



# Mr. & Mrs. Yager

## Living the Good Life in Amarillo

Like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie in the beginning of movie Mr. and Mrs. Smith, life at the Yager house in Amarillo, Texas seems quiet and serene. Now there was a bit of excitement in mid-December when Willie and his wife of 33 years, Connie, found a very pregnant Chiweener (that's 1/2 Chihuahua x 1/2 Dachshund) shivering and alone on their front doorstep. In spite of posting pictures of the lost dog on poles near parks and schools and advertising in the paper, no one stepped forward to reclaim her. Annie, as she is now known, is now the mother of five and enjoying the good life in Texas along with new pals Tootsie and Brooke, two dachshunds they already had.

Even in retirement, can life be this laid back for Willie, a former Navy Seal, and Connie, who was setting explosive charges for NL McCullough when they first met? Well, just like Mr. and Mrs. Smith, as the movie goes on, it's a quiet life only if you don't count the guns and fast cars!

### Growing up Near Fort Bliss

Willie Yager was born in El Paso, Texas. During the war, Willie's family including an older sister lived in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Their home was across the street from Robert Oppenheimer. His father Bill did work for Foster Wheeler including projects at the White Sands Proving Ground and at Fort Bliss.

Two things during these early years made a big impression on "Bill Junior" as he was known at the time. When Willie was a teenager, he and his father worked side-by-side restoring his first car, a 1954 Ford. It took 8 months to strip down and reassemble. This started a lifelong passion for restoring cars. Willie has restored or worked on over forty vehicles thus far, ranging from a 1932 Model A to a rare prototype 1980 Corvette. He still has a project going in his garage and probably always will.

The second thing that made an impression on Willie was the soldiers marching constantly through the sand hills at Fort Bliss left an impression. After graduating from High School in El Paso, he joined the Navy. There would be no marching in sand for him! Willie's career in the US Navy spanned eighteen years with 10 years of active duty and 8 years in the reserves. While most people remember President Kennedy's speech to Congress in May of 1961 for his promise to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, few recall that he also announced his intention to spend over \$100 million to strengthen U.S. special operations forces and expand American capabilities in unconventional warfare. Nearing the end of his second year in the service, Willie was approached about joining one of these elite units that would be able to operate from sea, air or land. Able to shoot and hit a mass the size of a watermelon from a distance of 836 yards with 1960s technology, Willie became a

pioneering Navy SEAL. Take that Brad Pitt.

During down time between assignments, Willie took advantage of the military's many opportunities to pursue higher education and he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil and Project Engineering from the Texas Western University. His specialty was metallurgy and metal stress. Although he did not actually

Forced to retire from active duty due to an arm injury, Willie went back to El Paso and took a job at Phelps Dodge as a Mechanical Superintendent. From there he moved to Farmington, New Mexico with Utah International as a Coal Operations Manager. It was here in Farmington that Willie met his wife Connie who had grown up in the area and had recently moved back from the Wyoming. He knew he had met his match when he found out Connie was the only female at the time licensed in the United States to handle and load explosives in the oilfields.

## One Job, Many Companies

In 1979 Willie was asked to take a three year contract position with Southwestern Public Service (SPS). At the time SPS was vertically integrated with respect to its fuel supply which caused some concern with regulators. In order to create a more arms length fuel supply, SPS sold most of its fuel assets to Cabot Corporation, with the natural gas components folded into Cabot Oil and Gas and the coal components held in a new subsidiary, TUCO, Inc. The new entity managed all aspects of acquiring, delivering and handling coal for Southwestern Public Service. It was in 1982, in the days following the Cabot purchase, that Willie starting working with railcars and rail transportation issues.

In 1996, SPS tried to repurchase TUCO from Cabot, but the PUCT would not grant a waiver in the fuel-cost rules that was needed to make the deal work. That September, Cabot sold TUCO to the closely held Nexgen Resources Corporation and the Republic Financial Corporation. If you are wondering where the name TUCO came from, it was named after the Tuco power plant near Roswell, New Mexico owned by the former Texas-New Mexico Utilities.

While the companies may have come and gone, Willie stayed, continuing to gain experience in metal fracture analysis including root cause determination, structural fatigue assessment and corrosion evaluation. In the mid-1990s he obtained a Master



Mechanical License and used his expertise to analyze rail equipment failures and develop inspection plans for railcar uses and standards. He was also involved in track maintenance of way, railcar maintenance, field and shop inspections, and AAR billing correctness and confirmation.

## Pioneering the NCTA Operations and Maintenance Committee

Just as Willie was one of the first Navy SEALs, he was also one of the original members of the Operations and Maintenance Group of the NCTA. Jim Culp, Ken Jernigan, Tim Farris and Bill Lenz were other founding members. Jim Culp served as the committee's first chairman.

Willie recalls, "The first meeting we had was held in Colorado Springs. The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I) had a rail line that went to Trinidad, Colorado. They had retrofitted an old caboosse to serve as a moving laboratory. The mechanics of the brakes, pistons, and valves could be observed simultaneously with the actual train operations. The group also went down for a tour of the AAR test facility in Pueblo, Colorado. The trip to the test center was the first of many for Willie over the years. The proximity of the test center to his base in Amarillo allowed him the opportunity to drive up and witness many testing protocols especially if coal gondolas were involved.

Willie was also a regular attendee to other NCTA (and its predecessor WCTA) events where he liked to sit in the front row during conference sessions, sometimes to pay attention and other times to have some fun with Tom Canter's predecessor. Up until his retirement in June of 2011 he served yet another

volunteer term on the O&M Executive Committee bringing his expertise to meetings, roundtables, and committee initiatives.

## Willie and the Centerfold

While wife Connie is the love of Willie's life, he does have a thing for a certain exotic centerfold. Over the years he has spent plenty of time and money on her sleek body and has treated her like a queen.

The centerfold as it turns out is a rare 1980 Corvette Turbo Concept car, displayed in her original glory in an issue of Corvette News, June/July 1980 issue. And although she is well traveled, she is as Willie describes her, a "trailer queen" having just 14 miles on the odometer since her frame-off restoration was completed. Willie





spent over 12 years researching the car's original specifications and restoring the car to meet them. The amazing thing was that when he started the restoration, he had no idea what a truly unique car he had.

In 1980, Chevy and Corvette were testing higher velocity and higher horsepower cars. With new federal emissions requirements on the horizon, further development was stalled and Chevy destroyed all but five of the prototypes. The car Willie now owns was purchased by a Vice President at GM who drove it for a while before selling it to a friend of his who owned a Chevy Dealership in Colorado Springs. He in turn sold it to a CPA that lived in Amarillo. Somehow it was making its way to Willie. The CPA had a bit of a drinking problem which was not good combination with a high powered car and he wrecked it not once, but twice. His frustrated wife had it hauled out to her father's place, put it in the barn, and there it sat for many years. One day when the wife was visiting the Yager's, she asked Willie if he still restored cars and offered to sell it to him. When he couldn't get any of the part numbers to match the available literature, he asked one of his contacts at GM to help track down the problem. A month later, after being quizzed about where he had gotten the numbers, Willie was told that GM had been looking for that particular car for a while and he learned how truly special it was. It was #17 out of 32 Corvettes that were tested.

## The Party Barn and Other Passions

Hobbies such as car restoration are not solitary activities. When he was young, Willie worked with his father, but these days he shares his passion with Connie, close friend Otto Harz, who he claims as an adopted brother, and a group of friends and their wives in what is affectionately known as the "Party Barn". This multi-purpose space that Willie helped to build provides ample room to store the group's cars, work on new projects, and, of course, party.

The barn is nothing like one would imagine a garage where a bunch of guys are hanging out and working on their cars. Instead it is an amazing place where every bit of the vast amount of wall space



▲ Party Barn and its Proprietor

◀ At the NCTA Spring Conference in April 2011

Annie's new pups ▶



is taken up with automobile related memorabilia, collectables, and award plaques from car shows the group has attended; where you could play air hockey or pool or watch HDTV; and where you could have a drink and hor d'oeuvres and feel you were in a fun and fanciful auto themed restaurant. While the party barn is mainly for the group's own work and play, the group was host to over 30 guests participating in the annual Route 66 ride that runs straight through Amarillo.

One of Willie's other passions is a modest but historically significant gun collection. One of his favorite pieces is a Colt commemorating the USS Arizona. The wood on either side of the handle is from the deck and mast of the battleship. Another piece, steeped in both family and Texas history is a Winchester rifle. Numbered #000068, the rifle belonged to his great grandfather who was one of the first Texas Rangers. Willie's family on his mother's side is one of the eleventh oldest families in the state.

Willie also continues to serve his community in a variety of ways including volunteering at the VA Hospital, the Meals on Wheels Program, and various projects through the local chapter of the Lions Club. One of his regular duties with the VA is driving vets from the retirement facility to their appointments at the hospital. Willie confesses that "The best thing about it is the

unbelievable stories they have to tell." Not that Willie doesn't have a few of his own he could tell.

Willie continues to consult for the rail and utility industry, focusing mainly on derailment issues. He also does railcar and rail fleet inspections for leases, new builds, and railcar shopped repairs. His expertise in railcar metal fracture analysis allows him to do root cause determination, structural fatigue assessment, and corrosion evaluation for clients. His services also include but are not limited to issues of railcar loss claims; railcar and fleet transportation contracts; operational issues between rail and shipper; AAR billings; rail loading and unloading operations; and track maintenance.

Maybe life is slightly quieter for Mr. and Mrs. Yager than it was for Mr. and Mrs. Smith, but it is one rich in friends, family, and fun. From the Amarillo Club where they are long time members to their favorite eateries about town, Willie and Connie are greeted as friends rather than customers and there is always laughter in the air. Their melded family consisting of son Bill, daughter Cindy, their spouses and grandsons, nine year-old Nick and seven year-old Jack, and of course the growing canine contingent complete the picture for living the good life in Amarillo. ▲