

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # 004

Date: 05/06/2010

Place Community Center

Length: 16:02

Interviewee Billy Lee (Bill) Beckwith

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Interviewer Dave Soker

Phone: _____

Family:

Bill's mother, Hollis Freemyer , was born in a house that is still standing in Palisade, Colorado in 1902 to Dan and Etta Freemyer.

Bill's father, Ed Beckwith, Sr., moved to Palisade from Kansas in 1916, at the age of 14. Bill's parents met while they were both in school. His father walked his mother home nearly every day and then walked down the railroad tracks to where he lived with Byron and Sadie Bancroft east of town by the State Bridge (*near the current I-70 interchange at Rapid Creek*).

Bill's grandfather, Dan Freemyer, delivered ice to people for their iceboxes before they had refrigerators. The ice house is still standing on the old Freemyer property on North Bower Avenue where Bill's nephew, Kirk Beckwith, now lives. There was a hole in floor with a pit below, which they filled with sawdust to store ice cut from the river or the old wooden water tank by the railroad crossing on Bower Avenue. Bill's grandfather died of injuries from a truck accident in DeBeque Canyon.

Bill's mother's family started driving the school bus route between Cameo and Palisade. His mother drove the first school bus, an open truck, when she was in high school. Her brother, Ed Freemyer, drove the school bus and a water truck to delivered water to outlying homes before there was domestic water, especially in the Vineland area (*east of Palisade along the Colorado River*).

After Bill's parents were married, they lived in Cameo where his father worked in the coal mine. Bill was born in 1935, and when he was six months old, they moved to Palisade and lived at 405 West First Street. The property was a large, two-story, brick home and five acres of peach orchard. Bill recalls is father saying, " If you had five acres, you had a good living. And if you had ten acres, you had the 'life of Riley.' You could hire your pruning done and spend the winter in a warmer climate."

When they lived in Cameo, Bill's parents became good friends with the William and Isabel Thomas family. The two families shared a cow. They split the feed bill, and one man would milk the cow in the morning and the other would milk it in the evening. The friendship between them lasted over the years. The Thomas' youngest daughter, Jessie Jean, and her husband, Leonard Wolf, are retired and now living in the same mobile home park where Bill lives. Mrs. Thomas was a daughter of Thomas and Annie McCall Sr. Tom McCall, Sr. built most of the homes in

Cameo for the original owners of the Cameo Mine. Other McCall family members included Jeannie Milleman, Jessie Dorton, and Thomas McCall, Jr. Thomas McCall, Jr. followed in his father's footsteps as a general contractor.

School Days:

Jeannie Milleman taught math at Palisade High School for three generations of Bill's family. Bill described Jeannie as "an institution herself." She sat and tatted as she sent students to the chalkboard to work math problems, and she would oversee and correct them when they made mistakes. She and her husband were close friends with Bill's parents. They got together nearly every week for pinochle games, often joined by another couple, Forrest and Marie Klinzman. Marie was the niece of Lige Jordan, the man who owned Jordan's Inn on the northwest corner of Main and West Third Streets, which burned (*in 1915*) when Bills' mother was a little girl.

When Bill was a freshman at Palisade High School, part of the initiation was to build and whitewash a letter "P" out of rocks on the mountain south of town. As lowly freshmen, they worked all day carrying rocks. The student body president and the senior class president went downtown several times to look at it and kept coming back, saying "more rocks!" Finally, around 4:00 p.m., they said "enough," and it was time to whitewash the "P." During the whitewashing, someone dropped one of the guy's baseball caps into the whitewash tub. He pulled the cap out and slapped both cheeks of the student body president with it. Bill thought they would be drowned in the river for doing that, but there was no punishment. Whitewashing the "P" became a part of freshman initiation in subsequent years.

The consolidation of Palisade schools with School District 51 in Grand Junction meant that Bill's senior class could not go on a trip they planned to Denver or Salt Lake City by charter bus, as there was now a limit of 100 miles on student travel. They could not even go to Ouray, but could go to Glenwood Springs. Since they had money saved up, the class sponsors suggested the class make a nice gift to the school. Instead, his class decided to throw a party and spend it on themselves.

Bill's father eventually bought the water truck and school bus from his brother-in-law. This was the last privately owned school bus in operation. Prior to the consolidation with District 51, Palisade was School District 19.

Early Palisade Memories:

Each morning when Bill's father came in from the school bus run, he would pick up the mail and then check in at Gene Cutter's shoe shop, located at the south end of the Palisades National Bank building. Mrs. Holderby's shop (*the Toggery*) was to the south--across the alley--from the shoe shop. The Toggery was torn down and A.G. Tilton built the brick building that now stands there. The Tiltons previously lived upstairs in the bank building.

Bob Gephardt had the Palisade Drug Store on the northeast corner of Third and Main Streets. Bancroft Grocery was the second door north of Third Street on the east side of Main Street. People referred to it as the B& R (Bancroft and Rice).

The building at the southwest corner of Third and Main has been occupied by many businesses over the years. Bill recalls it was a restaurant owned by Jack and Lucy Latham. Before that, it was the Hugus store. Later, Howard Roberts, who owned Robert's Hardware, had an appliance store at that location.

On the south side of Third Street between Main Street and Kluge Avenue was the Independent Lumber Company, which later was the home of Joel Prudhomme's Palisade Pride and Benson's second-hand furniture store.

The lot on the northwest corner of Third and Main Streets, the site of Jordan's Inn which burned, was vacant until Howard Roberts built Roberts Hardware. He later sold it to Bob and Geri Burdick, who named it B & J Supply.

Life in Palisade:

The 35 Road railroad crossing and connection to the highway is known by some locals as Bridges' Switch, named after Bill's uncle, John J. Bridges' family. They raised peaches, and at one time, there was a rail switch and loading platform for shipping peaches.

Later, Bill's Uncle John (also known as Uncle Dud) and Aunt Clara Bridges, lived next door to Bill's family at 383 West First Street. John was president of Grand Junction Fruit Growers. His office was at the northeast corner of West Third Street and Peach Avenue in Palisade. John and Mr. Gentry, who lived next door to the east and worked for him, unloaded a railroad car of box shoo and found a sprout in a corner of the empty car. They checked the railcar's manifest and discovered there had previously been a load of magnolia trees shipped from New Orleans. John tossed the sprout to Mr. Gentry and said, "plant it if you would like." He did, and the tree is still there at 341 West First Street. It still blooms, though partially dead. Bill's uncle sent away for 24 additional magnolia trees and added them to the landscaping on his property, but none of them survived. The original magnolia tree was planted about 1930.

Shortly after the beginning of World War II, Bill's brother, Ed Beckwith, Jr. was drafted into the Army and went to Camp McQuaid in California. He was later stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco for the duration of the war. The first Christmas Ed was in the Army, the family went to California to visit him. Shortly before leaving, Bill began having asthma. Dr Weidlein told Bill's parents he wished they were going to California right away, instead of a month later. He thought the climate there would be good for Bill's health. Dr. Weidlein was right.

Bill remembers Dr. Weidlein as a great figure in the community. He had a car and regularly traveled between Fruita and DeBeque to visit patients. In addition, his office was in the Hugus Building (*actually in the Hugus Annex above the current Slice 'O' Life Bakery*). Dr. Weidlein always had much greater concern for his patients' health than for collecting money for treating them. Dr. Weidlein's wife and two children moved to California because she liked life there better than in Colorado. Dr. Weidlein destroyed all the financial records prior to his death. When he passed, his wife came back to Palisade and tried to get the nurses who worked for him to reconstruct his accounts receivable, so she could collect them.

Bill recalls softball games along the railroad tracks on land owned by the United Fruit Growers' Association. Neighborhood kids from the Allen, Gesellman, and Tabarelli families played ball, or sometimes a game of "kick the can."

When Bill was in high school, there was a rock slide on the mountain between Palisade and Cameo (*March 1950*). It blocked Highline Canal Tunnel #3 which brings irrigation water into the valley. Crews worked in four directions--from a point midway in the tunnel and from both ends. The tunnel was reopened in time to water crops for the next growing season.

Bill's friend, JoAnn Juelfs, told a story about her father working on one of the tunnel repair crews. When they finished work on the tunnel, they had a big champagne party to celebrate. One Sunday, an entrance was prepared into the ditch and tunnel, so cars could drive through the tunnel from Cameo to the other end just above Palisade. A long line of cars drove through the tunnel. It seemed a bit risky because there was no ventilation in the tunnel, but there were no breakdowns, and everything turned out fine.

The original Highway 6 & 24 (*through downtown Palisade*) is now known as North River Road. When the highway was re-routed through Vineland, an appraiser from Denver named Watson Bowes was hired to appraise the land in Vineland where the road went. Bill later became friends with Watson because his daughter, Barbara, married Bill's friend, Blake Chambliss.

Bill arranged for a summer job after high school graduation to work at the United Fruit Growers' Association. He was excited, but his parents worried the box shook, insecticides, and fertilizer would trigger his asthma. Bill's brother, Ed, worked at the First National Bank in Grand Junction where his uncle John Bridges had been president until his death. On graduation day, Bill worked all day and dashed home to get ready for work. His mother told him the bank called and he was to work there, starting at 8:00 the next morning. Bill worked at the bank--part time at first while going to college--and then spent the next 27 years working there.

Later Memories:

In 1970, Bill was appointed to fill an unexpired term on the Palisade Town Board for a man who moved out of town. At the time, Bill was traveling in Japan and other points in the Orient with Expo 70. Bill then served 12 years on the Town Board. His father was on the Board for 18 years, so cumulatively, they were involved in the Town government for 30 years.

Bill semiretired from the bank on May 1, 1980. He enjoyed some leisure time and worked a few part time jobs until he moved to Denver in June 1982 for 2 ½ years. All of his nest egg was invested in Baldwin United Preferred Stock, the company which bought the bank he worked for in Grand Junction. It filed for bankruptcy and Bill saw his entire nest egg disappear. He moved back to Palisade, and on January 2, 1991, became bookkeeper for United Fruit Growers' Association, where he worked until he retired in 2000. During his time at UFGA, there were two complete freeze-outs in three years. The United was forced to seek outside assistance and was eventually bought out by the Fruita Consumers Co-op.