

"Who are you? What do you want?" When Brittany and I pulled into Mr. Dale Willis's driveway, he came to my car and asked us that question, and as you can imagine we were quite nervous, even a little scared of the man. After we let him know that Brittany and I were going to be interviewing him on his family history and Willis Road, he invited us into his office, and this is where it all began.

What we thought was only going to take maybe a half an hour at the most turned into almost two hours! Mr. Willis let us know when we first started that our interview was his first one ever, so while we were nervous about doing the interview, he was nervous about giving one. He decided to start the interview by giving us brief history about his ancestors. Originally the Willis ancestors came from England and settled in Illinois. This is the place where Willis farming started; they raised cattle and lived off the livestock. One day the family heard of a man named Brigham Young and went to hear him preach. As it turns out they loved the preacher and the Mormon religion so they became firm believers and when they got kicked out Illinois, the family followed Young to the Salt Lake, and this is how the Willis family came to live in the West.

The next man he talked about was his granddad Angus Willis. He came from Show Low and owned a farm up there milking cows. After a while he got tired of the cattle business and went to California to pick some citrus, and when he got back he decided to sell his farm and move down to Chandler. He bought one hundred sixty acres and started a new farm raising sheep. This move to Chandler happened around 1930 or 1935 and during these five years Angus built the house his family lived in for so many years. In fact, this house is so old Mr. Willis said he could remember the days when the house did not have electricity and they used to have to open and close the freezer very fast so the cold air would not get out as to not let the ice melt.



After Mr. Willis told us about his ancestors and granddad, he continued on with his father [Charles Willis](#). He went to high school in Snowflake and when his parents moved down here to Chandler, of course he came with them. So he finished high school and after that went on a mission to Fort Worth, Texas which is where he met his future wife Fern. After his mission Charles came home and when he got here, he packed his bags and went straight back to Fort Worth to marry Fern. The kick is nobody knew that they had gotten married! Fern and Charles lived with his parents for a while until he got enough money to buy land. Well soon enough he got some money and bought his land and

started a farm just like his dad. The only difference is they raised lambs, lippy lambs to be exact, which Mr. Willis declares is a crazy animal. During the summer Charles and Dale and the rest of his family drove the sheep to the mountains because it was too hot down here for the sheep. In order to keep the sheep with the herd they would put a goat in front of them. After a while Charles got the idea in his head to get a road named after his family. He figured since he lived out in the country, he ought to have a road named after his family. Since other pioneer families, such as the Riggs family and the Dobson family had roads named for themselves, he wanted one too. So, according to Mr. Willis, his father went to the county supervisor

and let it be known that he'd like a road, and a little while later Willis Road was named.

Last but not least, Mr. Willis told us a little bit about himself. He was born December 12, 1931 on land right where Chandler Gilbert Community College is today. As a little boy he helped out around the farm and according to him it was an everyday chore. He has four brothers and two sisters that are still living, but lost one little sister, so Charles and Fern had eight children total! Mr. Willis went to [Chandler High School](#) and played football. His favorite class was agriculture and Dale and his brothers got to school by way of an old army truck his father got them. The truck was so bad that during the winter they would freeze, and when it



would rain it was "tough luck" as Mr. Willis says. According to Mr. Willis, they could not ask a girl out on a date or take them to a dance because of that truck, yet their father refused to buy them another car. For fun they would go get ice cream from a nearby Dairy Queen or go to the drive-in, but most of the time all they did was work around the farm. After he graduated, Mr. Willis went down to the University of Arizona on a football scholarship but only got to play for two years because he was injured. So to make use of his time, he went on a church mission and when he got back he met and married his wife Donna Jane with whom he had three children: two boys and a girl. They later gave him nine grandchildren. Mr. Willis also told us how from his granddad, to his dad to himself, they have all served on Salt River Project Board for twenty years each, except for Dale who served for twenty one years.

The last part of our conversation ended with Mr. Willis telling us how he got Willis Junior High named after his family. When the school was built, there was no name for it so he went to the school board and let them know he would like the school to be named after him. Every two weeks he would have to fill out another paper to make sure they kept his name in consideration and he had to do this for one year! After no other families had requested the school name, the school board gave it to the Willis family. The funny thing is that none of his children got to attend the school.

At the start of the interview, we were very nervous but after two hours of getting to know a man, a stranger, we became very comfortable and almost like friends with Mr. Willis. We cannot help but to have a spot for him in our hearts now because he was such a nice man. He even let us know of an upcoming speech he is going to give in May and told us to go and see how he does. We consider ourselves lucky to have had the opportunity not just to do an interview, but to make a new friend. The Willis family, not just pioneers, but friends also.

An interview with Dale Willis by Jill Moreno & Brittney Mueller on April 7, 2005

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