

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # OH-279

Date: 08/20/1979

Place _____

Length: _____

Interviewee Eugene F. Rowley

Phone: _____

Interviewer Jack Weber

Phone: _____

This is a summary of a transcription of an oral history cassette tape 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.

In about 1908 or 1909, the old Grand Junction Fruit Growers Association folded up. It was a stock outfit originally, where each grower had to buy stock to get into it. Most everything at that time was cheap. The association went along for a few years, but no one made any money or got any returns at all. All at once, the Board of Directors called a special meeting, held in the old Armory building. The growers all went on a special train from Palisade and Clifton (*to Grand Junction*). At the meeting, the Directors notified the growers the company was broke, but they would give the growers part of the value of their stock.

Three men (*not named in the transcript*) reorganized the Grand Junction Fruit Growers. The association bargained for the growers and determined what they would pay the growers for their fruit, but year after year, the growers still did not make any money. In about 1920, the association went out of business. After that, the United Fruit Growers Association was formed. This was a well-run organization which was strictly for the benefit of the growers.

Weather was often a factor during harvest time. Heavy rains created muddy conditions and made the fruit ripen more quickly. It was especially difficult before they had tractors, when they used only horses and wagons to haul peaches out of the orchards to the sheds. In the period of about two weeks, they shipped out between two and three thousand (*rail*) cars of peaches.

In the early days, peaches were shipped in 18- or 20-pound boxes, rather than in bushel baskets. The peaches were individually wrapped in paper. Each rail car held 600 to 700 boxes of peaches. Later on when larger rail cars were used, more peaches could fit into a car.

Neighboring communities and people coming from other states helped out in the peach harvest. People brought their families with them, and their children who were old enough also worked in the harvest. There were no problems with labor. Gene always shipped peaches by express. They went as far as southeastern Ohio and arrived in good shape. Peaches were not picked extremely green – just firm ordinary peaches.

Gene remembers Palisade from the time he was four or five years old. There were three or four saloons in town. There were several small coal mines, and most of the miners lived in Palisade. The town was never very rowdy and was a nice place to live. There was no water system, so the water came down through town in canals, and there were ditches running along the street. Each home had a cistern, so the cistern would be filled out of the ditch. There was a lot of typhoid fever. Some houses had a hand pump but others just got water from the cistern with a bucket. There was no piping in the houses.

The first (*domestic*) water system went in around 1910. The water came from Rapid Creek. Then a few years later, a small reservoir was built further up Rapid Creek. This was an improvement, but it did not prove to be sufficient, so in another few years, a second reservoir was built. There were problems with construction, as it cracked. After that, water was taken from the springs further on up. This was wonderful water, the best there is in the state. For many years there was no water treatment plant, and the water was always clear and cold. Gene said the influx of people coming into the area was going to become a problem, in regard to the water. Palisade got electricity from a coal-fired electric plant. It supplied sufficient electricity to meet the need.

The Rowley's had a horse and wagon for transportation. Later they got a surrey with a fringe on top and a nice horse. Gene did some courting in a horse and buggy. He mentioned it was more economical because you did not have to take the horse to the garage (*for repairs*). You just put a little axle grease on the wagon wheels and away you went!

When Palisade was incorporated as a town, there was a city council. Colonel Bower was the mayor (*in 1922-24*). He was a robust fellow in his sixties or seventies. One night, he arrested some of the boys who probably had been drinking or fighting. Other boys went to get them out of jail. Gene went to the jail, too. He recalled the Colonel telling one of the fellows to "keep his mouth shut and stay out of it." The boy did not comply, so the Colonel threw him in jail, too. (*Herman Kluge was the first mayor when Palisade was incorporated in 1904.*)

One thing Gene remembered is when issues came up like a paving project, they would float a bond issue and have an election. The people supported such efforts. The streets in town are narrow because at the time the town was laid out, no one dreamed it would grow to its current size.

Gene recalled after he arrived in the area, the fruit industry increased two-fold, but low prices and freeze-outs gradually took their toll, forcing growers into other pursuits in order to make a living.

Gene was in California working for Douglas Air Craft during part of World War II and returned in 1945. The war was quite an experience, and he hoped we would never have to go through anything like it again. He attributes the country staying out of war to atomic energy.

One morning (in about 1912) when Gene and his brother just got out of Sunday School, they heard about a train wreck up by the tunnel. (*This would be the railroad tunnel about a mile upstream from the Grand Valley Diversion Dam in DeBeque Canyon.*) They went up to the depot, where an engine came down and picked up two doctors. A rock slide had come down and

hit the train, killing seven people. They wanted to go up and see the wreck, but it was about eight miles away. There was no way to get there, except to run, so they trotted all the way up there. In the meantime, they had gotten the dead people out. One car was completely smashed down to the wheels and another had the side ripped out. They rode the train back to town. Gene also recalled an occasion when he (and others) pitched pennies with several hobos up by the depot. Apparently, they did not have much money, but he got away with about a hundred pennies in his pocket.

For a time, movies were shown in an old building on Main Street. Finally, the pictures got a little better and business improved, so Gene bought the local theater business and operated it for three or four years. They sold it just before pictures with sound came in. The man who bought it from the Rowley's later sold the theater to a young fellow and his father from Nebraska, and they put in the sound. They had a pretty good show, but there was not enough business to justify it so it closed about twenty years ago. This would have been about the time television came to the area.

Gene recalled they had a Chautauqua just about every year. There was a big tent, where there were speakers, plays, and general entertainment like a medicine show or small circus. The big circuses were in Grand Junction, drawing a crowd from all over the valley. The first big circus Gene went to was the Hagen, Bacon, Wallace Circus. The circus grounds were set up at South Avenue and about Twelfth Street. This would have been around 1910 – 1912. He also remembered going to the Sells Flodo Circus and the Ringling Brothers Circus. They skipped school sometimes to go to the circus, riding their bicycles all the way to Grand Junction. Gene recalled being so tired after the ride, he would rather have gone to school. They had a good “speeler,” who would talk about a wonderful product he was selling for a dollar per bottle. Gene was surprised at how many people would buy that medicine, since it was probably just whiskey and water.

There was an apartment house south of the Post Office which probably had four rooms. Shortly after Gene started school, they expanded and built another building just west of there (*which became the second Palisade school building. It was demolished in the 1930s and the replacement apartments are called the Jordan Apartments*) Then in 1910, they built a new building (*on 7th Street and Peach Avenue*) which had space for eight grades, the high school, and an assembly room. Gene attended school there through his junior year, when the war came along. According to Gene, the school was torn down in 1950 or 1960. (*Actually, it was torn down in December 1970.*)

When Gene first came to Palisade, the population was around one hundred people. The population was relatively stable all of the years up until the past five years. Now (*1979*), a little over a thousand people live in Palisade. There are a lot of elderly and retired people living here now.