

Interview with Bill Temple
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By Winifred Robertson, San Dimas Historical Society Board Member
at
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Bill Temple was born in Covina, California in 1904. Bill's parents arrived in Covina in 1898. His parents lived on Puente Street and owned 20 acres of lemons. When his parents died, he purchased the acreage from his seven brothers and sisters. The property was under foreclosure, so his brothers and sisters said, since they were going to lose the property anyway, they would sell to Bill. (W) Did you make a go of it? (B) Yes, I turned it around and made a profit, and planted another 5 acres in lemons.

(W) Did you have frost in Covina? (B) We were on the verge. We very seldom lit the pots. I remember so often in February, we never lit a pot, but looking West of Covina, it would be all black with smudge smoke. (W) In Glendora up against the hillside, we seldom had to light the pots. One Christmas, I had to wait to open presents while my father and his men put out the pots. We had pots that used brickets instead of oil which was much safer to burn. (B) That must have been the freeze of 1922 or 1924 I don't remember which. (W) It was in 1932 when the cold was at a much higher elevation and most unusual.

(B) What do you want to know about San Dimas? (W) I want to know about you! When did you become the manager of the San Dimas Sunkist Lemon House? (B) December 1st, 1941, a week before Pearl Harbor. A funny thing, the Lemon House Manager, and President, some how got into a political fight with the Board. I don't remember the details. Anyway they both quit. They built a packing house in Covina and took about 20 to 25 percent of the San Dimas growers with them. So the Board had no one left to manage and take the job. They finally talked me into taking the job temporarily. And I stayed there for 25 years until I became 63. The San Dimas Sunkist Packing House was the last one in the entire Los Angeles County to close. (W) I thought Upland Sunkist House was the last to close. As my Dad had to drive his fruit a long distance from Glendora. (B) That Upland House was not in Los Angeles County, it is in San Bernardino County.

(W) Your wife's name? (B) Ruth. We lived only in Covina. I moved here to Mt. San Antonio Gardens 20 years ago. It was a good life. We raised two boys. I was raised in Covina with all my brothers and sisters. It was a good life and a good place to live. When I was in High School, there were 370 students the year I graduated. That was the only High School in the entire district. The district was Charter Oak, Covina, West Covina, Baldwin Park, Lark Ellen, and about 7 or 8 students from Irwindale. (W) Did Citrus Union High School exist then? (B) Yes, the High School served both Azusa and Glendora.

(W) tell me about the packing house? (B) I don't know where to begin. San Dimas Lemon Association was organized in 1900. (W) Was it associated with Sunkist? (B) No, Sunkist didn't exist till 1906, then it became Sunkist at that time. They built the packing house in 1908 and also built one in Glendora. Glendora Lemon used to be San Dimas Lemon. Their Grants were San Dimas Lemon, Glendora, California. If you could find some of those labels, they would worth thousands.

It was a lovely era. I don't think you could beat it.

When I first took this job, I thought it would be for a few weeks. I thought surely they could find somebody that would take it. The job paid \$230.00 a month. And I had to furnish my own car. The previous manager, was furnished a car. I think because of the war, I lasted, because I didn't know anything about the job. I didn't even know the sizes of the fruit. I was ready to innovate. I'd try something, because I didn't know the difference. Many, many, things that I tried, stayed with it and managed to change the whole industry. I remember you couldn't get nails to make boxes, and it got critical. There was a foundry in Colorado. I called them on the telephone and asked them if they could make nails. They said sent me a sample. So I did and bought a carload. I sold nails to all the other houses. I'm sure we made a little for our house. (W) Was field boxes hard to get then? (B) Everything was hard to get.

(W) Employees were hard to get, weren't they? (B) We still had a lot of "wet backs". (W) The Colony was across the street, right? (B) Yes. (W)

The Mexican boys that worked on the Silent Ranch in Glendora went to work in the Air Craft Factories because they were able to make better wages. (B) That was the same as me.

(W) The trains, Would the Santa Fe pick up fruit. (B) Yes the Santa Fe and the P.E. The P.E. had an agreement, by just a letter. The P.E. was thinking about coming East. See, the P.E. only ran to Covina till 1911. That's when they extended the line. We promised that we would ship half our fruit with the P.E. if they would come that far. We held to that promise. We would load one car on the P.E. and then one with the Santa Fe. They had to run a line or spur from the main line to the house.

When I was a kid, we had a team of horses and could load 76 field boxes or two loads a day and after the crews left, we would be hauling boxes for six or seven days.

(W) Did you ever have a nick name? (B) I was always, just Bill, Bill Temple.

(W) What would an average day at the house be? (B) You couldn't pick lemons if there was dew on the fruit. You had to start after the dew evaporated round 8 or 9 o'clock. If you rubbed a green lemon that had water on it, it would leave a mark. (W) I can remember the pickers in the field singing with beautiful voices. (B) I think that that is something that never can be described. It's a fact when people are working against each other, they got paid by the box, not an equal salary, a little bit of competition. Pride. Women got so much a box. When I first got there, it was eleven cents for each box. That was really high skilled work. They had to exactly pack 360 lemons per box. Or 432 or 490 or 300, depending on the size of the fruit. The fruit was in front of them in different sizes and they had to pick up the right size fruit for the box, and paper wrap each individual fruit.

(W) Most of my time was outside in the grove. How trusting my parents were. I wouldn't want my grandchildren wandering in a grove now. I wandered around never worried about a thing. Very trusting, beautiful people. (B) You might find that there is not too much difference now. The Mexican people that you knew, lived there. They weren't from Mexico.

(W) How did you meet your wife? (B) In High School. She played the Cello. And I played the violin. We lived 78 years together. We had two boys, William and James. William passed away about ten years ago. James is 76 years old. I have seven grandchildren. They're all scattered around.

(W) Was there ever anything that you wished that you would have done?

(B) When I was young, I had always thought that I would be an engineer. I was always interested in mechanical things. When I got into the citrus business, I really liked that. Before that, I was an electrician. In those days, when your battery went dead, you fixed it. You didn't automatically buy a new battery. You would go to the battery shop, take the battery apart and put in new parts, depending on how bad it was. Now days, you would never think of doing that. I worked in downtown Covina. I went to Whittier College from High School. I got a job in the battery shop and got \$25.00 a week in 1923, which was good money in those days.

When I had the chance to buy the ranch from my dad, I made a deal. The folks had what you called a hired man. He was getting \$75.00 a month. I made a deal with my boss, that I would come to work at 1 o'clock, and work till 5, for \$750 a month. So he and I could work in the morning and get a lot of things done that needed done. Then the ranch began to produce more.

(W) How many acres did your ranch have? (B) 20 acres. (W) the Silent Ranch had 312 acres of oranges and lemons and 15 acres of tropical plants.

(B) I remember the Silent Ranch when I was young. We would go there and have picnics in the park.

(W) Were you ever in the service? (B) No, I was too young for WWI and WWII, I was manager of the packing house, and the draft board was all citrus growers. I never even talked to them.

(W) Did you graduate from Whittier College? (B) No. Ruth and I decided to get married. When I had a good job, we made the plunge. She was the secretary to the manager of the State Compensation Insurance Fund office in Los Angeles. The Southern California Branch opened up in 1924, Ruth was going to Sawyers Business College and the State asked for the best student, and she was picked. Of course when we got married, women didn't work.

(W) We stayed home and had a family. (B) Right!

(W) What subject did you study when you went to Whittier College? Well, sort of like physics, mathematics, chemistry, things that would guide me to being an engineer. Which I never used. I don't know, I guess it was good for me.

(W) When you addressed Westerners International, you made the comment that the packing house was built on a river bed. So the air at night comes down out of the canyon, under the house, keeping the fruit cool. (B) At the sides of the house were big doors, that were opened up at night and closed during the day. (W) You had refrigeration when you were a manager there? (B) Yes, San Dimas Lemon House was one of the innovators. They put in the first refrigeration to keep the fruit cool, which changed the entire way that the lemons were handled. The best lemons are picked very green and we called it cured. They were in storage from three to six months. Now they don't even pack them, they roll them in a box. (W) My Dad would say, if the lemon did not have a green tip, throw it away. (B) That's right.

(W) After you retired from the Sunkist Packing House, what did you do? (B) I knew that I had a job as manager of the Covina Irrigating Company. I was President of the Board for many years. So I practiced retiring. My wife and I did a lot of traveling. We sold the ranch. I made one mistake, I kept five acres, because I like to raise lemons. I really enjoyed being out in the grove. But that didn't work, because your down town and houses all around. It became rather a play area for the kids. (W) How long were you with the Irrigating Company? (B) Just five years. I turned 65.

(W) Where did you and Ruth travel? (B) Everywhere. We never did get to Spain. The last trip we took, we went to China, Japan, Korea, part of Russia. We started out in 1960. I had a sister that married a man, a Frenchman, that became the French Colonial Administrator of Africa. She was in Togo in 1960. We got to be there when the Togo's received their independence. What a celebration. On the way home, we stopped in Italy for the Olympic Games. That kind of got us in the frame of mind to travel, so we did a lot. We traveled a lot in the United States.....a pretty country.

(W) Thank you for the interview. It has been a great pleasure reminiscing about your life, the Citrus Industry and your contribution to the San Dimas Sunkist Lemon Association.