

## 40 Years Later, Stan Willis Is Still Working Hard

By Benjamin Hoak

Since 1973, Stan Willis has been a company man. Through 40 years of managing technical resources, running meter shops and even building pipelines and coating them by hand, the Senior Admin for Field Operations knows Southern Star pipelines inside and out. Still, it's not the equipment Willis remembers most. "The people are what make it work," he said. "If you've got good people, they keep it all going."

Back in 1973, fresh out of earning a bachelor's degree in business administration from Emporia State Teacher's College, Willis managed an auto parts store in Willis, Kansas, a small town in the northeast part of the state named for his great-great-grandfather. Next door to the auto parts store was a gas service company. One day an employee asked Willis if he was interested in going to work for that gas company. "I had never heard of them," he said.

Cities Service Gas Company had an opening in the Hiawatha area about eight miles from his house, but that was the last time he lived in the area. "They told me after six months of training, I'd probably move back home. I never have gotten back there," he said.

Even though it was a small town ("the population was 110 at most"), it was tough to leave the area where he grew up, working on his grandfather's farm.



### Career

He started out as a repairman in the Lawrence pipeline division, moved to the Tonganoxie compressor station as an oiler repairman and then went back to Lawrence, where he became a field clerk. In 1984, he transferred to Lyons in the same role before he became a district administrative coordinator. In 1991, he transferred to Wichita to take over coordination for the meter shop, where they eventually also moved pipes, dials and fittings.

After a tornado destroyed the building in 1999 (this is Kansas, after all), the meter shop was relocated to Hesston, where Willis has been ever since.

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In his current role, Willis works in the technical resource center, testing and certifying meters and electronic gauges and thermometers. He orders and receives material and inventory and ships as needed for measurement, corrosion, mechanical and communications departments. He also works with Strategic Sourcing to track pipe valves and fittings in the system warehouse.

"I've always enjoyed whatever work I was assigned to," he said. "I've always been a plus and minus person ... I had quite a bit of accounting. It just kind of fell into place."

"I enjoy the people, that's the main thing," he said. "I've made a lot of good friends, and I still enjoy talking to the various people."

"He gets along well with everybody," said Belinda Bell, Manager, Measurement Services. "He does a great job with the measurement group. He knows that meter shop forwards and backwards."

Willis is also a tremendous example of safety – in 40 years on the job, he hasn't committed even one safety violation. "Just try to be aware of what your surroundings are, keep ahead of the game if you can," he said about his approach to safety. "Any type of injury is detrimental to the individual or the company."

Southern Star's monthly safety modules and meetings, as well as the driving training, have also helped, he said.

### Family and Memories



*(From left, Stan's daughter-in-law, oldest son, grandson, Stan, oldest grandson, oldest granddaughter, youngest granddaughter, wife and daughter.)*

While stationed in Lyons, Willis met and married his wife Terry, who already had three children. They had another child together, and now have five grandchildren, who enjoy being spoiled by their grandparents. Willis lives in El Dorado, about thirty miles from Wichita, where two of his children live. Another lives in Topeka, and he and his wife lost one daughter at 23.

When the company had surplus workers in the summer in the '70s, they went to field locations to help overhaul engines, Willis said. He did that job in Edmond, Oklahoma, and Ulysses, Kansas, before heading to Rawlins, Wyoming, in 1979 to help build the Rawlins-Hesston line. He worked on the western 20-mile section, a job he still ranks as one of his biggest accomplishments with the company. "It was very educational," he said. "That's what got me into the material side of the company."



*(1970s construction on the Rawlins-Hesston line as it crosses Arlington Mountain.)*

He also remembers when the company first got computers in the mid-80s and even likes to recall many of the smaller jobs he was involved with. "I think back to the pipeline gang at Lawrence," he said. "We used to go out and do a lot of our own replacements. We'd replace pipe across the creek, around the pond ..."

When he hadn't worked for the company long, he got put on a dozer, was given a one-time lesson and was turned loose. "I came from a farm background," he said, "(so) it wasn't terribly hard."

In 40 years, Willis has seen company philosophies change – and then often change again, going full circle. "There's nothing new, just a little different way of looking at it," he said.

### **Free Time**

When he's not ordering valves or moving pipelines, Willis likes to play some golf ("I'm not very good, but I enjoy playing"), do a little fishing at the lake 10 minutes from his house and watch old westerns – mostly, anything with John Wayne. He hangs out with his grandkids and his daughter has turned him into a hockey fan as they take in Wichita Thunder games together. He's thinking about retirement within the next few years, but isn't quite ready yet.

When he does retire, he won't miss the dog days of coating lines by hand. "Back in the '70s, doing pipeline work, to coat the line, we used hot dope, just a tar, all applied by hand," he said. "(You would

take) felt paper, hold it close to the bottom of the pipe, dump hot dope on top of the pipe and move the felt back and forth to make sure you got it coated. The smoke and the smell from that stuff, if you were in it all day long, would almost bake your face. That was one of the toughest jobs."

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Thankfully, men like Stan Willis endured those long, hot days to make Southern Star into the company it is today. "He's a wealth of knowledge," Bell said. "People don't understand how important he is to the organization as a whole."

His advice to the next generation? "Take advantage of what the company has to offer as far as training, classroom work and on-the-job training," he said. "It's pretty diversified. There are lots of opportunities. If you find one, go for it."



*(1970s construction on the Rawlins-Hesston line.)*