

Interview with
George Wilkens
October 21, 2004
by Nancy Gottfredson
for the
Highway 101 Association

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Interview of George Wilkens, 604 Canyon Place, Solana Beach, California, on October 21, 2004. Interviewer: Nancy Gottfredson. Transcribed by Kristi Hawthorne

Nancy: My name is Nancy Gottfredson. I am with the Solana Beach Civic and Historical Society. Today I'm going to be interviewing George Wilkens. George, could you state your full name and current address?

George: My name is George C. Wilkens. I live at Solana Beach at 335 South Nardo Avenue, Solana Beach, California, 92075. I came here in 1925 so I'm practically an 80 year resident of the town.

Nancy: Can you tell us where you were born?

George: Hartford, Connecticut. But we came to California when I was two months old.

Nancy: What were your parents' names?

George: I'm the son of Florence C. Wilkens and my father, Gustav G. Wilkens, otherwise known as Duke.

Nancy: How did you or your family come to Southern California?

George: Through my grandparents, my mother's folks who were residents of Escondido since 1908. They also had a home in Denver, Colorado and they vacationed in Escondido. My grandfather was a land developer.

Nancy: What period of time did you live on or near the 101 Highway?

George: Since 1925 to the present time, 2004.

Nancy: Can you tell me what outstanding event occurred that was meaningful to you related to US Highway 101?

George: I guess as a youngster, the most memorable event was in 1935, I was 14 years old, the day when President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his entourage passed through town in an open convertible sedan to attend the opening of the San Diego exposition in Balboa Park in 1935.

Nancy: How old were you when you first rode the 101 and where were you going?

George: Four years old.

Nancy: Four years old? Where were you going at that time?

George: I think up to Encinitas to buy some mercantile goods.

Nancy: Okay. Do you remember your first trip on the 101 driving by yourself?

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George: Sure do. We were able in those years to get licenses at 14. I passed my driver's license test with the local Highway Patrol officer, who had his residence in Del Mar. We did our examination parking our car that I was driving in front of I.E. Conner General Merchandise Store, right on the 101, diagonal parking.

Nancy: Do you remember the officer's name?

George: I sure do. His name was William Thompson. He was red-haired so a lot of them called him Red Thompson. I, of course, called him Mr. Thompson!

Nancy: Can you recall some of the buildings or businesses such as restaurants that were here?

George: Oh yes. We didn't have many buildings. Actually Solana Beach got started about 1924 when they had a land sale. They had the Ford garage; Cochran and Wise were the proprietors. They had one or two local hamburger restaurants on the highway that did general food. Then we had several gas stations, I think we had three at the time, later getting six or seven. We had the Associated Gasoline, we had the Union Station and the Standard Station, who had the terminus here in town where you could see the big tanks coming up and that's where they stored the gasoline to dispense to the individual stations along the 101 from about Encinitas to Del Mar.

Nancy: Any particular restaurant that you can remember?

George: There was a restaurant operated by the Eck family. It was a half a block off the highway; it was down at the Solana Hotel. It featured chicken primarily. Even in our store we had chicken feed as part of our commodity that we sold and he was a big customer for food for his chickens. I remember the Teddy Bear on the 101. There was another restaurant that I kind of remember, but I've forgotten the name of it. I think it was operated by a family called Baker, where the Pizza Port is now.

Nancy: What landmarks or unusual structures come to mind on the 101?

George: Well, the Ford garage. It's been remodeled somewhat, but it was on the southwest corner of the plaza. Then on the northeast corner of the plaza was the first bank, called the Bank of Solana Beach, opened and operated by Col. Ed Fletcher, who was really one of our primary fathers of the town.

Nancy: Was there a particular person associated with that stretch of the road?

George: I'd say Col. Ed Fletcher.

Nancy: Do you have a favorite memory, a favorite trip or favorite destination?

George: Well, in those days, in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, my dad was not self-employed; he worked for a lumberyard here in town. That lumberyard, by the way, had three branches. One in Del Mar, one in Encinitas and the one in Solana Beach, called the Loma Builders Supply Company. He had off on Saturday afternoons and quite often since he had no commitment to stay there all day, he'd take the family to San Diego. In those days we had a

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Model T Ford car, which had planetary gear transmission, three pedals that operated the forward/backward motion of the car. He'd have the car checked over by the Ford agency, bands tightened and so forth, and then we would take off and take the Highway 101 all the way into San Diego, which was about an hour or an hour and a half drive in those days. We went through Del Mar down to La Jolla by way of the Biological Grade and went by the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, down into La Jolla, down Pacific Beach and Mission Beach, Ocean Beach and then it cut across near where Harbor Drive is now, you turn the same way. Just as a note about the Highway 101, in 1927 or 1928, we had a very severe rainstorm when Lake Hodges overflowed and came down through San Dieguito valley all the way out to the ocean. It took part of the two-lane bridge at Del Mar out completely, so that interrupted our communicating between Del Mar and Solana Beach, and also San Diego. Solana Beach resorted to using the railroad trestle. You could get Ford and other cars across. The Ford was the best because of the width of the wheels were set apart such that you could negotiate the railroad tracks. But that was a side note. When we were in San Diego there was one big store down there called the Marston Store that we did our shopping and we'd also find an ice cream joint there and we treated ourselves.

Nancy: Do you remember a favorite trip?

George: Well, in those days, the highway, bear in mind, was only about 20 feet wide for north and south traffic. Cars were only about 6 foot wide so there seemed to be adequate space between cars to pass. We did take a trip to San Francisco, which was about 500 miles to the north and it took about 2 ½ to 3 days to travel that distance. The speed limit never exceeded 35 miles an hour in our town. We had about a 25-mile an hour speed limit.

Nancy: Do you remember any bad accidents happening on the 101?

George: Yes. I remember when they put the third lane in in 1933 or 1932; we called it the suicide lane. North and south each had a lane to itself and the center lane was used for passing. Quite often, more than they'd like to own up to, the north cars would start to pass and the south traffic would start to passing and then they'd end up having a head-on collision. There were quite a few of those. I remember one night as a little kid; we used to have the Chamber of Commerce outdoor meetings here in the Plaza. The fellow who was in charge of furnishing the food, Mr. Nichols, was coming down from the Sea Cliff Villa from Encinitas and his car was loaded with mash potatoes and meat and everything for the meal. En route through Cardiff to Solana Beach he had a bad accident and he was killed. There were some others fatally injured also and the food was all over the highway. Another one of our pioneers, George Beech, at George's, who built his place at Cardiff in 1916, and a good, personal friend of our family's, was in a bad accident and he was killed in San Diego, or en route to San Diego, I should say. George Beech was a character himself. His favorite song, my mother used to tell me, on the piano, at various Chamber of Commerce meetings was "On the Road to Mandalay". He had a booming voice. He was a very civic-minded man.

Nancy: How about stories of patrol officers or traffic cops?

George: We had really one deputy sheriff in the area between Del Mar and Encinitas, Sheriff John Bludworth. He had a little Chrysler coupe that had a red light and hand-crank siren. We

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would always try to be on our best behavior and attract as little attention as possible. He was the last word in authority.

Nancy: Do you remember the speed limit through town?

George: 25 miles an hour. Another side note about the town; there wasn't any stop sign on the 101 in the early, early days.

Nancy: Were there very many speeders that went through town?

George: Well, we did have our fair share. We had our own justice court beginning, I think, about 1932 or 1933. Judge Cochran, who was also the owner of the Ford Company in town, was our first justice of the peace. Thinking back, George Wise was a realtor in those days. There were quite a few people brought up before Judge Cochran, normally on Monday and Tuesday mornings. By way of information, Judge Cochran used to walk by our store every morning on his way to work. We always gave him a wave and said, "good morning, Judge." He was quite a colorful man.

Nancy: Did you ever get a ticket for speeding?

George: No. I guess around my home town I thought I better be good! I tried to never get caught I'm not going to say I didn't speed, but I tried not to get caught! tomorrow?" Red Thompson, the Highway Patrol, he was nice, and a good customer. He knew us, that we weren't too bad.

Nancy: Was there ever a celebrity in a parade route? We've talked about President Roosevelt.

George: We talked about Franklin Roosevelt and his entourage.

Nancy: How about some of the celebrities?

George: We had quite a few movie stars, especially with the advent of the Del Mar racetrack like Bing Crosby, Pat O'Brien, Jimmie Durante, Victor Mature and Betty Grable. There were quite a few of them. It's hard to recall them all but they all left their mark as having been residents at one time or another of Del Mar, Solana Beach or Rancho Santa Fe. Douglas Fairbanks in the early days was a frequent visitor down here. He had about a 1,000 acre parcel of land at Rancho Santa Fe, which is now called Fairbanks Ranch. He had been in our store, as well as Bing Crosby, Desi Arnez and a few others. Most of the time they sent their own personnel to take care of their wants.

Nancy: Do you remember the first traffic light installed?

George: Not exactly. But I think it came just about World War II or 1941. There wasn't really a traffic light from San Diego up the 101, except the first as I recall was in Anaheim. So you could go right along from Oceanside, San Clemente, San Juan Capistrano and then up to Anaheim. They had a bypass later through Long Beach.

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Nancy: When was the light installed on Lomas Santa Fe?

George: That was more recently, 1970 or something like that.

Nancy: What service stations were along the route?

George: We had the Associated, we had the Standard, we had the Union, and we had Richfield later. We had a Mohawk or something like that. I'm trying to think of other brands that are still around. Shell, we didn't have to my recollection. I'd say those three or four were the main ones.

Nancy: Your store was only about a half a block off the 101, could you name your store?

George: Yes, it was called G.G. Wilken's Ranch and Garden Supplies.

Nancy: It was started by your dad?

George: Yes, by my father in 1933. He was the manager of the lumberyard prior to that.

Nancy: Do you have other recollections of early Solana Beach that you want to comment on?

George: Our needs seem to be easily satisfied with skateboards and wagons. We had access to quite a bit of vacant ground so we'd build tunnels or trenches and cover them over to resemble a tunnel. We liked softball. We put a night ball field in town in the early 1930s or late 1920s. As kids we down in the summer and we'd see some of the motion picture celebrities down there playing night ball. That was a diversion. We didn't get our first theater until, I believe it was after World War II, 1945 actually.

Nancy: What about the flower fields on the bluffs?

George: Yes, we had some fields growing on the bluffs, gladiolas and the Comstock Dahlia fields are right down at the end of Sierra Street, the present location of the Bank of America.

Nancy: Can you tell us where the Plaza was located?

George: It was and is located at the intersection of Loma Santa Fe Drive and the 101. It was more or less the center of town as it was laid out in 1923 and 1924. In that group of buildings, there's a dentist and a beauty parlor or two, a dog washing place, and an eating-place, and one or two other shops that border the plaza.

Nancy: That about does it. I'm sure you've got plenty more to tell us. But I thank you.

George: One point before I go, going up the old Torrey Pines Grade, I don't think I mentioned it, but sometimes these Model T's with the location of the gas tank, there was a scarcity of fuel getting into the engine, so many of them turned the car around and backed up the grade on the way to San Diego. Or if the low gear band went out on the Model T, they'd turn around and backed up. The traffic wasn't so heavy and it was rather simple to do. Another thing, when Rose Canyon was cut through from Girard Street in Pacific Beach through the present side of La Jolla,

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UCSD campus, and that cut off an hour or more driving, which it's no longer necessary to go through Ocean Beach, Mission Beach and Pacific Beach.

Nancy: My father used to back up Torrey Pines Grade! I want to thank you, George.