

Ervin's Life - Younger Years

by Grant Wilson

May 4, 2009

Ervin McDonald Wilson was born June 11, 1928 in a camp wagon up in the Sierra Madre mountains on the frontier of Northern Mexico with a midwife attending his birth. His parents, Marion Lyman Wilson and Louisa McDonald Wilson, migrated to Mexico from Utah by team and wagon arriving in Colonia Pacheco, Chihuahua, Mexico in October, 1926: where they lived in a camp wagon until after Ervin was born. Ervin was the second son in a family which eventually grew to five boys and five girls.



Ervin's Family With 9 of 10 Children - Ervin Second From Right (1939)
(10th Child, Amy, Was Born in 1941)

His parents were raised in the faith of the Mormon pioneers who settled Utah. His father attended Utah State College for two years where he studied veterinary science, and his mother who also attended Utah State College graduated Summa Cum Laude majoring in food science. Both parents were very talented, and his father proved to be very inventive.



Piedras Verdes River at Colonia Pacheco - Winter

Ervin was bright and talented, and he grew strong through the challenging and sometimes arduous life of the frontier which included the care of horses, cows, pigs, chickens, sheep and goats. He helped his parents with all of these activities which also extended to the planting and cultivation of crops by means of horse drawn implements. In addition his father was the town blacksmith; and he built and operated a large water wheel which was used to run a shingle mill, a wheat grinder and a sorghum press to produce molasses from sorghum cane. Ervin assisted his father in these activities. His father acquired a heard of about 300-350 angora goats which Ervin also helped to tend for several years. These activities ensued during the coarse of the Great Depression which began in 1929 and continued through 1930-1940. Clothes were mainly hand-me-downs or clothes that his mother sewed for the children. Food was mainly from what was produced on the farm. Mattresses for the beds were filled with straw, and it was always a hike to the outhouse toilet. Shoes were only worn in cold weather, and children were taught to care for and sew-up shoes that were needing repair. There was no electricity, indoor plumbing, radios, etc.

Ervin attended grade school in a two-room school house during the years 1934 - 1942 where for the higher grades he only attended on alternate days in order to tend the large heard of angora goats where he alternated with other children in the family. Nevertheless he was a rapid learner,

and he was able to keep up with other students in his classes. Ervin was adventurous, and with the great outdoors of Colonia Pacheco became somewhat of a "Tom Sawyer" with many things to see and do. If he was told something could not or should not be done, he often set out to test it to find out for himself and perhaps to prove others wrong. This would sometimes get him into trouble, and he would be disciplined for his disobedience for which he sometimes rebelled.

It was during the years 1934 - 1942 that Ervin learned to play a reed organ which his parents had acquired. These were common on the frontier because they were light, easy to transport and tended to remain in tune. Below is a picture of such an organ. In order to play, one must first pump the pedals which cause air to flow past the reeds of corresponding keys pressed on the organ. The volume was controlled by how hard one pumped the pedals. Ervin was especially attentive, and enjoyed playing on the organ.



Typical Reed Organ

It was during this period that Ervin found that there seemed to be missing keys on the organ; and he could not play certain tunes from the Mexican culture which he had heard and wanted to play. This was a concern to him, and it became a pivot point to which he returned many times in subsequent years.

There was no high school in Colonia Pacheco, and the closest high school was 32 miles away at

the Church Academy in Colonia Juarez. This was way too far to commute because of the limited means of transportation at that time which would probably have been by horse-back. For this reason Ervin was sent to live with a family in Colonia Juarez during the school year for the first two of his high-school years. His parents moved to Rainier, Oregon while Ervin was in his sophomore year (10th grade); and Ervin transferred to the Rainier Union High School. There he integrated well with the classes which proved in some cases to be less advanced than the classes at the Academy.



Ervin's Family With All 10 Children At Rainier, Oregon - Ervin On Far Right (1947)

Ervin did not get along with his father during his teen years, and ran away from home for a few months while they were living in Oregon; subsequently he was sent to live with his Aunt Emily for his senior year in high school. After graduation from high school and when he was old enough, he enlisted in the US Air Force where he served with the US occupation forces in Japan. In later years Ervin and his father became reconciled, and the two became fast and loyal friends. They both engaged in a medicinal herb business where his father collected numerous herbs from the Sierra Madre mountains of Northern Mexico. These were shipped to Ervin who distributed them to various outlets in the US. In the course of this work Ervin became intensely interested in the cultivation and propagation of various medicinal herbs - both from the wild and those in cultivation. This work further led to Ervin's study and development of high-lysine corn, which is important to the diets of many peoples in Mexico and perhaps other countries.

After serving in the US Air Force, Ervin was entitled to go to school under the GI Bill which paid some of his college expenses. He attended Brigham Young University as a freshman and part of his sophomore years where he studied music theory. He found that the professors did not understand his concept of "missing" keys in the musical scale and treated him as if there was something wrong with him. This highly frustrated Ervin, and he left BYU to live in California where he studied on his own. This brought him to the point where he was able to understand and

develop new ideas regarding the musical scale and ways to provide the "missing" keys he had noted in his youth.