

Wilson Sorensen: Founding of UVSC

SEPTEMBER 27, 2002 12:00 AM • [TAD WALCH - THE DAILY HERALD](#)

The Daily Herald

The world was embroiled in war in February 1945. Saturation bombing turned the German city of Dresden into an inferno, softening Nazi resistance as the Allies pushed toward the heart of Hitler's crumbling empire. Fears of heavy casualties in an invasion on Japan grew when nearly 7,000 U.S. soldiers were killed in the assault on Iwo Jima. The Manhattan Project was in full swing in New Mexico, as scientists rocketed toward Trinity and the first atomic bomb.

In Utah Valley, government-sponsored classes at Provo High School trained women to build warplanes. These local versions of Rosie the Riveter stepped into an immensely productive industrial stream that poured out war matériel headed overseas. The nation's vocational schools churned out skilled blue-collar laborers who kept the assembly lines rolling.

At the capitol in Salt Lake City one day that February, Wilson Sorensen edged forward in his gallery seat as one of his key supporters spoke to the State Legislature. He watched closely as balding, bespectacled politicians determined the fate of a small vocational school, which 48 years later would become Utah Valley State College and would rival the size of BYU, the University of Utah and Utah State University.

Powerful enemies stood in the way of that future: legislators who didn't want to spend state funds to educate workers they felt should be trained by private industry. Sorensen knew the school -- known then as Central Utah Vocational School -- would close after the war, when federal money dried up, if the state didn't accept it as one of its own.

His vision for a Utah version of the nation's major trade colleges hung in the balance.

Sorensen battled dejection as he lobbied during the 60-day legislative session, trying to convince his hard-headed opponents that the school served the needs of many of the state's residents. A bill introduced in 1943 to provide state funds had failed. Now, two years later, Sorensen held his breath as State Sen. Elisha Warner of Payson stood up in support of Senate Bill 77.

Warner told his fellow legislators that the argument over CUVS reminded him of a large family sitting at dinner with an orphaned child waiting nearby for leftover scraps. "It's time for you to realize the orphan is an important contributor and should be made a member of the state family," Warner said.

The lawmakers did accept the school into the state family, but scraps were exactly what they gave. They appropriated \$25,000 for each of the first two postwar years to a school with an annual budget of \$200,000.

Nevertheless, with the vote of acceptance Sorensen had his foot in the door. As time went on, his genius for crisis management and his vision steered a nascent UVSC through a number of potentially fatal predicaments and finally transformed an underappreciated stretch of Orem corn fields, fruit orchards and gravel pits into an oasis of education for tens of thousands of Utah County students.

"The big step was to get the school established as a state school," says Sorensen, now 86. "Once we were recognized as a member of the family, I figured we could fight our battles for funding like the other schools."

At the dinner in his honor last night Provo businessman Bill Anderson said, "Wilson Sorensen is living proof of the scripture that out of small things proceedeth that which is great. He is the true father of Utah Valley State College."

Sorensen's trailblazing 37-year tenure as the school's president was honored with the Sons of the Utah Pioneers "Modern Day Pioneer Award" at a dinner in the UVSC banquet hall.

High schools in the Utah and Heber valleys began in 1938 to host a scattered group of 12 classes for a state vocational program. Those classes were the beginnings of a new school, and in 1941 a new institution was born, complete with its name and its first campus in Provo at 1100 S. University Ave. Its buildings were barracks on the Utah County Fairgrounds, leftovers from a New Deal project. Money came from Congress, which had passed the National Defense Education Act to provide money for training skilled industrial workers.

If the war was the school's *raison d'être* it also created imposing problems for a 25-year-old purchasing agent fresh out of BYU. Businesses that produced tanks, aircraft and small arms for war had A-1 priority to purchase scarce materials. Sorensen's fledgling vocational school was well down the totem pole, with a purchasing priority rating of A-10. It wasn't the lowest rating, but it was close, and not much different.

Other men would have bowed to the pressure, peers report, but not Sorensen.

"I found Wilson to be a very, very persistent person," says Orville Gunther, 90, one of the school's first three teachers and already on hand when Sorensen arrived in 1941. "He's quite calm and collected. He doesn't get overly excited, but he keeps coming back. I think that's his great quality."

Gunther watched Sorensen wrestle with the system to get instructors and students the materials they needed. Sorensen traveled the state. He frequented warehouses, especially at one Salt Lake company that allowed him to buy anything in stock on the theory that if the War Department hadn't taken it yet, it must not need it. He developed a knack for finding equipment that didn't have all the bells and whistles the military required but which fit perfectly the needs of the school. He patiently filled out forms others ignored, used gentlemanly persuasion and above all, kept going back.

Ironically, Gunther found himself in Sorensen's shoes in 1942 when Gunther's father died. Gunther took on the family business, Gunther's Comfort Air, but he, too, faced a low purchasing priority for the steel he needed. He tore a page from the Sorensen playbook on

wartime acquisition.

"I copied Wilson's techniques, studiously filing all the proper forms and using the proper persuasion," Gunther says. "I learned the same things and was able to get steel."

By 1943, school officials began to prepare for the war's end, which inevitably would mean the cessation of federal funding. They applied for state sponsorship, but the legislature rejected the proposal. Sorensen went to Capitol Hill as the school's lobbyist for the next legislative session, in 1945, and wedged that stubborn orphan foot in the door.

It was a be-careful-what-you-wish-for triumph, however. When the following year he became president of the school he'd helped save, it was in the middle of its worst budget crisis.

"We had to make a report at the monthly state board meetings and that was scary, me not having a lot of administrative training," Sorensen says. "We had to account for every dime we spent or were going to spend."

He visited other vocational schools to pick up administrative nuances, but never changed his habit of pitching in where help was needed.

When the fighting ended, the supplies he'd scrambled after for four years were classified as war surplus and became available for free or for pennies on the dollar. Sorensen drove a truck all over the state, snapping up machines and material, such as 22 diesel engines from armored tanks in Tooele, and hauling it all back to his campus of wooden barracks. He operated a forklift, too, moving big equipment around the campus.

"Surplus was probably one of the main factors we used to keep the school going for the next 10 years," Sorensen says. "If we'd had to pay for new equipment, we never could have made it. At the beginning, we could just go to the depots and haul things away. I'd leave somebody else in charge and go pick up equipment and supplies. Some people complained I was doing a laborer's work with an administrator's pay, but we were so short of help and everyone at the school was so good at what they did, I could leave and know everything would be all right."

It very nearly wasn't all right. Money ran out late in 1946, two months before the next legislative session. CUVS supporter Allen Bateman, the superintendent of education, managed to wrangle a \$20,000 appropriation from the state board of examiners to bridge the gap.

It was just enough. Gov. Herbert B. Maw signed House Bill 127 on March 14, 1947 and the Central Utah Vocational School became a state institution under the management of the State Board of Education. Sorensen's band of master craftsmen would continue to teach auto mechanics, radio, sheet metal, carpentry and pattern making.

"Kerry thinks he had some problems this year," Sorensen says, smiling as he refers to UVSC's third president, Kerry Romesburg, who grappled with the state over a budget of nearly \$70 million.

Sorensen's next problem would be a recurring one -- growth. In 1960, UVSC's enrollment was 1,896. By 1970, it exploded to 5,161.

The institution grew steadily, even as it struggled for prestige. For years the school was known in the valley as Trade Tech, a name that, to many, carried a negative connotation, suggesting a place not worthy of the respect afforded the large liberal arts universities and "higher" education.

"The image of the school began to improve as people who attended it started to get good jobs," Sorensen says. "At first, the high schools sent us kids who couldn't make it in English or philosophy classes. Shop class was a second-class citizen.

"The change began in World War II and continued as people realized a heavy equipment operator could make more than a school teacher."

In fact, UVSC still has trouble keeping some vocational students enrolled long enough to graduate because local companies raid the campus for men and women with a year of instruction.

The face of Provo near LaVell Edwards Stadium could have been radically different. Sorensen and other school officials put together a partnership in 1948 that included cash from Utah County, the city of Provo and four school districts and purchased 13 acres of land next to BYU for \$32,250.

The first building on the new campus opened in 1954, located at 1200 N. University Ave. BYU now owns the property. Students and faculty showed up the day after Christmas 1953 to move equipment from the barracks to their prized new home.

Sorensen, certain that even more land was necessary, planned to expand the campus north to 2300 North and west to 200 West. Then the state extended University Avenue beyond 1200 North and BYU built the football stadium and bought up land for a parking lot and intramural fields.

Before long, UVSC's Provo campus was bursting at the seams, breaching the planned capacity of 2,000 students. In 1966, Sorensen spearheaded efforts to purchase land in Orem along Interstate 15. The state bought up farms, orchards, homes and even two gravel pits, paying a dollar for one of them.

The original chunk included 116 acres, purchased for \$346,000. The site grew to 185 acres by 1972, including a plot owned by Richard Gappmayer, a holdout. Gappmayer finally relented, a decision he would be proud of were he still alive, says his son Merrill, who calls Sorensen a visionary.

"Wilson's a modern-day pioneer who managed to buy land in Orem with a fantastic vision," says Gappmayer, chairman of IHC's board of directors. "He provided a marvelous base for Marvin Higbee and Kerry Romesburg to create this wonderful school. Some of that land was my father's fruit farm. He for one would be really pleased to see what's sitting on that property, acquired under the wisdom of Wilson Sorensen."

Gappmayer said Sorensen saw the needs of an emerging valley and moved to meet them. "He said, 'We have to have space in a place where we can grow.' He knew what the future would hold as far as education here. He provided a place for students who wanted to go to BYU

when there no longer was room at BYU."

Anderson, the retired businessman who chairs UVSC's scholarship fund, is thrilled UVSC has supplemented BYU. "In our day," he says, "going to BYU was automatic. It was like going to the 13th grade for kids living in the valley. We just went up and registered." Last year, fewer than 3,000 of BYU's daytime students were from the valley while more than 15,000 Utah County natives attended UVSC.

Today, UVSC sprawls across 240 acres and total enrollment has surpassed 23,000. Sorensen believes the land could hold 40,000 students, if the state allows construction to continue.

"If I ever did anything for this school it was getting this site," Sorensen says. "It's ideally located in the center of the county with easy access to the freeway." That statement was made recently, as he shuffled slowly into the Wilson Sorensen Student Center -- "I was opposed to that name, but I was outvoted," he says.

Not everything worked out the way he wanted it. He is mildly distressed over the school's direction; his vision included making UVSC one of the nation's elite vocational schools, but the valley wanted a liberal arts college to supplement BYU, which capped its enrollment in the 80s.

"I envisioned not so much a liberal arts or general education school as a Rochester Institute of Technology or Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo," Sorensen says. "That was my hope, but those schools are close to industrial centers, and we're in a different situation here."

He hated to see the machine shop shut down because it was basic to all metalworking industries. However, he doesn't blame Romesburg, who as president from 1988 until he left this summer carefully listened to Sorensen and continued to emphasize the trades while building a liberal arts empire around them.

"Watching this unfold has been absolutely remarkable," Anderson says. "Wilson worried that Marv Higbee, who came from Snow College to replace him, would kill the vocational emphasis, but he just recognized the need. Romesburg got on a train going the right direction and just opened the throttle."

The foundation was built by an unassuming man. A search for Wilson Sorensen on the Internet is virtually fruitless. He hasn't sought publicity and it hasn't sought him in years.

"He is a quiet, energetic giant who was always willing to pitch in and help," Anderson says. "He was the first chairman of Provo's Freedom Festival and every year they had to build a stage inside the football stadium. It took a month. Wilson was out there much of the time in a carpenter's uniform, organizing the project."

Romesburg kept Sorensen involved at the school, to the delight of many. "He is so detail-oriented it's amazing," says Derek Hall, the UVSC spokesman who often fields calls from Sorensen reminding him to document the school's history.

This proves Gunther's point, as does a story Anderson retells about Sorensen's financial struggles as a BYU student. "He went down to BYU and told the president, Franklin Harris, that he didn't have tuition money," Anderson says. "Harris said he'd give him a half scholarship

if he could earn the other half. Wilson got a job making 25 cents an hour. It took him the whole year to save his half of the tuition, which was \$30."

Gunther said that perseverance was evident throughout Sorensen's service at UVSC. "He persisted in acquiring equipment from the federal government during and after the war," Gunther says. "He persisted in acquiring funds from the federal government and later from the state of Utah. Then he quite persistently worked on the state legislature for support of the school's growth."

One other development continues to bother Sorensen, however. Don't blame him for traffic messes at the intersection of University Parkway and Sandhill Road, the main entry to the Orem campus. He envisioned that, too. "I suggested an overpass or an underpass," he says. "The state didn't believe me."

The state was wrong and Sorensen was right. Anyone who makes it through that intersection becomes a witness to the best monument to Wilson Sorensen's vision, a vibrant, increasingly influential and ever-growing UVSC.

Tad Walch can be reached at 592-3122 or at twalch@heraldextra.com.

This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page A8.