

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History MCHS #92

Date: October 17, 1977

Place Bowman Home, Palisade

Length:

Interviewee Helen Bowman

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Summary of the 15 page typed transcription by Jean Page in 1979, (and re-typed and edited by her daughter, Priscilla Bowman Walker in 2015. Much of the tape was apparently inaudible)

Early years and school

Helen Bowman was born in Salida, Colorado (August 6, 1909) and in 1917 her family, (parents Mathew and Priscilla "Bessie" Crossley Maher and step-sister, Mary Jackson) went to California to settle an uncle's estate (William Maher). After living there a year, the family moved to Grand Junction in April 1918. Helen was in the third grade and went to the Emerson School for the first month, and then the family moved to a house on 6th and Teller. She went to the Hawthorne school in the 4th grade. There were fourth grade to sixth grade classes at Emerson, and then all the kids in town came to Hawthorne School for the seventh grade. The 8th grade was in the basement of the high school building. There were six rooms in the basement and about six divisions of 8th graders. Then, they all went to the high school that has since been torn down.

When the Maher family came to Grand Junction, Main Street was not paved. It was paved the next year or two, but Helen remembers there was mud on Main Street. There was the street car and the court house was on 6th and Main Streets where L. Cook's store was located. It's Laurence Capps' furniture store now. The Franklin school had burned, though it was still standing. The Lowell School where she went to the fifth and six grades was where City Hall is now. When the Courthouse was built, they tore down the remains of the Franklin school which may have been the first high school before they built the high school on Chipeta and 10th.

Helen remembers a very strict teacher, Miss Strock, at Lowell School. She taught arithmetic as it was called in those days. The principal, Miss Dewey, used a rubber hose to punish some of the boys that were pretty naughty, in her estimation. Miss Strock was very cross and not a favorite of any of the kids. One noon, for some reason, Helen took her lunch to school. It was wintertime and there was a lot of snow. The kids spent a good deal of the time skating on a small ditch and made it really slick. Miss Stock was walking back to school from lunch. The kids could have warned her it was slick to walk, but they didn't. They just watched her fall down. She wasn't hurt. Helen thought she "was too ornery to get hurt."

In the 6th and 7th grades, there were no men teachers, but in the 8th grade, Mr. Davis was the science teacher. In high school, there were men teachers, but not in the lower grades.

Helen doesn't remember parties at school in the lower grades. There were no organizations like the P.T.A. or other groups who would put on parties like they do now. The school board was composed of about five people and they held the position for years. Dr. Munro was on the school board and Mrs. Dent Ela. They didn't have the problems like they have nowadays.

There were no girls in the school band. It was all boys. Helen said students were enthusiastic at the games. She said "Fruita, of course, was Grand Junction's worst enemy and they thought of mean things to do when they came to play." Helen remembers hearing about some kind of banquet where the food they served the Fruita side was atrocious, just terrible.

Helen thought she had a very good time during high school. He liked the junior and senior prom and many activities in different clubs. There was the Latin club and the Spanish club and various others like home-ec, rhetorical, and glee club. There were also plenty of activities outside of just going to school. They put on plays and musicals all the time. The music teacher, Miss Moulton, was very fine, Helen remembered. She would go one day a week to different elementary schools and teach different grades for an hour. At the high school, Miss Moulton taught the glee club which Helen belonged to. The group sang locally.

Helen took elocution lessons, as they were called then, from Paul Blackwell. He took students out of town - as far as Atchee, which isn't a town anymore. They also went to Palisade and Fruita on day trips. They stayed overnight at Atchee. It was lots of fun. Blackwell was a Shakespearian actor and later went back to Martha's Vineyard and did work in different Chautauquas.

Helen remembers Chautauquas the first few years she lived in Grand Junction. It didn't make money, so they quit having them. There were circuses and tent shows with old-fashioned plays, like melodramas which were very popular. There was one as late as 1927. She had a friend who was instrumental in bringing the melodramas to Grand Junction, but he said they didn't make any money, so they had to quit.

The Chautauqua emphasized culture, though that was pretty dry, and people didn't attend. It was held over a week with different programs every afternoon or evening. The tent was on 6th and Ouray. It was a quarter of a block on an empty lot.

Denver and Rio Grande Railroad

Helen's father, Mathew Maher, was a freight conductor on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. His run was between Grand Junction and Minturn, which was the division point for the railroad at that time. Moffat Tunnel had not been built until the 1930s. Before then, when they went to Denver on the train, it would take 18 hours because it would go by Minturn, Leadville, Pueblo, Canon City, Salida and into Denver. It was always an overnight trip.

There were eight passenger trains a day in and out of Grand Junction. The even numbered trains ran east and the uneven numbers went west so you could get out of Grand Junction four times a day or come into Grand Junction four times a day at different hours.

When train number four came in about seven o'clock in the evening, it seemed like everybody was down at the depot to see that train come in. The LaCourt Hotel had a car that met passengers who were staying at the hotel. For a time, the St. Regis also had a car which met the trains.

Restaurants and Night Life Entertainment

The LaCourt and St. Regis were the two big hotels and everyone staying there had to sign the register. The Sentinel printed the register for years, though some of the salesmen objected because they weren't even supposed to be in Grand Junction, so they discontinued that. Helen said you could find out who was in town by reading the Sentinel and seeing where they were staying. *The LaCourt Hotel was on Main Street near 1st Street. At the time of this tape, it had become the LaCourt Motor Inn.*) Helen mentioned the LaCourt dairy was on North 7th Street about where Orchard Avenue is now. The Hotel had their own beef and cream and butter, so it was a real treat to eat at the LaCourt. They always had sherbet with the meat and cottage cheese, which she thought was a nice meal. The Hotel was added on to in the 1930s and then the Buthorn family owned it for years. She did not know if they built it or not.

Mary and Willa Buthorn were in Helen's high school class. Their brother, Bud, was two or three years younger. Bud and Mary managed the hotel until it was sold and torn down. They said it was condemned, though Helen thought the newer addition shouldn't have been in bad shape. The first part was where the restaurant was located. In the basement, they had professional musicians in sort of a tavern setting and served good meals until it was sold and torn down.

Helen said they ate out "at every drop of the hat." There was a nice cafe restaurant, called the Grand, where Capp's Furniture store is located. Further down the street was the Western Cafe which was Chinese. She remembers eating there in the 7th or 8th grade. It had been there quite a while and it was torn down. Where the Flamingo is now was the New World Japanese restaurant.

Helen remembered a chicken salad at the Grand Cafe cost fifty cents, and it was really good. It was not high-priced at all. The Merchant's Cafe is where Penney's is now (*Main and 4th Streets*) The Penney store was always there, but they added on to it by taking in the Merchant's Cafe space. That was where everyone went after the dance. They'd meet at the Merchant's Cafe and have a sandwich. The Elk's Lodge was also a great center for social life, especially on New Year's. The dance at the Elks was just **the** place to be on New Year's Eve.

During prohibition of course, they could not serve liquor, but there was a lot of bootlegging going on. Another place for dances was at Lincoln Park, where Helen's husband, Marion, played when Lincoln Park was dedicated in about 1923. (*Marion played the C-melody saxophone in local jazz bands*). There were also dances at Fruitvale on a fruit platform that belonged to Charles Schoening. He hired it out to people who wanted to hold dances. Hap Harris played there. She thought the fruit platform was still there, though a regular dance hall was built west of the platform. The fruit platform was not enclosed, just out in the open, so for the winter, they needed something different, so they built the dance hall. It went by various names, including the Red Bird, and the Green Lantern after prohibition.

Another place was the Mile-Away which is on the road to Fruita, west of First and Patterson. It was just a dance hall, so no liquor was served there like it was other places. The Mile-Away was

quite popular and there were dances twice a week - Wednesday and Saturday. They sometimes had Charlie Curonta who had a band in Pueblo. He would come to play at the Mile-Away, as did various local bands. She did not remember when the Mile-Away closed, but probably in the 1930s. Another dance hall was on North Avenue around where Johnson's House of Flowers is located. She thought it was called Rose something.

Helen recalled big bands which played in Grand Junction included Benny Goodman in 1935. He had been at Elitches (*Elitch Gardens in Denver*) and the music hadn't gone over very well, so instead of being there two weeks, he was there just one week. He was traveling to California and Grand Junction was on his way, so he played one night at the Mile-Away. Fred Harvey was the owner and manager of the Mile-Away. Benny Goodman and several of the players who stayed with him later on were there, though there was practically no crowd. Helen thought the cover charge was \$.75 a couple and Benny was very disappointed in the crowd. Helen and Marion were at the bandstand when intermission came. Marion asked Benny, "would you like to come out to the car and have a drink with us? We've got some King's Court Sour." That was a very popular mixer made in Glenwood Springs and was a good with bourbon. Benny said yes, so they got into Marion's Moon Roadster for a drink. Goodman was curious what people did for a living in the area because the attendance was poor. He wondered why they couldn't pay the \$.75 cover charge. Helen and Marion explained it was mostly an agricultural area, so they had a drink and he went back and finished the dance. Benny Goodman went on to California and soon became successful.

Helen remembered another challenge for dance attendance was there were so many stags. Men didn't ask "girls" to go to dances. They'd go alone and the girls "would stag it out" also and get together and dance. Sometimes the men would take them home, and sometimes the girls would go home by themselves. Helen said it was not a safe place, but she doesn't remember having any problems about not being able to walk down the street after dark. Most high school activities were at night, and she walked to them without any fear of not being able to get home safely. Helen said the population of Grand Junction then was between 7,000 and 8,000 people.

D&RG Details

Helen explained the division points for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad were Denver, Pueblo, Salida, Minturn, Grand Junction, Helper, and Salt Lake. D&RG employees were hired on a particular division, so they could develop seniority. Sometimes, if there was a shortage of help, they would send a man from one division to another.

Montrose and Gunnison were also division points. The D&RG had a narrow gauge out of Salida to Montrose. Her father went from Grand Junction to Minturn and that on freight, they couldn't work more than 16 hours. It would take eight hours just to travel from Grand Junction to Minturn. He had to work on passenger trains at the beginning because he didn't have seniority for the freight. He preferred freight trains because he thought "passengers ask too many questions."

Helen's father liked to work on what was called the "Palisade Switcher." That was a preferred run which he would bid for. He would leave Grand Junction about four o'clock and come to Palisade. They would switch the railcars in (*to the tracks closest to the fruit platforms*) and put packed peach boxes into freight cars. They used to ship 1200 freight cars of fruit out of Palisade

in a harvest season. Her father would be through work about four o'clock in the morning and he'd come home. He could be home every night with that run, as opposed to working from Grand Junction to Minturn where he'd be away from home one or two nights.

It was also thought of as working east or west. If he worked from Grand Junction to Helper, he was on the west end. If he worked from Grand Junction to Minturn, he was on the east end. The east end paid better money because it was mountainous. From Grand Junction to Helper is the desert and the rate of pay was not so good. Helen said that probably changed as her father retired in 1931 and there have been a lot of changes on the railroad since then.

Helen provided further details about the mountainous route east of Grand Junction. Out of DeBeque is a hill they call "Nigger Hill" which would require a steam engine train to "double up"-- have two engines--because it was so steep. One steam engine would not be able to pull the load. She thought diesel engines had more power.

In 1926 or 1927, a railroad friend from Salida came to visit, and Helen tried to persuade her to stay over to go to the dance on Saturday night. That would mean she could travel on the Number two train which left about two o'clock in the morning. However, the friend promised her mother she'd be home earlier, so she left on the Number four train which left Grand Junction about seven o'clock in the evening. The next day, they found the Number two train had wrecked and about 36 people were killed. The first coach, where the friend probably would have been riding, was the one where most people died. It was a very bad wreck just outside of Salida. Helen was always grateful the friend didn't stay for the dance.

Helen mentioned a famous train wreck in Dotsero, before she lived in Grand Junction. In those days, it was just a single track road. She thought a passenger train ran into a freight train and people were beheaded. It was referred to as the Dotsero wreck. The D&RG has a pretty rocky roadbed because of the mountains and before they had the central control system they have now, it was easier if the dispatcher fell asleep for two trains to come together.

 Note: It is a pity the interviewer did not encourage Helen to talk about her extensive community service work in both Grand Junction and Palisade. Helen was a tireless volunteer and held leadership positions in a number of community organizations, including as a member of the Board of Directors for the Tuberculosis Association and Goodwill Industries. She served as Public Information Chair for the Mesa County Unit of the American Cancer Society and was Chair of the Palisade Public Library Board of Directors when a new library was built on 3rd Street in 1968. She was a charter member of the Palisade Federated Women's Club and served several terms as chair of the community activities committee. One of their projects was successfully lobbying for a new post office in Palisade in 1966. She served as president of the Elks Ladies Club, B.P.O.E. #575 and was active in the Elks ladies' Past Presidents' organization. She was a member of the Mesa County Republican Women's Club and served as a Republican Precinct Committee Woman for a number of terms. She served on the KREX TV Advisory Board from 1969-1970 and was listed in the 1973 Edition of *Who's Who in Colorado*. A gifted musician, she played the organ and piano. She was also a 50 year member of the Sunshine Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star.