GILBERT ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW OF

JOHN & ZELDA FREESTONE

GILBERT ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW OF

JOHN AND ZELDA FREESTONE

Edited by Pat Castaneda

Interview by Carol Shepherd
July 9, 1992

This project was funded in part with funds granted by the Department of Library, Archives and Public Records under the Library Services and Construction Act, State Administered Program, P.L. 98-480, as amended.

Gilbert Oral History Project

Interview with John & Zelda Freestone
January 30, 1990
Interviewer: Carol Shepherd
Location: 16809 S. Gilbert Rd., Gilbert

Interviewer (I): Mr. Freestone, we'll start the interview with a little background that you and I were just talking about. You and your wife are both natives of Arizona, not necessarily Gilbert. But, why don't we go back to what you were just telling me about your father and where he was born, and your mother.

Mr. John Freestone (JF): My father, who was George Leonard Freestone, was born in Alpine, Utah in 1872. When he was eleven years old, the family migrated by covered wagon train to the Gila Valley in Arizona. Mother was born in Brigham City, Utah, and when she was about eleven years old also, her family migrated to the Gila Valley in Arizona, and that's where they grew up, met and married. I can remember my mother saying how frightened she was when they let the covered wagons down into the Grand Canyon to have it floated over Lee's Ferry crossing on the Colorado River. She got back into the cabin and held a quilt or something over her eyes as they floated the wagon and the cattle and everything across the Colorado River. I know that my father had about the same experience. It was a frightening thing to negotiate the canyon and the river.

(I): How did they negotiate that Canyon? Did they ever tell you how they lowered those...?

(JF): Yes, they did. It was so steep in places they had to drag a log, tie a log to the wagon to drag and to brake it, to lower it down into the Canyon.

(I): It would have been a long, arduous trip. What was your mother's name then?

(JF): Her name was Packer. Charlotte Packer.

(I): How many children were there in their families, respectively?

(JF): Well, in my mother's family, I have to stop and think, there were five girls. And in my father's family there were three boys and three girls.

(I): Mrs. Freestone, you were born in Mesa. Where did your family come from?

Mrs. Zelda Freestone (ZF): My mother was born in Idaho and my father was born in Utah. Their families migrated to Arizona approximately at the same time, maybe a year or two difference. They were both very young when they came. I think my mother was about nine years old and my father was thirteen or some such age. I don't remember exactly.

(I): What was your mother's name?

(ZF): My mother's name was Martha Ann Passey and my father's name was William Wallace Ellsworth.

(I): And then they settled in...?

(ZF): My father's people settled in Show Low in the beginning, and my mother's people settled in Mesa from the beginning. They came directly to Mesa, and then after my father's family came, he came down here. He and some of his brothers came to the Valley. That's when he met my mother.

(I): What did your father do for a living?

(ZF): He was a farmer. Mostly he did a lot of odd jobs before he had a farm to work. He worked at about anything he could find to do.

(I): What about your father, Mr. Freestone?

(JF): He was also a farmer. And, by the way, I have a map here which shows the properties that my father purchased, the year and the amount he paid. I'll let you have a copy of that. I made copies for my children and grandchildren so they....

(I): I'd love to have it! Various parts of the country had various methods of acquiring farms. How were farms acquired here?

(JF): I can tell you about ours, and it's quite an interesting story. My uncle had already settled in Mesa with a farm and he wanted his brother, my father, of course, to come here too. He thought it'd be a great opportunity. At this time our family was living in Los Angeles. Shortly after I was born in Safford, we moved over there and stayed a few years, but he wanted to come back to Arizona and get

into farming. Well, there was a place for sale and he was interested in it, but he didn't have the money to buy it. But he did have a friend named Henry Day. He had a big cattle ranch in Arizona and New Mexico. Henry Day had retired and had a home in Pasadena, so my father went to see him knowing that he was quite affluent, and to see if he might help him purchase his land. So Mr. Day agreed to do so. But he said, "First of all, I want to go and look at the property before I put up any money." So he and my father came over to look at the property, and he had the money, the cash, in his pocket. If the name Day seems familiar, Sandra Day O'Connor is his granddaughter.

(I): I was going to ask if there wasn't a connection there.

(JF): We had a very close relationship with the Day family.

(I): How much land was involved in that farm?

(JF): Our first purchase was 160 acres on what is now Elliot Road.

(I): Elliot and what?

(JF): Well, you know where the high school is? We purchased two eighty acre farms, that was in 1916, for a total cost of $13,000, which is $81.15 an acre. Then later, we purchased another eighty acres just west of this land, and that was about as close to the corner of Lindsay and Elliot Road. We bought that in 1918 for $18,000, a little more money. That's $225 an acre. The next was a twenty acre, and that was on Val Vista. We purchased that in 1922 for $4,000. That's $200 an acre. Then, our next purchase was 160 acres, and that was on the corner of Baseline and Lindsay Road. It was 160 less about ten or twelve acres of the canal that ran through there. We bought that in 1933 for $41,250, or $275 an acre. My brother, George, also farmed a hundred acre farm during the year 1929, so that was all within the family, and he and my older brother Alfred also farmed 320 acres in Queen Creek during 1929 and 1930. So during these years we came into possession of over 600 acres of land here in Gilbert.

(I): Now, Mrs. Freestone, your father was farming too?

(ZF): Yes. He never was a big farm owner though. He had a few pieces of small acreage, but nothing ever very big. And

besides that he worked at about anything that he could get to do in those days.

(I): Was his land closer to Mesa, or...?

(ZF): The land I remember that he had, when I was old enough to remember anything...we lived in Lehi and he had a twenty acre piece there that he farmed and raised cantaloupe and corn and mostly produce and stuff like this on that twenty acres.

(I): (To Mr. Freestone) What was your family raising?

(JF): Mainly cotton and alfalfa. Some grain.

(I): When your father, on that first 160 acres...that was already cultivated when he bought it?

(JF): It was partially cleared and farmed one year before he bought it, but he finished the clearing of the land.

(I): When they cleared the land out here, what was involved in clearing it? What did they have to do?

(JF): They had to remove mesquite trees and cactus and brush. The land was quite nice as far as that goes. They didn't have to move much dirt around, but just had to clear the surface and go right to farming. We were under the Eastern Canal and the Consolidated Canal.

(I): They were already in place?

(JF): They were in place, and had been for twenty years before our family came in 1916. The water...there was only one dam on the river, the Roosevelt Dam, but there was a diversion dam at Granite Reef that diverted the water and brought it to Gilbert.

(I): How did they allocate the water out to the farms?

(JF): Well, that was allocated, I guess, according to the supply behind the dam. But the Salt River Water Users Association was formed to control the water, and my father was very active in this association. He was on the Board of Governors for a number of years and had a lot to do with the building of Bartlett Dam and some of the other dams on the other rivers.

(I): Did you have to go out and, like they do here in town, take your own water and have somebody out to open your gate?

(JF): They had what they call zanjeros, a Mexican word, but they were water bosses. Mr. Brookens was the zanjero for all of this area that we farmed, and it was a matter...he had one of the first telephones in Gilbert, and it was a matter of ordering how much water we wanted in amount in number of hours. We ordered what we would call a 300 inch stream for forty-eight hours, then he would come and turn the water into our ditch, and then shut it off at the appointed time. If you were a little short, sometimes you'd ask him if he could let it run a little longer. That's how the system worked on limited water usage, which is now the Salt River Project

(I): He was a pretty good man to know, then.

(JF): Yes. You remember Trudy Cooper?

(I): Right.

(JF): That was her father.

(I): Then the Salt Water Association, the Salt River Water Association, actually preceeded the Salt River Water Project?

(JF): Oh, yes.

(I): When you returned back to Gilbert, how old were you when you came back from California?

(JF): I was seven years old.

(I): You got to go to the first school then?

(JF): Yes, I went to the school that the museum now occupies, and I was in second grade there and continued through the school system there until I graduated from high school.

(I): What year did you graduate?

(JF): In 1927. I spent five and a half years in high school (laughs)...in the building. But I think maybe I should explain that.

(I): I think so too.

(JF): I wasn't necessarily a slow learner, but in the middle of my seventh grade they had completed the first high school building, and since the old building was very crowded then, they moved us, the seventh graders, into the high school building, and we stayed there through the eighth grade and the four years of high school. For awhile, when under construction, it was so crowded we never had a place for all the high school students and those who were to occupy the building. They put a big circus tent out there in front of the building and they conducted classes. There was a circus tent right there in front of the old building where the museum now stands.

(I): It had to be a little difficult to keep the kids' attention.

(JF): Yes.

(I): How many were in your graduating class?

(JF): Eighteen.

(I): And, Mrs. Freestone, you graduated from...? You went to school in Mesa?

(ZF): No. I never did go to school in Mesa. When I was three my parents moved to Lehi, and I was there until I was in the fourth grade, and then my parents moved to Peoria. I was in Peoria then, and went to school there until my junior year in high school. Then I finished my junior year in Flagstaff College. At that time they had a high school department on campus where NAU is now, of course, and I graduated from high school in that group. It was the last group. That was the last year that they did that.

(I): So you graduated from high school and college?

(ZF): At college, right. And I lived on campus just like I was in college, because I lived in the dormitory with girls.

(I): Did either of you go on to college? You probably were tired of it by then.

(ZF): I stayed three more years and got my three-year certificate, but then I never did teach. I got married instead.

(JF): I went to Flagstaff my freshman year and then I came down to Tempe and finished there.

(I): Is that how you met?

(JF): Yes.

(ZF): Actually, we met in Flagstaff. That was the year that he was going to Tempe. It's complicated.

(JF): It was through her brother with whom I went to school in Flagstaff that year that we learned about each other's existence, I suppose. But the year I came down to Tempe is the year she started up there.

(I): You just kind of passed.

(JF): I was playing basketball for Tempe College. We made a trip up to play Flagstaff, and that's when her brother introduced us.

(I): And then it was history.

(JF): Yes, the rest is history.

(ZF): The rest is long history!

(I): How long have you been married now?

(JF): Well, fifty-seven years. I used to worry about my family. There were seven children. Six of us survived. Our average age of the six living members is eighty-seven. I'm the youngest survivor and I have five brothers and sisters older, with the oldest one turning ninty-four next month.

(I): Are you all in the Valley?

(JF): We're all here and we meet together as a family about three times a month.

(I): That is nice.

(JF): My sister is the oldest.
I might explain, my first trip was from Safford to Bisbee. My father was taking a load of produce to the mines in Bisbee to sell to people there since they couldn't raise gardens there. My mother wanted to go, and my older sister.

I was six weeks old. So, we said, well that'll be all right, for my father and older brothers will go in the wagon and we'd go right behind them in a buggy. And that was my first trip. It took us three days to go from Safford to Bisbee, and I was six weeks old.

(I): And your mother was a brave woman.

(JF): In a way, but she never got over her fright of Indians, and this was a dangerous trip then. They did see Indians at one time on this trip, and they wondered whether they were friendly or hostile because her sister's husband, my uncle, was killed by Indians.

(I): What was his name?

(JF): Seth Wright. He and his brother were ambushed and killed by Indians in the Safford area.

(I): Do you remember what his brother's name was?

(JF): Lorenzo.

(I): What was your mother's sister's name?

(JF): Her name was Jane. She was married to Seth Wright.

(I): How were they...where were they killed, and why were they killed?

(JF): Well, they were having a big social function, community-wise. They probably had a band and dance, and whatever, and during the occasion the Indians came in and unhitched their horses and took them. When they went out after the dance, their horses were gone. They thought it may have been the Mexicans from Salmonville, a town in the area where they lived, so they got on their horses and went in pursuit of them. But they went the direction they thought they would go, and they were right. About dawn they came upon the Indians and they were ambushed, shot and killed.

(I): More, then, than just Seth and Lorenzo were killed?

(JF): Just those two were killed. Some were wounded but they were the only ones who were killed.

(I): What was the community they were in?

(JF): Safford. My mother never got over this fright and she would never go to bed at night without pulling all the shades, switching on the light in the kitchen and the family's rooms.

(ZF): But the killing took place out between Safford and Duncan.

(JF): There's a monument out there now. They were Apaches. They thought the Indians could have been led by Geronimo, but that is just speculation.

(I): Did you have any kind of protection from the U.S. Army at the time?

(JF): No, never.

(I): Not like in the movies.

(JF): Nothing like the movies. They didn't blow the bugle and come in.

(I): Your mother must have had another experience with Indians.

(JF): Well, at one time she was riding with my father on a wagon and they saw some Indians standing on horses. My father had a rifle. He knew how to use it, too. But he took it out of this big scabbard and had my mother hold that so it looked like they were a little better armed than what they were. The Indians came up but they didn't bother them at that time. They just turned around and left.

(I): How long were Indians a problem?

(JF): They were a problem, I would say, right up to the turn of the century. They were very hostile up to that time.

(I): This would have been when your father was out here after 1900, but before 1912 or so when this all occurred?

(JF): Yes.

(I): So they were still raiding or coming in on your property?

(JF): Yes.

(I): What are your earliest memories of Gilbert as a town or a gathering place?

(JF): When we came here I was seven years old. We were moving back to Arizona from California. We moved from just a moderately sized town called Los Angeles at that time. It took five days for the family to come in cars, but my older brothers, two of them, and myself were sent ahead, and we came on the train. I recall that trip of getting off at the railroad station in Phoenix. My grandmother and two of my aunts were living in Phoenix. The two aunts were working at the State Capital.

(I): What were their names?

(JF): Clara Seeman. She was a legal secretary to Mr. McFarland who later became Senator from Arizona. He was Senator then in the Arizona Senate. My other aunt was Augusta Miller, and she operated a little luncheon stand within the State Capital building. I remember walking over to the Capital and seeing them. Then we got on a stage and rode from Phoenix to Mesa. That took quite a long time. The stage was an elongated Model T Ford. It had about four seats. We went to my uncle's home and stayed there several days until the family could make the trip. There wasn't room for all of us to come in the car.

(I): What was your uncle's name?

(JF): Frank Freestone. His property was on Val Vista and Southern.

(I): It's freeway now.

(JF): Now, coming to Gilbert, our home was on this eighty acres right here, which as you see, is about halfway between Val Vista and Lindsay. It was a mud adobe house. It had a wooden floor and it had a lean-to with a dirt floor.

(I): How many rooms?

(JF): One big room. It had been used, they say, as a dance hall. They said there were some wild times there in the early Gilbert days. We found where bullets had been shot into the walls.

Can I tell you a little story about this? When my father came over and looked at the land and made a deal on it he was really excited. He went back home with the news and

told all the family about it. When his excitement subsided a little, my mother said, "Well, what kind of a house did it have on it?" He said, "A house? I don't know if it had a house!" When they came over and saw what it was, my mother went in, sighed, and just sat down and wept. It was such a disappointment. I even have a picture of it if you'd like to see it.

(I): I'd love to.

(JF): I'll show that to you. We, of course, fixed it up and built onto it.

I don't have a lot of recollection of Gilbert right at that time, but as I grew up there were no paved streets, and there was no electricity out here in the country. We did have a car. There weren't many cars, but there were still a lot of buggies and wagons. I can remember all of that. It was a mile and a half from school.

(I): Where did you buy your groceries? I know you grew most of the things.

(JF): We were quite self-sufficient. We had a large garden and an orchard. We had cows for all the dairy needs. We had chickens. But we did buy salt, flour and things like that. We would shop right in Gilbert usually.

(I): There was a grocery store of sorts?

(JF): Yes. The first store came to Gilbert in 1911, so it had been there five years before we came. But it was quite a long trip to Mesa by the way we had to travel and the way the roads were, so what grocery supplies we got we traded mostly with Mr. Page.

(I): He was the owner?

(JF): Yes. Walter W. Page. He had a partner by the name of Dublin for awhile. He was located south of the Norwood Furniture Store. Right in that area.

(I): What about going to church? Where was your nearest church?

(JF): When we came here, there was no LDS Church, so we went to Chandler for a couple of years, and then they built a church on the corner of Elliot and Gilbert Road. The building that stands there is not the original.

(I): There was a previous building?

(JF): Yes.

(I): Well, that was quite a trip to make to Chandler.

(JF): It was a long trip. It was on dirt roads until the mid-twenties, when they laid cement roads.

(I): Were there any churches here at all?

(JF): Yes, the Church of Christ and the Methodist Church. The Church of Christ was the first one. It is in about the same location where it is now. The Methodist Church is in a different location. It was right in the center of the old town, and it was north of us about a block or two.

(I): What about doctors?

(JF): Well, we eventually had a doctor move into town, and his name was Tompkins. I don't recall what his first name was, but he married one of our school teachers. I remember that. And he lived in a house. I think it still stands, and that is north of where Connie and George Salas live. Just north of that house. That house is still standing.

(I): How long was that after you moved back into Gilbert before you had a doctor?

(JF): Before the doctor came? I think he came right in the early twenties.

(I): There was a lot of activity here, as far as I can tell, with the hay growing during World War I.

(JF): Oh, yes. During that time. It came about because of the demand in World War I for feed for their cavalry. They found in testing that the alfalfa grown in this area was the highest in protein and the other needs. So that was the big cash crop. The government was the main customer to sell to, and and the hay was hauled to the depot, loaded into boxcars and shipped by the railroads to the training forts established during World War I.

(I): The railroad line that comes out here wasn't always here was it?

(JF): Not always. That didn't come until 1910 or 1911 when Mr. Pine, Charles Pine, got them to run a line through here. So it had been in place about seven years or so before World War I.

(I): When your father came out, you were talking about the kinds of crops that you grew then. Was cotton such a major force when you first began farming?

(JF): Yes. It was nearly all what they call Long Staple. The Egyptian Long Staple. Mr. Hudson, in Tempe, made a trip to Egypt and brought back a lot of seed and started the Long Staple cotton here in the valley. W. W. Hudson in Tempe. He was a great friend of my father's, as was Dwight B. Heard, one of the first big real estate men here in Arizona.

(I): Heard Museum?

(JF): Yes.

(I): Did Heard have a lot to do out here in Gilbert other than friends he had made here?

(JF): Just friends. He didn't do much developing out here, but he was a good friend and traveled around a lot. I remember him very well.

This one place that we bought here, known as the Ramsey place, has a little history. We bought it during the boom, the cotton boom, and paid $18,000 down payment and planted it in cotton, and we couldn't give the cotton away. We had to turn the place back. So we only had that place for about a year.

(I): Yes, you'll be on the title record.

(JF): We went through the Depression.

(I): What was that like for you?

(JF): It was very hard.

(I): You two were married by that time?

(JF): During the depth of the Depression, 1932.

(I): That was love and hope. Tell me about the Depression.

(JF): Well, I'll, in fact, tell a little humor. Part of the Depression years they had the Dust Bowl in the Midwest, and a lot of the share croppers were forced out of business, and they started migrating. They headed for California and stopped off in Arizona. And the saying went around the State that they captured Arizona without firing a shot! But the funny part was that my father hired a lot of these "Oakies," as we called them, and they worked for $1.00 a day, twelve hours a day, six days a week. And their salary eventually got raised to $1.50 a day. So for six days of work they'd earn $9.00.

We had befriended a family from Oklahoma, and had a little place for them to live. They were working for us. One of the brothers was still back in Oklahoma, and he wrote my father a letter to see if we might have work for him, too. My father's first name was George, and when he addressed the letter on the envelope he tried to abbreviate George as "Geo." But it looked like God-- like it was addressed to "God Freestone, Gilbert, Arizona." I wish I had saved it. The letter, of course, came right to us. I picked up the mail that day, took it to my father and said, "Lookit here!" We opened it up and saw what it was he wanted. His brother's name was Deebil. I said, "Looky here. Here's the letter to God from the devil!" (Laughter)

(I): Did he move him down?

(JF): Yes, so the devil came and worked for us.

(I): Yes, worked for God.

(JF): It was so funny. We ran out of things to do, but finally the cotton was just getting up about like that in acreage there, maybe eight inches high, and the jackrabbits would come in and nibble the plants. Dad didn't have anything for the devil to do one day, so he got out his shotgun and gave him a bunch of shells and said, "Just walk up and down these rows. If you see a rabbit, shoot it." So we were kind of watching him, and he spent the whole day walking up and down those cotton rows, and once in awhile we'd hear a big blast. Saw a lot of dirt flying out. And that's how he worked for a few days. The devil was blasting.

I swear, actually, if we'd have lost our sense of humor we would have died in the Depression. They came in with relief, and they set up a relief office right in the town of Gilbert. My younger brother was rather involved in that,

too. People could apply for relief and get food commodities and things of that nature.

(I): This would be a good time just to mention the names of your brothers and sisters.

(JF): Yes. I'll give them in chronological order with the oldest first. The oldest is Lillian Millett. She presently is in Mesa. My brother George is in Tempe.
Paul is in Mesa. He left home. He didn't care for farming, and he went to Los Angeles. He will be ninety this year. He was on the police force in Los Angeles for a total of thirty-five years. He had a very exciting career. When they first put radios in cars, he caught the first bank robber because of radio, and he handled one of the most unsolvable mysteries, famous cases, in the history of Los Angeles, the "Black Dahlia" murder. He investigated that. He gives all kinds of stories. It may be interesting. You know that they had a lot that confessed to the murder, but there are only two men, my brother Paul and one other police officer, that when they questioned these men...there was only one question that they would have to answer to know that they were speaking the truth and that they were actually guilty. He said they had twenty or thirty that confessed to the murder, but they would not be held, and he said nobody ever knew that question except himself and the other officer. They never let it out. They never caught him. Never got the killer. Never. They made a movie out of it here a few years ago.

(I): That's basically how I know about it.

(JF): Alfred who lives in Mesa. Deliah in Gilbert, then me. My younger brother was Bert. He is deceased. The youngest one first. He was Vice-Mayor of Mesa. His wife now lives in Gilbert.

(I): What is his wife's name?

(JF): Margaret. She lives out at Val Vista Lakes.

(I): And your sisters' names, Mrs. Freestone?

(ZF): I'm the youngest of ten, and I just have two sisters living.

(I): Are they in the Valley?

(ZF): Yes. One of them lives in Chandler, my oldest sister, who is ninety-one. My next sister, older than I, is Lona Cloud, and she lives in Mesa. She is eighty.

(I): What are some of the things that you did as a community for fun? You surely had the dances and the church sponsored programs.

(JF): Well, they're not the only activities, but there were a lot of community activities, especially during World War I. There was a very strong patriotic feeling, and the community came together many times. They used to have box socials. There were school activities. We had plays and festivals and carnivals and all of those things. One thing that we had that brought a little culture was a Chautauqua. We had the regular visits of the Chautauqua.

(I): Did you have a true platform for your Chautauqua speakers?

(JF): Just what was in the old auditorium. I heard William Jennings Bryan give his classical speech in Mesa at the Chautauqua program. It was in the old Vance Auditorium on Main Street in Mesa where the Mezona Motel now stands. The Mezona is torn down, but that's where it was.

(I): But that was kind of a highlight to have the Chautaqua speakers come in?

(JF): Oh, yes. They brought music and drama.

(ZF): That was so rare that it was a big treat to go to it.

(JF): Gilbert had a little bandstand. They got a little band together and that's the reason I'm smiling. There were a couple of men who were twins, Russels. I can't tell you their first names, but one of them played the trombone and the other played, I think, the trumpet. But one of them was stone deaf. (Laughter)

(I): Beethoven? (Laughter) Do you remember hearing them play?

(JF): Yes.

(I): Were they good?

(JF): I thought they were (laughs). Then the Fredericks. I think there were a couple of them that played instruments. There were about ten or twelve, and they'd put on concerts here in town.

(I): Where was the bandstand at?

(JF): It was where Beavin's is-- just about in there. There was a kind of a vacant lot there where his rental is.

(I): We were talking about the Downtown. About the time when you were a child. The fact that you could get your staples at the grocery store from Mr. Page. What else was downtown?

(JF): There were two stores. G.C. Davis had a grocery store, and the other one was that auto supply house. We had three grocery stores. We had a clothing store. We had a shoe store there. They had everything. I guess we had two clothing stores. Serrano's, and a Jewish family by the name of Aaron ran one of those clothing stores. We had a lumber yard for hardware. J. D. Halstead. We had two blacksmith shops. We had a creamery. We had a furniture store-- not like Norwood's, but we had one. By the way, we had another grocery store, too, that had the post office. Creed's Store had the first post office in Gilbert. It was the first. We had a garage. In fact, from 1910-1920 all of these businesses, in that decade, came in and the town really didn't change for the next forty years very much as far as business was concerned. As Mesa grew it kind of stopped further development here, and we could get on a paved road and go there. If we wanted to take a full day we could go to Phoenix.

(I): Boy, that's hard to believe isn't it?

(JF): Do you know how we went to Phoenix? There was only one way. If you started from Main Street in Mesa, to go into Phoenix was Washington Street. You couldn't go on Van Buren. Just one road down there unless you went Southern or Baseline. You could go south.

(I): There was only the one bridge wasn't there?

(JF): Yes.

(I): That's another thing. What about floods and water problems?

(JF): Well, without all the dams they have now, they had a lot of big floods. I can remember that Salt River being at least a half a mile wide, running pine logs, trees and all kinds of stuff. It was just unbelievable.

(ZF): We used to go down and watch it. Of course, I was still a child living in Lehi, so I didn't have very far to go. I was right on the edge of it. Everybody used to go down and watch the water when we had a flood.

(JF): I used to go swimming in the Salt River. When I went to college, we'd go down and go swimming in the river under the bridge.

(ZF): Times have changed.

(I): You weren't immune to water problems out here though, as far as under a heavy rain.

(JF): Out here it never was a problem, really, in this area. What eventually helped to control those flood waters was when they put in Whitlow Dam. That helped Queen Creek flooding. The trouble is, those waters would hit the railroad grade. The graded up railroad would just push it right into the town. I got a picture I can show you of the canal down here, and you can't even see the canal. The water was over this canal on Elliot, and you couldn't even see the canal.

(ZF): We've seen this area under water a couple of times.

(I): That's what I wondered. But it's from things like the railroad banks that stopped the natural runoff of the water?

(JF): I have a little anecdote to tell you about one of the last floods. Sam Lee, a Chinese, and his wife Mary operated that store. It later became True Value Hardware before they moved, and it's now an auto supply. They had this store, and one of these floods came.

(ZF): That was after we were married.

(JF): That was soon after we were married, so it had to be in the early 1930's. It really flooded Gilbert and it flooded his store. He had a lot of his stock and canned goods down in the basement, and all the labels came off, so he put on a big sale. So you could go down and buy all the

canned goods you wanted, but you didn't know what you were getting!

(ZF): It was a surprise every meal.

(JF): It wasn't until the 1920's that we got any electric power. The first power we got was when Salt River Water User's Association purchased some used equipment that some community wanted to get rid of. They bought it and put it out on the farms for us. It was twenty-five cycle instead of sixty, but it was nice anyway. We finally got electric lights. Before that, it was either a kerosene lamp or carbide gas, and when we got this electric power, how wonderful it was that we had light bulbs! But they pulsated from twenty-five cycles. I used to say if you were going to read you had to get in rhythm and blink your eyes as you were reading. It was nice though.

(ZF): Well, carbide lights were a big improvement over kerosene lamps.

(JF): Oh, yes. We had a regular plant. We had what looked like about a five hundred gallon tank that was set down into the ground. You put carbide in the water, agitated it a little bit and it would generate gas. We even had a large fan that operated with a gas motor. Stirred a little air--didn't cool off much, but it stirred the air.

(I): What did you do for the heat?

(JF): We slept outside!

(ZF): You slept out anywhere you could to cool off. Everyone slept outdoors. If they didn't have a screen porch, they just slept out on the lawn. We just moved beds out. You couldn't stand it in the house. There wasn't any air circulating where you could even breathe if you were inside, but occasionally you could get just a breath of air if you were outdoors.

(I): Did you do your cooking outside too?

(JF): Oh, yes. We did a lot of it outdoors.

(ZF): Well, I don't recall my mother cooking a lot outdoors.

(JF): My mother did.

(ZF): But I know it sure was hot because all she had was a wooden stove.

(I): And that's the season, too, when you're canning.

(ZF): Yes, I know she must have spent many a hot hour over that stove, because she did all the bread baking and everything. In those days you couldn't run to the store and buy that sort of thing. If you had anything baked, you did it at home.

(I): Did they use any of the tent houses? In Chandler I've seen pictures of the canvas house, where they had the canvas sides and top and a wood framed bottom. Were there a lot of those here?

(JF): There were a few. Not a lot. In fact, after my oldest sister, the one that is about ninety-four, got married, they lived in one of those.

(I): What was the predominant home construction? Adobe?

(JF): Adobe and frame. Mostly frame.

(I): Where did they bring the wood from? The mountain areas, or brought it in to the lumber yards from...?

(JF): Well, I guess from...there were a lot of saw mills up north and it came in by train.

(ZF): By wagon, probably.

(JF): You know, Phoenix was not even on the main-line railroad when we moved here. Maricopa...

(ZF): ...was the closest, really.

(JF): The main-line went right through there, and it was just a little spur that ran up here.

(I): Really, then, in summer here, things just kind of closed down for the heat?

(JF): People that could went to the beaches or up in the mountains to spend a lot of their time.

(ZF): Or spent a lot of time in the irrigation ditches! As a child, I remember doing a lot of that.

(I): I've seen a lot of pictures of young folks in which it looks like they're out on a swimming party on the canal bank.

(JF): We swam in canals and ditches.

(I): We have to be careful about saying that to the kids now.

(JF): Yes, it's illegal now.

(I): About how soon did refrigeration...?

(JF): The first thing that came was a swamp cooler. There were none on the market, but the idea had started and a few of them had been made. The lumber yard down here, then, if you went in there and said you wanted to build a cooler, they had all the materials. So we first went down there, and I think I built this thing myself, and we put it on our house and we had a big saucer pan.

(ZF): We would just take out a window and put it in the window space.

(JF): Yes, we'd put it in there and we'd cut out a hole and had a electric fan sitting in there to blow. Then, later, they came out with the rollers, you know, the cylindrical fans. We installed one of those, and it worked pretty good.

(ZF): Oh, it was great!

(JF): Except, one night, when Zelda and I and my younger brother Bert, and his wife Margaret, were home. We had radios at this time. I'll tell you about the first radio in Gilbert, if you want to hear about that. But we were there listening to the radio and enjoying the cool coming off this blower when all at once we heard kind of a thud noise. Pretty quickly it looked like the blower was blowing something into the house. We couldn't figure it out, so we shut down the motor. There was a huge gopher snake that thought that sure felt cool! He got into that cooler and got tangled up in that fan. It just kind of chopped him up and blew him all over the house!

(I): Mrs. Freestone, did he help you clean that one up?

(ZF): I had to help clean that one up.

(JF): When radios first came here, of course, this was after electricity, but the first thing that seemed to be available was that you would get a little kit and wrap copper wire around the coil. You had a crystal, a little crystal rock-- are you familiar with those? Well, that's what we had, and we made little crystal sets with them here. And they authorized a station in Phoenix, KFAD were the call numbers, and they started broadcasting.

Well, there wasn't anyone we knew in Gilbert that had a radio until the drug store bought one. They were setting it up and made a big announcement that the whole community was invited to come and hear the radio on this night. So I went, and nearly everyone else in Gilbert was there too. The population must have been six or seven hundred, but about half of them were there, and they set this radio up. It was a cabinet about that long, about that high, and had all kinds of dials on the front of it. It had one of these speakers. They got all ready to turn it on and had a big speech and everything, and they turned it on. And here came the music. And here's the crowd, wide-eyed. They couldn't believe it! Once in a while the static would come in and sound like a cat fight or something. That would fade out and we'd hear the music. We just thought it was the most miraculous thing!

And Elvin Lynes lived on the corner of Gilbert Road and Elliot, on the southeast corner. His home was there. He had a Mexican working for him, and he brought him up to hear this marvel. I'll always remember his story. They were listening to this, and the Mexican laborer asked him, "Where is this music coming from?" He said, "Well it's coming from Phoenix." Mexicans always pronounce Phoenix as Phoenica. He shook his head. He says, "How long does it take to get here?" And Elvin said he snapped his fingers and said, "That soon." He really shook his head. He just couldn't believe it. He couldn't understand it.

(I): It would be difficult.

(JF): I tell this story. I've told it to some of the civic clubs, and when I told it, I said, "He just couldn't believe it." Then I hesitate and say, "I couldn't believe it." Then I hesitate a little more and say, "I still can't understand it! I can't understand how a picture comes into our home." But, that was the first radio in Gilbert.

(I): Who owned the drug store then?

(JF): Mr. Nowell.

(I): There was a Mexican or Spanish-speaking school here for a long time?

(JF): Yes, they had a Mexican school. I know a little history that Connie Salas wrote on is quite interesting. I don't remember a great deal about it, but they segregated us. They had segregation.

(ZF): Connie has some real good stories about it, though.

(JF): All through school, I was never in a classroom with a black person, ever. The first black person that I ever remember coming to Gilbert, came to one of our neighbors, probably the Neeleys. Anyway, I was out in front of our house on the road and this black man came down the street. I saw him coming and I waited until he got down there. When he got down to where I was, he stopped. He took off his hat and bowed. I was just a boy or teenager, and he was an older man with kind of gray hair...I imagine the son of a slave. And he introduced himself. I told him my name, and he called me Mars John after that. Everytime I saw him he was respectful, took off his hat, and it just gave me a good impression of those people.

(I): Did he live and work here?

(JF): He worked here awhile. I think for meals, but I wouldn't say that for sure.

(I): Do you remember his name?

(JF): No. But he was the first black person I remember in Gilbert.

(I): Was Sonora Town there when you were?

(JF): Yes.

(I): Did you have any characters?

(JF): (Laughter) The place was full of them!

(I): The general population, huh?

(JF): We had more than our share.

(I): Any that you particularly remember?

(JF): There were so many of them. We probably had more of those than we had straight citizens! You know, I guess we had some kind of on the delinquent side too. I'd better not go into any names! But they were full of tricks and mischief, especially at Halloween time. At one time they found a buggy up on top of the high school. Then, on the other school, they found a bull right up on top on the day after Halloween. They really had homemade entertainment.

(I): What about natural disasters, fires, things of that nature?

(JF): Well, this man by the name of Aaron had the clothing store. He had regular fires because business wasn't too good.

(I): Fire sales.

(JF): Fire sales and anything else. Without that he probably wouldn't have made it. But, I remember once I was right downtown during one of these fires in his store and, the way one of my friends described it, he got there and he'd look around to make sure there was someone there to hold him back, and then he'd holler, "I'm going to go in there and save my store." He wanted to make sure someone was going to grab him before he'd holler.

(I): You had a volunteer fire department?

(JF): Yes, Mickey Johnson was our first fire chief. It was kind of a hose and water wagon deal to begin with. There was one other fire, too. It was a feed and seed place that burned. It was behind Page's store.

(I): One thing we haven't covered is the number of children that you two have.

(JF): We have five children.

(I): Would you care to name them for me?

(JF): In order, we have David in Mesa, Janette Brown in Gilbert, John-- he's not a "junior," he has another name different from mine. John is in Lehi. I guess that's considered Mesa now. Paul is in Mesa. Doreen in Gilbert.

(ZF): Doreen Payne.

(I): And spouses? David's wife.

(JF): Mamie.

(I): Janette's husband?

(JF): Wilburn.

(I): John's wife?

(JF): Debbra. A little different spelling.

(I): Paul's wife?

(JF): Janie.

(I): And Doreen's?

(JF): Jan. He's a teacher and head of the science department at Posten Junior High in Mesa.

(I): What is the number of grandchildren you have?

(JF): Twenty-seven. How many great-grandchildren do we have? At last count, the last census...

(ZF): Didn't we figure it was seventeen?

(JF): Seventeen great-grandchildren.

(ZF): It seems like everytime we count we change it. I must write it all down somewhere.

(JF): Before the year's over, it will change.

(ZF): Before next year's over, it will change three times, I know.

(Interruption in recording)

[(I): What about movie theaters?]

(JF): We had one. Let's see. I'm not even familiar with all the stores. First, it was on the west side of the street, a little bit more north of Norwood's furniture-- one of those stores. I used to get one of our work horses and ride into town, tie it up and go to a movie. All silent pictures, of course. Later, it moved over to where the deli

is now, in that building. It was first a grocery store for a few years and then it quit. Then they put a movie in there, and by then we had talking pictures. Talkies, as they called them. You remember those do you? You're not old enough.

(I): No.

(JF): Phoenix had three theaters. The Rialto, The Orpheum and the Strand. They had three movie theaters.

(I): What was the name of the one here?

(JF): It didn't have a name. Just movie house.

Interruption in recording.

(I): You played on the basketball team didn't you?

(JF): Yes. I'm the only survivor of the main team. There's one other boy that made the trip, but he was not a regular team member and didn't play on the national team.

(I): What year was that?

(JF): Well, it was 1926 or 1927.

(I): Where did you go and what was your record?

(JF): We went to Chicago. The National Championship was held there at the University, and everytime we played a game, we played the champion of a state. A state champion.

(I): Who did you play first?

(JF): We played Connecticut. We lost by two points, but it was double elimination. Then we played North Carolina. We beat them. Then we played Florida, and we beat their state champion. Then we beat the Minnesota state champion, and we lost to Kansas by one point. So actually we were three points from a national championship. But as it turned out, we didn't win in the nationals. The highest any team west of the Mississippi River ever went, or ever will, because they discontinued it a year or two after that.

(I): And that was from Gilbert High School?

(JF): Gilbert High School.

(I): Were they still asking them, "Where is Gilbert, Arizona?"

(JF): Yes. They hardly knew where Phoenix was.

(I): Were there quite some celebrations when you got back?

(JF): Yes, the whole community had a big community affair for us when we got home. We were all happy about it and talked about our experiences.

I don't know if you want to write this down, but...don't write the first part. Mesa High School had gone the year before and represented Arizona. And the coach, when he realized we were going, said, "Listen, let me give you a word of advice." He said, "When you get there, they're going to want to put your team in the fraternity house." He said, "Don't do that." He said, "The kids won't get any rest." He said, "Let me tell you what to do."

And I found out we did it. "Just before you get into Chicago, there will be a stop. Get off and go to a hotel, a nice hotel. Check yourself in, register, and then call the official. Tell them, 'Well, we're here.' 'Good, we'll put you in a --.' 'No, we're already set up in a hotel.' He said, 'Where are you?' 'Well, we here in Windemere East." Plush hotel. Here we were country boys.

(ZF): Some of them had never been out of Gilbert.

(JF): They'd never been out of Gilbert hardly, and so we stayed there. We said walking on the carpet you needed snow shoes.

(I): It couldn't have been that bad.

(JF): Well it was first class. And this is the episode I wanted to tell of. We got on the elevator one day. There were three or four of us, and I was one of them. We were up several stories, and a lady was in the elevator with us. She said, "Where are you guys from?" We told her. She said, "Why are you here?" And we had quite a conversation with her until we got off the elevator. And later in the day the elevator operator, which they had in those days, said, "Do you know who that lady was?" We said, "No." He said, "That was Edna Ferber." Course, we didn't realize it until he told us that. We'd read her books at the library. We were staying in the same hotel!

But we did beat three state champions. And we lost two games by a total of three points. With Kansas. That ball

was in the air when they blew the whistle to end the game! And it went in. We lost by one point. It was a heart-breaker.

(I): It was.

(JF): We could have easily won. We shouldn't have lost the first game. We were a lot better team, but we were stage struck out in this huge gymnasium with several thousand people watching us. We had only played in an old barn type gym.

(I): And here you were staying in a plush hotel.

(JF): We went first class.

(ZF): Can you imagine? That was a riot.

(I): I bet it was. How many of you went?

(JF): Eight players and two coaches.

(I): How did you go?

(JF): By train.

(ZF): They didn't go by plane.

(I): No. I was going to say...I wondered how long it would take to drive back. It would have been quite a trip that way, too.

Interruption in recording.

(I): Charles Lindbergh flew over?

(JF): Yes, and the reason...everyone knew his plane, the Spirit of St. Louis. You know, he flew all over the country after it was all over, visiting cities. He was scheduled to stop in Tucson at a certain time, but he didn't. He came right into Phoenix. They had a little airstrip. I was outside with some of my brothers. We saw this plane come over and said, "That looks like the Spirit of St. Louis!" And they reported it in the Arizona Republican, which was the name of the paper, the next day, and the time and place. That was it.

(I): And you saw him?

(JF): Yes. But I also saw Amelia Earhardt over in Phoenix. I saw her fly in and get out of her plane. She was quite young.

(I): She really was?

(JF): She even looked like Lindbergh. She was tall and slender. She must have been a brave girl.

Interruption in recording.

(JF): I was the principal of a two-room, eight grade...no, three rooms, eight-grade school at Nutrioso, Apache County.

(I): After that...?

(JF): I taught the next seven years. I taught high school in Duncan, Arizona. Then I taught one year at Florence High School during World War II when there was a shortage of teachers. That was all the teaching I did. My other educational experiences were with the State Department of Education.

(I): And you came back to Gilbert?

(JF): Yes.

(I): When did you come back?

(JF): Fifteen years ago.

(I): You retired?

(JF): Yes.

(I): The land you are on right now...?

(JF): John Allen and my sister, Delia, they live right across there. They did live in this house but it had too many stairs and their knees bothered them, so they just got'em another home. This was homesteaded by John Allen's father. They came here in 1914, two years before we did. John and my brother Alfred went to school in Gilbert, and college together, too, at Tempe. I graduated from Tempe three or four times, you know.

(ZF): It sure took him a long time to get out of school!

(JF): This was the story. I graduated in the last Normal School. That was in 1929. That was the two-year program. After that year you had to have three years, so I got three years and graduated. Then you had to have a degree, so I got my degree and graduated again. I've got about thirty-six hours of graduate work at ASU.

(I): What was your field of specialty?

(JF): English and Social Science.

Further interruptions in the recording.

(I): Thank you Mr. and Mrs. Freestone.