

West Custer County Library District Local History Collection
Oral History Collection

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Austin, Irma

October 1, 1986

Interviewed by Irene Francis.

IA: Henry Wilker Zentz and Edith Elizabeth Zentz.

IF: And where were you born?

IA: Fairvilla, FL.

IF: Fairvilla, FL

IA: It's a suburb of Orlando. I think it's absorbed by Orlando now.

IF: And you were telling me that your father was a writer.

IA: Yes, he wrote under the nom de plume of Solomon Weisman.

IF: Ok, and his name, and he spelled his name, he was a professor?

IA: Yes, he was a professor. He taught in colleges for oh, 40 years or so.

IF: And his last name was spelled Zentz.

IA: Yes.

IF: You have some papers here that your father has written and maybe I'll read those a little later, after I talk to you. I might do some reading. Also, your grandparents were George and Sarah Jane Sellers.

IA: Yes, and they had a family. The oldest was William Sellers and then, Edith Edith Elizabeth, my mother, and Clarence Sellers. I can't think of the other's name.

IF: And they homesteaded out in Junkins Park.

IA: Yes, they came from Worcester, OH.

IF: You remember what year that was that?

IA: I believe 1910.

IF: 1910. Have you heard any stories about their homesteading at all out there?

IA: Very little, only they tried to have some cattle but they were stolen from them so they just gave that up. They said, my mother, my grandmother said that she wouldn't fight with neighbors. So, but they just

couldn't keep a cow, or calf. They'd got a heifer calf and it didn't disappear.

IF: Did they do any gardening out there? Raising vegetables?

IA: They had 160 acres to start with that they homesteaded and they had wonderful gardens. When we came from Florida, we came as far as Kansas. My dad was bedfast, so we left my oldest sister to take care of dad. He was very ill. Mother hadn't seen her father and mother for years and years, so she wanted to come to Junkins Park and see them and so we left Laurena, the oldest daughter of theirs, there to help take care of him. She was probably 12, I guess. We came on out to Junkins Park and we stayed there that first winter and missed school, which was wonderful for my brother and me. And we thought-

IF: You thought it great to miss school, huh?

IA: We just looked the country over and trapped squirrels and things we shouldn't do. We found a pair of skis of my uncle's; we called them snowshoes. But we decided that one could walk, put their feet in the front and the other one stand back of them. So, we got way up, where, in the summer our old patch was, and it was quite steep and my sister got on, my sister that came with us. The other sister was still in Kansas. Why, she was older, so she said her feet would be in those skis, so I stood back of her and we thought we could walk like in snowshoes. So, we started out, and we started to slide, so I just squatted down and down we went, almost to the cabin. My uncle came out. Oh, he was angry, sticking his skis up and he said we could kill ourselves.

IF: Why sure!

IA: He stopped all of our fun on skis.

IF: Now, your mother moved to the area then after your father died.

IA: Yes, we stayed there and he died during the winter. There was six foot of snow on the level and he went on snowshoes to Rosita to get the mail. Dad had been buried for two weeks when we got word.

IF: That was the time when they had a town in Rosita and the post office was in Rosita.

IA: Oh, yes, and that reminds me that my uncle Will said when they first came, that was in 1910, at the turn of the century, he went in there to Rosita and they had lynched a man and he was still hanging up there. He went back to Junkins Park and told his folks that he didn't want to live in such a country.

IF: Did he ever find out why they lynched the man? What we had done?

IA: No, he said he just didn't remember all the ins and outs of it. But they wanted to get out of there right now.

IF: But your grandparents wanted to stay.

IA: Yes, they stayed because they were proving up on there, and later, they liked the place and I guess it got tamer.

IF: Were there stores, grocery stores and things like that, in Rosita at that time or did you have to go to Westcliffe?

IA: I didn't remember that. Surely, they had some method of getting groceries without going way out, because it was too far for the wagons.

IF: Now, when your mother moved to the area, did she move to Silver Cliff or Westcliffe?

IA: She moved to Westcliffe to start with but she had a friend in Silver Cliff and it wasn't long till she moved to Silver Cliff.

IF: And when you went to school, tell me where you went to school.

IA: I started in Westcliffe, moved to Silver Cliff, and oh, we, I liked it better.

IF: Where was the school in Westcliffe? Where it is now?

IA: It was in the old stone building.

IF: Where the park is now?

IA: It wasn't in the same place at all. That was built much later.

IF: Right, and then when we went to Silver Cliff, did you go into the old Silver Cliff school?

IA: This old schoolhouse here is apartments now.

IF: Right, and how many students were there, do you remember?

IA: Well, they had the oh, quite a few, I can't remember but the big room, we called it, and the little room. Even then, I used to draw pictures, make pictures, so the teacher found out. I made the calendar one month, and so she made me make that calendar every month. Then I told her I could do better by making a picture to match the month with colored chalk so she got me colored chalk so I used to make the colored top and the picture to match the month. So, we had the month there, that stayed each month you see, on the blackboard.

IF: You remember any of the names of your teachers?

IA: Oh, I don't remember any anymore. They changed every year.

IF: Did you graduate from grade school?

IA: Yes, there was no high school. So, I studied with a woman, Mrs. Johns. She used to live next door and she'd hear my lessons and she did it for free. My mother couldn't-

IF: This was high school. Some of the people went down to Canon to high school, didn't they?

IA: Yes, mother couldn't afford it, so after that, it's just through Mrs. Johns.

IF: Then when did you leave the area? You left the area for a while, didn't you?

IA: Not until, yes, I went to Wyoming for a while with a friend of mother's. That was quite an experience because it was so different, Rock River, WY and it was just built up. So, I was going to art school. I had

friends that I met at the Pines [ranch] where I worked and they wanted me to come and stay with them because they thought I should go to art school. So, I was starting to go to get off at Boulder and Mrs. Richardson started reading a letter she'd gotten from where she was going, from her son. So, I thought, it would be exciting to go out there where everything was new. We had to wait in Denver and I decided I wanted to go on out there. So, I told her, do you think mother would care, as long as I was under your care? And she says, no, I don't think so. And she says, of course, that's their responsibility, but she says, you're a good girl. I'll look after you. So, I went on to Rock River with her. We had, it was certainly different. They had a mile tunnel that train went through at Rock River and I didn't know why, but it's because the snows were so terrible, they had it clear across that flat. They had to have that so the trains could get through.

IF: So, they had much more snow than you were used to.

IA: Oh yes, but no, there was no snow while we were there. We went to eat at the Orrs Café and Sam Orr, was his name and he hired her for a cook right away. She was a cook and she was real rough talking, just like she was crank, to people, you know, outsiders. So, we went to bed. We got a room and the only place to get a room was above a pool hall and they shot and they, oh, it was all so noisy. So, we pushed the dresser and everything else we could get against the door and it was locked. Nobody bothered the door but we weren't sure.

IF: You were making sure.

IA: Somebody knocked on the door the next morning early. It must have been 5:30 and she said, who's thar? She was real tough and he said, Sam Orr. He says, if you would come down, he must've canned that cook because I guess the cook wasn't too dependable. He says, if you'd come down right away, well, you can have a job. And he says, if the young lady wants to wait table, she has a job.

IF: Oh, how nice.

IA: She has a job too. So, we worked there for three months, and she was so cranky that they canned her after three months and I wanted to stay. They said that I could even do the cooking and I was only 14 years old.

IF: Oh, my goodness.

IA: So, she says, indeed you will not. You're under my care and you'll go right home with me which I did after I thought over it. I thought, well, that's right.

IF: But you went to art school there?

IA: No.

IF: You never did.

IA: I never got to art school.

IF: You never got to art school.

IA: I never took a lesson in my life.

IF: Oh, well, you sure do wonderful work for not taking a lesson.

IA: Well, I came home and just lived here until I married a boy that was in school that I'd known.

IF: And now tell me-

IA: George Fuchs.

IF: Now we talked about how you spell that name.

IA: It was Fuchs, and he spelled it Fox.

IF: Right, changed it to that.

IA: Well, after we were married and moved to Pueblo, because people couldn't find us in the directory and so we had to change it. Not legally, but we never did spell it, only Fox. And George has never spelled it, only in the service. It was both ways, when he went to the service.

IF: And you have one son.

IA: That's one son, that's all.

IF: And his name is George Earl Fox.

IF: And he spells it Fox.

IA: Yes, but he got mail Fuchs too. Both ways in the service.

IF: You just mentioned a little while ago that you worked at the Pines [ranch].

IA: Oh yes, for a number of years. Those were happy years.

IF: Now who was running the Pines at that point?

IA: Reginald Cusack.

IF: Cusack. How do you spell his name?

IA: Reginald Cusack, and he has part of his family are still living in Canon City, I believe, Nancy. And [unintelligible] was married and I don't know where she is, and just recently, the boy died.

IF: Right. I saw the obituary, yes. Now, are those the people that built the Pines from this kit that was from Sears and Roebuck, I think? Is that the Pines? When they built it, how did they build it, do you remember?

IA: I don't remember.

IF: Now there's two places that I've heard about. One is the Pines and then, there's another place that had guests and that was called Spread Eagle.

IA: That was later, that came later, Spread Eagle.

IF: So, Pines that the Rusks are running now. Dean Rusk is running the Pines.

IA: I don't know but I worked there during the summer till I was married and they were happy years. Audrey was home and we were about the same age and-

IF: That's your sister?

IA: That was uh, Cusack. And Reginald, he cooked. Then they had their, that was down, they called that Rock Mound and they took guests and they had guests in Rock Mound and cabins. There were cabins in the woods and the Rock Mound. Fermont was their family home and it was about a half a mile west up in the Sangres.

IF: Oh, I see. The Cusacks lived away from the guest ranch.

IA: Reginald stayed there and Audrey and I. Audrey and I took care of all of the rooms and waiting table.

IF: About how many guests would they have?

IA: Oh, they could take about, I'd say, 12.

IF: And how long would these guests stay?

IA: Sometimes all summer.

IF: Really? Stay in the cabins, and then would they eat in a dining room?

IA: Oh, yes, we had the dining room. Then we had sometimes extra guests on Sundays, that would come out, or special days, they'd call up, and ask if they could come. So, we always had a dining room full.

IF: Did they have phones up there then?

IA: Telephones, oh yes!

IF: They did have telephones.

IA: It wasn't connected with Westcliffe, I don't believe, at that time. It may have been. The phone service wasn't through entirely. They couldn't call long distance or anything.

IF: Would these people come by train to Westcliffe?

IA: Yes, they were met, sometimes Verdemont, and sometimes in Westcliffe.

IF: Where are some of the places they would come from?

IA: Oh, all over, NY, some people from, what company was it? It was some big company. I couldn't tell you now, but they were all quite wealthy, most of them from far off, and oh, I don't know. I can't remember where. There were some from Chicago, the Staley girls, and their father was interested in some railroad and they came up for the summer. There was Vava and Emily Staley.

IF: Did they have horses up there? Was it a working ranch?

IA: Oh, good horses. They had one called Redwood that I just loved and Audrey and I used to go down riding. There was a big arroyo in front of the wash, come out of the Sangre de Cristos and we'd get way down and go oh, we'd go very fast and then jump clear across that arroyo. It looked impossible to get across and those horses really could! Oh, they could span that so easily.

IF: So, they had well trained horses.

IA: Oh yes.

IF: Would they take people up on backpack trips too?

IA: Oh yes, I've taken some up there, and when some of the rest were busy, and then later years, I went up from our ranch with ones that I took up. I'd cook. Dewey was a commissioner and we'd meet so many at the state convention, and they'd come up to visit naturally. He'd ask everybody that we met practically, and so would I and they came. [laughing]

IF: So, you had to find some rooms for them when they all came.

IA: We always took care of them when they came. Special ones, I remember there was Elizabeth somebody. She was administrator of public assistance. Stevenson was her last name. She had never ridden a horse and she played out. Dewey had that practically pecker down and she was so sore so couldn't walk. It was awful, so I waited there at the foothills when they got down with my horse. I had ridden the horse up and Dewey'd taken the car and I'd ridden my horse up and took his for some reason. He'd gotten up there and had to do something else and so I took the horse for her and drove, he took the horse, but no, I've got it turned around. Dewey took the two horses and I drove up and he led the two horses so he'd have them there so she wouldn't have to ride any farther than possible.

IF: She was sore, huh?

IA: We thought that would help and it did because when we came down, I had to bring her down in the car. She couldn't stand. She had given out up the trail and she couldn't ride anymore so I had to bring her home in the car.

IF: Well, let's backtrack a little bit now. Your first husband died after you were married ten years, you told me.

IA: Yes, and I was-

IF: And you had lived in Pueblo at that time?

IA: Yes, I had a beauty shop in Pueblo.

IF: And then you moved back to Silver Cliff.

IA: Yes, my two sisters married. They were married and they lived here with families, and my mother and my brother, all of them, four in the family that had homes here.

IF: Lived here. And so, then you moved here and then you married Dewey Austin.

IA: Yes.

IF: What year was that, Irma?

IA: '20.

IF: Somewhere in the 1920s anyway?

IA: Uh huh, it was I believe, in 1920, '21.

IF: Uh huh and then you moved. Did he have a ranch at that time?

IA: No, we never owned a ranch here.

IF: I see.

IA: We leased ranches and I think the one I liked the best was the Beck place; it was 2080 acres on it.

IF: Beck place? Beck?

IA: Uh huh, Beck place, and we stayed there five years, I guess it was, and then we had quite a herd of our own. We didn't pay the lease. We gave him a percentage of the increase on our stock and he gave us a percentage. Really it was trading across, but he had more than we had.

IF: I see.

IA: And so, we sold most of the cattle when we left. We took just the special ones, the cows I wouldn't let him sell. And the horses, he took the team and we bought a place in Missouri. He thought he'd like it because that had been his home but he didn't like it. He wasn't there two weeks and he wanted to come home and so we came back as soon as we could sell. We were there four years.

IF: Now tell me something about your life on the ranch.

IA: Oh, it was good.

IF: You, did you have to cook for the hands?

IA: Oh, yes.

IF: How many hands did you have? Did you have people that worked-

IA: No, we usually kept one, that's all, and I was a hand too.

IF: I see

IA: With my husband. And we took care of most everything. If we needed any extra, we just hired extra. Oh, those were good years and by him being commissioner, we had so much company. I had lots of extra company come in. You never knew, that's the way. I remember my son came from Denver with my daughter in law's uncle, and he came out in the morning, he says, I've never saw such a place, people coming all night long. I was cooking, I cooked dinner for, made steaks for a bunch that came from Denver

and there was something like eight or ten and it was at 10 o'clock at night and then we got in a card game. They liked to play cards, poker, and we got in a card game and that lasted till probably 2 o'clock in the morning. So, that's the way it was.

IF: And then you'd have to be up again in the morning.

IA: Yes, but I got up at 6 o'clock or before and I had to. You have to on a ranch and then if there was anybody came that visited, one got the lakes. We always took them horseback, to my sorrow, because that's a long ride for people.

IF: Yeah, and they aren't used to the altitude and-

IA: Well, yep, not only that but they got saddle sore and then they thought walking would be better, and they were so sore from the saddle that they could scarcely walk, almost had to pack them out of there.

IF: What lakes would you go up to?

IA: Lake of the Clouds and Venable and Comanche, mostly. You had to go down the trail a little to get to Hermit and we didn't go there very much.

IF: Well, you know, Irma, there's a lot of people that live here all their life and never get up to those lakes.

IA: Oh my, they missed it.

IF: Don't they?

IA: I used to go up fishing, my sister and I, and we'd go on to, I'd say crawl practically. We'd climb to the top so we could look over in the San Luis valley.

IF: Uh huh, beautiful.

IA: Beautiful!

IF: Irma, since you've been up in the mountains and you've seen so many of the lakes and the beauty up there, I know you write poetry and you said that you had a poem that's about the Sangre de Cristo mountains?

IA: Yes.

IF: Ok I want you to recite it for me, as well as you can remember it.

IA: I can't find my book, but I will eventually, but I'll try.

IF: Right.

IA:

Sangre de Cristo is cold, serene,

Behold her of another scene.

Before the white man sought to gain
possession of your vast terrain.
You seem to frown and reprimand
our banishment of Indian band.
Your spruce trees even seem to sigh
a requiem for the days gone by.
The valley that your mother saw
was loved by warriors long ago.
Your mighty forest sheltered game
That was before the white man came.
The land that myriad fences bound
Was once a buffalo grazing ground.
And there were [unintelligible] a town
is where the herd once bedded down.
Wondrous mountains, could you but tell
The secret that you guard so well.
The wanton slaughter of the herd
The slaying of each beast and bird.
Still, you look down in proud disdain
Then seem to ask, what did you gain?
Tis then in retrospect I see
Your valley as it used to be.

IF: Oh, that's great!

End of tape.

Note: This is followed by a reading from the book *Reminiscences*, Bicentennial Centennial, 1976, Custer County, CO, Custer County Women's Club. This has not been transcribed; book is available in the WCCLD.

