

Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # 28

Place: Home of Wilma Kerr

Date: 12/9/1986

Length: 90 min.

Interviewee: Wilma F. Kerr

Interviewer: Alpha Nolan

This is a summary of an oral history from an audio cassette tape recording, which came to the Historical Society's attention through Wilma Kerr's grandson, Brent Kerr. Wilma's children, Wilford "Nibbs" Kerr, Jr., and Caroline "Ceddy" Kerr Williams were present and contributed information to the interview. Wilma was 96 years old at the time of the interview.

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

Cameo Mine History and Operation

Information added by Brent Kerr: Early history of the Cameo Mine ownership and operation is uncertain. A Museum of Western Colorado article says John Nichols opened a mine named Cameo in 1885. The same article states in 1885 George Smith opened a mine in Cameo. In his book on the history of Cameo, John Klemenic writes, "In November of 1899, Mr. Smith was one of the incorporators of the Grand Junction Mining and Fuel Company and General Superintendent of the Cameo Mine."

The Grand Junction Mining and Fuel Company was absorbed by the McNeil Coal Company in 1928. During the Depression, coal mining dropped off. In 1934, Wilford Kerr, Sr. saw an opportunity and decided to lease the Cameo Mine from McNeil Coal Corporation. After Nibbs returned from the service at the end of World War II, he joined his father in the operation. Prior to leasing the mine, Wilford Kerr, Sr. was master mechanic and had been caretaker of the Roller Dam. He passed away in 1952.

In the early days, the mine shipped coal to the State Home (*now known as the Grand Junction Regional Center*) and the Holly Sugar factory, both in Grand Junction. Then later, they shipped coal by truck to the Vanadium Corporation of America mill in Naturita, CO.

By 1937, 200 people were employed in the Cameo Mine. The miners affiliated with the United Mine Workers union. World War II increased the demand for coal, so at that time the Cameo Mine had three shifts of 150 employees on each shift working around the clock.

The two main customers of the Cameo Mine were Public Service Company of Colorado, which used coal for power plants—initially the one on 5th Street in Grand Junction, and the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad in Grand Junction or Minturn. As diesel engines replaced coal burning steam engines, the D&RG's use of coal diminished.

Nibbs formally took over the lease in late 1949 or early 1950. On November 1, 1955, Nibbs bought the mine and Cameo townsite from the McNeil Coal Corporation.

Early on, the Cameo mine used three mules for short haulage from the working face to the prep plant (tipple) outside the mine. Mules would take the empty cars back for the miners to load again. Later on, the mules were replaced by horses. The horses were replaced by electric locomotives. The prep plant included two crushers, a screening plant, and bins to hold three sizes of screened coal. Bins were used to load railroad cars or trucks. *As demand for multiple sizes diminished, all mine-run coal was crushed to meet Public Service Company powerplant specifications.*

The Cameo Mine was easier to work than the mines in the Bookcliffs because it was a “slope mine,” not a shaft mine. The Cameo coal seam is more or less flat, so trolley haulage followed the grade of the coal seam. The coal outcropped on the side of the hill, so miners just dug in there. The Powderhorn Coal Mine across the Colorado River from Cameo is another slope mine, which operated on the same Cameo seam.

The shaft mines have much steeper pitches, and thus the coal required hoisting to the surface. They were not vertical shafts, but the inclines were steep enough to require a rail or tramway to transport the coal down to the valley floor.

The Cameo seam was also easier to mine because it was nine feet thick. Miners could mine the top six to seven feet, leaving the bottom foot or two of coal, which had some impurities. This mining plan ensured higher quality coal, and it left enough space for the miners and animals, and later, mechanized machinery, to work.

There were some cave-ins, because on top of the coal was a 14-inch caprock of weak, sandy shale. A new method of roof support (roof bolting in addition to timbers) afforded better safety. There were no mine casualties when Nibbs and his father operated the mine, and one casualty after Nibbs took over as sole operator of the mine.

Some of the long-time miner families included Charley Bennett, and the Kissell, Creagor, Gibson, Vesakis, and Klemenic families. Jack Roudy was a mine foreman. There was very little turnover of miners. The miners lived in camp in Cameo, on surrounding ranches, and in Palisade.

Transition from Mining

Nibbs sold the Cameo Mine in 1964, and it ceased operating in 1969. Ownership changed hands a couple of times after that, and finally it was owned by the Powderhorn Coal Company, which closed its entire operation in 1986 – laying off 166 people.

Nibbs started Kerr Truck Company in 1950. He hauled coal from Cameo to Naturita and brought back uranium ore from Paradox Valley mines to the Union Carbide mill in Grand Junction. The Cameo Public Service power plant first unit began operating in 1957. The Kerr Truck Co. shop was located across the river from the mine. This provided areas for parking and maintenance work.

The Town of Cameo

Cameo gets its name from the rock formation on the mountain across the river from the town. It appears to be the head and shoulders of a man looking west.

The two-room schoolhouse was for 1st through 10th grades. For their last two years, students went to Palisade and graduated from Palisade High School.

A swinging bridge spanning the Colorado River at Cameo was built in 1909. Wilma Kerr drove the school bus (at one time a 1925 Buick). She transported six or seven students to Palisade Schools for 11 years. She made them walk across the bridge and picked them up on the other side. On one occasion, a truck went through the boards on the bridge. Wilma wrote to her Congressmen about the hazardous conditions of the bridge blowing in the wind and rising water. This resulted in the bridge being replaced in about 1940.

The Cameo bus station was across the river from town. Cameo's mail was delivered to the bus station, so it had to be picked up and brought across the river by the Cameo Mercantile store, which also housed the Cameo Post Office. Clark Rush ran the store, and later Mr. Miller ran it. Mrs. Duncan served as the last Cameo Postmaster. (*The Cameo Post Office ceased operation in 1969.*) Church services were held at the schoolhouse, and only occasionally would a real minister be there. Mrs. Mulvaney ran the Sunday School.

Family Information

Wilford Kerr, Sr., and Wilma Matzke were married in Paradox, CO. Wilford was on the Cameo school board for 27 years and served as secretary-treasurer. Joe Rigg and Mr. Miller were wonderful teachers.

Wilma did all the books and reports for the mine when it was operating. Payday was twice a month. She picked up supplies in town for the mine, including blasting powder. She was a 50-year member of the Order of the Eastern Star in Palisade and was a Gray Lady at St. Mary's Hospital for two years. She is the same age as Lucy Ela. She drove until the age of 92.

Wilford Kerr, Jr. "Nibbs" was born in 1918 at St Mary's Hospital, and Caroline was born in Cameo in 1922. She was delivered by Dr. Weidlein, who was the Company Doctor for the mine.

Nibbs married Miriam Price in 1942. She was a softball player and named to the All-Star team. Nibbs served in the Navy Sea Bees in the South Pacific Theater (Philippine and Marshall Islands) in World War II, where they constructed roads, hospitals, and other infrastructure. He worked on the survey crew laying out buildings, roads, and air strips.

Nibbs and Miriam had five children, Brent (Construction), Mark (Engineer), Karen (Science Research), Rebecca (Schoolteacher in Palisade for 42 years), and JoAnn (Construction company Office Manager).

Caroline graduated from Colorado Women's College, then served in the Coast Guard for over three years. She traveled a lot and worked primarily in recruiting, and later in separation of servicemembers after the war ended. She met her future husband, Jim Williams, in Kentucky

when he was in the Army. After marrying, they moved back to Colorado where both graduated from the University of Denver. They had one son, Bruce (Art Director and Graphic Designer) who served in the Air Force.

Wilma has nine great-grandchildren.

Summary by Priscilla Walker and Gary Hines 04/26/2021