

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History # 29

Date: 1/10/2020

Place: Butler home on East Orchard Mesa

Interviewees: John and Doris Butler

Interviewer: Charlene Weidner

This is a summary of an oral history interview created for the Palisade Historical Society. The text in *italics* is not part of the original interview and is added for clarification.

Family History and Early Life:

John Butler was born June 17, 1929 in Dolores, Colorado.

His father, William Lester Butler was born in 1889 in Liberty, Mississippi and died 10/24/1964 in Dolores, Colorado. William was a linotype setter in Cleburne, Texas. When he learned he had tuberculosis, his doctor advised him to move to a drier climate.

His mother, Mary Magdaline Jenkins was born in 1891 in Coryell County of Eastern Texas. She died 10/11/1972 in Naturita, Colorado.

The family were dry land farmers on Granath Mesa, above the town of Dolores. At times they grew potatoes, corn, wheat, barley, and clover. Some of the farm chores were to milk the cows and hoe the corn and potato crops. William Butler also worked as a “Rawleigh Man,” *a door-to-door to- salesman for the Rawleigh Company selling kitchen condiments and medicinal potions and salves*. He won Salesman of the Year and was awarded a Ford Model T.

John had eleven siblings, Lois, Norman, Edith Jane, Paul, Robert Morris, Harry, Wilbur, David, Mary Ruth, and two younger sisters, Hannah and Sarah.

The Butlers attended a nearby one room school on Granath Mesa with about 30 students. His oldest sister, Lois, was his first-grade teacher. One of her duties was to deliver drinking water as there was no running water. Also, there was no snow removal equipment, so they attended school in the summer in lieu of a winter session.

Later, John rode his horse 3.5 miles to Dolores High School. After spending his junior year at the larger Cortez High School, John returned to Dolores High School and graduated in 1947. He admits he was not a serious student.

The family's dry land farm was sold to his brother, Paul, after he returned from the Army. The Butlers bought 80 acres with irrigation from the Corkscrew Lateral which allowed them to grow hay and field corn. The new place had a cow barn, and with a permit they grazed 15 head nearby. John joined the Army in 1949, training at Fort Ord, California. He served in occupied Japan at a new air base located near Fujiyama, 50 miles from Tokyo. John drove a 6x6 GMC truck used to pull a 40 mm anti-aircraft gun. The soldiers were thrilled to find milk at the PX when they visited Tokyo. According to John, his 2-year stint was cut short by 6 months, as General Douglas MacArthur sent soldiers home in favor of a reduced troop presence.

John returned home in 1950 and was employed at a sawmill near Dunton, Co. He attended a dance at the high school and was introduced to Doris Forest. Six months later, on August 11, 1951, John and Doris married at Aztec, New Mexico.

Doris (born 11/29/1930 in Lewis, Co.) was the daughter of Eva Velva Jewell and Melvin Forest. Eva was born in 1910 at Santa Fe, Kansas and died in 1982 at Richmond, California. Doris' father, Melvin Forest, was born at Supply, Oklahoma in 1905 and died in 1994 at Lewis, Colorado. Melvin had a small ranch and was a government trapper for 19 years. There were four children born to this union, Robert, Doris, Donald Eugene, and Patricia. The marriage ended in divorce, and Eva then married Keith Alley in 1952. Melvin married Lucy Salazar.

John and Doris moved to Denver as they thought there was no future in Dolores. Here they joined John's brothers, David and Morris. John found employment with Western Electric, an equipment factory for Mountain Bell.

In 1955, an opportunity with the new dial-up phone system provided a job in Grand Junction. As an installer, John's job was to install phone cable inside of buildings. Eventually, he became a central office repairman in Grand Junction and retired from Mountain Bell in 1989 after 35 years.

They rented a home on B-1/2 Road from A.C. Carol and leased his 10 acres of Elberta peaches, apricots, and cherries. They hired people from Kansas to help with the harvest, providing housing and meals cooked by Doris. The packed fruit boxes were delivered to the United Fruit Growers Coop in Palisade, where John recalls them packing the train car with ice. They leased here for about 2.5 years.

Life in Palisade:

They purchased 10 acres at 3681 F Road, planted in Elberta peaches and Montmorency cherries, from Raymond Peeples. They hauled water to fill the cistern until Ute water provided domestic water. George Bunte's equipment company dug the foundation for their home. They built a basement with a flat roof and called it home for 5 years before they added the second story. Their family grew from daughters, Geri (Anderson) and Cindy (Richardson), to later include sons Randy and Kevin, whom they adopted as babies two years apart.

In the early 1960's they quit the fruit business. The trees were aging, and the Skyland Cannery sold out and was no longer buying the pie cherries. They took out the trees, bought some cows,

and planted hay and field corn. Eventually, John was farming some of his neighbor's land as well.

While raising the family, Doris worked for H&R Block and Halley's Tax Tallys for 13 tax seasons in Grand Junction.

Mesa Land Trust:

During 1980, the Butlers helped create the Mesa Land Trust. Ted Albers, husband of long-time Mesa County Commissioner, Maxine Albers, introduced them to someone from the National Land Trust. Worried about oil shale development and out-of-control growth in the area, they teamed up with Harry Talbott, Blaine Derrick, Herman Allmaras, and others to safeguard the region's agricultural land. This dedicated group spent many hours around the Butler's coffee table forming and guiding what is now the Colorado West Land Trust. Doris served as bookkeeper and secretary, championing a 7-year battle with the IRS regarding the non-profit status and the tax credits earned by the landowners. The land trust prevailed. In 1995, the Mesa Land Trust received a grant that enabled them to hire Rob Bleiberg as executive director. After 28 years of service, John Butler was the last of the founding directors to retire.

Community Activities and Retirement:

Doris served two terms on the Mesa County Planning Commission in the 1980s. John was Deacon and Trustee of the First Baptist Church in Palisade and taught Sunday school for several years. Doris volunteered as Treasurer for 30 years and acted as registrar of the Grand Mesa Church Camp at Baron Lake for 19 years. John served as a trustee of the Grand Mesa Assembly that ran the camp. Doris served on the board of the Palisade Historical Society, acting as treasurer.

After John's retirement from farming, they leased the farmland and it was replanted with peach trees, and a sprinkler irrigation system was installed in the orchard.

The Butlers have sold their home and orchard to granddaughter Gwyn and her husband, John Hittle, but remain in the home they built 60 years ago.

Summary by Charlene Weidner 05/06/2021