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Harpers Ferry Center's 40th Anniversary Oral History Project



Shirley Wilt
June 16, 2010

Interview conducted by Michele Hartley

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Interview with: Shirley Wilt

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Shirley Wilt:	00:00	I was-
M. Hartley:	00:00	I did, too.
Shirley Wilt:	00:01	Really looking forward to coming back and seeing it again.
M. Hartley:	00:02	I hope maybe one day I can do it again. But it's so much work. It's a lot of ... it's a quite an extreme sport. It's kind of abusive physically, I have to say.
Shirley Wilt:	00:15	Yeah, I wouldn't want to do it.
M. Hartley:	00:15	I mean, you really beat yourself up a little. So I don't know if I'll ever ... but it was so much fun.
Audio Tech:	00:23	Okay, we're recording.
Shirley Wilt:	00:24	Uh-oh.
M. Hartley:	00:24	Okay.
M. Hartley:	00:25	I'm here with Shirley Wilt and I just want to confirm that you're okay with us recording you.
Shirley Wilt:	00:30	I am.
M. Hartley:	00:31	Great.
M. Hartley:	00:33	Could you go ahead and tell me your name and your title, positions here at the center?

Shirley Wilt: 00:42 Okay.

Shirley Wilt: 00:42 My name is Shirley Wilt, and I came here in 1969 just a few months before the center opened, and my title coming in was Clerk Typist. And I ended up as an audio visual producer.

M. Hartley: 00:57 That's quite a span.

Shirley Wilt: 00:58 Quite a span.

M. Hartley: 00:58 Can you talk about how you got from point A to point B?

Shirley Wilt: 01:03 Well, actually point A started before I came here.

Shirley Wilt: 01:07 I worked for the Department of Army for three years. I was a single mom, and I was a GS-3. No, I just got my career service status in and I was GS-4, but I was away from my kids for maybe 11, 12 hours a day. I thought, well, I really need to get away from ... I don't like this being away from them so long because I was a single mom. I was the only one they had.

Shirley Wilt: 01:37 And so, a friend of mine down in Harpers Ferry Park, the personnel office was there at the time and she called me and she said, "Would you like to work at the Harpers Ferry Center?" And so I said, "Sure."

Shirley Wilt: 01:53 What I had to do was take a grade cut. They put me back at a GS-3, and I had to take a temporary assignment not to exceed a year, and then I would have to take a two week break, they told me. But I jumped on it because I wanted to be closer to home.

Shirley Wilt: 02:10 I came here and I'm so blessed because I never had to take that two week break. I always got personnel action, and that gave you another year. And I got back, I went back to my GS-4 and I worked my way up through the ranks and became a GS-12 when I retired.

M. Hartley: 02:34 Did you start out in the AV group or how did you manage to get into the AV world?

Shirley Wilt: 02:39 That's where the job was. Yes. I did start out with AV, and I worked there the whole 25 years I was here.

- M. Hartley: 02:48 I just want to point out that you do have the distinction of being the first female AV producer here. Yeah? When did that happen?
- Shirley Wilt: 02:56 Well, I'm not sure which year it happened, but I came at the right time. I had wonderful men in my division that really, I guess, they saw I had some talent and they helped me so much. Blair Hubbard was one, he was our sound engineer. Rick Krapela was one of the producers here, an assistant chief. And, of course, Carl Degen was here. He was the first chief that I ever worked for. And they all were into helping me go up the ranks.
- Shirley Wilt: 03:29 And so, I just, I kind of moved up when there was a woman's thing that came in and they wanted to promote more women and get them into the audio visual, into the so-called men's jobs. And so that's how I became the first female producer.
- Shirley Wilt: 03:48 And I was just recalling a little story outside about one time, Carl, he really tried to push me. I was not aggressive. I thought if I have the talent then I'll do it. But sometimes that's not the point. But anyway, he sent me upstairs, sent me up here one time for a committee meeting or some kind of meeting about the women's movement. And what it was, it was textbooks, elementary school textbooks. And it showed in these textbooks the men out playing ball with their boys and the women in the kitchen, cooking with aprons, with the girls. That kind of thing. And taking care of babies. And vice versa.
- Shirley Wilt: 04:33 And, oh man, I got so mad. I went back down there, I was just boiling mad. And I said, "Why did you send me up there? I don't see anything wrong with those books, what they're doing." So anyway, he said, "Well," and I'll never forget this and I've always remembered it, you have to go to the extreme sometimes to prove a point. And he said, "You know, maybe you don't agree with that, but in order to bring women up into these jobs that are men's, they have to go to the extreme, too. You know?"
- Shirley Wilt: 05:07 And I still don't mind it. I think women and men should share the household and the jobs and all that. But I was kind of mad at that time. But it helped. It worked. It pointed out some things to me.

- M. Hartley: 05:20 So when you came here, were you over in the library or were you in this building?
- Shirley Wilt: 05:26 I was over in the library.
- M. Hartley: 05:28 Mm-hmm.
- Shirley Wilt: 05:28 Yeah.
- M. Hartley: 05:29 And then when you guys moved over here, the first floor didn't even have a bathroom. Could you talk a little bit about that?
- Shirley Wilt: 05:37 I can, I can. There was only a men's bathroom on the first floor. Now, this is a brand new building that we had just moved into. And so, I get to thinking we had women on our bottom floor who were pregnant and had to run up to the second story and up to the third floor if the second one maybe was being cleaned or something. And I thought, "Why don't they have a women's bathroom here?" So, I am a kind of N.O.W. woman.
- Shirley Wilt: 06:09 I put in a suggestion, and it was not approved three times. And the reason was because when this building was designed, there were not supposed to be women working on that first floor. It was supposed to be a shop. And I thought, "Well, that's no excuse."
- Shirley Wilt: 06:32 So I kept putting in the suggestion, kept putting it back. Finally they made, I think the first time they did something down there, it was a unisex bathroom. In other words, men and women both use, I believe, use the same thing. Well, that didn't seem appropriate. So then we started, you know how people do, they just keep persisting at things. And so then we thought, well that's not good, because the men would go in and maybe lock the door on us or somebody was playing tricks on us and they would lock the door from the outside so we couldn't get in.
- Shirley Wilt: 07:09 And so anyway, then they took it, they divided it in half, into two bathrooms. But the men's was always the biggest. And so they gave us this little corner, the men's part had a nice big lockers in it, and it was the biggest half of that.
- Shirley Wilt: 07:29 I understand now they're going to switch them again and make the women's side the biggest.

- M. Hartley: 07:36 Yes, we are now ... well, we're renovating the bathrooms for accessibility purposes, but the women get the bigger side now because they need more stalls.
- Shirley Wilt: 07:48 Wow. Yes. So, see, it did work. And that's my legacy. That's a Shirley Wilt bathroom. That's my legacy to the National Park Service.
- M. Hartley: 07:58 Well, I think you have other legacies, which I want to just briefly talk about, too.
- M. Hartley: 08:04 We're showing one of your movies downstairs.
- Shirley Wilt: 08:07 I heard that.
- M. Hartley: 08:07 I don't know if you saw the schedule, and I don't know if that's one of your favorites or do you know how many projects you may have worked on?
- Shirley Wilt: 08:17 Well, when I first started working on projects it was a lot of audio station messages and sound slideshows. And there were numerous. Throughout the Park Service there were, I don't know, hundreds of sound slideshows. I didn't do very many videos or the movie-type things.
- Shirley Wilt: 08:37 But later on in the career I did begin to do those, too. And when they were really needed in the Park Service. The slideshows were not very well ... they just couldn't keep the equipment running and everything in order.
- Shirley Wilt: 08:53 But my favorite one is Pablita Velarde: Story of an Artist and Her People. And I got this assignment, I was scared to death because it was working with the Santa Clara Indians out there, American Indians. And so I had talked to her many times, she was the second Indian woman or female painter, because they didn't do that in those days. I mean, they just did not have women who were painting. They were expected to do the housework and just like we were in the day.
- Shirley Wilt: 09:32 And so we went out to Bandelier, and we found in the archives some paintings that she had done during WPA days. She got \$5 a day to paint those paintings. And they had them in the archives. They would bring some out every month maybe and change the exhibits so that the paintings would ... they were originals, so they didn't want them to

get ruined and faded. So anyway, we saw that and we thought, wow, and then we found out she was still living in Albuquerque.

- Shirley Wilt: 10:06 That was just a wonderful experience. We went out there, Fred Palm and I went out there, and we took pictures of all those paintings and we went out to her house and we sat down with her and had her describe what she was trying to say in these paintings.
- Shirley Wilt: 10:24 Anyway, I had had ... she had written a book, an illustrated a book called Old Father the Storyteller, and this almost broke the whole project because I walked in her house, and I showed her this and I said, "They tell me that you wrote this." And she said, "Where did you get that?" And I said, "Well, we have a researcher at the National Archives who got it." It was a microfiche copy. It wasn't the book itself. And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Well, that is not supposed to be anywhere because," she said, "I had that imprinted, some Anglo was taking all the money." So she said, "I took it out of print until I retire and get my social security, and then I'm going to publish it again."
- Shirley Wilt: 11:11 So anyway, I thought, "Oh no, here I am. This is the first time I've ever met this woman in her house and she's going to kick me out of the project." But she didn't. I explained to her how we work here at Harpers Ferry.
- Shirley Wilt: 11:23 So we went on to interview her and, to make a long story short, we went out on several trips, and Tom Gray was the photographer, and so we went out there several times and we filmed them baking bread in the beehive oven. They invited us into her sister's home up on Santa Clara and we had a nice dinner with them.
- Shirley Wilt: 11:45 It was just a wonderful experience. And before we ended, she and I became very good friends, very good friends. And so anyway, she had this daughter that was a contemporary Indian artist and I met her and saw some of her things, and when the project was just about ended, this daughter died. She had cancer really bad and she died. And so that was really a blow to Pablita.
- Shirley Wilt: 12:15 But anyway, I hadn't seen her for years, and went out there on a trip with, I believe, interpretive planning. And so we were going in that area. We stopped to visit Pablita. By that

time she had the book published. And so, I was able to get a signed autographed copy of that book, *Old Father, The Storyteller*. That was really a wonderful thing in my life.

- Shirley Wilt: 12:41 And yeah, I think that's my favorite. That's my favorite. Because I loved working with the Indian culture and hearing their stories. And I'm just one of these people, I love people and I think all of us are at heart need love, want love. And I don't care who you are or where you're from. You might be not show it. And I just think we're all the same, so much more than we think. We might be from a different country, a different culture, we're just all the same inside. And I found many similarities with my religion, with everything with her and those people out there.
- M. Hartley: 13:26 Do you have a favorite park as well? Or would that be your favorite park or ...
- Shirley Wilt: 13:31 Not necessarily. I love the southwest. I would probably live there if it wouldn't be that I have all these grandchildren and family around this area.
- Shirley Wilt: 13:42 I think my favorite park might be Olympic National Park. It's so big, and it has beaches and it has mountains and it has glaciers and the wildlife and everything. So I really, really liked that park.
- Shirley Wilt: 14:00 But I've always found, I haven't been sent to Hawaii or Yosemite or Yellowstone, but I was sent to Alaska instead of Hawaii, which I didn't like that idea in the first place. But I haven't found any park that I don't find something to love in that park. And that's our job really. I mean, it's our job to communicate what's good about the parks. But I can sincerely say I haven't been into one park, and I've been in many, that I haven't found something that I've just love about it.
- Shirley Wilt: 14:37 But I guess Olympic would be my favorite, although I wouldn't live there because it's too cold, too rainy.
- M. Hartley: 14:47 Well, Corinne couldn't be here, but she was involved in the Pablita project?
- Shirley Wilt: 14:55 She edited it. Yes. Yes. She was a film editor at the time and she did the editing on it.

M. Hartley: 15:02 Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

M. Hartley: 15:03 And in terms of the makeup of the center at the time that you were here, if you were to paint a picture and tell us if I were brand new and just walked in the door, what would be some of the highlights you would maybe mentioned to me about how this place look like or was like in your time here?

Shirley Wilt: 15:22 Yeah.

Shirley Wilt: 15:22 Well, the basement was pretty bare and that was, I think it was still bare when I left. We didn't have much furniture down there, but we did have the nice AV theater and we had a sound studio, which was run by Blair Hubbard and designed by Blair. And so I think that's gone now, but that was there.

Shirley Wilt: 15:45 And the, I don't know, the offices I think are pretty much as they were then. This floor right here was the manager's office then, and also had interpretive planning just across the hall there in one of the offices. And the top floor, as far as I know, it was always publications and waysides and and those things.

Shirley Wilt: 16:13 I don't think anything has changed that much. The furniture's changed. I haven't been down maybe to see the new furniture, no. But those things have changed. People have changed, but we all agreed, all of us old ones, we don't look any older, but everybody else does. Tom Gray and I, that's our comment. He said, I said, "I don't know where the hell got with all these old people because we don't look that old, do we?"

M. Hartley: 16:37 Did you get to work with Steve Ruth at all?

Shirley Wilt: 16:42 Yes, I did.

M. Hartley: 16:44 Okay.

M. Hartley: 16:44 Could you just tell a story perhaps about Steve?

Shirley Wilt: 16:47 Steve Ruth. Yeah. There are many good stories.

Shirley Wilt: 16:52 Actually, he was, I don't know what he was. Intern, maybe that's what, I don't know what you called him when he

came here. But, anyway, I think I was the first person that took him out on a trip, and I believe our first one was to Great Basin. And so, of course, I always have to fly into Las Vegas. One of my bosses told me one time, said, "Shirley, if I would try that, they would never believe me, but you can do it. Nobody even thinks you want to fly into Las Vegas to gamble." But anyway, it was just as easy to fly into Las Vegas as Salt Lake City for all the places that I went in that area.

Shirley Wilt: 17:37 So anyway, we'd always fly into Las Vegas and I'd always, if we had time to lay over, I get down on the Strip and he would go with me. He would never, never gamble, but he'd stand in and wait for me and watch me, which I thought was really nice of him because I would've been scared to death.

Shirley Wilt: 17:57 But anyway, we flew into Las Vegas one time and went to Great Basin National Park, way out in the middle of nowhere. I think we drove a hundred miles and didn't meet a car even. And we got up close to the Great Basin somewhere, and we had to go across this pass. Well, it was snowing up a storm. We didn't ever think we were going to get there, but we did.

Shirley Wilt: 18:21 It was like late at night, maybe 12, 1:00 o'clock in the morning. And at that hotel that we stayed at, I think it was in Baker, Nevada, one side of it was in Nevada and the other side was in Utah. So the restaurant and the machines and the office where you checked in were in Nevada. You walked across the parking lot and you were in Utah. And so, big difference.

Shirley Wilt: 18:50 So anyway, we got in and got settled in and I was just had laid down in the bed, still awake, kind of awake. My door opened to the motel and I jumped up and I said, "Who is it?" And this guy, some guy said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I've got the wrong room." He shut the door and went out. I was scared to death after that. There were no locks on the doors, no deadbolts, no locks, so you could get in if they gave you the key, and I think it was keys at that time. So anyway, he went out and I went to sleep finally because I was just dead tired.

Shirley Wilt: 19:29 The next day we go across to the restaurant to eat breakfast and these people were in there, and Steve and I were in

there and this guy said, he said, "Are you the one I opened the door last night?" I said, "Yeah, who are you?" And it was some senator from somewhere, and I went off on a half joke ... what did I say? I thought it was Clinton and whoever that was that he was with that time, me. So we had a big laugh about that.

Shirley Wilt: 20:02

But I wasn't used to that. I was used to having a deadbolt on my motel room, and I didn't that time. So that was one of the adventures that we did.

Shirley Wilt: 20:13

And then when I retired, Steve and I went that way quite a few times, out in the West that way. And so when I retired, he wrote in my book, he said, "Who knows. Maybe if we'd had one more trip through Las Vegas we both could have retired now." But it was never that good.

Shirley Wilt: 20:33

Steve and I went to Alaska, too. He went up on the Chilkoot Trail and photographed, and I stayed down in Skagway and went through files. And it was nice. And I would never have believed that you could go to Alaska and be bitten by mosquitoes, and you can in the summertime. And I was sweating and it seemed like I was here, but I loved that that state, because the sun went down at 10:30 came up at 3:30. I loved the light, but I would not want to be there in winter because it reverses.

M. Hartley: 21:12

Well, I know you want to get back to your kids.

Shirley Wilt: 21:14

My kids.

M. Hartley: 21:14

But before we do go, do you want to offer anything about the value of the center or AV within the National Park Service System or for visitors? Do you see its importance or value or use?

Shirley Wilt: 21:33

Oh my gosh. Yes. Yes. And I just, I feel like we're letting too much of our parks or our land go without environmental health. But I think, along with me, if we can keep doing the interpretation in parks for people to enjoy. I mean, along with me, I've said I went into many parks and I didn't know anything about them, didn't even want to go to some of them, but you walk in there and you see what they have for interpretation. Somebody talks to you about the park, and you fall in love with it. And I think that's the

same value that it has for people everywhere who can visit the parks.

- Shirley Wilt: 22:18 I only wish they would put more money into them to keep for the upkeep, and also for more interpretation. And the guy down there that was, I don't remember who was talking down there, but they got a compliment on something they had done and they said it wasn't preachy and it wasn't wall-to-wall talk. And I think that's important for all of us to remember, too. If you're doing an audio visual, you get a lot from the picture and from the sound and from the tone of the narrator's voice. And I think all of that is very, very important, and the music and sound effects that you have.
- Shirley Wilt: 22:58 I think all of that's important and I think it's worthwhile. I hope for centuries that we get to keep this to hand to future generations, which was always our big line when we ... we're saving it for future generations. And it's true, it's true. That's what we should be doing.
- Audio Tech: 23:19 Before you go, there were some level fluctuations due to me bumping some controls here.
- M. Hartley: 23:24 Okay.
- Audio Tech: 23:24 Right around the end of her answering the first question about her being the first woman here, before the bathroom question. I don't know if you wanted to re-ask it once and maybe see if can get ... it's probably usable, but perhaps you want to re-ask about her experience coming here as the first woman in the department.
- M. Hartley: 23:43 Uh-huh.
- M. Hartley: 23:43 All right. So first AV producer? Okay.
- M. Hartley: 23:47 Gosh, now I have to kind of remember what ...
- Shirley Wilt: 23:52 This is a trick. He's going to see if I'm telling the same story twice. But you know what? I'm old, so I could change my story and get away with it though.
- Audio Tech: 23:59 That's right.
- M. Hartley: 24:00 Well, I think maybe the question, if you wouldn't mind, Shirley, but you know how this goes right?

Shirley Wilt: 24:07 I do.

M. Hartley: 24:07 [Kelly?] opens a door.

Shirley Wilt: 24:07 Take one, take two.

M. Hartley: 24:10 And so I think maybe the question was how did you get from as a Clerk Typist to your last position as an AV producer, and if you could just maybe talk about you were the first female AV producer here, woman producer here. So if you could just kind of summarize how you got there and what's significant about that.

M. Hartley: 24:46 And it's okay. You can say something completely different.

Shirley Wilt: 24:47 Do I have to start where I said ...

M. Hartley: 24:50 No, you can just-

Shirley Wilt: 24:51 Where do I start?

Audio Tech: 24:52 Wherever you feel like starting.

M. Hartley: 24:55 You could tell me a new version.

Shirley Wilt: 25:02 And you won't know the difference in 10 years. And you, either.

Audio Tech: 25:02 I already don't remember.

M. Hartley: 25:06 Well, let's start with point A to point B. You're started out as a clerk typist.

Shirley Wilt: 25:10 Right. I transferred here from the Department of Army, and I had my career status with Department of Army. I was a GS-4, and I was a single mom. And someone called and asked if I wanted ... someone in personnel called, ask if I would like to have a job here at Harpers Ferry. And so, I said yes, because I didn't want to stay away from my kids for 11, 12 hours a day.

Shirley Wilt: 25:38 When I came here, I took a grade cut and I also had to give up my career status because I was on a temporary assignment, and not to exceed a year and I would have had to take a two week break after the year was up. But I was

so blessed because I never had to take that break because I always had a personnel action. I got my 4 back.

- Shirley Wilt: 26:04 And then I worked with the most wonderful men in the world because they saw that maybe I had a little bit of talent and they helped me to move up. And I'll never get over that. I'm not saying I did this as a woman, myself, because I'm a woman. I don't ever believe that because you're a woman or a man or anything that you can do things that you're not helped, you need help.
- Shirley Wilt: 26:34 So anyway, I started out putting music with slideshows. That's the way I started. And so, I guess they thought I was pretty good at that. And so I worked at that for quite a while. And then I loved the sound studio. So I worked in sound quite awhile, and then I started making sound slideshows. And with that I had to write scripts and treatments and do all the whole thing like you do for a movie. And I have either produced or rehabbed many, many, many shows throughout the Park Service.
- Shirley Wilt: 27:17 But, like I said, I worked with wonderful men, and Rick Kapela, who was here as assistant chief, Blair Hubbard, who was the sound engineer, Tom Gray, who was our cinematographer. And also Carl Degen.
- Shirley Wilt: 27:36 This one time he was trying to push me up because it was a time when they were trying to put women in men's jobs. And so Carl sent me upstairs one time so that I could be in a N.O.W. Woman. I was not very aggressive, because I just didn't think I had what it took to do what everybody did here. So anyway, he sent me up here up on the second floor to go to a meeting about women's rights and women's meetings. So what they had was a elementary school textbook, a reading book, and they had illustrated all the women with their aprons on in the kitchen and taking care of babies and putting diapers on. And the men were all outside doing yard work and playing baseball and different things that boys do.
- Shirley Wilt: 28:33 And so I just was so mad because I didn't see anything wrong with that at the time. And so I went back downstairs and I said, "Carl, don't ever send me to anything like that again. I'm just really mad about that. Why did you do that?" And he said, "Well, you know," and I'll never forget this.

He said, "You know, to prove a point, sometimes you have to go to an extreme."

- Shirley Wilt: 28:56 And that sunk in with me. Yeah, you do kind of kind of have to go to an extreme to get back to the more regular part of what you're trying to prove.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:08 And so from that time on, I really, I never have been aggressive about anything like that. But I really thought that that was a good point and a good way for me to learn.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:21 I ended up, I went from a GS, well, I came here as a 3 temporary, and when I retired 25 years later, I was GS-12 step five or six or something or other. And I was an AV producer and not a clerk typist, which I'm very blessed. I don't know how I did that, but I'm very blessed.
- Audio Tech: 29:43 Great.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:43 Did I say the same thing?
- Audio Tech: 29:45 I think it was close, or better.
- M. Hartley: 29:45 It really was though. Yeah.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:48 Or better?
- M. Hartley: 29:48 Yes.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:49 Better on your meter, right?
- Audio Tech: 29:51 The meters are definitely better. My problems were absolved.
- M. Hartley: 29:58 Thank you so much.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:58 Thank you very much.
- Shirley Wilt: 29:58 I'm glad to meet you.
- Audio Tech: 29:58 Yeah, glad to meet you. Sorry about the retake.
- Shirley Wilt: 30:01 Oh, that's okay. I can always talk.
- M. Hartley: 30:03 Oh, and you know what, Shirley? Do you have one of these? For your time- [END OF TAPE]