

Palisade Historical Society  
Oral and Video History Project  
Interview

Oral History # 33

Date: 2/10/2023

Place: 737 36 ½ Road, Palisade, CO

Interviewee: James “Jack” Stephens

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:**

James Stephens, known as Jack, was born in Boise, ID, his mother’s home state, on October 26, 1932. Jack’s parents were Caleb George Stephens and Zella Kiggins Stephens. Caleb, known as George, was born 8/10/1906 in Todd, NC and died 2/8/1975. Zella was born 9/8/1913 in Emmet, ID and died 2/28/1988. Jack had a younger brother, Mike Stephens, born in Palisade in 1945, who died while in service at Fort Sill, OK.

Jack moved to Palisade with his maternal grandparents, Samuel J. Kiggins, Jr. and Estella Kiggins. They lived on 36 ¼ Road, near the Phillips and Hodgson families.

Jack’s parents moved to Palisade from Rifle, CO around 1943. At the time, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Lind, owners of the Ute Theater in Rifle, bought the Elberta Theater in Palisade, establishing the Stephens as resident managers, as they had done in Rifle. The name of the theater had recently changed to the Victory Theater, but Lind quickly changed the name back to the Elberta. One of Jack’s early memories was watching the big “V” from the sign out front come down. Eleven-year-old Jack also remembers his theater jobs as popcorn maker, sign changer for the marquee, and janitor. The Elberta changed hands again in 1946. Jack says the theater’s popcorn maker later found a home at the Baptist Church that his family attended in Palisade. His parents later owned the Palisade Café from 1959 until 1965. Beginning in 1959, the Stephens family lived at 212 Bower, a home owned by George Bunte.

**Education and Early Memories:**

Jack attended Mount Lincoln School, where he remembers Superintendent Avon Taylor, and teacher Rena Mary Taylor. He was aware of the nearby coal mines and enjoyed watching the Gearhart tram come down the Bookcliffs. Starting in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he had a paper route from Bridge’s Switch into Palisade, earning a penny per paper delivered. He loved getting to know the dogs and their owners on his route. He met the Harry Plank family, whose place on 36 1/10 Road he would later buy.

Jack attended Palisade High School, where he was active with Future Farmers of America. Mr. Rhodes, the instructor, took the class on a tree pruning excursion where the boys got to eat lunch with the girls. He played high school football and baseball. His father was a pitcher for the local American Legion baseball team and convinced Jack to be a catcher for this adult team.

Although his dad wanted him to be a professional ball player, Jack was not thrilled with the speed of the ball coming at him, the dirt lot, the summer heat, or the alkaline soil down by the river at the ball field. Jack helped his maternal grandparents, Samuel J. and Estella Kiggins, with summer chores at their ranch near Plateau City, now part of the Collbran Job Corps. Jack's great grandparents, Samuel James Kiggins, Sr. and his wife, Rebecca Kiggins, were Plateau Valley pioneers who came "over the Mesa from Iowa," arriving in Colbran on August 3, 1884.

### **Military Service:**

Leaving Palisade High School in 1950, Jack enlisted in the United States Air Force. He had wanted to be a pilot but was not accepted due to his color blindness. His basic training was in San Antonio, TX with meteorology school at Chanute AFB in IL and Control Tower Training at Keesler AFB in MS. By the time his dad's Palisade auto body shop burned in October 1952, Jack was an Airman First Class at Erding Air Depot outside of Munich, Bavaria. After the fire, the best Jack could do to help his family was to send money home. During his time in Bavaria, Jack said he regularly received *The Palisade Tribune*, probably a gift from his folks. Jack was honorably discharged in 1953. He re-enlisted in the Army National Guard, where he trained and served as a qualified Communications Officer. In 1968, Jack transitioned into the Army Special Forces Group. He spoke of becoming a HALO (High Altitude Low Opening) jumper. He was assigned to the 19<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne) and earned the rank of Major in 1969.

### **Marriage and Family:**

Jack met Duna Mechau of Redstone while they attended Mesa Junior College (*later Mesa State College, and finally Colorado Mesa University*). They married on 9/24/1955 at the Baptist Church in Palisade and had five children, Kristian, Karol, James, Sandie, and Erin. Duna was born 11/3/1935 in Colorado Springs and died 12/11/2023 in Palisade.

### **Occupation/Professional Background:**

Jack attended Adams State College in Alamosa, CO, graduating in 1965. He balanced home life with military service and pursuit of higher education and later teaching. He taught Earth Science at Bookcliff Middle School and Geology at both Palisade and Central High Schools. He retired in 1993, having done post-graduate work at the Colorado School of Mines, Princeton, Rutgers, UTEP and Western Washington State.

### **Community Involvement:**

For 18 seasons on his summer breaks from teaching, Jack worked as a wildlands fire fighter and Crew Boss for the Forest Service, serving the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison (GMUG) National Forests and the Bureau of Land Management. Jack said it was firefighters who taught paratrooper skills in the Army.

When he retired, Jack began volunteering for Discover Ability out of Grand Junction. He loved the outdoors: hunting, skiing, and rafting, so teaching disabled people to ski worked for him. At

Winter Park Ski Area, he trained for his volunteer certificate and eventually earned the Professional Ski Instructor's American (PSIA) certificate. He volunteered for more than 20 years and at age 86 was featured in a YouTube video for Colorado Discover Ability. (YouTube Jack Stephens – Colorado Discover Ability). CDA's annual volunteer excellence award is called "The Jack Stephens Award."

For a time, Jack served as Scout Master for the Boy Scout Troop in Palisade.

**Hobbies / Interests:**

An avid outdoorsman, Jack liked to hunt deer and elk in Slater Park in Northern Colorado near Hayden. He remembered that the American Legion in Palisade kept rifles in racks, which they rented for hunting. Jack had Catahoula hunting dogs.

*Jack passed away on 9/4/2023. More detailed information on Jack's life can be found in the Palisade Historical Society's Oral History files.*

Summary by Charlene Weidner	4/23/2024
Reviewed and edited by Gary Hines	5/13/2024