

FROM GARDENER TO REPAIRMAN

WILLIAM GLEN NICCUM

Interviewed by Dick Nelson

One of a series of oral histories covering the growth and development of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power as seen by the participants - its employees.

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CONTENTS

Biographical Notes iii

TAPE NUMBER: 1, Side One (May 19, 1992) 1

Niccum's Early Years ... Living In The Owens Valley ...

The Family Moves To San Francisquito Canyon In 1936 ... The

B School ... Riding To School In The "Candy Wagon" ...

The House At Haiwee ... John McCullough ... Olancha School

... Enlowes ... Roy Hill ... Hydro Operators Go To

Boulder Project ... Eugene Barrows ... Recreation At

Haiwee ... Vaughn ... Primitive Refrigeration ... Al

Harris ... Moving DWP Families ... Eating And Sleeping

On The Road ...

TAPE NUMBER : 1, Side Two (May 19, 1992) 17

Housing In San Francisquito Canyon ... Ed Caldwell ...

The Point System In Obtaining Housing ... Power House Titles

... Frank Walker ... Spainar ... Bruenger ... Doty ...

Chris Miller ... Flooding In The Canyon ... Ken Young ...

Marooned At Times ... Raggio's Ranch ... Henry Reese ...

Saugus Bunkhouse ... San Fernando High School ... WW II

Effects On The Canyon ... "Granddad" Guards The Penstock ...

Bill Meets Pat ... Bill Joins The DWP ...

TAPE NUMBER; 2, Side One (May 19, 1992) 30

Gardner-Caretaker ... The Rock Wall ... Maintenance

Construction Helper ... Building Repairman ... Taking Care

On The Houses In The Canyon ... Vince Raggio ... Hydro

Tunnel Maintenance ... Talking The Tunnels ... Bill's

24-Hour Job ... Fires and Floods ... Wildlife (four-legged)

... Retirement ...

Biographical Notes

William Glen Niccum

Born in Los Angeles, California, on December 15, 1929.

Parents: M.G. and Jesse (Mason) Niccom.

Brother: Bob

Married: Patricia Ann Gregg on February 25, 1949 in Los Angeles, California.

Children: Susan (Niccum) Good, Richard, William and Stephen.

Grandchildren: Seven.

DWP Service: October 1, 1948 - Gardener/Caretaker
January 1, 1985 - Building Repairman

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William G. Niccum 6-30 92
William G. Niccum date

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TAPE NUMBER: 1, SIDE ONE

WILLIAM G. NICCUM

GIVEN TUESDAY, MAY 19, 1992

AT

HIS HOME IN BODFISH, CALIFORNIA

THE INTERVIEWER IS DICK NELSON

NELSON: Bill, why don't you fill us in on where you were born and growing up years.

NICCUM: I was born in Los Angeles in Queen of Angels Hospital through Ross Loos because my folks lived in Haiwee and there

weren't very many doctors in the Owens Valley in those days. My dad went to Haiwee somewhere in 1928, after the Saint Frances Dam broke because he was working at San Fernando Power House at that time, re-wiring it. Then when he finished that job, they said that they didn't have nothing particularly for him to do so he went downtown and talked to Scattergood and Scattergood said, "I've got a job for you at Haiwee." So they shipped him off to Haiwee.

My mother had never been out of Los Angeles and when you got to Mojave, that was the end of the pavement. From then on it was all dirt and she said she'd stick it out for a year. I think they were there for seven or eight years. But anyway, after they went to Haiwee she came back to Los Angeles to have me.

NELSON: How did she get back to Los Angeles?

NICCUM: My dad brought her back in his Essex. I'll tell you a little story about that. In those days, I think she was down there for three months. So at least once a month, he would go to town. This old drive back then was pretty long and he was driving one night coming in and he was just above Indian Wells out here somewhere and he fell asleep and went off the road and he woke up and saw all he was doing was going through the sagebrush so he thought he knew where the road was so he just turned and went back and he couldn't find the road. He looked for a while and finally about two hours later there was a car coming down and he was a lot farther off the road than he thought he was and he was even in the wrong direction. So he saw headlights from

another car. But he went quite a ways out in that desert before he woke up going through the brush.

I started school at Olancha. Went to first grade there and then in 1936 we moved to Power Plant 1 and we thought we were downtown then after being out there. Then I can remember when I started at the big school there at Power Plant 2, second grade that in this school went from the first grade to the eighth grade and there was myself and four other girls in the school and that was the extent of everybody that was there. There weren't very many kids around there, but that was our school.

NELSON: Was that mostly DWP kids?

NICCUM: Yes, all their kids.

NELSON: Was the teacher a regular teacher from the school district or was that somebody that DWP contracted for?

NICCUM: DWP.

NELSON: Hired them?

NICCUM: Yes, they hired them and paid their wages and furnished the school and furnished the transportation for the kids back and forth to school.

In the early days we had what we called the "candy wagon." Every other day a truck went from the power houses up there in

Newhall to buy groceries for people and pick up milk and any other supplies they needed. It went every other day. That was what hauled us kids back and forth to school and we'd just sit on the back of the truck on the milk crates back there and that's how we got to school.

NELSON: Describe this truck.

NICCUM: It was like an old vegetable truck that they used to have years ago with the side curtains on the back and just a canvas curtain on the sides of the metal top up over the top of it. Then in I think, 1938 the Department bought us a bus. It could have been 1939 so we got to sit inside on a seat then and it took us back and forth to school.

NELSON: That was to the B school?

NICCUM: Yes.

NELSON: Why was it called the "B" school?

NICCUM: Originally the school was at B Canyon which is two and a half miles below Power Plant 1 and that was, I presume, so that the kids that lived at Power House 2 and the kids that lived at Power House 1 had a way back and forth and there was a ranch there at B so it could have been that they just used one of the old ranch buildings. I have never seen a picture or anything.

And then in later years they removed the school and I don't know why that reason was either, but it was then about two miles below Power Plant 2 and then, of course, after the flood the dam break, the Department built a new school right at Power Plant 2 and that was the school that we went to.

NELSON: What are your remembrances of the house at Haiwee?

NICCUM: Well it is still there. Our initials are still carved on the door. When they first moved up there, they moved in what they called the "bachelor's quarters," and they lived there for a long time and they had a school there too and they hired a teacher and she lived with my folks there for a while. Then they finally got a regular house that had a bathroom in it and stuff. This thing didn't even have a bathroom. There was just an out house out in back.

Over the years when he became Chief Operator, when McCullough left there and went up to Independence to be chief of the Valley, my dad became Chief Operator there and we moved into the house down by the powerhouse which they don't let anybody live in it any more because it is below the dam.

NELSON: That was the top power house at the power plant?

NICCUM: That was at Haiwee, yes. The house was down by the power house, not up by the camp area. The camp area was up in the canyon.

NELSON: How many people? Was there quite a number of Water and Power people working at Haiwee at that time?

NICCUM: Oh no. I would guess there were only about seven families that lived there at the most.

NELSON: So seven families had their own teacher in school?

NICCUM: Yes, because at that time it was a pretty good haul to Olancha where I went to school. You sure wasn't going to ride a horse up there.

NELSON: Pretty good call to get to the road.

NICCUM: The one family, Enlowes, they had six or eight kids. They had a pretty good bunch of kids there.

NELSON: Do you remember names of some of those DWP people up there? The family names?

NICCUM: The Hills lived there. Roy Hill because he got the job when my dad left in 1936. This is when the big shuffle was going on and everybody got promoted because 1936 was when they were opening Boulder and they were taking all these hydro men to Boulder Dam and so it was like in the Department you had to wait until somebody dies or gets promoted so you could get a job. Well

everybody got a job. We all got an instant promotion because they started something up big and they needed a lot of men.

NELSON: So a lot of fellows went on over to Boulder?

NICCUM: Yes. This was the hydro division from the Owens Valley to Power Plant 1, 2, 3 and 5. I never ever remember Power House 4. I don't ever remember seeing it.

NELSON: But you remember Hill as one of the families? Do you recall any others?

NICCUM: That's all I remember.

NELSON: Tell me about the McCullough Electric System. Do you remember that?

NICCUM: Well they kind of called it that over the years.

NELSON: Did you know John McCullough?

NICCUM: Yes, but I was just a kid because I left there when I was six. I can remember we used to stop and see him once in a while up there in Independence in his house that he had there which Mr. Barrows lived in until last year when he passed away.

NELSON: So Gene lived in the home that? I didn't know that.

NICCUM: Yes.

NELSON: I interviewed Gene.

NICCUM: Very interesting and very knowledgeable man and has a lot of good stuff in his house besides he started that museum there in Independence.

NELSON: What occasion do you, leaving the school at Haiwee and then going to the school in Olancha, did the Department give up the school or did you outgrow the school?

NICCUM: No, they finally started running the bus down there to pick us up. My dad was on the school board so maybe that's how we got a bus to come down there, I don't know.

NELSON: Was that the county would run a bus down? It wasn't a DWP, a City bus?

NICCUM: Yes, it was Inyo County that came and got us and hauled us up there.

NELSON: You were about six when you left, what did you do for fun up there at Haiwee? What kind of activities, not only kids, but the adults, what kind of social life was there?

NICCUM: I don't remember other than played kick the can or something like that. There wasn't nothing to do. Even in the later years I can remember people saying the biggest thing to do is opening of the fishing season is to drive up and watch the people go by on the road or years ago we'd listen for the train. We knew when the train was going to come, we could hear the train coming.

NELSON: That train didn't make a stop at Haiwee did it?

NICCUM: No. It would just go on by. There was no way you could get any radio reception or anything until late at night probably about 9 p.m. and then you could start picking up some radio reception, but during the day time as long as the sun was shining and heat that killed all the radio reception so you had to wait until it cooled off at night before you could even hear a radio.

NELSON: How did your mom get clothes and food and things like that?

NICCUM: Well, what they didn't buy locally, it was a hard thing about refrigeration. I can remember a cooler hanging out there on a tree in the back yard with burlap on it and you poured water over that. Then they finally got a refrigerator.

NELSON: That was living mighty high.

NICCUM: Yes. You had to drive to Lone Pine to get a block of ice which is 35 miles and on a dirt road, by the time you got home from Lone Pine with that block of ice, it wasn't very big. You just about wasted your time. It kept the quart of milk - we used to stop at the dairy and get some milk and ice and by the time we got home, the ice had just about melted.

NELSON: It was difficult then to keep fresh meat?

NICCUM: Yes.

NELSON: Was there any hunting or fishing up there? Did your dad or others fish? There must have been a few fish in Haiwee.

NICCUM: Yes, but it was against the law to fish in there and the dam keeper by the name of Vaughn, I think his name was, if he ever caught you down there fishing, he'd hang you. He'd hang his mother I think. So you had to be real careful if you were going to sneak up there at night and throw a line in there or know that he'd gone to town or something.

NELSON: What kind of fuel did you have for heating and cooking? Was that electricity or did you use oil?

NICCUM: No, we used a wood stove. We used to burn railroad ties in it all the time and you can imagine what that was like. That was about all the wood we had, so as the railroad replaced

railroad ties, we'd go bring the railroad ties home and the creosole would run down the outside of the stack and make kind of a mess.

NELSON: During this time your dad was an operator there?

NICCUM: Yes.

NELSON: And then he was promoted at that point or when he left?

NICCUM: At Haiwee they call operator in charge. I don't remember what that was but when he came to Power Plant 1, his title was Junior Chief.

NELSON: That was in 1938?

NICCUM: June, 1936.

NELSON: How did you move down? You loaded everything in a truck or a car and came on down?

NICCUM: Al Harris came and got us and Al Harris had the job that I had and that was my job for all those years too. Every three months when the bid sheet comes out, you'd start moving people. No he drove an old flat-bed truck out there. I don't even remember - it could have been the 1935 GMC because after we moved down there, once in a while, if he was going to Owens Valley or

something on a move job, he would take me with him. I can remember us going to Owens Valley in that old 1935 GMC ton-and-a-half truck to pick people up, load all their furniture on the back. Of course in those days, people didn't have as much as they do now. A ton-and-a-half truck could usually carry everything that everybody owned. They didn't have very much stuff.

I can remember once this old truck was getting old and we were going up through Red Rock Canyon and the radiator cap blew off of it and drowned the motor out and we were on our way to the Gorge to pick these people up and we got to the Gorge and these people were old country folks and they had more can goods and home made soap and this poor truck had more than the load on it and the road going into upper Gorge was a nasty, nasty road and really steep and Al was coming out of there and I was in the front seat with him and he looks in the rear view mirror and these people are about three feet from the back of this truck in an old Model A and he said, "Bill jump out of this truck and go back there and tell those people to get away from the back of this truck." Because in those days if the motor stopped, you didn't have any brakes because they didn't have any vacuum tanks on them or anything and when the motor stopped he didn't have any brakes and he said, "If this thing drowns out again and the radiator cap blows off, I'm going to have to coast backwards into the side of the hill and I'm going to run right over these people."

So I jumped out of the truck and ran back there and told them to get away from the back of the truck while we were trying to get out of this "hole."

NELSON: On those trips that you went up with him, did you also go to provide some muscle? Did you help or were you just sort of a bystander?

NICCUM: Somebody for him to talk to, I think, on the trip. That's all.

NELSON: What did you do when you got up there? That was more than a day. How did you stay?

NICCUM: We used to stay in Independence. There was a bunkhouse in Independence in the back of the yard there and when we'd leave Power House 1, we'd go to Independence and stay in the bunk house all night and then the next morning we'd go and load our load or sometimes we were taking a load up and sometimes we were going to pick up a load.

I don't even remember if they paid his meals in those days. I don't remember that anybody got any money for meals. He had a job. You'd eat wherever you eat and we were just lucky we had a couple of cots in that bunkhouse back there in the yard that we could sleep on otherwise we'd probably sleep in the truck.

NELSON: Oh, so there wasn't someone like at PPl later on. A bunkhouse in which you had a cook and meals would be provided.

NICCUM: No, this was just the thing in the back of the yard there at Independence that we used to stay in.

NELSON: You mentioned that this one couple had almost more than one load, did the Department put a limit on how many loads they were going to move for you or would they move as much as you had?

NICCUM: I never remember anybody that we couldn't get all their stuff on until later years, say in the last twenty years. We've had to go back and pick up a load once in a while.

I remember once I went to Big Pine to pick up an aqueduct and reservoir caretaker up there and it was snowing and so I was loading this load and it was snowing so bad when I got there, I really didn't see these lines that controlled the gates and so as I loaded the furniture, I kept stacking it up front because I knew I had to stop at Cottonwood Power House to pick up some more because he was a relief man between the two power houses at Big Pine and Cottonwood.

So he had a house at Cottonwood too. Well we got this truck all loaded and tied down and got in the truck to drive out and I couldn't get out of there. So I had to stop and get back there and unload the furniture and make the load lower. So that night I just came on home and the next day I went back to Cottonwood Power House and picked up the rest of his furniture.

NELSON: You were working for the Department at that time and so later on you did some of this moving of employees and apparently you did for both systems?

NICCUM: No, just for Power. Just in hydro is all we moved. Hydro employees from one power house to the other and moved them in. If they got hired in into hydro, we went and picked them up which sometimes it was clear out of the city of Los Angeles.

NELSON: Well you'd go to Hoover then, I suspect.

NICCUM: Yes. All kinds of places that we weren't supposed to be.

NELSON: At that time, did you have a bigger truck and a helper?

NICCUM: Yes, we had a bigger truck. In those days we didn't really get into too much trouble. I remember once that we were in Oxnard picking up a guy and the only place there was to eat around there was a bar and, of course, L.A. Water and Power truck parked in front of a bar in Oxnard, we got a call on that, but as the years went on, say within the last - well maybe ten years ago, on one load of furniture, I got three calls the next day.

We had a brand new truck and it was painted bright yellow and it had Water and Power written all over the side and we picked up an employee that was working at Castaic and moved him to Frazier Park and then instead of coming back down the Ridge Route, I cut across 138 and came into San Fransquito Canyon that day and we got three calls in one day that Water and Power trucks out at places where they weren't supposed to be and loading furniture, etc.

TAPE NUMBER: 1, SIDE TWO

WILLIAM G. NICCUM

NELSON: Bill, the family, as I understand, moved from Haiwee to Power Plant 1 in San Francisquito Canyon in 1936, what are your remembrances of moving into the canyon and that first home in the canyon.

NICCUM: The first one was just one of the little old construction sheds that they had moved along on the aqueduct as they built the aqueduct. It was a portable thing that they bolted together. It was built in four foot sections, but the only reason that we were living in that is because everybody hadn't left to go to Boulder yet. So as soon as all the guys went to Boulder, then we were assigned a regular house.

We lived there at Power House 1 until 1941 and then we moved to Power House 2. The best thing, I think, I remember about coming off the desert up there at Haiwee when we moved there, the creek ran right through the front yard and that was really something, having a creek running in the front yard with turtles and stuff in it. Something you could go out and get wet in any time of the day you wanted to after living on the desert for those years, that creek was the biggest attraction that there was.

NELSON: Who were your closest friends up there at that time?

NICCUM: I guess the ones that we were the closest to and it seemed like they lived next door to us all those years were the Caldwell's. They lived next door to us there at Power House 1 and then when we moved to Power House 2, about the next bid sheet, well he bid the Power House 2 and lived next door to us there again. Their only son, Ed, was my big buddy and that's probably the reason I'm in Bodfish now because his uncle had homesteaded a place up here and he bought it and he moved up here when he retired and so when I retired, I came here too.

No sooner than I got up here then he passed away. That's just the way things go. There at that time everybody was assigned a house. The bosses were assigned a house and the operators were assigned a house and it was assigned by the Department and if you had three kids and there was a three bedroom house, they told you to move over there and years that went by, then they finally got bidding rights and point system and everybody had their choice. But in those days the boss assigned you a house and if you got in trouble with the boss, you might live in a one-bedroom house for a long time.

NELSON: I was going to ask, was that fairly fair?

NICCUM: Yes, I think they tried to keep it fair. A lot fairer afterwards when there was a point system and there were single guys living in a three-bedroom house and people with a family

living in a one-bedroom apartment. But they had the points, so they got the house.

NELSON: When your dad came up there, what was his title?

NICCUM: Junior Chief.

NELSON: And what was that in the hierarchy at the time? You had a Chief Operator...

NICCUM: You had a Chief Operator and a Junior Chief at each power house and then the superintendent...

NELSON: This was before the "B" and "C" Operators?

NICCUM: No. He had an "A" operator and a "B" operator and a "C" operator and then a Junior Chief and a Chief. That was the hierarchy. The Superintendent lived there too. All the years that I was there, it was Frank Walker, eventually he moved out and moved to San Fernando and they had given him an office down at Second and Hill. So he had his own office down there then, but he was the Superintendent of the Aqueduct Division at that time.

NELSON: Who was the Chief at that time?

NICCUM: The Chief at Power House 1 was Spainar and the Chief at Power House 2 was... I remember Bruenger was there and Doty was

there somewhere. Maybe it was Spainar, Doty and then when Spainar left, Doty moved up to Power Plant 1. He was the Chief Operator then. Then I think Bruenger was at Power Plant 2.

The Junior Chiefs, some of them stayed there and became Chiefs, Chris Miller, Barrows, I can't remember all of them because they came and went.

NELSON: You talked about a creek running nearby, that creek sometimes in that canyon, I understand, turned into more than a creek.

NICCUM: Yes, I am afraid that one of these days, there's going to be a lot of people surprised around there because in 1938 we had one good flood and in 1964 and 1968 and 1974. We had that little doings right there at Power Plant 1 last week in a park that they had put there....

NELSON: That was the 75th anniversary celebration.

NICCUM: Where the park was, that's where the creek used to run and I can remember building that back up twice with a tractor. Because when the water comes down through there, it goes back to the original creek bed. They built the bridge over there to the side and diverted the water, but when the water comes...

NELSON: How high, what are you talking about flood? What kind of water?

NICCUM: Well when you are sitting in the house and see the forest service house trailers floating by in front of your house. My wife took two of my cars out of the yard and moved them across the street once and they went down the canyon. You're talking water, not in the creek, right out on the streets up to four foot deep.

NELSON: Did people have to evacuate at any time?

NICCUM: Yes. The other day Ken Young was there and after we were at the party there, I should have walked him over there to the creek and see if we could find the piece of iron that saved his life once.

It had been raining and it was getting bad and worse and I came down past the apartment house there at Power House 1 and I am sitting there looking at the bridge and there are telephone poles coming down and they went through the railings of the bridge and they caught and I am sitting there looking at that and I thought, "Boy, that's something." And about that time Ken Young, who was a Junior Chief then, he came around the corner in his little old Studebaker Lark, running in about two feet of water when he shouldn't have been anyway and, of course, when he saw that bridge with these telephone poles sticking through the railing, he knew he wasn't going to drive that Lark through those telephone poles and as soon as he stopped moving, of course, the car just lifted up and started floating and it floated backwards and it went over the bank and headed into the main part of the creek, but years ago we put some TOWER steel in there and there was a hunk of this

steel sticking up from that TOWER steel and it hooked on the a-frame of that Studebaker and that was the only thing that saved his life, because otherwise he would have been gone down the creek. I was sitting there and I can't get to him and there's no way I could get to him because the water was running over the top of this bridge at least two foot deep and one of the guys came around the corner and he was following Kenny, but Kenny was always in a hurry and he was far enough behind him and he came around the corner in a dump truck and here Ken is. He had climbed out of the window of the thing and was sitting up on top of his car when it's hanging by it's nose over the cliff and so they had a rope in the dump truck so they tied it and threw it out to him and he thought he was going to walk back up there using that rope, but there was no way he was going to walk through that water two foot deep or so and he was just on his belly sliding across the top of this water pulling himself up to the dump truck.

Yes, it gets real nasty at times. The only way you could get in and out of the canyon was on a motorcycle and then I had to make my own path. I went to Palmdale on a motorcycle to buy groceries for people and come back with this motorcycle with enough groceries so that they could survive because we had probably been in there a week or better by that time and there was no way nobody was going to get in or out of there.

NELSON: This was just a two-wheeled motorcycle and you tried to carry what you could in your bags or behind you?

NICCUM: Yes, I had a backpack, but I had a rack on the back that I could keep a box on and I could bring quite a bit of stuff. Not that I bought what they all decided what they wanted. They wanted quarts of milk and I bought them powdered milk and the stuff that they could get by on.

NELSON: You didn't buy the 100 pounds of dog food?

NICCUM: No, but one other time I remember at Power House 2 the same thing happened so at that time, of course, none of us had motorcycles then, but we got a couple of horses from down there at Raggio's or maybe Henry Reese, I don't remember who let us have the horses, and we packed the stuff in over the back way and so they made a list for everybody to get what groceries they did, but try to hold it down and I remember someone ordered a bundle of firewood and I thought, "I don't think we're going to get this firewood, they can go out and cut some firewood, we're not packing firewood in on a horse when we are trying to get groceries in here to them not firewood.

NELSON: You said that when the family moved to Power Plant 1 it was quite a contrast between living at Haiwee. You felt like you were moving into the city almost.

NICCUM: Yes, the one thing was they ran the "candy wagon" that I talked about - the supply truck that went to town. That "candy wagon" was started during the days when the dam was being built in

the town and the Department furnished this truck that would bring stuff up to the guys, they called it a "candy wagon," in those days, if they ran out of cigarettes or anything that they needed in town.

The Department had a - I don't know what you would call it - a bunkhouse. It was a two-story building right there in Saugus, not that I ever saw it when it was in operation, but I can remember as a kid, it was still there. That was where the "big shots" when they were the towns and the power houses and stuff, they all stayed there. They'd come out to Saugus and stay there.

NELSON: Okay, you are going to school and you have gone to B school, did you continue on from B school?

NICCUM: Yes, Landcaster was a little bit shorter and they actually claimed that we were in Antelope Valley District, but there were so many times during the year that we couldn't get out over the back road, they called it the "Burma Road," but it was just a dirt road back there and when it snowed, we couldn't get through and there were some places that were pretty slippery and the bus driver would have to get out and put chains on.

Then they transferred us to San Fernando. The year that I started the ninth grade, B school went to the eight, I went to San Fernando. That was the closest school. There were no high school or anything in Newhall/Saugus and that area so we had to go to San Fernando.

NELSON: How did you get there?

NICCUM: The Department furnished the bus still and it ran us down to the Bouquet junction at the bottom of the canyon down there, Bouquet Soledad. Then the bus from San Fernando picked us up and took us on in. We left in the morning about twenty minutes to seven if I remember right and got home at night about 5:30 p.m. So during the winter time, it was dark when you left and it was dark when you got home.

During World War II, the canyon was all locked up and they had the Army in there to start with, guarding it, and then the Department finally hired their own guards, but at both ends of the canyon it was locked with a guard down there.

NELSON: You mean kind of like a check point or something? You had to show identification?

NICCUM: Yes, if you didn't live there, you didn't come into the canyon during World War II. If you were having company, you had to go down the canyon, which was the Forest Service boundary down there at Raggio's ranch and that was where the gate was. And if you had company, you had to drive down there and meet them and identify them and they would let you through and that's the only way you could get in there.

NELSON: And these were initially Army and then later on private guards?

NICCUM: Department. That was where my third generation of working for Water and Power come in. Of course, my dad and I both worked, but my grandfather was 65 and, of course, he volunteered to be in the National Guard and so when he got 65 they told him he was too old to be in National Guard any more and he was kind of broken hearted over that and so dad said, "We've got a job for you up in the canyon if you want to come out there." So he came out there and lived with us for three years I guess and he was the guard at the reservoir at Power Plant 2 and worked from midnight to 8:00 a.m. or something like that.

At midnight every night he had to hike up along that penstock at Power House 2 and climb to the top of the mountain out there and sit up on top of that mountain and guard it every night. For 65 years old he did pretty good hiking up that mountain every night with a flashlight.

NELSON: Did they carry sidearms or rifles?

NICCUM: Oh yes, everybody carried a side arm. Anybody that worked outside during the war carried a sidearm - a .38 and my dad, he was always so small that that darn .38 was about more than he could handle because he never weighed over 130 pounds and was about 5' 5" tall. So he got him a .22 - it was a shoulder holster and he carried it, but everybody that worked outside, carried a gun and all these guys at the B canyon, there was a machine gun mounted at the top of the siphon, at Power Plant 1 at the top of the 57" valves there was a machine gun.

Power Plant 2 at the surge chamber there was a machine gun mounted right there in case somebody was coming in.

NELSON: Where did those troops bivouack?

NICCUM: The Army, I think, they were over in Texas Canyon at the Forest Service headquarters and when the Army took it over, when the war first broke out, the Army moved in there and sealed it off and then when the Department hired their own people, they just furnished them transportation back and forth, most of them lived in Newhall, because there wasn't any gas and you couldn't buy tires so they had a spot either at Saugus or Newhall where they picked them up and brought them up the canyon every day to do their shift.

NELSON: As I recall, your dad was a World War I veteran, wasn't he?

NICCUM: Yes.

NELSON: When did he become, he became Chief Operator there or chief, or superintendent?

NICCUM: No, he was Junior Chief all the time he was in the canyon. When he left the canyon in 1946, 1947, he went to RSA as a chief and that's where he retired from, RSA.

NELSON: Okay Bill, you've gone to school, how did you meet Pat?

NICCUM: We met in high school.

NELSON: In San Fernando?

NICCUM: Yes. We got married in 1949 and I think it was two years before we got a house up the canyon. At that time there was a waiting list. You had to build up some seniority before you got a house. We lived in Newhall and then we decided this might be a long run, so they were selling these houses right there in San Francisquito Canyon for \$7,500 and my wife said, "We aren't buying a house here out there in the sticks. If we're going to have a house, we're going to go..." So we went to Sylmar and bought a house. Now it means I'm driving from Sylmar to Power Plant 2 every day to work, but we didn't think about that.

NELSON: But you're not in the sticks.

NICCUM: Yes, we are not out in the sticks now, we're downtown Sylmar.

NELSON: What got you and when did you go to the Department of Water and Power? Had you worked - when did you decide or was it at that time a job and your dad was in it and you were kind of a part of the family all those years and you just naturally an employee?

NICCUM: Yes, I was ready to go to work for them and put my application in and at that time there was still a lot of veterans that came back and jobs were hard to get. Another thing was veterans got their "ten points" over you so if you didn't pass an exam up there, there were lots of guys that beat you out because they all got ten points.

Anyway it took me a year and a half, I guess, before I got on with the Department. In the meantime I worked for Gladdy McBean and that belonged to the Newhall Ranch. It was a pottery outfit down there.

NELSON: You were potted or you were doing the potting?

NICCUM: No, I worked in the seconds where we handled all the seconds. I worked there a year to the day, if I remember right. I got my call to report to the canyon. I had a job. So that was the start of it. October, 1948.

TAPE NUMBER: 2, SIDE ONE

WILLIAM G. NICCUM

NICCUM: Okay so I reported to Power Plant 2 as a Gardener/Caretaker, then Chris Miller was Junior Chief and John Bruenger was the Chief. So Chris takes me out and he didn't really have to show me what to do, but now he's boss because I'd been living there since 1941 so he said, "Well you know all the lawns you've got to mow and there's the lawn mower and there's a Pennsylvania push type lawn mower, that's your lawn mower and you know where all the hillside watering systems are and you know that you change them every night when you leave after work, you turn the sprinklers on and now, we want a wall built right here by the club house.

I want you to start this wall and any spare time you have, I want you to work on the wall. When you are not mowing lawns and stuff, I want you to work on this wall. I want this wall to start out here two foot tall at the upper end here and when it gets down to the bottom down there, which is about 200 feet, I want it about three and a half to four foot tall down there. I want it two foot wide and I want it faced on both sides." I said, "Mr. Miller, I've never built a rock wall before." He said, "Well, you're

going to learn." So that was my first project - mowing lawns and when I wasn't mowing lawns, I was hauling rocks out of the creek and stacking them up and building a wall. That was my project to start with.

Anyway I don't remember how long I worked as a gardener/caretaker. Then I became a maintenance construction helper. That was probably two years or maybe three, I don't know. It was about time we moved to the canyon. We finally got a house up on the hill.

NELSON: Where had you been living all this time?

NICCUM: We were living in Sylmar and driving back and forth. So then I was a Maintenance Construction Helper until 1957 when Al Harris retired, which he was the building repairman that we talked about. He used to take me on move jobs so I got his job and that's where I stayed from 1957 to 1985 is on that same job. I took exams and passed them, but never had the heart to leave the canyon.

I can remember transmission trouble calling me and wanting me to come out and be a labor foreman on the grader crews and stuff and I thought about it so hard that I just couldn't leave the canyon. So I stayed as Building Repairman all those years.

NELSON: Did you move around in residence there in the canyon?

NICCUM: Yes, I think we lived in two on the hill and two down in the canyon and upper camp at Power Plant 1 and then two of them down in the lower camp and then finally back to the house at Power Plant 2 that I did most of my growing up in. Finally we got the old homestead back.

NELSON: Still had the dirt under the rug that you had left? Were those homes pretty regularly maintained by the Department or was it pretty much up to the owner to take care of it?

NICCUM: No, they didn't do anything. That was what my job mostly consisted of was that.

NELSON: Initially you were the private gardener for all the people?

NICCUM: No they have to take care of their own yards except when they were on vacation and stuff, we'd take care of them. Then when I became a Building Repairman, of course, that was the Building Repairman's job to take care of those houses. I think at the peak I had 27 houses that I took care of. That was the ones at San Fernando and Sylmar and the ones at the canyon.

NELSON: You mean take care of? You were the plumber, the carpenter, etc.?

NICCUM: Yes, and we had paint crews that did the outside and stuff, but just normal type care, me and my helpers. Vince Raggio was my helper for 26 years, I think. He has my job now. So it's one of those things, you either die off or retire to get promoted. Vince is saying he was born in the Canyon. I wasn't born there, but he was born there and he's going stay there until too so he isn't going anywhere.

NELSON: During that time, then you also went back to moving the hydro employees?

NICCUM: Oh yes, that's just part of the job. Every three months when the bid sheet comes out, you figure two or three moves, somebody's getting moved around. Then working in the tunnels. We did all that in those years. I can remember surveying all of our tunnels and putting a marker every 100 feet from all the tunnels that belonged to the hydro division and I marked all those tunnels and measured them all off and put a marker every 100 feet in there So we could keep our records for every crack.

We used to work in there and they holler now about all this stuff, well we knew that diesel fumes wouldn't kill us so we were in there with compressors running and diesel tractors and diesel smoke so thick inside the tunnels you couldn't see at time, but it didn't kill us. Probably didn't do us any good either.

NELSON: Those were the tunnels just from PPl on down to San Fernando?

NICCUM: No the only tunnels that belonged to the hydro division is from south portal to Power Plant 1 and from Power Plant 1 to Power Plant 2 and from Power Plant 2 about a mile and a half below Power Plant 2. I don't know why those tunnels belong to Hydro, but the rest of them belong to the water divisions, the aqueducts.

NELSON: Would you have to wait to get into those until the aqueduct was shut down or could the hydro just shoot the water in the aqueduct and you could go in? Or did you generally wait until it was shut off?

NICCUM: Yes, we walked them at least once a year. We had a tunnel outage at least once a year and we walked them and we knew what we were going to do with the cracks we were going to fix from the last time and then if there were any new ones, we'd fix them too.

NELSON: What do you mean walking? You would literally get inside and walk up or down the tunnel? What were the size of these? What were the conditions inside a tunnel?

NICCUM: Yes, we'd walk them. Wet and slippery. Years ago they were so slippery that you couldn't stand up in there. We had hobnail boots. We wore hobnail boots in there so you could walk. Then over the years when they started treating Haiwee Reservoir with copper sulfate, we finally got rid of the algae that grew in there and it was pretty good for ten years or so. We finally got

where we wore kind of like a GOULASH with a suction cup on the bottom and you could walk on the cement floor with those suction cups and not fall down in there.

Then in later years they started using that Palomar in the water, then it got slippery again so we had a period there, maybe ten years that you could walk without falling on your butt, otherwise you could land up on your butt in no time at all. The tunnels are 12' tall and 8' wide.

NELSON: How many of you would normally go through? I assume you'd make an inspection first to determine what needed to be done, then people would go in and do that big things.

NICCUM: Usually about four of us. The Junior Chief, he was out to walk with us because he was the low man on the high ranking up there so he had to walk with us. The rest of us, myself and my helpers and usually we had a maintenance operator with us because these guys were supposed to know what was going on inside these tunnels too. He usually kept the log where the cracks and all the stuff was because like I said, every 100 feet we had a marker in the tunnel so we knew where we were at all times.

NELSON: Were you able to communicate with people outside?

NICCUM: No.

NELSON: Did you go from point A to point B, or did you go in and have to backtrack?

NICCUM: Some of them we would backtrack. We used to walk it right straight through, but there were some things that we did that weren't very safe and over the years decided it was worthwhile to walk back out. We used to come out at B canyon and to get out we had to drop a ladder down through an air vent and that air vent was right over the water and we'd swing that thing over then grab a hold of the ladder and swing out over the water and climb up the ladder out the air vent and if somebody would have fallen down that siphon, we would have had a hell of a time getting them out, so we decided it was easier to walk that mile and a half or two miles back instead of trying to climb out that air vent hole.

NELSON: As your times, Bill, as Building Repairman, what were your hours? Were you like someone out of the "Yellow Pages?" You had pretty much a 24 hour job depending on the severity of the problem?

NICCUM: Yes. Anytime. I had a company phone in the house and anytime that phone rang at night, I knew I was going to get wet, oily, muddy, something would had happened that you knew you were going to get dirty, that's all there was to it. Usually, anyway. Sometimes in these years another part of my job was maintaining all the road inside the canyon because that road all belonged to

Water and Power. So any time there was a wreck out in the road or anything like that, I was called to go out there and see what happened and went to court a few times and all kinds of things because this is a Department road and everything that happened on it, of course, right now they are going sue Water and Power. So it was a 24 hour job. It was a great job, but that's the way it was.

NELSON: One thing I should ask, how did your wall turn out?

NICCUM: It's still there, it looks pretty good. I have to admire it every time I go by it. I was 19 when I built it.

NELSON: Do you have your name in there any where?

NICCUM: No.

NELSON: Now that does take a little doing, I suspect, if you are 19. I guess you had some inclinations toward that kind of work. If you know you are a klutz, you just don't do it, but had you had any previous training? You just picked it up and your natural abilities were the...?

NICCUM: No training. He just told me what he wanted and I figured I'd better do what he wanted.

NELSON: What was the most memorable experience out there in the canyon?

NICCUM: Oh, I wouldn't even have the least idea. With all the fires and the floods and all the things we went through over the years.

NELSON: Did you get some fires close by?

NICCUM: Yes, we had them. Probably the darn floods were about the worse. The fire, it was all over with within a couple of hours and it was done with, but floods, we put up with it for two weeks sometimes before we could even get out of there. They were probably the worst of the disasters that happened, if you want to call them disasters.

NELSON: Life has changed out there in the canyon. Now they get pretty good television reception I understand. How was your social life out there when you started with your family and such? Did the families stick together pretty much or did everybody go their own way or what were the activities?

NICCUM: We used to have the camp activities - the parties and stuff and during the summer time we always had the things at the swimming pools - picnics and pot lucks and quite a bit of everybody joined in.

When we built the swimming pool at Powerhouse 1, that was one of my dad's first projects when we got there. That was in 1937.

NELSON: They call that the "tailbay" instead of improved?

NICCUM: We just went up and built a dam across the creek up there and started building us a swimming pool up there, but we built the dam. We used the tunnel tailings out at South Portal. Every night everybody would jump on the back of the dump truck and everybody would go up there and load the truck there and every night that was their project.

NELSON: It was built by the families basically who were living there?

NICCUM: Yes, by the families.

NELSON: And you had a lot of enjoyable times there at the swimming pool?

NICCUM: Yes and everybody lived there during the summer time. Every kid was swimming by the time he was five years old or so anyway.

NELSON: I imagine that was quite a good environment for kids - a nice place to grow up without the influences of the big city. What about "Big Foot" and all the creatures up there? Because I

had heard that there were all sorts of animals at one time or another had been spotted.

NICCUM: The only people that had seen the mountain lions and all the stuff was the new ones that came. In all the years that I lived there, which was 49 years, I saw one mountain lion and that was all. I've seen tracks, I've seen one place down there in B canyon under one oak tree three deers that had been killed at different times. But as far as ever seeing a mountain lion, you don't hardly ever see one.

NELSON: You probably didn't see any bear either?

NICCUM: Yes, I did see a bear one time up in South Portal Canyon on a fire and he come out and ran past my truck, but wild animals are usually pretty hard to see. I've seen more in Bodfish than I saw down there. There were a lot of rattlesnakes.

NELSON: Was there any Department person or so who you admired over the years who now you said, "Gee I like that guy's style," and I guess at that time there were mostly guys. There weren't any women employees out there were there other than the dormitory cooks and housekeepers, etc.?

NICCUM: Yes, we had housekeepers. The biggest thing was the school teachers. It seemed like the poor school teachers, they only lasted a year before they married one of the bachelors that

lived in there because they all lived there at Power House 2 at the clubhouse.

NELSON: There were a lot of matches made there.

NICCUM: Yes, a lot of bachelors all wanting to live at Power House 2 because the school teachers lived down there. I can remember four of them that married operators. That was the big attraction - every year, who was Water and Power going to hire for a new teacher?

NELSON: Do you remember anyone that you admired quite a bit who in your mind did a good job. Somebody you had a great deal of respect for?

NICCUM: I can't really say particularly one person. I said, I never ever worked for anybody I didn't get along with, so I never had any trouble with any bosses or anything. I had a good job.

NELSON: In that time that you spent in the canyon, did you get out of it much, vacationing and things like that?

NICCUM: Oh yes. We had a trailer by the time our kids... we had our kids camping by the time they were a year old and had a camper on the back of the truck, then we went to a trailer, then we went to boating, and then, of course, we went through all that water skiing bit for lots of years.

NELSON: Where would you be waterskiing?

NICCUM: About anywhere in California. Always at the Colorado River during Easter and we still go there now. We haven't missed an Easter at the river since 1956, I think was the first time we went down there.

NELSON: What have you done since you retired? It's been about seven years now, more or less.

NICCUM: For the first three or four years we were never home over three weeks at one time. In the last couple of years, sometimes we do stay home for a month, maybe - not very often. We are usually always gone for at least three months during the summer time to Colordao, Alaska or wherever. The rest of the time, it's just during the winter time we are in Arizona, Quartzsite and of course, at the Colorado River at Easter.

Our daughter lives in Newhall/Saugus area, which is "old home" down there, and then we have a son that lives at Palm Springs and we have a son that lives at Laguna Beach and we have a son that lives at Tahoe. So really we just go around and see the kids once in a while.

NELSON: How did you get up here to Bodfish?

NICCUM: I think I got into that to start with bit, anyway our neighbors there in canyon all the time, Caldwell's, and his uncle homesteaded a place up here and then he sold it to him for \$1400 I think it was or something, and he had a cabin on 2 1/2 acres so that was how then and this is where he retired so this is where we retired too.

It's kind of close enough where all the kids are that we can within a days drive, you're there.

NELSON: Do you get back in the canyon once in a while?

NICCUM: Oh yes, I still like to be there until 7:00 a.m. when everybody comes to work, but I was always the first one in the office every morning and had the coffee pot on when everybody else showed up in the morning.

I always go back at Christmas because they have a Christmas party. I would like to go back every several months just to see the guys and my helper and stuff that are still there and the operators.

NELSON: Can't fit them in with your travels.

NICCUM: Yes, can't get that fitted in with all the traveling we are doing.

NELSON: Well, in summing up your career with the Department, would you do it again?

NICCUM: Oh yes. Definitely. Same routine day and night. I don't think I would change a bit of it.

NELSON: Consider it was pretty good to you and for you?

NICCUM: Where would ever work for 36 years and be furnished a house and a truck and free utilities and free water. We didn't realize what the cruel world was until we were retired and Uncle Eddie sends us a \$100 a month electric bill and water bills \$100 a month and propane bills \$100 a month and all those things were free all those years. You don't find a job very often that they furnish you a house and a truck that sits right in your driveway, you walk out and get in that truck and push the radio and say, "I'm at work where do you want me to go?" I wasn't on a freeway for two hours getting to work or two hours going back. When I walk out the back door and sit down in the seat of that truck and started the engine, I was at work.

NELSON: Oh one thing, I have to go back. One question I had that you kind of brought it up here. When you were a building repairman, how were you assigned work? Did jobs come in, were called in and put on slips and then you prioritized them? How did you do that?

NICCUM: Like I say, when I got in the truck every morning and started it up, I'd call Power House 1 and the first thing I would ask him is if he had anything that I had to tend to. If an oil

line had broke or screens plugged up or sewer lines, whatever. When I called in and said, "Do you have anything on your desk for me this morning?" If he said no, then I would say, "I'm headed for Power Plant 1 to the office." But that was the way I called in every morning. If it was something at San Fernando Power House or Franklin Power House or wherever it was, then I would just leave home and call ahead and have my helpers follow me on the way and tell them to bring.... by that time I was usually there and if I needed something, they would pick it up and bring it, but that was how I worked all the time.

NELSON: I assume what you are saying is you kind of had two lists, if you will. One was things that required immediate emergency attention and you had all the "honey do" things that needed to be done, but could be done more at your fill in time.

NICCUM: Yes. Everybody turned in a slip. If they had something on their house or something they wanted done. I just had a notebook sitting on the seat of the truck and as priorities came up, well we don't have an emergency today, we'll go do this.

Lots of days you might start two or three jobs in a day's time and as the day progressed, the water system shut down, the sewer plugged up, so your priorities changed during the day. You may change jobs three times in a day easy and change any where from Fairmont Reservoir to Beverly Hills in the length of travel where you're at. You're just moving.

NELSON: Okay, Bill. I want to thank you very much for taking the time to