

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview
Summary approved 12.31.2013

Oral History #15 Date: 6/6/2013
Place: Merlino living room, 126 West 4th Street, Palisade Length: 35:05
Interviewee Albert Merlino a.k.a. "Peanuts" Phone:
Interviewer Charlene Weidner Phone:

Family:

Father, Joseph A. Merlino, was born in French Algeria and was a life-long coal miner. Albert's mother, Carmella Marie Massaro, was born in Pueblo, Colorado.

Albert was born in Canon City, Colorado on July 24, 1921 and lived in Brookside, a small town near there. The family moved to Palisade when Albert was 10 in 1932. His nickname, Peanuts, was coined by from Oswald "Ning" Rosa.

Had three brothers - John, older, and Gerald "Jerry," and Edward, younger; and three sisters, Angelina, Helen, and Margaret.

He married Marion Theresa Bertram in Steamboat Springs on December 5, 1948. Marion's sister, Blanche, was a home economics teacher in Steamboat Springs at the time.

Marion was born January 19, 1923, delivered by Dr. Weidlein in Palisade. She graduated from Ross Business College in Grand Junction and did clerical work for the CD Smith Drug Company in Grand Junction as well as the bookkeeper and secretary for United Fruit Growers Association. She was also a gifted artist, and many of her oil paintings are displayed around town. Albert and Marion first rented an apartment on the top floor of what had been Judge Hoke's home on Bower Avenue and bought the house at 126 West 4th Street in 1950. Frank Waite who ran the theater owned the house on Bower street.

His older brother was an excellent athlete and they were competitive at everything - fishing, outdoor activities and ball playing. The American legion sponsored a team which played in Riverbend Park - near the CCC Camp. The High School football field was also there. Cameo had enough youngsters to form a team as well. Later, became part of Palisade.

Hobbies/Athletics

Albert was very athletic and played baseball, basketball, and went out for track in High School. Later, he played on Town basketball and baseball teams. He enjoys fly fishing for trout, and ballroom dancing.

First Impressions

When the Merlino family came to Palisade in 1932, they stayed at the Midland Hotel on Third Street, owned and operated by Frank and Mary Brissio. Over the ensuing years, the Merlino's rented homes at various locations in Palisade, including one at 4th and Kluge in 1934 across the street from St. Ann's Catholic Church. Later, they rented a home on First Street from Jim Hart where he had an orchard. The new St. Ann's Catholic Church is located there now. Then the Merlino's bought a home on Logan Street.

What first impressed Albert about Palisade was the water in the drinking fountain by the Palisades National Bank at 3rd and Main Street. The water in Brookside was hard water from wells. Palisade's water "tasted like soda." There was another fountain between Hoffman Garage and the Hoffman's house across 3rd Street from the Midland Hotel. The fountain was eliminated by street work. He also liked meeting youngsters here.

Work in Peach Harvest

Albert worked in peach harvest and swam in canals - first the smaller ones, then the Highline, and the Colorado River. In the other direction was the Grand Valley canal. By 3:00 in the afternoon, everyone was hot and decided to go swimming and cool off and then go back to work.

He started working as a "box boy" which supplied empty boxes to the packers, and other shed work. They didn't earn much in the Depression, maybe 10 cents an hour. Albert moved here in the Depression and graduated from Palisade High School in 1939. Everyone had to work. Later, he made boxes and nailed lids. They worked in the packing sheds from 7 a.m. to 3 a.m. during harvest. There was only one fruit season a year to make money.

Agriculture and Mining

Farmers worked in the mines and vice versa. They didn't have to supply coal in the summer. People had a two - three months supply. There was no natural gas until the late 1950s in Palisade.

Natural Gas Regulations

Albert served on the Town Board for six years, including four years as mayor (1960 - 1964) When he was on the town board, coal miners came to Town Hall to protest natural gas. Difficult for him because his Dad was a coal miner, and with John L. Lewis leadership, miners could get pension. The Union District manager from Delta came to protest natural gas in Palisade. Ironically, Cameo miners who moved to Palisade, including Louis Klemenic who lived across the street from the Merlino's, used propane to heat their houses.

Town Improvements

The fight over natural gas was one of the major frustrations he had as a board member. The other was improvements to the streets and sanitary system. The proposal to the people was for assessments to cover the costs - his house was assessed \$700 for curb, gutter, road and sidewalks, which would be several thousand dollars now. Most people were tired of the dirt, and dust from the streets. Town Marshall Tom McVey was also responsible to drive the sprinkling wagon to keep the dust down. He would start at one end of the street and by the time he was at the other, the first part was dry again so he could never keep up. Stanley Smith was Town

Marshal later. Some business people objected to the assessment because it would take money away from other uses they would like to have seen. Never paved the alleys except the one (from Main to Kluge) was finally paved. The traffic is tremendous since the postal (mail drop box) on the corner.

Insectary

Albert worked at the Colorado Department of Agriculture Insectary his whole career. When he came home in January 1946, his dear friend, Wade Hampton who he graduated with, and Gene Taylor, another classmate, both worked there. Gene decided to do something else, so Wade contacted him. Lorin Anderson hired him for the summer. Ruth Rowley was Lorin's acting secretary and she left to marry Barney Davis. When the summer ended, Lorin decided Albert could stay on. He could type, and file, and perform other duties, so "they kept me on ever since." He was Lorin's stenographer, did filing, typed letters and was "very versatile." His job was "Oriental Fruit Moth Scout." He would place traps and grow the parasites which parasitized the moth larvae.

He also drove a school bus for four or five years, beginning in 1946. He would go to work, then get the bus and take the kids to school, go back to work, then get the bus and take the kids home and go back to work.

The Insectary also did shop work--make insect cages, and electrical. Lorin was good at that. Also, bio work with insects. Albert felt he was born to do the work. Mrs. Burlingame, was the high school biology teacher and Albert was curious about dissecting worms and bugs, so this "miracle fell into his lap" so he could prove himself.

The Insectary work transitioned from the Oriental Fruit Moth into others. It was recognized by other countries. They sent material to South America, Argentina, Australia. A person from Australia came to the Insectary to see parasites being raised. They also traded with other states, with USDA approval that the bugs wouldn't cause other problems. When the (peach) varieties changed, the Oriental Fruit Moth became less of a problem because the life cycle changed. Albert eventually became the director of the Insectary.

CCC Camp

He was in the service when the German POWs were in Palisade, but remembers the camp before he left. His cousin from Pueblo was billeted at the Palisade CCC Camp. The CCC Camp also had Bureau of Reclamation employees living there later. They played baseball there in the 1950s.

The fruit growers petitioned for the Migrant Camp (to be built further west from the CCC Camp)

The Busby family lived in the only house there. They later moved to Bridges Switch.

Telephone Company

His older sister, Angelina, was the soda fountain gal, working for Bob Gebhardt at the Drug Store. Al's younger sister, Margaret, was a telephone operator at the telephone company building on South Main Street. Other operators included Frances Allen Bennett, Ivy McKay, and Dorothy Hartgraves. The manager of the telephone company was James Tillotson. He was replaced by

Earl Schaffer. Tom McCall, Jr. local contractor , won the bid to remodel the building. Harry Herman worked on the building's brickwork. Lois McCall, Tom's wife, was a fourth grade art teacher . "She was special!"

The Town always had a good baseball team. From the early days and after WWII, The Palisade American Legion Post 50 sponsored the team. Some old time players were Gene Cutter, Frank Clark, Bill Tilton, Farmer Thomas, Dick Cope, Jeff Williams and Albert's older brother, Jack Merlino. Albert was the bat boy. The baseball field in Riverbend park where they played is where the largest cottonwood trees are now located.

Proudest Accomplishments

Albert is proud he earned "respect from my community to become mayor. It was not political," he was asked to run and had to get approval from the (Agriculture) Department. Bill Lorenzen, Publisher of the Palisade Tribune newspaper, ran against him, but Albert was reelected. Bill later ran for town board and they served together. Lorenzen was later elected mayor (1964-1972).

His work with the Palisade Fire Department is another thing he that makes him proud. He was a volunteer for more than 30 years, including seven years with the Colorado State Fireman's Association. They would compete with other Western Slope Fire Association members and won many trophies now displayed in the new fire house.

Early Days

There were four or five families that ran most of the businesses, with the exception of Mr. Kluge. They were prominent, went to different churches, and didn't step on each other's toes. His Dad worked, raised a family, and earned respect and didn't trespass on anybody or their interests and it turned out well.

Mining

Mr. Merlino and Matt Somerville leased the Palisade Coal Mine. It closed in the late 1940s, and he worked for the Supancics - Louie was in Albert's class - and then worked in Cameo because they had a good contract with Public Service until the "poor coal" situation. Then, Mr. Merlino went to Somerset above Paonia. He loved the coal mines. He told his sons, though, we're a coal mining family, but the industry won't last, so they all went in different directions (than mining).

Navy

Albert first tried to enlist in the Navy in 1940 with Harry Herman and Gene Moore. He was at school at Mesa College and they went down to the recruiter to enlist. Gene Moore was the only one who passed the physical test. It was very rigid then - no partial color blindness, arches had to be so high. Two of them didn't pass the physical, so they went to California and were there when the war broke out. Albert's oldest sister and brother in law were living there. Albert was living in Culver City, 1/2 block from MGM Studios.

Albert, his brother, John, and Harry Herman were working at the Harville Aircraft and Diecast Company in Englewood, California when Pear Harbor was bombed by the Japanese. They were offered trial for deferments, but felt they'd get drafted eventually. His brother, John, did get drafted into the Army and earned the Bronze Star for his service in the Pacific Theater. Albert

and Harry, along with Palisade classmates Harry Hampton and Garth Gardner, decided to join the Navy to avoid the risk of being drafted. In the War, they didn't have the same rigid physical requirements. Albert felt if they had passed the physical in 1940, the four of them would have been sent to San Diego for training and been at Pearl Harbor in December, 1941.

His number was 6187898 and he served as a Gunners Mate 1st Class in the U S Navy in World War II. He enlisted in 1942 in Grand Junction and was discharged in 1946 at Shoemaker, California. He trained in Farragut, Idaho and Newport, Rhode Island. He was at the Naval Gun Factory in Washington D.C., Portland, Oregon, and on the USS Caravan (AM-157) Minesweeper all over the Pacific - Hawaiian Islands, Alaska, and the Caroline Islands. His last ship was the USS Garrard (APA-84) bringing troops home from the Philippines.

Harry Herman served in the Atlantic, Dutch Hampton served in the Pacific.

Other Memories and comments

"Growing up in Palisade is a privilege." His Dad offered they should have moved to California where other relatives had gone and done better financially, but they all loved to fish, picnic, camp with Grand Mesa so close. He told him he made the "right move" to stay in Palisade

The fruit industry has changed so much. It used to ship 2,000 railcars. He worked at "all three" marketing associations, the United Fruit Growers, Co-op, and Pacific Fruit - Snoboy. There would be refrigerator transit cars all the way from Palisade to Clifton. The Railroad would keep shifting loaded cars out and empty ones in.

When he was a boy, five acres was a big deal. All of us hate to see the changes but have to adapt. Palisade has done a good job of that. Palisade is now three A - Art, Agriculture, and Alcohol. It's wonderful to have the grape people to balance out the (economy.) He admires the peach people for their nitty gritty to keep staying in the business. He grew up the industry, since 1932. His father in law, Tom Bertram, had 16 acres of fruit in the Vinelands - Albert bought five acres from him when he retired and enjoyed it.

The changes in labor. People came from Kansas, Oklahoma, and other Western Slope communities, and willingly camped in the orchards with five gallon cans of water and access to an outhouse. They would load their trucks with fruit and head back home, like it had been a vacation. Now, if you take on labor, you have to have government regulated housing and all things that go with it. "My house wouldn't pass. New homes, at that time, either." Don't know if it still exists.

Lots of changes for our little town have been good - you can't stop change. Locals will think change was good in the long run.

The big thing was harvest - and Palisade Day - it was really something. People who moved would come back and reflect on their associations with each other.

He is glad to see the festivals, Sunday Market, the Library across the alley, and the Chamber across the street. "It's very special. "