

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # _008_____

Date: 12/03/2010_____

Place _Simpkins/Decker house_____

Length: 43:30_____

Interviewee Merrilyn Kay Decker Simpkins_____

Phone: _____

Interviewer Barbara Hampton_____

Phone: _____

Family:

Kay clarified her full, married name is Merrilyn Kay Decker Simpkins, although when she was growing up in the Palisade area, people knew her as Kay Decker. Her given name, Merrilyn, came from her father, Merrill Decker, who was born in Oklahoma in 1918. Kay's mother was Donna Jones Decker, also born in 1918 in Oklahoma.

Kay's father was one of two children and the only son. His family had a large acreage of wheat where they lived in Oklahoma. At the time it was generally expected that one of the sons would take over the family farm. Merrill and Donna, knowing the area and having honeymooned on Grand Mesa, loved Palisade and decided to move in 1948 when Kay was six years old. Kay's grandmother had grown up in the area, as well. They bought five acres of land in Vineland from Kay's great-grandparents and farmed it for over sixty years.

Merrill often had to work at outside jobs because there was not enough income from the peach orchard. He worked as a mail carrier and contracted out as a house painter. At one time, he worked on the Orchard Mesa Irrigation District's power canal that comes out of DeBeque Canyon. For several years before he retired, he worked as a painter at the VA Hospital (*now known as the Veterans Administration Regional Medical Center*).

Donna was a hard-working woman who knew and loved every tree on the ranch. She put in a lot of time caring for the farm and also held outside jobs at various times. For a short time, she worked at Burdick's hardware store (*B & J Supply*), and later when Kay was in high school, her mother worked at the Toggery.

George and Lily Eyer were Kay's great-grandparents. They lived in the old house and planted the peach trees on the ranch. She has very little memory of her great-grandfather, since he passed away when she was quite young, but remembers during most of the time while she was growing up, her great-grandmother lived in Grand Junction. Historic photographs of the ranch show it was originally a vineyard. Ironically, when they sold the orchard after Kay's mother passed away, the acreage was replanted as a vineyard.

Kay had an older brother who passed away shortly after the family moved to Palisade. He contracted diphtheria, and Kay vividly recalls the measures they took, such as fumigating the house and having to undergo a series of injections, to prevent the spread of this highly contagious disease. She also has a brother, Jim, who is three years younger and still owns property in the area.

The old house where Kay's great-grandparents lived was torn down some time ago, and Kay and her husband now live in a newer home on the property. Kay's husband is a "city boy" from Milwaukee but loves living here. Kay feels very fortunate being able to live on the same land where she grew up.

Schools:

Kay attended school in Palisade, starting in first grade and going all the way through high school. One of Kay's early memories is having to walk down the lane from their house in all kinds of weather to catch the school bus, since it did not go right past their house. She went to elementary school in the old school building (*built in 1910 and torn down in 1970*). She recalls as you progressed through the grades, you moved through different areas of the three-level school building. She also remembers the thrill of testing the old spiral slide fire escape from the top floor of the building. Kay still has a desk and a brick acquired by her mother when the old school building was demolished.

Kay went to high school in the building to the west of the grade school. She was active in the Girls' Athletic Association (GAA), and recalls they did not have competitive sports, so it was more like physical education. Kay graduated from Palisade High School in 1959.

After high school, Kay went away to college, where she met her husband. She returned here once for about a year while he was serving in the military in Vietnam. Later when they had their own family, they moved back to the area. Kay's children, Alan and Jamie, attended Palisade schools and were among the first students to graduate from the new high school.

Life in Palisade:

Living in Vineland, Kay's family considered themselves "country folk" and were not involved to any great extent in Palisade's politics. She recalls the old bridge across the river at Fourth Street being a one-lane bridge, over which they hauled their peaches into town on their old jalopies. The new bridge across the river was wide enough for two vehicles to pass on the bridge. Even to this day, they refer to the houses, especially in Vineland, by the names of the people who lived there in the past.

Kay has fond memories of going to the drugstore, which had a soda fountain. It was a special treat to have an ice cream sundae or a soda, and it was sad when the soda fountain was removed. There was a movie theater in town, so it was fun to meet friends there on Saturdays.

The market was where Rapid Creek Cycles is now. (*The Purcell Building at 3rd and Main Street.*) The Post Office was next door. Kay recalls going into the Post Office in the spring, where she could hear baby chicks and ducklings peeping in the back, waiting for the farmers to come in and pick them up.

Kay recalls going upstairs to a large auditorium-like room in the Hugus Building on the corner for tap dance lessons. Some local also organizations held meetings there.

Growing up on the ranch, Kay loved riding horses. She rode in parades, once on her white horse as the Lone Ranger accompanied by her brother on their pinto horse. They often rode to the Vincent Ranch behind their place, where they moved cattle and got into a pond up there. They rode trails up Grand Mesa and Mt. Garfield before the Interstate highway was built, as well. Palisade had a riding club, which organized contests and rides. Kay would still like to have a horse, but now there are few places with public access to ride, so it would not be the same.

Grand Mesa holds many memories for people who live around Palisade. On several occasions, Kay and her friend, Susie Canon Noel, rode their horses from Rapid Creek to under the rim of Grand Mesa. One time, they rode all the way to Mesa Lakes. It took all day, and by the time they arrived, their horses were totally exhausted. Sometimes on these rides, they camped out and packed their saddlebags with simple supplies, such as Spam and ingredients to make pancakes.

Jamie and Lois Clark had a cabin on Grand Mesa. After peach harvest, it was always a treat for the families to go up and stay at the Clark cabin, sometimes for a month or so before school and other fall activities started. Kay recalls they enjoyed fishing, playing cards, and just spending time together.

Hunting in the fall was a necessary part of their livelihood, because without deer and elk, there would be little meat to eat during the winter months. Kay's parents worried about their riding horseback on the mountain during hunting season, so they always wore bright colors so hunters could see them.

In the winter, they went up to the old Grand Mesa ski course, which had only a rope tow and later a Poma lift. Kay recalls her father making "skis" for them from boards and tin cans. He told them to walk up the hill and come down on their "skis" and when they were able to do so without falling down, he would buy them tickets for the rope tow. So as Kay puts it, they learned to ski through "perseverance." Kay recalls a time when they hiked in to the cabin from the top of the old ski course. It was extremely difficult because the trail was not packed, and they did not have cross-country skis like today.

Living on the ranch, they had most things to be self-sufficient. According to Kay, it was not an easy life, but everyone was living the same kind of life. It seemed people enjoyed life, and it was simpler and more productive, compared with today. They had cows, pigs, and chickens. A separator was used to separate cream from raw milk, and they always had fresh eggs. Kay's parents raised a beautiful garden and did a lot of canning every year. In addition to peaches, they raised apples, nectarines, cherries, and English walnuts. In the fall, they took deer meat to the meat locker plant located across the street from the high school to have it ground with pork fat to make delicious venison sausage. They sometimes canned sausage to preserve it. Kay said raising, preserving, and eating your own food are valuable skills, which children often do not have the opportunity to learn these days.

Kay's mother made a beautiful red cherry wine from sour cherries they grew on the ranch. This was a special treat for Thanksgiving and Christmas. She recalled a time when they made homemade beer. They put the bottles of beer in the crawlspace under the house. The beer froze, and they could hear the "pinging" sound as the caps came off the bottles!

Raising Peaches:

Growing up around the peach orchard, the children were involved in all aspects of work needing to be done, from thinning to picking and processing the fruit. When they were old enough, they hired out to other packing sheds. When she was twelve, Kay packed peaches for Ad and Shorty Rush. You had to be sixteen years old to work at the Mountain Lion and United Fruit Growers co-ops. Packing peaches there, Kay could make up to \$1.00 per hour at five cents per box. If you did not work in peach harvest, you did not have spending money for the rest of the year. Working in the sheds was always fun because you worked with your friends and other people you knew. School did not start until after harvest was done, because everyone worked during harvest time.

The older peach trees in the orchard were planted by Kay's great-grandparents. These large, old trees each produced upwards of 30 bushels of fruit each. They had two varieties of peaches on the ranch – July Elbertas and Standard Elbertas. The July Elberta was an early peach that ripened around the end of July. Then a few weeks later, the Standard Elbertas would be ready to pick. Harvest back then did not last as long as it now does. The Standard Elbertas were not as attractive on the outside as some of the newer varieties, but they held up well when canned and were sweet and tasty with pretty, solid, yellow flesh.

Kay's parents packed peaches for shipping in bushel baskets through the Mountain Lion co-op. The peaches were picked early in the day and taken to the shed for processing in the afternoon. The peaches were first sorted to cull out poorer quality fruit, then went through the de-fuzzer (*a series of spinning brushes on rollers that gently removed the peach fuzz*), and were separated by size into bins.

They used an inverted metal tub in the shape of a basket with a paper liner and a cardboard facing ring with scalloped edges. The first layer of peaches was carefully placed on the bottom of the tub in rows. Then, more peaches were dumped on top and a basket was placed over it and flipped. Thus, you got a beautiful layer of peaches on the top of the basket with the decorative facing encircling it. Finally, the baskets were lidded, stamped, and labeled. It was usually the kids' job to label the baskets.

Sometimes relatives would come to work during harvest, so they had to be fed three meals per day. It was always a big family production, and the relatives liked coming because they could can and dry the tree-ripe peaches. Although they sent much of their crop to the co-op for shipping, they had a good business selling directly to people who returned year after year for peaches. People came from Nebraska, Iowa, Oklahoma, Wyoming, and elsewhere. Growing only two varieties of peaches, Kay's mother could estimate about when the peaches would be ready, so she sent out postcards to let their customers know when to come for the harvest. Later, as people got older, they did not come to the ranch, and since Kay's parents were getting older, too, they decided to sell the orchard.

During peach harvest, migrant workers lived in tents around the house. They enjoyed sitting out under the big trees in the evening, visiting with them and learning what their lives were like. Kay recalls one of the women came from Aguilar, Colorado, near Trinidad in the south central part of the state. Her family worked on a cattle ranch there, and she brought her children with her to work in the peach harvest. Kay had an old horse that allowed her and her brother to ride it. The horse would go only a short distance before turning around and coming back to the house. The horse had emphysema and died. The woman from Aguilar felt sorry for them, so she brought them a big black and white plow horse named Champ. She had taught Champ to lie down so you could mount and ride him. The kids made a game of getting on the horse and then sliding down off his rear end. Kay's father liked to take Champ hunting. Champ would lie down while they loaded an elk onto his back and then carry it back to camp. You had to keep moving, though – otherwise, Champ might decide to lie down if he got tired!

Kay remembers on Saturday nights during peach harvest they went to town and parked outside the saloon. Everyone sat around on the cars and visited. Workers from the Migrant Camp, which was located west of Riverbend Park, came to town. For a few years, a group of African Americans came to work in the harvest, so they enjoyed getting acquainted with them, as well. Kay said it was fun getting to know people from other cultures and places. The growers would often take peaches they could not sell down to the Migrant Camp, so people who lived there could use and can them.

Growing Walnuts:

The Deckers grew English walnuts on a much smaller scale. The walnut trees were grafted by Merrill Eyer, who had a big walnut orchard over by the mountain (*palisades north of North River Road*). He was a distant relative of Kay's father. They did not have enough walnuts to warrant having sophisticated equipment to process them, so all work was done by hand. After the first good freeze, the walnuts start falling to the ground, so they placed big tarps under the trees and shook the branches to get the walnuts to drop. If you did not harvest the walnuts in time, the squirrels, raccoons, and birds would get them before you did! On a few occasions, bears came down for the walnuts.

After they were gathered from the orchard, the walnuts were put into a washing machine tub with water and agitated to break off the husks. The husks were removed, and the walnuts were placed on large drying racks in a building used during peach harvest to house workers. After drying, the walnuts were bagged for sale.

Kay's parents had great skills in marketing the products they grew. Their English walnuts were huge and could easily be cracked by hand. The meat inside was large and tasty, and people loved them! Kay's mother put the walnuts in egg cartons to sell. The bank bought them to give out as gifts. Most of the walnut orchard has now been converted to vineyards. Nowadays from the remaining few trees, Kay likes to get just a bushel or so of walnuts for their own personal use and is happy to share the rest with the squirrels and birds. Some of the walnut trees are about fifty years old, and their production is slowing down. Also, they now have a husk fly, which turns the walnut shells black from the husk. They are unattractive on the outside, but the meat on the inside is still as tasty as ever.

Other Memories:

Kay recalls her father was a pitcher for Palisade's town baseball team. They traveled to nearby communities, such as Collbran and Mesa, and often played ball out in the pastures. There was a ball field at the old Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) Camp. Kay went to school with some of the kids who lived there. The CCC workers built a big rock wall up on Highway 65 toward Collbran. German prisoners were housed there later in World War II.