

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # 794

Date: March 1 & 6, 1984

Place 3706 G Road, Palisade, Colorado

Length: _____

Interviewee: George Bunte, Jr.

Phone: _____

Interviewer: Justina Nelson

Phone: _____

This is a summary of an audited transcription of three oral history cassette tapes from the Museums of Western Colorado/Mesa County Historical Society.

The text in *italics* is not part of the original transcript and is added for clarification.

Early Palisade and Family:

George's parents (*George, Sr. and Emma*) came to Mesa County in 1910, bought an orchard, and continued to raise peaches for 30 years. He began renting orchards on Orchard Mesa and in the Vinelands. Beginning in 1910, George's father purchased peach orchards for \$2,000 per acre. George Bunte, Jr. was born in 1911 in Palisade, Colorado.

After pruning was done in winter, the farmers worked for local merchants. This enabled them to support a small family. In 1918 fruit prices boomed to \$1.00 per bushel or \$.50 per pound for peaches. But as WWI was ongoing there was a shortage of help. Eventually, more peach trees were planted. Peaches were hauled to town by wagons to be shipped via rail to the Midwest. Many people bought peaches to can. The Bunte's relatives would take 10-15 bushels home to can.

George recalled his father cutting ice by hand out of the Colorado River. He stored the ice in a house made of railroad ties located where the Palisade sewage lagoons are now. This ice was for domestic use for the family's ice box.

Schools:

George attended elementary and high school in Palisade and then went to Ross Business School, which was located in the Rasso Building on the corner of 3rd & Main Streets in Grand Junction. While at Ross Business School, George studied bookkeeping, shorthand, speech, and typing. There were few jobs available in the 1930s. George wanted to work with his father in the fruit business, so he attended Colorado Agricultural College in Fort Collins for two years.

During the 1928 Bust, peach prices dropped. There were no jobs and no money. George Sr.'s peaches fell to the ground. Canneries went defunct. George had to quit school in his 3rd year of college as there was no money.

Life in Palisade:

The first place George bought was the home place and he later bought across the Highway where George's sister (*Myrtle*) later lived. The third location under the Highline Canal was ruined by seepage from the canal.

Irrigation:

Colorado has "first right" laws for water usage. The Grand Valley Irrigation Canal has the first water rights on the Colorado River. This original canal stretches from Palisade almost to Loma.

The Roller Dam was built on the Colorado River. (*The Roller Dam was also known as the Grand River Diversion Dam, part of the Grand Valley Project. Construction on the dam was finished in 1915.*) Rollers raise to allow the water through. It was a U.S. Reclamation Service project.

The Price and Stub ditch pumping plant was mentioned. The Price Ditch, named after John Price, became part of the Palisade Irrigation District. The Stub Ditch was so-named because it was only a short stub, and it became part of the Mesa County Irrigation District.

The Orchard Mesa Irrigation District begins east of Palisade with a siphon in the river. The water travels in a ditch which can be seen raised on the right as you travel east on the Interstate. On 38 Road you can see six pipes, two pipes (*with water coming down to the hydroelectric plant were built in 1933*) create power to make the turbines turn, and four pipes *from the pumping plant* bring irrigation water up to Orchard Mesa.

Discussion on the Grand Junction Drainage District. Property owners pay taxes based on a mill levy for drainage purposes. The drainage office is located north of 1st Street and North Avenue. At the time of this recording, George said the Highline Canal was beginning to line the ditches with cement to prevent seepage. The budget was \$100,000 for the project. All the open ditches needed cementing, including the Highline, Grand Valley Canal, Stub, and Price Ditches.

Peach Industry:*Frost Protection:*

Peaches are less cold resistant than some other fruit. Dry air freezes the fruit easier. On a clear night 28 degrees can ruin the blossoms. Some of the devices used to combat frost have been smudging, using propane burners, and fans. The areas that had the least freeze were north of the railroad tracks, and above the (*Government Highline*) canal west to the Mt. Garfield area. The canyon breeze around 3:00 to 4:00 a.m. created a movement of the buds which helped prevent freeze. There were also breezes on Orchard Mesa. Cold air settles near the river.

Smudge pots that burned coal or crude oil were used to warm an orchard to reduce frost. They were expensive operations. Apricots bloom earlier, thus requiring more smudging. Now orchardists use propane or large fans to create a breeze to keep the fruit trees moving. Maybe smudge pots are still used on the outside of the orchard.

Fruit Cooperatives and Shipping:

For a time peaches were sold in bulk as boxes and bushels were deemed too costly. Firm peaches were transported by truck two to four feet deep with little loss. Truckers would put mattresses on

top of the load to lessen the vibration. George saw a man at the river cutting tall cattails to use for this purpose. The truckers would uncover the fruit at night on the top of the mountain passes as a natural coolant.

Before there were fruit co-ops, farmers would consign their fruit to stock companies. The Pope Patterson Association had a platform which later burned down. I.W. Charles was another buyer until the 1930's. After their expenses and profit, the farmer was paid.

The cost of shipping peaches was high as were other fruit growing expenses. George Bowman came up with the idea of a farmers cooperative which George Bunte Jr. believed saved the fruit industry. (*George Bowman got the Marketing Order passed which allowed growers to work together on pricing.*)

The United Fruit Growers Association was founded in 1923. It is one of the best fruit co-ops in the United States. When the stock companies were selling the fruit, the farmers were going broke. As a member of a co-op, the farmer would sign a note and receive borrowed money to operate. He could hire help, purchase spray, and buy bushels or whatever was needed until the crop came in. This co-op was still operating at the time of George's recorded interview.

The Grand Junction Fruit Growers Association (*which later became the Mountain Lion brand*) had a large fruit platform east of (*South*) 7th Street where the Daily Sentinel building is now located.

There was also a platform west of the 5th Street viaduct, the Pacific Fruit and Produce, which was used especially for shipping Redlands' fine peaches. At this time, hundreds of boxes of fruit were shipped until the terrible freeze in 1963.

Another platform was east of 30 Road on the north side of the tracks. Apples, pears, and later, green tomatoes were shipped to the eastern slope and to Kansas. George remembered seeing horse-drawn carts being unloaded here. The traincars were filled in bulk three feet deep with apple varieties like Winesap and Black Twig that traveled well.

Clifton had three wooden fruit platforms. One was located west of the 32 1/2 Road crossing. Another was operated by the Grand Junction Fruit Grower's Association east of 32 Road on the south side of the tracks. This was later purchased by Producer's Coop. Pacific Fruit Produce operated on the north side of the tracks.

Bridges Switch (*at 35 Road and US Hwy 6 bypass*) had a platform named after John Bridges. He later became an officer at the First National Bank. Fruit was hauled by wagon so local platforms were needed.

Palisade had five or six fruit platforms at one time -- all have since burned. Many were built at the turn of the century and the wood became dry. The United Fruit Growers Association fire was caused by an electrical failure. George helped combat three major platform fires as a member of the Volunteer Palisade Fire Department.

Henry Hickman had a fruit platform 1.5 miles west of the State Bridge where he shipped his own peaches.

During WWII there was a large population of mules kept at Camp Hale where foot soldiers were being trained to fight in the mountains of Europe along side the mules. Needless to say 15,000 mules create a lot of manure which was valuable fertilizer for the orchards. One to four trainloads were shipped via rail daily to Palisade. Bunte Trucking helped move the loads to the orchards.

Camp Hale was located at the former town of Pando, located at the top of Tennessee Pass between Minturn and Leadville at 9,000 feet. At this location was a lake where ice was cut and hauled by rail to ice houses located just west of the 5th Street viaduct in Grand Junction. These ice houses were later torn down. (*The foundations can still be seen from the viaduct.*). George recalled ice even being hauled in cattle cars.

For a time the United Fruit Growers shipped 100 train cars of peaches per day, including the Redlands market, until the 1963 freeze. Each car required five to ten tons of ice. Of course they would have to be re-iced in Denver on their way east.

Marketing, Quality, and the Peach Board of Control:

In the early 1930's George, Jr. began renting orchards in the Vineland area from Mr Port. A hail storm pecked fruit in part of the orchard. George took 200 bushels to Kansas and got \$.15 per bushel. It cost \$.05 bushel to get the fruit picked and he paid \$.05 per bushel to Mr. Port. George earned \$.05 per bushel. He didn't go broke, nor did he make any money.

During this time, eight to ten farmers were price-cutting fruit to truckers. A committee of 12 was formed, including George McDowell who owned several peach orchards and a coal mine. (*Mt Lincoln*). The committee agreed to sell peaches for an agreed upon price. The Committee of 12 was abandoned when the Peach Board of Control took over in the mid 1930's. Members of this board were elected by regional peach growers including Orchard Mesa, East Orchard Mesa, Vineland, Palisade, west Palisade, and the Redlands. At this time, the State created regulations regarding price fixing in many businesses. The Peach Board of Control had a mandatory weigh-in with trucks empty and trucks full. The name of the grower was recorded on a blackboard with the weight and price.

Oscar Jaynes was the last manager for the Peach Board of Control. George thought he did a fine job standing up for the Grand Valley orchardists when he spoke with the Governor and the Legislature. George witnessed Oscar's leadership when he was a board member attending sessions in Denver.

Peach orchardists were assessed several cents per each bushel shipped for the operation of the Peach Board of Control, later called the Peach Administrative Committee. This also paid for advertising in the Denver, Topeka, Kansas City, St. Louis, and Minnesota papers. Radio ads and a few TV ads were also purchased. There is still a small ad campaign.

During the terrible freeze in the 1960's (*1962-63*) the Redlands peach industry was wiped out and

the Peach Board of Control also suffered. The market declined from two million bushels to 200,000 bushels of peaches. The allocation from these sales was hardly enough for the current expenses.

Federal and State inspectors inspected the fruit. Unacceptable peaches included overripes, fruit not completely formed, fruit blemished or with insects. The Lygus bug which created blemished fruit was discussed. The fruit used to be dusted but now liquid sprays provide better control of these pests.

The Colorado Insectary is located in the same building as the Peach Administrative Committee office at the corner of First and Main in *Palisade*. They raise bugs that are parasites of the Oriental fruit moth. Albert Merlino is a knowledgeable employee. He was the first person chosen by Governor Love to receive the Colorado Man of the Year Award for his work at the Insectary.

In the Lower Valley, the only spray used for the apples and pears was arsenate of lead. The trees were sprayed seven times a year and the worms from the codling moths became immune to it. The new sprays kill the moths and the worms never form. The spray is applied four times per year and is highly regulated.

Dr Sikenberger of Grand Junction made a statement regarding the safety of arsenate of lead. He said if a man ate a bushel of pears at one time (sprayed with arsenate of lead), it would not make him sick. The government recommends washing the fruit to remove the spray. The lower valley pear and apple industry was almost stopped but was saved by expensive, potent sprays. Appleton now has no wormy apples and no codling moth. Certain sprays have to be avoided "so many days " before picking as regulated by the Federal Government.

Peach sizes are also regulated. Only 2 1/4", 2 1/2", and 2 3/4" diameter fruit is allowed and must be sized uniformly in its container.

The National Peach Council provides a large national peach promotion and education regarding peach production. The Council met for their Annual Meeting in Atlantic City in February. George attended with Manager Oscar Jaynes. As there were no ripe peaches available the Mesa County growers provided off-the-shelf canned peaches to serve at the banquet. They were ridiculed and accused of bringing peaches especially packed for this event. Oscar Jaynes attested that these were regular canned peaches. At the time of this interview United Fruit Growers Association still had a membership along with large acreage peach growers like Dale Ferguson, Allen Jones, and Larry Clark.

Elberta peaches have a very fine taste but the color has a green cast when ripe. Now there are much brighter varieties among the 100 current varieties available. There is more fruit breeding now for good shipping qualities, color, and taste.

Peach fuzz was discussed. Some pickers used talcum powder to alleviate the fuzz itch. Peach packers, mostly women, suffered from the fuzz until peaches were brushed prior to packing.

Trucking Business:

George could not finish college, as there was no money available and little work. His father had a Model "A" truck and was hauling peaches for farmers. So, George started a trucking business which he owned for 30 years. (*The George Bunte Transportation and Construction Co.*) He did trucking for the ditch companies, hauling rock, cleaning ditches, and installing pipes. He hauled for Associated Grocers and hauled gasoline. He eventually purchased a bulldozer, a front-end loader, and a backhoe.

Tenure as Mesa County Assessor:

George was getting worn out from his work and was thinking of quitting. He stopped at the County Clerk Office. An employee that George knew named Ann *Dunston* suggested that he run for Mesa County Assessor to replace Guy Jones. Ann thought George was a Democrat but he had previously changed affiliation in order to get the County Sheriff elected. George won the election and became the Mesa County Assessor. (*He served in that capacity 1966 – 1978.*) He sold the trucking business at this time.

George had been Secretary -Treasurer for the Volunteer Rural Fire Department and knew about evaluations and mill levys. But he learned much more. There were 44 different tax districts which were taxed with different mill levys. Every district has the same taxes such as the School District and the Grand River Water Conservation District, but different mill levys depending on the location in the county. The rural areas have more tax districts than the city. The Redlands is the only district with a mosquito levy. This required twenty some people to do the bookeeping for proper tax assessment

To help determine proper assesments, each year the Assesor's Office went to the different union houses to learn the hourly charges. This information was sent to Denver to be computed to determine the going house price per square foot. State laws also factored into these amounts. All farm land was assessed at the ability to raise a crop with a limited amount of fertilizer. The price of the crop minus the expenses. George Sr. paid \$2,000 per acre for his orchard, and now made \$800 per acre net.

The Assesor's Office looked at every home in the county once every 4 years, as home improvement added to the valuation of the property. George stated there were currently 55,000 parcels in Mesa County. Because of Public Lands only 26% of Mesa County was on the tax roles. The remainder were Federal, State, and school properties.

Other Memories:

George talked about the road naming system in the Grand Valley, with numbers and letters. (Roads parallel to the Mesa County line are letters – starting with A Road.

Appleton was originally called Holland, basically a stop for the Inter Urban (*Railway*).

We have poor soil in the valley. Apples were grown with water and fertilizer. The soil is underlayed with shale which brings water to the surface.

Summary by Charlene Weidner, 2019