***Transcription sponsored by Cuyahoga Valley National Park***

**Joe Petit** [00:00:00] Hello, I'm Joe Petit, and today is Monday, March 28th, 2011. I'm interviewing Skip Wilson for the Cuyahoga Valley Agriculture Project. For the record, would you please state your name and spell it for me?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:00:17] My name is Thomas G. Wilson, my nickname is Skip, S-K-I-P. Obviously in a family that comes from numerous Thomases, Thomas Wilsons, I got the nickname.

**Joe Petit** [00:00:28] All right. Well, why don't you begin by telling us something about yourself, such as when and where you were born and where do you live now?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:00:36] I was born here in Cleveland, the Cleveland area. I lived all my life in the Valley View Village, grew up here, worked here. I went to school in Cuyahoga Heights School District and I'm a father of four, married to a lovely wife and hope to spend the rest of our lives around here.

**Joe Petit** [00:00:57] How did your family come to reside in the Cuyahoga Valley?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:01:00] Well, our family is... the Wilsons purchased the feed mill that was owned by then the Alexanders and some of the other interests back around 1900. The actual date's to still to be decided. But there they moved into this valley approximately 1900. And we've been living in this area ever since. Father was born in the house that my grandparents built, so we've been within a stone's throw of the feed mill all our lives. They actually moved out of the area known as the Millstream, up in Garfield, not too far south of the Slavic Village, north of Garfield Cleveland area, where there was numerous mills at that time. So upon selling those properties, they moved to the valley.

**Joe Petit** [00:01:50] How long have your family been millers?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:01:53] As near as we can tell, we're going on about six generations right now. And if you want to put a date on it, I would guess probably predating the civil war. So about 150, 160 years.

**Joe Petit** [00:02:08] How is milling different today than when your grandfather purchased the Wilson feed?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:02:16] When my great-grandfather and grandfather were running things, there was a larger agricultural presence in the valley. Farming was pretty much it. They were doing grinding and milling for animal feeds for the local farmers or where there was the grain to bring in and process so that could be sold or ones to be made into feeds. Today, we do very little actual milling per se. We do some mixing, but most of the feed now is preprocessed, pre-bag. We're buying it from major distributors like Buckeye and Purina. And in between, we went from using a turbine-powered feed mill to now electric, where back then, until like the mid '70s, early '70s, my father used the water power. Now everything is electric. In the early days, my grandfather once boasted he had one of the finest bread flours in Cuyahoga County. And now we're a little more, everything is retail. It's aimed for the pet owner, for the bird fancier, the lawn and garden fans, horse owners. We're quite a bit more broad than we were in those days.

**Joe Petit** [00:03:33] So you no longer use the water power, do you still have the facility for it? Or do you still maintain that?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:03:40] A majority of the parts are still in place. I'm old enough to remember when Dad still used the water power, but because of conditions that came through with the canal water actually being river water from Cuyahoga Falls and Akron, that and floods, it would basically gum up or stop the mechanical pieces. So Dad had to literally go out and physically clean it out every time there was a big flood or heavy rain, something of that nature. The parts are pretty much still there and we just don't have really the water there to use the wheel also and it needs to have a constant flow of so much water in between the canal, not containing as much water in the Park Service at the time, doing different projects. You know, we could probably get it up and running. It would be a pretty good undertaking with some dollars involved, but it could be done without saying hesitation yeah.

**Joe Petit** [00:04:39] So you said that one of the reasons you switched from being water power was especially when the canal would flood. Is that a problem today?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:04:49] We don't see as much of the problem, partly because the water level in the canal was left lower in those days. What happened was, is that all the mud and whatnot would come down through the canal from the river. The river actually, underneath Route 82 bridge, is where the opening gate is for the canal. So when that water would flush through there, if it wasn't controlled, we would end up getting it, you know, way too much mud and stuff in there. To actually have flooding problems with the facility, we don't see that as much because we sit a good bit higher than the actual floodplain. So actually, the only time we see a real problem was is like in 2006, I think it was, we had that heavy flash flood of sorts and then the water came down. But we sit a good bit higher than where the river comes in. Now, if the water does get up and into us, there's gonna be a lot of folks in Valley View and all north of us that are going to be some serious, serious trouble.

**Joe Petit** [00:05:49] So flooding doesn't affect your business personally, but how does it affect people actually frequenting your business?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:05:57] That would be the problem because a lot of our clientele has to get into us, has to come down into the valley. So if any of the roadways have to be covered with floodwaters, we're sunk. And all we have to have is the rumor of a flood and the phone calls start coming in and asking, "Hey, can I get to you? Is such and such a road flooded?" And it lasts usually several days after the floodwaters are long gone so it does affect us. It affects the people that work for us. Some of them actually live in flood plains. My sister's part of it. We do see, you know, the inconvenience and also getting a little bit landlocked because they can't get to you, they can't get to you.

**Joe Petit** [00:06:42] Over the years, what would you say has been the biggest change your mill has experienced?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:06:50] It has gone through several, and I don't like to use the word evolutions but, several different reincarnations or times where the mill's had to reinvent itself, because I can even go back in my lifetime and see how many of the local areas, townships and villages were more agricultural and farming oriented. Where you would have a small herd of cattle, you know, dairy cattle or folks would have an actual chicken coop in the backyard with several dozen hens. Now we're seeing things like the resurgence of what we call urban flocks, where a lot of the towns and villages and cities are allowing you to have a small flock of chickens or raise an individual animal. But as the land has become more and more suburbanized, we've seen that move away from what we call farming as we've kind of known it, to now backyard gardens. The flock has become a couple of chickens, the only cattle we have are one or two small herds, if you will, in a nearby area where there allow such animals to be raised. There are not as many, they're pretty well landlocked and have to be almost grandfathered in. So we've seen this shift from really a place where the people coming in were more ag-related to now where they're coming in to feed the birds, they're coming in to feed their pets, they're coming in to put a little bit of fertilizer on their lawn or a reseed it, or comes wintertime buy rock salt from us. So we've had to see this general diversification from a time when it was all about farming pretty much to now about a little bit of everything and sadly gotten away from a lot of that farming, at least on the extent it used to be.

**Joe Petit** [00:08:38] Any other big changes you can think of?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:08:41] Well, watching the terrain change around us in terms of how many open pieces of ground that used to have, you know, a garden in it to where now these houses have the urban creepers come in. The sprawl that we see, you know, what used to be open fields is now housing developments and what this has done has changed our clientele. We see a lot more of a suburban thing, which means we also see a lot more competition. You know, we used to be able to sell a lot of, let's say, dog food, and we were an island unto ourselves. Now you have the box stores. So there's always a Wal-Mart or PetSmart or Petco not too far away that you have to worry about whether or not you're going to sell them a bag of fertilizer, a bag of dog food, you know, any of the things we have in our store. So it forces us to become more service-oriented than the big guys are.

**Joe Petit** [00:09:35] How about any big changes to the actual facilities? Have the grounds stayed relatively the same?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:09:42] With the exception of the things that have happened before my lifetime, so we're going to have to go back almost 50 years at least, the building has pretty much stayed the same as where it is. We've done a little remodeling in what we would call our sales area, but it's a very small place to begin with. And if you can double like 400 square feet, you know, to almost 600 square feet, that's really something. I don't think we have that. The building is primarily as it's been probably for the last 120 years, shoring up a few times with about four or five years back. My brother did some foundational work to help shore up where the footers and the beams are. But other than moving around equipment in there, the building itself and the ground's pretty much stayed the same. We've moved our parking lot around a little bit and got rid of some older, we used to store some things in trailers, it was convenient. There was an outbuilding that was on the premises that was part of the old American Steel and Wire division of U.S. Steel. That was pretty well ready to fall down, so we helped it along and took it out. But otherwise, what you see is pretty much similar in one way, shape or form, since the longest most anybody can remember.

**Joe Petit** [00:10:58] What type of grain do you sell?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:11:00] Well, the only real true grains we sell whole are things like wheat, corn, oats, milo [sorghum]. For the most part, the grains we get in are your prebag, with the exception of corn, which does come in bulk from a farm out slightly west of here, out towards Huron, Norwalk area. Our grains are all, again, like I said, are all coming in bagged. And we do sell some of it for mixing, but for the most part, it's either horse food or poultry feed of one kind or another.

**Joe Petit** [00:11:35] So most of the grain is horse feed or poultry feed. Anything else?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:11:40] Our mainstay is birdseed. That is one of the biggest hobbies around is to have and stay with your pets indoors, have them outdoors. So we sell a lot of mixed greens where we have, it's mixed up to our formula that we've been using for probably 30, almost 40 years where we put it in the backyard and let the birds come. Birding has become a real big hobby to a lot of folks and we sell a lot of birdseed. Things like sunflower seeds, different grains like thistle seeds, safflower, to track the different types of birds and the feeders that go with it. So you can see that there's horse feed, a little bit of poultry, but that's really our bread and butter is birdseed.

**Joe Petit** [00:12:23] Do you have any actual farmers that buy from you?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:12:27] In terms of the grains or are you talking like also from fertilizer and seed? I mean, the farmer nowadays around us is one who has a small backyard flock. Let's say maybe as much as three or four dozen chickens at the largest. I do have a gentleman who lives up in Sagamore, has a small string of dairy cattle he uses mostly as a hobby and to show at county fairs. The growing ag-type farmers around us are doing pretty much like pick your own greens, sweet corn and things like that, so they'll buy some seed and fertilizer from us. But many of those things are also getting out of seed houses where they're having it delivered in. The days of having numerous farms around from when I was a kid to now, you can probably say went through twenty or so down to virtually nothing. Three or four that I can count really on one or two hands, you know, fingers. That's about it.

**Joe Petit** [00:13:27] Can you pinpoint the time when it really changed?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:13:34] It's been a gradual change because you look at the generations, for instance, when I was a teenager, the guys that were my age and their kids were my age at that time, maybe their families are not handing down the farms. Maybe the [inaudible] children didn't want to get into it. In some cases, you had the pressing use of land. For instance, several of the smaller farms that are in the valley, some were bought up by the park. Some just went out, decided not to carry on the tradition any longer. So it really probably took place over about a 20 year, 30 year period where you just saw it dwindle down. One here, one there. And just also the idea of some of the mass markets. I mean, if you're trying to go up against, you know, the grocery stores and things of that nature, it's pretty hard to be able to do it unless one wants a farm-fresh this or that. The old-fashioned garden markets are kind of making a comeback here and there, we see them pop up in the summertime. But the full-time stores that were there, they're not so much. And there were a couple in the area.

**Joe Petit** [00:14:48] So you say a lot of the farms dwindled, probably because the children didn't want to continue that. You obviously have been doing this as part of your family for a while. Tell us how you got into that.

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:15:02] I honestly think that God has a sense of humor, that if you're a Wilson, you're gonna be some way, shape, or form gathering dust on you, mill dust. Originally when I was in high school, I was hoping to become a teacher but working at the mill, I would help my parents out. Cleaning on a Friday night when I was eight years old probably didn't accomplish very much, but still was there, quote-unquote, "helping". And by the time I was 14, I was legally working there with a work permit. And even after going to college, I started to see that this might be the place I'm going to make my business the same way my father did before me. So and my brother was in the same boat. He can actually do a nice job as a stone bricklayer, but we're both here doing feed mowing. My sisters, the same, they help us out with bookkeeping. So it seems like, you know, there's a little link to the family being linked to the business and we found that it's made a good living for us. There's been some uptimes and some downtimes like right now where the economy is at, but we're still at it.

**Joe Petit** [00:16:08] So how long would you say you've been a miller, let's say?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:16:13] To use that term, I've been working legally at, you know, of course, we as kids, you always work for mom and dad doing little things. But I started literally with my work permit at 14, so that's thirty-three years already. And for that, it was sweeping floors and doing odd things down there. Being a little bit larger and a little stronger, I could carry some of the bags before I was 14 without any trouble. So I can put 33 years on the books there and then say that much with these.

**Joe Petit** [00:16:47] How long have you been doing it full-time?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:16:50] Since literally I graduated. I went to school pretty much full-time at Tri-C and any other time of the week I was working forty hours a week. So that goes back to when I was 18. So I'm looking almost 30 years there again.

**Joe Petit** [00:17:09] What about your kids and your siblings' children? What about the next generation? How actively involved are they?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:17:17] Well, the eldest of them are right around sixteen. I've got a daughter who's fifteen and a half at this point and her two nieces are just slightly older, same grade. They'll come down and do a little bit of work once in a while. Bagging, they've helped me out numerous times and promotions and special events. I don't know how much interest they have. All the kids have come down and run around and climbed on the bags and jumped into the bins where the grains at and things like that. It's, you know, taking home the dirt to mom, just like we did to my mom. But I don't really know how many of them will be interested in carrying on the business part of it. The next wave of my kids and also my nieces and nephews, then we go down around twelve years old and other than them looking for money to help pay for whatever, you know, hobbies and things that they want as teenagers, I'm not so sure if they're ready to work there or want to work there or not. We haven't been, we don't push them, and it just kind of happens on its own and we see what happens. So inevitably, I don't doubt that there will be some, one of them will want to pop their head in there and end up doing something like their father or mother did.

**Joe Petit** [00:18:33] Alright. Well, you said sell some things besides grain. What do you sell?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:18:40] Well, the bird feed is a big part of the feeders and accessories. During the spring, summer, and fall, we sell quite a bit of fertilizer, lawn products, insect killers. You know, if you got problems with your grubs in the yard as an example, ants around the foundation, we sell a great deal of grass seed bulk so that you can come in and take care of a patch in the yard. Dog food, cat food, pet treats are another part of our staple. You heard about the poultry type things, if we literally can, between some of the suppliers. If it walks, flies or swims, we could probably find a food for it. Wintertime, we do quite a bit of ice melters, whether you're buying it by the bag or by the pallet for a contractor who's doing snowplowing churches, funeral parlors, you name it. So we have a large umbrella of products of different kinds. It just depends what season and what you're looking for.

**Joe Petit** [00:19:46] When did you start to diversify what you sold?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:19:52] My father was probably the one that best saw this because in the late 60s and early 70s, he could see the shift of going from where we were dealing also with farmers, where our customer base was going to start being more retail-oriented as they just came in the door to buy fertilizer for their lawn or garden or finding garden vegetable seeds, or they were coming in to buy a bag of feed for the few chickens they had, it all started to shift. So that's when we started to see this switch over to a pre-produced product where we're getting a lot of things from suppliers versus making some of them ourselves. And also with that was the rise of the bird feed demand, which, you know, went from a time when he would maybe mix a pallet ton in let's say a day to where we can average two and three a day without any trouble. So it really happened probably when I was a younger child, in my early childhood and throughout about my early teens, he started to see the shift and with it came also, he had the foresight enough to think, you know what, I can't fight it. I might as well go with it and stay just enough ahead that because of our unique placewe're at, this old building. The people knew they could get good service there and there wasn't really any competition except for a few hardware stores and garden centers. We could do the lawn and garden point there, we could do the pet food thing. We could do the bird feed thing and still keep in touch with the farming, whether they were feeding a few cattle, a few pigs or whatever.

**Joe Petit** [00:21:29] Have you added anything new in the past few years? Have you been involved in any sort of diversification?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:21:39] Other than just adding and seeing what the newest products are and what people are looking for, nothing radical at this that I could say lay claim to. Of course maybe I'll have one of those aha moments coming up, but at this point I can't really take any credit there. It's been pretty much a within the same genre. If we have a new pet treat come out, that's something like that, but nothing radical and say "oh, we automatically have this here to." Other than maybe a game that became very popular in the last five years called cornhole toss, we sold the corn and my wife, being a mild seamstress, started making the bags. And, you know, we did a little bit of things like that. That's probably about the only diversification I could say was really there.

**Joe Petit** [00:22:34] Okay, so you guys made your own cornhole game?

**Speaker 2** [00:22:36] Yeah, I've tried to become a carpenter and it's this little sideline. It's developed because of the mill.

**Joe Petit** [00:22:45] Paint me a picture of your typical day

**Speaker 2** [00:22:50] Things I do? Do I include getting up and herding teenagers to a bus stop. Get my oldest ones up the school about six o'clock, walk them down to the school bus,about 6:20, next baskets up at seven. I have them down the hill about, because I live right across the street from the feed mill, I have them down the hill about 20 to eight and step foot in the middle, get the cash registers ready to go, start to set up any of the products that we have outside for displays. And basically, it's taking care of the customers, taking care of orders, troubleshooting customer relations, ordering product, taking care of random inventory. At this point in time when you're here, I basically whatever needs to get taken care of. It can be anything and everything, from standing behind the counter and doing actual sales with you as you walk in the door to carrying out the feed and putting it in your vehicle to answer your questions. "How come this ugly-looking weed is in my yard?" to "my dog doesn't like its dog food" or "what's that strange bird coming in?" I'm taking care, just basically watching as a bit of a shepherd over the young guys that I've got working for us because we need, you know, strong bodies and sometimes with it comes easily distracted. I shouldn't say that, I can't on tape. But dealing with early teens or early 20-something guys, it's sometimes keeping them moving and getting there. Basically making sure when the people come in the door, we get them what they need and have a reason to tell someone that they want to come back. And that'll go on and off from before eight to when we close the doors on the weekdays at five-thirty and then four o'clock on Saturdays. We haven't had to open on Sundays, but Lord willing, we probably won't.

**Joe Petit** [00:24:49] Is that pretty standard throughout the year, each season?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:24:54] You have to just change our focus from whether it's wintertime, where it's more feeding of the wildlife and taking care of snow and ice to summertime, putting in the lawns and fertilizing and selling some. We'll have a chick day coming up here in a couple of weeks. In early April, I got baby chicks for those who want to have a backyard flock and in the fall, it's selling pumpkins. So, you know, it's a little bit of everything, depending on what month of the year it is.

**Joe Petit** [00:25:25] Who makes the decisions?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:25:28] Well, in the past, my father was the chief cook and bottle washer, if you will use that. He was the president and the one who made decisions. As my brother and I have grown older and so has dad, he's pretty well-turned things to both of us. My brother is technically the president of the company, I'm a vice president. So a majority of the weighty decisions come through him, but he also makes sure to see what's the temperature in the room and what's the feel on anything he needs to make a decision on. So it is a bit of a a select democracy, if you will, between a couple of us. It is a family-owned business, so we best make sure we keep my two sisters in the loop on things because, you know, after all, this is their livelihood as well as ours, but primarily my brother and myself.

**Joe Petit** [00:26:25] Is your dad still actively involved?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:26:29] He comes into the mill. He calls himself retired, but he comes in for usually Monday through Thursday to work behind the counter. It keeps him busy and keeps him thinking. When we lost my mom about thirteen years ago, he decided he was going to get involved with trail riding with horses and now he raises donkeys and mules down towards Mansfield area and Galion area. So he needs to pay for his hobbies and take care of his critter, so he comes up for a couple of days, keeps his house up here and he's got a small farm down there. But usually three to four days a week, he's still there. So there's two generations of us working.

**Joe Petit** [00:27:14] Has that ever presented a problem where you and your brother make a decision and he might not agree with it?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:27:20] There's always going to be second guessing between generations. I'm starting to realize I'm becoming my father and I'm looking up and like asking him at times in my head, why are you thinking this way? So there's sometimes question about what's the judgment on it. For the most part, he's realizing that his view on things and his perspective is desired, but it may not always work for what's happening today. Just the same as maybe he saw with his dad and I heard there were some pretty good arguments between them in that in those days. So why would it be any different with us? But it's usually even if it's hotly discussed, it's pretty amicable.

**Joe Petit** [00:28:05] So between your father and his father, what sort of disagreements?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:28:10] Oh, it was about like the same things, which product needed to be in, why are you doing this? Why are you doing that? Or just the style of running a business and decision-making process. As we get generational, you'll find out as you get older, you start to look at the younger one and wonder why they do what they do. What was their thinking? Just the same as our parents and grandparents before us probably looked at us and going, why were you doing that? What were you thinking? I hope you're right when you make this decision, because if you're not, it's going to hurt. We're going to take a hit in business. You think you can sell that product because if you can't, somebody's gotta to pay for it. And both of them probably had very strong personalities, when they finally decide they want to make a decision, boy, don't step in the way of it. See him even now, "I don't know what you're doing, but I hope you're right."

**Joe Petit** [00:29:06] Was your father's decision to expand what you guys sold, was that a problem between him and his father?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:29:14] It might have been. I was too young to know about, I just heard that they had some pretty good knock-down discussions about stuff. That both of them were, my grandfather I know was a very strong personality, a little more outgoing than my father was so. They were probably coming at the same thing, looking at the same perspective from two different angles and bang, butting the heads.

**Joe Petit** [00:29:41] Alright. How successful is Wilson Feed Mill?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:29:44] Well, I will say there's a bit of irony attached to that because we're now in the third and fourth generation are working there. And throughout most of my limited but college education in business management, it seems that we had broken most of the major rules that my professors were telling me business needed to survive. So by the grace of God and hard work, it has been serving the people around this now for 110 years. And hopefully there will be another couple of generations there, depending on our relationship with the park and how the economy goes, and how things change with the customer's buying habits. You know, we're really an old-style business that needs to try to play catch up in a modern world. I mean, we do actually have a website now and that's something that we're only probably, what, a good 10 years behind the curve on things. But successful-wise with employees, we have probably six or seven full-time employees besides family and another half a dozen part-time kids that come in seasonally just at the Valley View location. So keeps us going and keeping people working. I guess we're fairly successful.

**Joe Petit** [00:31:06] You say that the business is more successful, or this is the most successful it's been?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:31:14] If you look at in terms of the number of customers and dollars and cents, those things are all up. We do add a little bit of a downturn in that last recession year, but if you think about it, it's still the number of customers coming through the door. We did OK. We had our high watermark and our best. It's hard to say because what we used to be able, let's say, buy a product for two dollars a bag, now it's costing us five and six dollars a bag. So to literally try to compare dollars, we'd have to try to use that factor of what's it cost today, no different than a gallon of gas 10 years ago versus a gallon of gas today. You know, we're always selling more units of this, less of this. So we usually trading one product for another. So that's a good question. I don't know if we can give you a straight answer other than what I gave.

**Joe Petit** [00:32:13] Tell us about the Chesterland location.

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:32:16] Well, my brother has been looking for some time because we have an odd arrangement with the National Park Service. The property that we occupy right now, the building belongs to Wilson Feed Mill. But the strange way the land has been drawn up in terms of the parcels, part of it belongs to us. Part of it belongs to what originally belonged to the state of Ohio, which we leased from the state, which then was turned over to the Park Service. So if you want to take a look at our overhead view of the land plots on it, it's like looking at a pie that comes all together and different angles. None of it's square, none of it, but part of it we own part. To make a long story short, we're never quite so sure what their game plan, long term plans were for this historic building because it's in a national registry. They did studies probably 20 some years ago, archived it, the whole nine yards. But what is the future? And in watching past processes and ways that the Park Service dealt with the public, it was pretty easy for them to almost wipe out small sections of people living there. Parts of Boston Heights and whatnot, even housing and certain businesses in the valley were just bought up. And we're always wondering when were we going to be next? Because this is something that's historically what makes the valley what it is. So my brother has always been looking at us. What are we going to do? We have to try to think about tomorrow. And somehow or other, he came into contact with the realtor and told him about this old business, I think was like 80 years old. A nursery out in Chesterland, not too far from where Mayfield Road, which it's on, and the 306 intersect. And by an odd sort of coincidence, which only can be talked of as irony or God's hand, he came to this place where he could buy the parcel for a very good price. And his tough time right now is to reacquaint himself with the people around him. He's got incredible traffic pattern out there in a very nice community, but the building hadn't been open for a really consistently for about two years. So they go back in there, are you going to still do the nursery like Sunnybrook was? Are you going to do a feed? Are you going to do both? So he's been having an interesting little game of juggling to find out what it is the people want there and when they shop, how they shop. The best way to describe our business down in Valley View is you're almost like the old fashioned McDonald's. You walk up to the counter, place your order, and you carry it out. We take it out for you. Sunnybrook, he's got an area there where he's got showplace. He's got people that walk around, so you could have someone walk in the door and disappear for twenty minutes and not even know they're on the grounds unless you bump into them. This is a whole different way of doing business that he's not quite so used to. So he's trying to familiarizing. In the meantime, we get to take care of business down at the valley like we have.

**Joe Petit** [00:35:27] Are there any notable differences in what people are looking for one location to the next?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:35:35] That's something slowly. Yes. And that's one of those works in progress for them because they are... The people that are buying out there are much more service-needy. They would like your personal attention a little bit more. A lot of our customers have come to know that we'll give you good customer service, we'll answer your questions, we'll try to give you the product that you want as best as we can. But there's no room for you to literally hover about and go and look and browse, if you will. Short of looking at the hundred and some bird feeders are hanging from the rafters, there's not a great deal there to get lost and wander about. And the folks that he's dealing with there are also coming and going at different times. Ours already, because of our hours, folks know usually when we're open here, they're much more relaxed. They're getting starting a little later in the morning or they would have been real early and then, let's say evening, almost in the early evening type of sell. So we just got to find out where the public wants to be there, when they want to be there. But they are a little more, personal attention would be the best way to describe what they're looking for. Products, if they want a certain type of dog food, they know what it is they want and come looking for it and they'll ask you.

**Joe Petit** [00:36:56] How long has that location been open?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:36:59] Coming up on the one year anniversary, which is basically the end of April, so April of 2010.

**Joe Petit** [00:37:07] You said that you purchased this second location as a backup in case of your current location being bought up. What is your relationship like with the Cuyahoga National Parks?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:37:26] It has been pretty good of late. We've had several meetings, our family, with different members of the staff out there from Dennis Ham, who's the... Works in the land contracts and land things to the assistant superintendent, who was at one of the two meetings we've had in the last four months. And we're trying to find out what it is we can and can't do because of the nature of the oddity of the way the land cuts. And what do we do because technically, the lease that we have, they can't renew it without having legal... The legal eagles look at it and the lawyers and say, okay, we can use this, but then we have to come up with a long-term plan. Are we gonna lease the property to Wilson's? What are we gonna do and how are we gonna proceed from here? It has been amicable because the one thing that I believe that the Park Service has come to realize, this is not just a historic building. It's a historic entity there and part of it is the people that have been running it and the people that have been coming to it. I can say more times than I can count the people that say "I used to come down to see this place when I was six, eight years old." And they're my age, which means they were probably bumping into me as I was running around there like a banshee with my sisters or my brother. This is where they've come to this place where they starting to see it's about the heritage that's there. Like many of these farms that have disappeared, you might have been two or three generations working the land, but it's just not going to happen. So we've had a good working relationship with the National Park Service, even though we have this paranoia that's hard to get around that says, you know what, Uncle Sam, when they want to do something, it's hard to stop the motion of something that big there. The inertia there is too hard to overcome.

**Joe Petit** [00:39:24] You said that relationship with them has been amicable of late. Was it ever not?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:39:31] Well, in the early days of living in and around the park, there was always this idea of that you never quite knew where you stood with the Park Service because we knew of horror stories of people that had their houses, just literally they were told, we're going to give you a relatively fair settlement. Here is your check and sorry, we need you to vacate your land or sell your business. Now, are they compensated fairly? Yes. The idea is you're telling me I have to pick up and move from a place that I've grown up in, or maybe it's been a part of our family for generations. That was never a good taste in the people's mouths. Plus the idea, as an example, we as kids used to run all over parts of the valley down by the river, shooting B.B. guns and sticks in the river, things like that. And all of a sudden there are park rangers telling us we can't go do what we've always done. Well, we necessarily were out there causing vandalism. But, you know, to us, that plant over there that we just stepped on, we'd have no clue what it is because there's a bunch of it in my backyard and a bunch of it here so we walked on. We grew up as kids that way and our parents before us. Now there's someone else coming in and telling you how to do things. You can't go here do, you can't do this. We may take your property. And as you well know, paranoia and hearsay kind of snowball. The rumor is, and when it gets started it's impossible to stop it now. Did we ever have bad blood between us in the park? No. But there was always that looming figure without a face that we didn't quite know who it was or what they were going to do.

**Joe Petit** [00:41:18] When the park came in and were buying up land. Did you lose a lot of customers? Did you lose any?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:41:26] Well, there were... I did have at least one friend that I grew up in high school that her family had to move. And there was others that I saw that I don't know whether they were forced to or given an offer they couldn't refuse. It was, you know, that good. But example, on the corner of the Tinker's Creek and Canal Road was a gas station there. I actually found out in earlier days I had uncles that owned it and the fellow that owned it at the time, his son was one of my best friends. And then now it's just a piece of green land. Now, was it a particularly pretty thing? No, it was your typical small-town gas station with tires and things around it, but that was part of the valley and everybody knew who it was that lived here, whose business it was and that was part of things. You know, when you start to hear those stories and you don't know as a kid, all the details, it's a pretty well given that you're not going to hear the whole story and you're still going to be kind of leaning towards paranoia. And my dad is has never been trusting of the government to begin with them in terms of when they want to do something. It seems like we've had way too many times we've seen big government change its mind and tell you what they're gonna do and you can't fight city hall. Now, that's not to say that it's always true that way, but it's hard to get around this perspective if you've, you know, seen it once or twice, the sky is falling, the sky is falling.

**Joe Petit** [00:42:51] Did your business change to lose a lot of customers?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:42:56] Not really, no. I mean, some of the open areas in the Valley, in Valley View, and I said the Valley, Valley View and some of the areas right around it, may now be a whole lot less agriculture-oriented because some of the properties in there or let's say a certain farmer was leasing a piece of ground by the river that was owned once by the state and now it's owned by the national park for him to go in there and use to plant his corn crop, let's say, now has come under the National Park Service governance. So whatever rules and regulations about what you can do, when you could plow, what you could apply in terms of insecticide or something like that, that all changed. And some of them found that they couldn't make a profit farming that way because the restrictions and regulations were now not going to be workable.

**Joe Petit** [00:43:50] What would you say is your philosophical approach to running the mill?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:43:59] Oh, you're going to need a memory card for that one. The big thing we can offer that it doesn't matter what we're selling, but we need to be knowledgeable what we sell is trying to provide service to customers who come in because you can find a lot of the same things that we're selling in other stores. You may not find it all under one roof, but can a big box store give you a service and take care of people and keep them coming back? We have numerous, as I stated before, many times over, there's people coming in there that have been coming in with their grandparents. You know, they're third generation coming in. They're just as I am a third-generation working there, fourth-generation. And to take care of the people coming in is still part of it. There's a little bit of an old-style charm to stand and talk to someone face to face rather than just going through a checkout line and also to be able to know what product I'm selling and be able to tell you if it works or how to use it. And it's much like the old-fashioned hardware store versus some of the bigger home hardware places. Now, do you have the knowledge of what to do? That's really one of the things we've tried to do that it doesn't matter where we're at when we're open. You've got to make sure you take care of the person coming through the door because there's so many places out there right now that would be willing to take their dollars. And if that's all it comes down to doing, then we've missed the boat. Now taking care of the employees, we don't get into doing, you know, what's my management style on that? Because it's a mishmash of different things that I think work. But running the business part of it is making sure that we're doing something more and take care of that customer and just more trading dollars for goods. That's a big plus today.

**Joe Petit** [00:46:05] Is this a different approach than your father's or your grandfather's?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:46:09] Nope. Pretty much the same thing. That's why the kids and grandkids of the folks in my dad took care of and my grandfather before him took care of hopefully they're still coming in if they live in the area. They know they can come down and get something at Wilson's that's just like their dad and mom did 20 years ago.

**Joe Petit** [00:46:31] Is this relatively the same approach you use for the Chesterland location?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:46:38] Yeah, very much so.

**Joe Petit** [00:46:43] How is the Cuyahoga Valley as a place to do business?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:46:48] Well, the neatest thing about living in Valley View in Cuyahoga Valley and working here is that we're close enough to cities and far enough away from them. For instance, if you want to come down to the mill, it's a short jump downstream from Akron or upstream from Cleveland. We've got multi big villages, small cities right around so people can get to us. Springtime it's a place where there's plenty of green to be seen in the fall. It's one of the prettiest places to visit. So there's a bit of an ambiance to being down in that natural place that when people can come down to it, there is this old building in a place that's kind of old-fashioned, still doing things in a fairly old-fashioned way. And that gives us a little bit of charm to work with and I think it's one of the real assets and benefits and blessings of being there, because if I want to, I can be in Cleveland in about 15 minutes and I'm also 15 minutes away from it. And if anybody wants to come to me, they're only 15 minutes away. But at the same token, it's a nice little nook away from things and a nice quiet place and a good place to live.

**Joe Petit** [00:48:06] In your years working there, can you think of any really notable years that it was particularly difficult or successful or not successful?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:48:18] Well, the last one has been difficult because we have tried to open a second location with the Chesterland store right behind us. The Park Service had a bridge that goes back to the Fitzwater maintenance yard for the Cuyahoga Valley scenic railroad. And the way, even though traffic was kept going, it was maintained, folks just didn't want to come down past that because it was a pain in the neck. So traffic flow was down, the economy was still in a bit of a downturn, and we had things being stretched. We're trying to figure out which way from Adam we're turning next on things in, this last year was a bit of a growing spell for us today. Gave us a few lumps and a few things that go, aha, I guess we need to watch for that. You know, every so many years, something pops up to challenge us. The economy has been in an interesting turmoil between cost of fuel to ship products to us and also an, shall we say, intensified interest by speculators in contracts for things like grains. Because right now you can go on the like Wall Street and buy futures on corn. And if you think about everything that corn is used for in our country, not only just animal feeds, but that means literally animal feed, because any piece of beef and pork and chicken that you're eating is probably fed with some form of corn. Go to have yourself a box of corn flakes made by with corn. Have yourself some Doritos made with corn, drinks and pop or sweeteners, corn syrup. And you start to see something that's just using that one individual product. Now, if that cost goes up, it sends a real ripple through everything. And there's even a bigger push now for bioplastics coming out of things like corn and certain grains. So let's say the demand on that is higher now than it's ever been. And someone with a portfolio says I can trade on that just the same way they traded crude oil and what it's going to be tomorrow. See, those type of things happen more often now than they did probably when my father and grandfather were there, it just intensifies. Instead of every five years, maybe having an upswing or downswing, now it's every two or three years stuff like this happens. So it makes it a challenge. And I'd say I have a real good year lately. I mean, there's a lot of decent ones. Nothing that we go back and say, wow, we just went right up through the roof with it. But, you know, the strong ones are the ones that help you grow, the hard ones.

**Joe Petit** [00:51:09] Any particularly bad year that stand out to you?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:51:12] I mean, other than watching, you know, like I said in the last couple of years, there's been— about three years ago, there was a spike and it happened again. We're watching the grain prices just take, you know... If you have expendable income, or really disposable income, and you want to spend it on the birds, that's great. But at what point do you say enough is enough and I don't have to do this. I want to do this. Now I have to ask how much do I want to spend if I want to do this? If I want to buy a bag of dog food, at what value do I have to count the cost and see folks will start looking at that and saying, well, I don't have to buy the real good stuff or I could buy the better, so I'll go buy the cheap stuff. I can get that at Walmart. It's cheap there, let's say. And now I have to figure out, you know, these are the questions we ask ourselves as we watch this economy happen with again, fuel costs that influences fertilizer, which influences grain production. And then we start to see transportation costs and then I used the example corn as a as a commodity. Sunflower, believe it or not, if you think for all the bird feeding we sell it for, that's cooking oil. So Frito-Lay decides they're going to use sunflower oil to cook with and the demand goes up on it and then all these things are sold on the market, we take a hit like we did this year and have to go, cross our fingers and toes and pray a lot and say, "hey, God, we need help here." I guess I don't believe in crystal balls, they don't work too well.

**Joe Petit** [00:52:51] Do you have any additional stories about your time there that you'd like to share with us?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:52:59] How about I just sum it up with this, I really do enjoy working down there because there were so many characters that used to come in that were my grandfather's age. And, you know, I wish that I had the opportunity to sit down with the tape recorder and ask him questions. Kind of like what you're asking me, because we've forgotten in this world really how we used to do things. Listening to the farmer who used to live up on the hill talking about when there used to be two cars, four cars, he'd seen every day. Same two going into town that were coming out of town every night back in a time when things were still horsedrawn. It was well before my time, but to hear them talk about it, it seems like such a distant memory to folks that live like us where we can be on a highway doing 70 miles an hour and be at Cedar Point in an hour. But yet those days, 10 miles an hour by a pretty fast-moving carriage would have been the trick. And watching how my father and my grandfather, everything had to be done by hand where now we have lift trucks to get literally a rail car full of peat moss for putting in gardens and beds and things like that, that every bail was handled by hand. And, you know, as a youngster, I remember having to help stack those things and the smell of the mill, the grain, the smell of fertilizer, it's one things if I'm away for a couple of days and I go back, it just heightens the senses. So it's kind of a broad palette to take a paint from and say, do I have one story and give you dozens and dozens. But they all come down to being and working in a very unique and wonderful place and hopefully be there for a lot longer.

**Joe Petit** [00:54:48] Is there perhaps one story from your time that you think embodies your work?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:54:56] Hmm, you may want to hit the pause button on this one. One like that. It's tough. It's part preacher and part storyteller. I could come up with dozens of little bits and pieces, but I can't say one ever stands heads and shoulders above it. It's more like a patchwork, more like a quilt if I would. You know, being down there with my dad when I was a kid, I could remember coming home and using pillows, throw them around like they were sacks of feed because that's what dad did. Going down there and snooping around in the mill and climbing up in the bins and almost swimming in like what would seem like a sea of the kids doing in the balls, except ours were kernels of corn. And you step wrong, you could basically bury yourself up to your knees and, you know, someone else could bury elected, buried in the sand to go out underneath some of the pallets. We used to have peat moss and dig up earthworms and go fishing. Like I said, there's dozens of little snapshots like that to go to and make a real nice quilt, but I can't come up with one. I'll think of it on the way home, how's that? I'll call you. He's going to get this on his cell phone, there's going to be a voicemail six minutes long.

**Joe Petit** [00:56:38] Alright, Carolyn?

**Carolyn Conklin** [00:56:40] Yeah, I just have a couple of questions. Can you describe for us, because we've never been to the mill, what does it look like?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [00:56:48] The mill as it is right now is a fairly rectangular, boxy building, about four or five stories tall, white, with a general peak on it has. And on the outside of it right now, modern, what we call grain legger elevator. It looks like two metal rectangles that go up to the top. And what that is, is like when we used to offload grain or we off load grain truck comes up, puts we put an auger to it, which is like a screw mechanism and puts it into what is now a conveyor. And these cups take it up and dump it in through the mill. It's perched right on the edge of the Ohio and Erie Canal, which was built that way because it was built to use the water power. On the northern side of the building would be a falls box or what they called the mill run and the water there was diverted underneath the mill and would turn the turbines. So if you can imagine how having a water wheel like we see in a lot of pictures that flows over the top, most of the time in the life of the mill was probably turbine-powered where it went underneath and the wheel laid on their sides and then through belts and shafts and different things to, you know, dispersed the power that everything from grinding to mixing to moving the elevators, to the Canal Road side of things where it's now there is a small sales office where we funnel the customers and that's where we have our show place. All the bird feed, our feeders, and some of the small things that we have right there. There are two buildings; it's one building directly attached to the actual mill portion. It's cinderblock that was put in probably 50 some years, 60 years ago. And then there's one gigantic shed, if you will, that handles where we put all our bulk pallets of birdseed and fertilizer and horse feed. The mill was built 1853-ish, so you're looking at inside, the timbers are fairly rough-hewn. Some of the original windows in there that we had some of the glass. You could see how imperfect it is because it wavered. Much of that is still original. On the insides, the floors are, if you can find a flat piece of ground and the floor is God bless you because there's really no bedrock underneath the mill being in a flat bottom land like that. So when my dad used to use a turbines, the whole place kind of had a twist and shake, you know, a sway to it. Back when the mill was originally built, the parking lot where we have now would have been part of the old canal roadbed. We have pictures I think even on the website over there where you can see where they stand now versus, if you were to stand there and stood there 50, 60 years more than that ago and, it used to be a pretty much gravel parking lot, as you know, now paved with a few fading lines on it. So it's a unique old looking building. At one time during the 60s and 70s because of the height of the falls box , because you can almost guarantee there was the biggest bubble bath you ever seen outside where the waterfall was because the turbines would get churned up in it. Now, not having as much water in the canal as it is, that area is all open and part of the most all the original falls, the box itself is it had rotted away and was pretty much we tore it out now. We'd like to fix that back up again. If the money in the situation was right to do it, we could probably have a working water turbines in there without much trouble. But it's like I said, four or five stories tall, white with a green roof on it. It's been used as a backdrop by the local weather people for probably 30 years and ever since they started putting things behind, you know, Dick Goddard and Don Webster when they did the weather forecast.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:00:51] I understand you are the family historian, is that correct?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [01:00:55] I'm a history buff.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:00:57] Okay.

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [01:00:58] I've always had a love for history and not a specific thing. I am not a great detail person to things. But I can remember stories, remember facts. It's led me to one of my favorite hobbies, I'm a Civil War reenactor, right here in the heart of Ohio. I'm a tried and true Confederate. I'm not a racist. I believe in states' rights and some of these men were dead on when they say we needed a little less huge, big government telling us what to do. But I enjoy history because there's stories to be told there. Sometimes just not facts and fiction. It's nice to hear, you know, that somehow or other 200 years ago, his family and mine happened to hop off the boat or bump into each other when our boats came together at Ellis Island or whatever. And this is kind of a Forrest Gump type of thing where he manages to waddle his way through history and bumps into great events that happen. And I love that type of thing. So I get to be the one to try to tell the stories and try to remember the facts and the general flow of what happened from finding out that as the story goes, it was about six years ago, going up to the opening of the Mill Stream Reservation by Garfield Heights. They had all these family members coming from the people that had one of the more prominent mills. But yet we have had in our business a picture of the place that my great grandfather and great-great-grandfather had before him and if you look at the old land parcels, you know the drawings of it, sure enough, there it says either Thomas R. or Thomas G. Wilson. Here I'm standing there and they're getting all the hoopla and one of my friends said to me, "Why don't you say something?" I said, "Why? We'll be here after they're gone and business as usual," you know? But it was neat to think that the same place that one of the future governors of Ohio had property, we were in that same, trying to make a living using falling water someplace. So, yeah, I love trying to remember the stories and tell them. And it's neat when you can touch and smell history.

**Carolyn Conklin** [01:03:06] Do you have anything else you wished we had asked you would like to share?

**Thomas "Skip" Wilson** [01:03:10] Like I said, I'll have 20/20 hindsight here, probably within half hour of getting out of here. Yeah. Just out of curiosity, what is it... How do you get involved with it? You can take it off, yeah.