

Interview with

**Robert Wilkens**

December 6, 2004

by Nancy Gottfredson

for the

Highway 101 Association

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**Interview of Robert Wilkens, 604 Canyon Place, Solana Beach, California, on December 6, 2004. Interviewer: Nancy Gottfredson. Transcribed by Kristi Hawthorne**

Nancy: My name is Nancy Gottfredson. I am with the Solana Beach Civic and Historical Society and I will be asking you questions today. If I could have you state your full name and current address?

Robert: My name is Robert M. Wilkens, 604 Canyon Place, Solana Beach, California, 92075.

Nancy: When and where you born?

Robert: I was born in Escondido, California on December 25, 1923, which is Christmas Day.

Nancy: What were your parents' names?

Robert: My dad was Gustaf George Wilkens and my mother was Florence Cranston Wilkens.

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

Robert: Well, I'm not entirely sure. My dad was born in San Francisco and my mother was born in Denver, Colorado. I think some summer times her family would come out to California and my dad happened to meet my mother's brother. One of her brothers and introduced him to my mother. I'm not even sure where they were married, to be honest with you. Later, my brother George, whom you both know, was born in Hartford, Connecticut back east. My dad worked at that time for Goodyear Tire and Rubber County in Hartford, Connecticut. So they lived there prior to my birth. I guess they wanted to come to California to live and they moved to Escondido. My dad had a job over there in a feed store, Howe's Feed Company. Mr. Howe was actually, at one time I think, a supervisor for the City of San Diego. One of the Howe brothers ran a feed Store. Then later, a very prominent citizen in Solana Beach, Mr. Herschel Larrick Sr., who was almost the founder of the town, brought development, like Ed Fletcher, Anyway, my dad had met Mr. Larrick in San Diego, that was before my dad and mother had been married. So they worked at the same lumberyard, Benson Lumber Company in San Diego, together in the 1920's perhaps. Anyway, Mr. Larrick asked my dad to come over to work at the lumberyard in Solana Beach, which he did in the mid 1920s. That's why we moved to Solana Beach, because of my dad's job.

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

Robert: From about 1925 to about 1929, or thereabouts. I just learned today in this book that we moved up to another home in 1927, so I'm a couple of years off. But we were on Rio Street, which is only a block east of the tracks, approximately. So that's pretty near 101. Later we moved up on top of the hill on South Granados in 1927, so that was approximately seven blocks from the 101.

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

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Robert: Well, the one that comes to mind is President Franklin D. Roosevelt came through Solana Beach in about a 1936 Ford open convertible sedan, with the flags waving and with a procession. That was one of the main happenings of somewhat importance in our town. Dad had worked at Solana Lumber from about 1925 to about 1933 and his pay was getting very low. We had a family of mother and dad and three children and his pay got down to under \$100 a month. He had some ownership in that lumberyard, and he took out the money that he had in it in garden type hardware items like garden hose, shovels, picks and so forth and then he decided to go in the feed business, too, because there wasn't a feed dealer nearby. So in 1933 he left Solana Lumber and he opened up his own garden store. I've been told that in the first month he made \$200 instead of the \$100 in the first month of operation, which was really something. A couple of hundred dollars went quite a ways in 1933 and then it got better after that. So our Depression didn't last too long. The Depression really lasted, I feel, until World War II. In fact, Solana Lumber changed hands where it had to be rescued financially from a man in Santa Ana. Anyway, after the war, the same people bought it back with more partners and then they did very well after 1945.

Nancy: Well, that's interesting to know because my dad had a cabinet making shop in Pasadena and he managed to hang onto the property but most of the work went away so he went to work in the studios, which fortunately were just starting up. He sort of changed his whole career. He managed to keep the shop, which was pretty important. It's gone now because they widened the street. It was fairly large and had its own lumber rack.

But anyway, how old were you when you first rode the 101 and where were you going?

Robert: Well, I was just a baby. We did go—there was a restaurant—back as far as I can remember was Cardiff, actually—do you know where restaurant row is on the beach?

Nancy: Yes.

Robert: There was a restaurant north of that, before you go onto the bridge, within a half a block from the restaurant that is there now, called the Breakers. Even when I was young I liked steaks, so I recall that you could have a complete steak dinner for a dollar. But anyway, I really enjoyed that.

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

Robert: Well, I don't know, but I do have a little story that I can recall about that. My brother George and I both got our driver's licenses about the day we reached the age of 14 and we were able to legally drive big trucks and so forth. The only restriction we had was you had to have a parent with you at night until you were 16 and then you could drive alone. So my brother and I both drove rather large trucks at 14 years of age. One of the first things I recall, I looked very young at 14, and I was stopped by the one and only Mr. Red Thompson, a Highway Patrolman, and he was pretty strict. The reason he stopped me was he didn't think I had a license, but I proved to him that I did and I got over that all right. We were delivering to Del Mar, Rancho Santa Fe, Cardiff and Encinitas, generally in what is now the San Dieguito district. Once in awhile we'd go to Oceanside or something but mostly it was in a ten-mile radius.

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Nancy: So you delivered hay and feed.

Robert: Yes. We were lifting, and I'm not exaggerating, we were fooling around with things that weighed 200 pounds by ourselves. One of the things we sold was spray oil to Fairbanks Ranch and Douglas Fairbanks owned it at the time. They were not fifty gallons, but thirty-gallon drums and if you multiply 30 times 8, that's 240 pounds, plus the weight of the drum and I delivered those by myself at 14 years of age and having to get them off the truck. The truck we could load on a dock, so we didn't have to lift, but we would roll them, but I had to take them off the ramp by myself and deliver 20 or so at a time. So we were lifting heavy things and sometimes somewhat dangerous, too. We did a lot of dangerous things in our kind of business. My brother and I were actually stonemasons after World War II. We both had gone to college but we were going to go into my dad's store. Well, I didn't get out of college until 1947, but after 1947 the store really wasn't big enough to support three families, you know, my family, George's family and my folks. So my brother and I actually got into contracting, masonry. So after 1947 we spent twenty years or thereabouts doing that. We worked out of the store, there had to be deliveries and things made, but then we always got to our jobs, which could be La Jolla or Rancho Santa Fe. We did quite a number of jobs and mostly did them by ourselves. Things are different today, equipment and machinery is different. But some time later, after my dad passed away, my brother went into the store. During the 1960s and 1970s there was quite a bit of prosperity. The town grew. So I contracted alone for another two or three years. Did you ever see our store?

Nancy: Oh yes, absolutely.

Robert: We really got pretty busy to where we ended up hiring about ten people. But early on we did a lot of the backbreaking work, almost unbelievable. And we did silly things. We sold mureatic acid, as an example. They came in containers of porcelain. They were 20 gallons or so, and you poured them into one gallon bottles with no protection for inhaling, you just did it. These days you have to have a mask and everything else. But a little bit would spill out on the concrete and it would eat the concrete and start sizzling.

Nancy: We didn't think about those things so much.

Robert: We'd start coughing and you'd get away from it for about a minute and come back and do more.

Nancy: Can you recall some of the other buildings or business, such as restaurants?

Robert: In 1930 there were really about six different gas stations on the 101. Then after the war, before 1950, we actually had a gas station on this side of the tracks, up about a block off of Rios Street. Then there was a gas station right on the west side of South Cedros on Lomas Santa Fe, also. But that was after the war, so there were two there, plus the six of them that were still going on the highway. Eden Gardens had a gas station, too, at that time so there were a lot of places to buy gas. There were two restaurants at least for a while. You know where the Stone Hotel building is? There was a restaurant in that building there for a period of time. Then on the plaza, even today, there's a pizza parlor. There have been restaurants more or less all the time, but on different corners. On the highway, I don't remember exactly the time period, but we had the

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Teddy Bear in south Solana Beach and that existed from the early 1930s on and probably into World War II. Then there was a place in the building that's now just south of the barbershops on 101.

Nancy: Yes, the little Sushi Bar.

Robert: Yes, that same building housed not only a drug store in the 1920's but later a place called the Knotty Pine. The Knotty Pine restaurant was opened by a lady named Mrs. Brown and she was the mother of a girl I went to school with named Katherine Brown who still lives on Pacific Street in Solana Beach. She's been here essentially as long as I have. I went from first grade to twelfth with her. She's been here a long time. In fact her dad, Mr. Brown, worked at one of the gas stations on the Plaza, which would be the building on the south side of the plaza, next to Highway 101, comprising a gas station and a Ford dealership. We had two barbershops and they were both on the plaza, one on the south and one on the north. In 1929 they had a new car Ford dealer that sold Model A Fords. In Solana Beach that was the only dealership we've had, I believe.

Nancy: What landmarks or unusual structures come to mind when you think of the 101?

Robert: On the Plaza, where the fountain now is located, someone decided we needed what I call an obelisk. It was, I think, an ugly thing, as I recall. It was pretty tall but it was tapered. It was fairly high, maybe 30 feet, I would be guessing. It was burned later by vandals!

Nancy: So you had nothing there?

Robert: South of that spot we used to have a ballpark. Later, in the fifties I think, a fountain (designed by Mrs. Wenetta Childs) was placed where the obelisk had been.

Nancy: On the bluffs.

Robert: Well, actually, it was really just off the plaza. You've got the plaza and then if you walked, there's a building there called the Bridge, well that parking was the ball field. It was on the east side. It goes sloping up to the condominiums now, and if someone hit a homerun it would go into that slope. But the ball field was really where the parking lot for the Bridge Company is now.

Nancy: And Bridge Company is the old theater, I believe.

Robert: That's right. I believe we had a bowling alley in the same building.

Nancy: I remember the bowling alley being down on the 101.

Robert: Well, that's very true, but that was later. They did have something else in that building after the theater, but I don't recall what it was now. I could be wrong about the bowling alley.

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

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Robert: A Highway Patrolman we called Red Thompson. He was rather strict but he did a good job, and he was tough. The story is he even gave his daughter a ticket! But that's here-say.

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

Robert: I told you about that favorite eating place, the Breakers steak house. We also ate at George's, which is about where the Chart House is now.

Nancy: Do you remember the Beacon?

Robert: Yes, the Beacon Inn. That was kind of a risqué kind of place as far as reputation. I've actually been in that building before they tore it down, but later it did become a meeting place for organizations. But early on like in the 1920s and 1930s, it had a reputation of being a little bit on the wild side.

Nancy: You talked about your favorite destination being the restaurant ...

Robert: Of course, we did get to go to the movies, and the only movie place was the La Paloma in Encinitas. I could finish talking about the ball field, where the fountain now is. One of the barbers put up a sign every time there was going to be a game. A sign about three feet wide that said, "Softball Tonight" and they'd put the sign up actually where the fountain is now, so if anybody was interested in going to the game, if the sign was up you knew there was a game. So people were informed.

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

Robert: Yes. We had some serious ones. There are several stories about that. When I was real young we just had one lane each way, just a two-lane road and you would have your head-ons and so forth. But it really got kind of bad in the 1930s when they finally got three lanes and you know what they called the center lane on the three lanes? Suicide lane.

Nancy: I remember that.

Robert: We had actually quite a few. You'd have head-ons, and even though they weren't going 80, many cars in the 1930's were going fifty or sixty, it wasn't good, so there was a lot of that. Then the young people, like today, they would fool around and speed. I lost two or three of my friends that way. I've heard people say you could stand on the 101 and play softball or something, and a car wouldn't be there for 30 minutes. Well, that's not exactly true, particularly after 1937 when the races began down here. We didn't have I-5 and I'm talking about when they were leaving the races on that three-lane road. They changed the lanes for people going home to the LA area, so they had two lanes going north and one lane coming south. So if you're coming south you could never get around a car in front of you while that was going on. This would be about 4 p.m. and later and I'm telling you, you can't believe how busy that was. Particularly if you wanted to get from Lomas Santa Fe going west and if you had an errand to do like go to the bank or post office. At that time in 1938, when I had just begun driving, trying to get across 101 when you had two lanes bumper-to-bumper, and they were probably cruising at about 45 or 50, and you also had to worry about the one lane going south, you had to get across three lanes if

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you were going to the Plaza. This is all true. What I did, I cut ahead diagonally towards the northwest building, which at that time was a bank at the Plaza. The plaza's almost a block wide, so you'd have to be sure nobody's coming south, (there weren't a lot of people going south), and with most everybody going north, if you'd see a little break, you'd go diagonally and we did that, but it was very dangerous. I don't know of any accidents that way. If there were, there weren't very many. It was mostly head-ons.

Nancy: Do you remember the speed limit through town?

Robert: I don't think it's a great deal different than today. I think it's 40 or 45, isn't it? I don't know about your memory about cars, but way back then, and I started driving at 14, we had a very fast car. Our family car would go 80 or more. In fact, that particular engine won the Indianapolis Speedway in the 1930s for a couple of years.

Nancy: What car was that?

Robert: 1932 Studebaker. It was a big car actually, but fast.

Nancy: That's what my dad used to drive to work. Did you ever get a ticket?

Robert: Not as a boy. George and I have a pretty good traffic records. But yes, I've gotten tickets. But speeding only, nothing else. No fender-benders, nothing. I've been driving over 65 years. But I did get one the other day! They've been working on the design of the walkway and they had the pylons out. I was going north to the bank wanting to turn east on Lomas Santa Fe and the workers were working down south, and not anywhere near that intersection. So I'm coming north and there were about four cars ahead of me and I wasn't paying attention to who were in those cars so I decided, well I'm going to make a right turn. So I went between a couple of pylons. It was safe, I was only crawling about five miles an hour. However, there was a Highway Patrolman sitting in the line of four or five cars, which I had not seen. I figured, "Well, I've had it" and I had because he followed me and he gave me a ticket for going through a construction zone! A side story on that; I got a ticket where on Sunday they have the farmer's market. One of my friends happened to be walking by and the Highway Patrolman's sitting in his car doing the writing. So my friend says, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I went through a construction zone over there on the 101." And he said, "You know, that's double the penalty nowadays going through a construction zone." That made me feel really good! I was telling that story to someone else and he said the same thing: "Do you know that's double!" So anyway, between that time and the date on the appearance for court, (he gave me enough time) we went to Hawaii. So after we got back from Hawaii I went up to Melrose Courthouse and paid my initial fine. I also made a mistake on that in a way, because the lady at the counter asked me if I wanted to go to traffic school. And I wasn't really thinking too much and I said, "No, I don't think so." And she didn't give me a sales talk, meaning I should have asked her why because that would have obliterated the traffic ticket if I went to traffic school and also I would have ended paying a little less money because of what happened. On the way home I began to think, maybe I should have said "yes", but I had already paid my fine. So I got on the phone and called up one of those traffic schools on a Friday and she said, "Are you free tomorrow?", which I was. So I went to traffic school for a day. Then I had to undo the damage with my insurance company. So I had to pay a fee for the traffic school and then when I went back to the courthouse I had to undo the

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fine I had paid which also cost me an additional amount of money, although all in all it cost me less than I had anticipated. What I did was very safe, but it was against the law. As far as other tickets, really none. I've been stopped two or three times but I didn't get a ticket. But no accidents. Neither has George and we've got a 130 years between us, more than that actually, 135 years.

Nancy: Was there ever a celebrity in a parade route? We've talked about President Roosevelt, was he the only celebrity?

Robert: He's the only I can really remember, to be honest with you. I can't really remember much. We were just a sleepy little town.

Nancy: Do you remember the first traffic light installed on the 101?

Robert: I imagine it was 101 and Lomas Santa Fe.

Nancy: What service stations were along the route?

Robert: We had Jack Emblem's Mohawk, this is north Solana Beach; then Murfin's Mobile Gas, which is Solana Automotive today; then Cochran and Wise. Mr. Brown worked for Cochran and Wise, which was on the south end of the Plaza right on 101. George told me he thinks that that was an Associated. Then Davis Brothers had a Texaco station, just south of the Sushi restaurant where there is a new restaurant, or fairly new. Do you know that restaurant?

Nancy: The Beach Grass.

Robert: Yes, that actually is a converted gas station. I think that building was Davis Brothers Texaco. Right next to Texaco, the very next lot, 30 feet, not very far—actually that's kind of an eyesore today because it should be redeveloped—but that property had been another gas station and that was called Russell's Union Gas station. Then, not too far from where the City Hall is today was a place called Moreno's Polly Gas. Then there really was a gas station just north of that, at one time also, but I forget the name of it. There was Nick Fix's Signal Gas and he was on Lomas Santa Fe off of Rios Street, just about where King's Garden is, essentially there. That was really after World War II.

Nancy: Are there any other things that happened.

Robert: I don't think anybody ever talked about the circus we had in town in the 1920s. That was located on the property which is the Napa Auto building. That block had a circus on it at one time. We didn't own the land, we got that later. I do remember I was a pretty young boy at the time so it would have to be in the 1930s.

Nancy: What do you know about the neighborhood house?

Robert: That was a building on the Plaza, which is two-story. I think it's still the same building. Am I right or wrong, is that restaurant the Pizza place? What is that now?

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Nancy: Pasta Prado.

Robert: Okay, now, that's two-story and that would have been that building. They did not use the bottom floor, which has been like a pool hall and so forth through the years.

Nancy: So they were up above?

Robert: They were on the second story, yes.

Nancy: What about Halloween? No trick or treating?

Robert: We did more mean things. There weren't kids knocking on the door wanting candy.

Nancy: Just mischievous?

Robert: Some of them were pretty severe!

Nancy: Oh dear. Throwing tomatoes?

Robert: Yes! I was involved. There were about three or four of us young kids, we were about ten. We were in a field that had tomatoes growing, this happened to be off of Rios Street, right near Lomas Santa Fe. So we were throwing tomatoes at night at cars going by and in those days many of those cars did not have what we call shatter-proof glass, they just had window glass, basically. And all of a sudden we heard glass breaking. We didn't know who threw that particular tomato. They were green, not ripe. They happened to be middle-aged teenagers, like about 18 years old, mean, at least we thought they would be mean, and here we are being around 10 and 12 so we ran to escape. Of course, they could have outrun us but they didn't see us. The tomato plants were pretty tall and there was about an acre of tomatoes. So we stayed in the tomato field, trying not to breathe too heavily, and we got away that night!

Nancy: My dad used to tell me about turning over the outhouses!

Robert: Well, that was done, too! Then regarding the local grammar school, Central School was added on to, maybe in 1930, so it's been made double the size it had been. Now it's got a couple of wings. The south wing was the one that was initially there. Then they added on and connected it and later it became like an "H". Anyway, we would always get involved in soaping the walls. What ever we did, we never did anything really bad. But they had a caretaker, Mr. Pickett and we thought he was a mean person, but in reality he was just doing his job. He was fairly old so we could outrun him! I think we gave him a bad time and he never could catch us!

Nancy: Did you do daring thing on bicycles?

Robert: Yes, I was one of those. We were actually kind of mild. You know what they do on skateboards, bicycles and motorcycles today.

Nancy: Yes, pretty elaborate.

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Robert: Yes, and pretty dangerous, too. I'm not saying they're not good at it. They are good at it, those guys on skateboards that jump up on railings. I think we were a little safer that way. We were tame in regard to that.

Nancy: You said after school you wrestled?

Robert: Yes, I was more or less an early athlete. I was pretty good when I was six or seven years old in a lot of things, even football and softball. But for some reason I liked to wrestle. I had two or three guys that were more or less friends but we had the idea we wanted to be better than the other one.

Nancy: I think it's funny that the adults wanted to watch you.

Robert: That's true.

Nancy: I think today they'd break it up!

Robert: We had two or three adults that were off work early. We wrestled. Particularly one fellow I kind of had an appointment with, "I'll meet you down at the ball field tonight." But the others, they were in the heat of the moment. One of my very best friends, he and I were just about equal strength, but he was killed unfortunately, not overseas but in the states during the war. We had two or three casualties in the states while in training rather than overseas.

Nancy: You said most of the time was after grammar school you had the physical activities. That's something that the kids are missing today.

Robert: We had a lot of fun, even though most of us didn't have a lot of money, but we had a lot of fun.

Nancy: You worked mowing lawns and throwing newspapers.

Robert: During the Depression most of the kids had something to do. My dad pretty much believed in work. We did men's work at ten years old. Not only six or eight hours, I mean hard work. This is what had to be done.

Nancy: My dad was raised on a farm and everyone had to contribute, even the littlest one.

Robert: I think in a way that's good. But of course, in today's world you have to know the computer and things like that. In my opinion, a good attitude is needed if you want to get ahead no matter what you want to do. Attitude is terribly important and it's not talked about that much. It's very important, I feel.

Nancy: I think you're right.

Robert: We had one case, my brother hired this young fellow and he was going to start on a certain morning after he had been hired. He had to walk east from where our store was, up the hill a ways. So I picked him up because I recognized him and he was only in the truck for three

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blocks and he was talking about my brother's interview. He didn't like it. Just in those three blocks. After we stopped, I said, "I don't think it's worth your while just by what you said, I don't think you're going to fit in."

Nancy: We had miniature golf in Solana Beach in the 1930s?

Robert: We did have miniature golf in the 1930s. It was located where Mitch's Surf Shop is located, just south of where the Harley Davidson place is. It was a fad in this area, mostly in the 1930's.

Nancy: You said through the years the Bridge from south Solana Beach to North Del Mar was washed out at least twice.

Robert: One fellow had about a 1927 Chevy four door sedan and the pavement to him looked okay as he was coming to the bridge down there. All of sudden, before the bridge itself, the approach, the last 10 to 15 feet, sunk due to the weight of his car and he crashed into the abutment of the bridge. He wasn't going fast and so he only got scratched. That, I remember.

Nancy: I can remember that storm we had in the 1980s where we pretty much got flooded out and we lost our phone line along the lagoon and Del Mar and the freeway.

Robert: Talk about wash outs, many times, that's where the water came down. It came down where Whispering Palms, or Morgan's Run is now. There are stories, and they're true of course, in that flat area, right off of that road that goes by, on the north side of Morgan's Run, there have been cars buried there in the storms. I'm talking the 1920s and 1930s. There may be some of them still there. In fact, you know where the Japanese farming was, the vegetable garden?

Nancy: Chino's.

Robert: Chinos. Right, in that area, very flat. There have been some cars buried.

Nancy: I remember reading that during these 80's storms that a couple women launched a little zodiac on the golf course and the groundskeeper came out and said, "You can't do that, you're going to ruin the greens." And their attitude was they were already ruined and so they hit him over the head with their oar and they went on their way!