and stuff and lining up movies for the kids to see on certain Saturdays. Whatever needed to be done, I did.

Q: You had a board of directors?

A: Yes, I had to report to them every month. Every year I gave them a summary of activities for the year. Howard Balsley was on the board -I'll never forget- and every year when I'd give the report, he would clap when I finished. He would say, "Billie, you did such a good job, I vote we double your salary." (And of course, it was volunteer) So by the time I gave it up, I had a lot of zeroes for salary. Every year he would say that. But I made a lot of good friends. I'd be working there and there would be a knock on the door. Howard Balsley was one who, if he would see my car out in front, he would knock on the door and come in and visit and tell me old-timer stories while I was doing an exhibit. There were two or three other old-timers who would do that. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with them.

Q: Is there a special story you remember?

A: He (Howard Balsley) told me a story of how the "Yellow Circle" mine was discovered. He brought the rock down and donated it to the museum while I was there. This old prospector – can't remember his name- used to go to Howard and Howard would grubstake him. Howard would buy his food and stuff. So he came and told Howard that he had dreamt of seeing this yellow circle in this rock and he knew it was

uranium. He knew it was high grade and if he could get another grubstake he could find it. So Howard grubstaked him and then he was gone a month. Howard thought for sure that he was just going to be out his money. But he showed up in town and told Howard that he had found the rock with the yellow circle in it. That's how it was discovered. Then he said, "Would the museum like to have it ? I've got it in my yard." I said, "Certainly". So he brought it over.

Q: It's on exhibit to this day.

A: Isn't that wonderful?

Q: Did you take part in politics or social clubs? What did you do for entertainment?

A: Not too much. I did belong to the Mary Martha Society for the Baptist Church for a number of years. We furnished dinner for the Lions Club meetings every month. We cooked the dinners and served it to them for a price. That's how the Mary Marthas made most of their money. I helped with those for years. When we had a day off that we could really get away from everything, we headed for the hills.

Q: For fishing, picnicking?

A: We went hiking and rock hunting.

Q: Why did you move to Arizona?

A: Harold was offered a better job. At that time we had two daughters of college age so it really made a big difference. He was doing exactly the same work that he was doing here – instrument technician – but he was making several thousand more.

Q: He was working at the mill here at the time?

A: He finally quit Atlas and went to work for Texas Gulf. He worked down there a couple of years before we moved. The Texas Gulf job was better than the uranium mill job. This one in Arizona at a paper mill out of Snowflake paid a lot more so that is why we moved.

Q: Did either of you have health problems from working in uranium or living with him while he worked in uranium?

A: I think Harold has quite a few problems. I think his osteoporosis is from his radiation exposure. They don't recognize that. But he is using oxygen now at night. Really, we are quite fortunate. I think it's because we were healthy to start with and not smoking helped.

Q: When you went to Arizona what did you do for entertainment and to keep busy?

A: That was hard after having Harold's grandmother, Grandma Belle, to check on her at least twice a day or so and when Harold's folks would go on trips, I'd take care of their mail and their bills and stuff, besides all the other stuff and the kids, too. Then we moved down there and our last daughter went off to school and we were alone. That was the most horrible. So I found a job. I became secretary to the manager of the local bank, the only bank in Snowflake. I was secretary to him for a number of years until Susan got out of college; then it didn't pay for me to hold a full-time job because it just put us up in another bracket for more taxes.

Q: How long did you live in Snowflake and Arizona?

A: We were in Arizona 35 years before we moved back.

Q: What brought you back to Moab?

A: It was time to come home.

You asked about when I was a teenager here in Moab, what we did for entertainment. In the summertime we used to pick fruit for Mr. Evans. He had a big orchard that probably took in the (Cliffview) area. He had a big strawberry patch and cherries and apricots, peaches, apples, pears, and grapes. All of us teenagers that wanted to could go down there and he would pay so much for your work.

Q: Do you remember how much you got for a box of strawberries or peaches?

A: No, it wasn't too much, but it made spending money and the movies didn't cost too much at that time. You could go to the movies and have a bag of popcorn pretty cheap.

Q: Where was the movie theater?

A: It was on Main Street; the Ides Theater was just up from the T-Shirt Shop where the Drug Store used to be; between that and the bank. We went every Saturday to the matinee.

Q: Was the Drug Store there with the fountain?

A: Yes, that was where I got my first job after I got a Social Security card. I had to be sixteen before I could start working there. I got my Social Security card and started working there behind the fountain in the drug store. Jim Kelly owned it at that time.

Q: Anything special happen there?

A: No, it was just a gathering place for all the kids.

Q: How long did you work there?

A: I worked there one full summer and then after school for quite awhile. Then I guess I had to do more work at home.

Q: You said you were the fifth of nine children. How many came to Moab?

A: There were seven of us. My two oldest sisters were both married when we moved to Utah. The rest of us came. The next oldest only stayed here a month or two, then she went to Salt Lake and got a job; she didn't live here very long but she would come back to visit.

Q: Do you have relatives living here in Moab?

A: Our daughter, Ann, lives here. My brother, Junior's, widow, Pat Garlett, lives here. She is my sister-in-law. Then one of my sisters lives in Blanding now. She got remarried about a year ago and moved to Blanding.

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