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Oral History Collection

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Benson, Bud and Kathy

No date

Interviewed by Debbie Hood

DH: Kathy, I will let you start anywhere you want to start. You were telling me about anything you want to put in. We'll just get started.

KB: You want me to get started with my grandfather? Charles Wolf was of German descent, the son of Paul and Augusta Wolf. His mother died when he was three years old. He had an older brother, Ignots. His father remarried and to this union three sons were born, Casper, Henry, didn't know the other one's name. He was raised mostly by his grandmother named Greta who he loved very dearly because of her devotion to him. His stepmother was mean to her stepchildren.

DH: Oh dear!

KB: Both Ignots and Casper came to the United States. My grandfather, Charles Wolf, left Germany between the age of 17 and 18 to avoid military training so it isn't any different, is it?

DH: No, it isn't.

KB: He came to New York city where he had a relative, I believe. He worked there doing any labor possible for some time, but as soon as possible, worked his way westward. When coming to Colorado, he came to a distant relative, the Fred Dietz's, Dietz's and Becks. Do those names sound familiar?

DH: Yes, they do.

KB: Where he worked and learned the ways of the West, farming and so forth. He homesteaded a place on Gruff Creek, 11 miles west of Gardner and lived there for a number of years.

DH: Yeah, I'd have to [unintelligible]

KB: Right, that's right.

DH: [unintelligible]

KB: No, it's Gruff, GRUFF-

DH: [unintelligible]

KB: I just think it is, uh huh. I'm pretty sure.

BB: It's called Bus Creek. Gruff is the way it's spelled.

KB: Still. In the late 1800s, he was married to Effie Hughes of Shellsburg, Iowa. To this union was born five children. Izeke passed away in infancy. Paul, who was my father, Zeda, Lida and Dorothy. Dorothy also passed away when she was born. He and wife took into their home a niece, Elfie, and nephew, Charles Ribble from Shellsburg, Iowa, whose mother passed away when each child was 16 years, that's wrong. This is my aunt wrote this and her punctuation isn't just exactly what it should be, so I made an error there. When each child was 16 years of age, they passed away, Elfie from ruptured appendix and Charles from tuberculo-meningitis.

Charles Wolf and Amul Schmidt and owners of the JM Ranch lawsuited many years with the San Luis Valley over water in the Medano.

DH: [unintelligible] was telling me that [unintelligible]

BB: That's right.

KB: And it was quite a chore. Every spring, they had to clean this ditch out and it was really a big job.

DH: [unintelligible]

BB: Yes, all of us, lot of times.

KB: Aft, er many years and many dollars, the lawsuit was won and water was brought across the Medano to irrigate on the ranches. For years and years, water was hauled from the wonderful soft water spring one and a half miles west of the ranch house, but finally was told by a surveyor it was possible to pipe the water to the house and barnyard. Galvanized pipe was used and Charles Wolf hauled it by wagon to the ranch from Walsenburg, which was 45 miles.

DH: Oh, my goodness!

KB: That's a long ways, isn't it?

DH: Yes, it is! And this was the pipe.

KB: This was the pipe to pipe the water from the spring to the ranch house. In handling the pipe, he contracted Ara Siples. This was my grandfather. After being doctored at home by a doctor from Walsenburg, he was taken to Poorland Hospital, which is now St. Mary Corwin where he was near death for some time.

DH: Can you tell me [unintelligible]

KB: I really can't. It's a bad disease, really bad. Every year, till his death, he had a very bad sick spell every spring, after he had the [unintelligible]. He passed away November 18, 1932 after having pneumonia. He was buried in the Gardner cemetery. His wife passed away on December 15, 1951 in Walsenburg where she lived after a short stay at the ranch when it was turned over to son Paul. Paul passed away in 1971 and daughter Lida in 1976. My grandfather, Mr. Wolf, was born in Hollandholler, Germany. He was a highly respected man, friend to everyone and a very hard worker and always helped the less fortunate. His brother Ignots who worked in a butcher shop in some town in New York, and I just can't make it out, contracted tuberculosis and my father brought him to Colorado hoping he would be benefitted. But after about three years, he passed away and is also buried in the Gardner cemetery. So that's the history on my grandfather.

DH: We had a note that your grandmother came from Iowa. Did he go back to Iowa to find her. How did they meet?

KB: Well, the story is that she was a mail order bride.

DH: Oh, my goodness!

KB: He advertised and this is how he met my grandmother.

DH: And I would assume the marriage was reasonably happy.

KB: It evidently was because they lived together and-

DH: And had you said five children?

KB: Five children, uh huh, five children.

DH: And your father was-

KB: Paul.

DH: Paul.

KB: Right.

DH: Now, had your grandfather been involved in farming in general. I'm not familiar [unintelligible] I don't know=

KB: I'm not either, Debbie. I don't know.

DH: [unintelligible]

KB: He left when he was 17 so I really don't know much about-

BB: No, he couldn't.

KB: Right.

DH: Why did he come back? This always intrigues me.

KB: The only reason I know is because, to avoid the military service.

DH: I see.

KB: But I don't know what drew all these people to the West.

DH: It's so intriguing to me because at that time, you would do anything. There was money to be made in the city, I think.

KB: Mm hmm.

DH: But perhaps there were just so many people in town.

BB: Don't you think it was the gold?

DH: Well, I would think it would have to be-

KB: Gold. 'Young man, go West'.

DH: They really say that (laughing) The ranch remaining in your family's hands was the [unintelligible], wasn't it?

KB: Yes, it did.

DH: Was this on your father?

KB: This was on my father.

DH: Oh, great!

KB: Paul Wolf, my father, was born on the ranch home, on Gruff Creek, on November 12, 1901. He was reared on this ranch which was originally homesteaded by his father, Charles, in 1892. He was married to Josephine Kiesler of Westcliffe, CO, October 19, 1925. To this union was born seven children, Catherine Benson, Georgia Hughes, Charlotte Rogers (deceased July 20, 1965), Margarie Riggins, Eddie Joe Cooper, Charles and Paul, Jr. Paul was a highly respected and prominent rancher who took great pride in his cattle and ranch holdings. A hard worker and friend to all, always ready to lend a helping hand. And I think Bud can tell you the ranch was a hunter's paradise.

BB: Yeah, they used to just hunt all the time, you know, lots of deer there, all the deer was-

DH: [unintelligible]

BB: No, it hasn't. There was no elk down there then. You know, now there's elk all around there.

DH: This is true and even with down the-

BB: That's right.

KB: They used to come in the fields by the hundreds and destroy the hay stacks-

DH: They were really a detriment.

KB: Right.

BB: Yes.

DH: What, I'm sorry but I just have to stop here. It really interests me – what were they able to do? Did you always have, when did you begin to have to have a license for deer?

BB: Ever since I was a kid, used to have to be 18 or older to buy a license.

DH: I see.

BB: I've got one every year from the time I was old enough to hunt, you know, so I don't know how long before that?

DH: Was the new government records here from you to-

BB: They would, you know, if-

KB: One year, didn't they, seems like one year there they-

BB: Hurmongolo lived right west of Alva Schmidt's, you know. Fish and Game used to pay him for alfalfa that they'd eat up in the spring of the year, any stacks they'd get into. But I don't think your dad ever put in for any of-

KB: I don't think she did, I don't remember that he did. It was just-

BB: That's right.

KB: But you'd go in the fields and oh, you just can't imagine, it was just like the hillside was moving.

[unintelligible] we brought a bunch of cub scouts from Walsenburg up to my dad's ranch one Sunday, and they branded, and the kids got to help with the branding.

DH: Oh, how exciting.

KB: Oh, they had a ball, and then afterwards, we took them up in one of these fields and let them see the deer and you should have heard the oohs and aahs, because the hillside just looked like it was just moving, you know. There were so many deer and of course, they went home and told their fathers about all the deer they'd seen.

DH: Yeah! (laughing)

KB: You can imagine they thought oh, we can just go there (laughing) Another thing we had was a lot of jackrabbits that came into the fields. So, one of the greatest sports was going out at night with a spotlight and shooting these jackrabbits, and it was nothing for somebody to fall off the fender of the car and kick up. But it was great fun! And then, my dad raised pigs and so then they'd feed these jackrabbits to the pigs.

DH: Oh really? Yeah, and it seemed like what I used to hear that the pigs' eyes.

KB: They seemed to enjoy the jackrabbits. At least, we got rid of a lot of the jackrabbits. It was great entertainment you know for the family and all the hired hands.

DH: Oh, I'll bet so. (laughing)

KB: in 1959 the ranch was sold to the Level Cattle Company in El Paso, TX. A million-dollar ranch land and cattle investment which included the JM Ranch which was formerly owned by John Myer, the Long Jekyll Ranch, Wolf Ranch and the Hallerio Serda ranch. The sellers were Hugo Rutherford, owner of the JM Ranch, Joe Romsville, owner of the Long Jekyll Ranch and he also owned the Bill Garritson ranch, the Charles and Albert Schmidt ranch and the Jess Roach ranch.

DH: My goodness. What was his name again?

KB: Ah, Joe Romsville.

DH: Romsville. Where was he?

KB: He was from Pecos, TX. The Andrew Tillmans, owner of Serda place, and Paul Wolf. The transaction involved 45,000 acres in three counties, Huerfano, Custer and Sagauche, and according to the attorneys who handled the transaction, abstracts covering the property showed hundreds of former owners of small tracts within this combined unit.

DH: Have you ever read the abstracts on it?

KB: No, I never have, but I know when I was a teenager, there was families scattered all out through these ranches. There was just, I can remember, probably 25 or 30 families that hold on these ranches and just little-

BB: There's a lot of old cabins down there now, you know, just about ready to fall down or some of them has fell down where people used to live.

DH: This would really be something to have a map of those original homesteads.

KB: Yes, it would.

BB: Just timely people.

DH: Yeah.

BB: Actually homesteaders.

DH: Keith and I have been talking about doing that up here in the Valley.

BB: That would be good.

KB: They've torn down so many of these so now, anybody that goes there now would never know there was anybody that ever lived there.

DH: I would assume the original abstracts are on file somewhere.

KB: Yes. I'm sure in Walsenburg.

DH: Yes.

BB: Yes.

KB: And if you talk to Jeanette Batch-

DH: I'm going to. I did not get her note written yet but I'm going to and Mrs. Myers that I must.

KB: Yes, she's very good and they're a real estate office handled a lot of the sales of these ranches.

DH: Oh, I see.

KB: So, she could give you a lot of history and I'm sure you could see the abstracts and [unintelligible] oh yeah, you've got a job ahead of you, Debbie.

DH: Oh (laughing) [unintelligible] with the changes, I don't know.

KB: The history of the ranches dates back almost 100 years and involves transfer of the first intermountain water diversion in Colorado in 1886, diverting water from the Hudson branch of Badmouth Creek near the Sand Dunes monument into the watershed of Bloody Creek on the east slope of the Sangre de Cristo range. Diversion of the water resulted in a lengthy court battle between John Myer, original owner of the Rutherford ranch, known for many years as the JM Ranch, and the owners of the Medano Springs Ranch near the Sand Dunes. In 1904, a consent decree was entered in district court in Alamosa, guaranteeing the right of the JM and Wolf ranches to divert 15 cubic feet of water per second to the Muddy and Gruff Creek watersheds during certain seasons of the year. Charles Wolf, father of Paul, joined Myer in the lengthy court battle. This was when they got the water over the Medano, so it was quite a lengthy battle and I'm sure there was probably some enemies, you know, water always brings hard feelings-

DH: That was the understatement, especially when two prominent managers in the Valley have water from the other side of the mountain.

KB: Right.

DH: What come to them to bring the water over the mountain? Was it really that short? It must have been to compel that experience.

BB: Yes. The ranches down there wouldn't have been any good if they didn't have that water. Gruff Creek won't, the spring runs a little but it doesn't run-

KB: Not through the summer.

BB: No.

KB: See, they used this water to irrigate these ranches and without bringing this water over the Medano, it would be-

DH: Now, does it still come over? When the Levels bought all this land, did they buy also the right-

BB: Yes, they bought all the water rights.

DH: I see.

KB: But I don't think they're irrigating. If they are, not very much.

DH: I guess we just better say 'no comment.' (laughing)

KB: That's better.

BB: I think so too.

DH: I'll take that part out of the tape.

KB: Yeah.

BB: Can I say something?

DH: Your eyes got big and white! (laughing)

KB: I hope that's all.

DH: Don't be afraid. But, that's alright. I'll erase it.

KB: Ok. (laughing)

DH: You know, really, 15 cubic feet used in the right places and carried right is a lot of water.

BB: Yes, it is. No, it's not really, half a year.

DH: Oh, all right. Now, this is unfortunate because some of the interesting, there are people still alive who recorded the-

KB: Yeah, mm hmm. Right.

DH: And I think I may use that as my introduction to this tape. But anyway, ok.

KB: In 1970 the ranch sold to James W. Hyde and Harold F. Vessels of Englewood and Associates. The addition of several other ownerships had been added to the holdings including the Porter and Winner ranch, largely in Custer County, the old Harry Vandenburg ranch and Rex Schnadderly land are included in the Custer County portion of the ranch as well as part of the Jim Wilburn ranch acquired from Anthony Pondo. This transaction involved 56,000 acres at a price reported to be just under two and half million.

DH: My word.

KB: Lots of money.

DH: Yes, it is.

KB: My father moved to Rye in 1960 after selling his ranch to Level. He owned a small ranch there and operated it until his death on April 3, 1971. Mother sold the ranch to Dr. Calvin Hunter and moved to Pueblo where she now resides at 2807 Royal Avenue.

DH: What a beautiful, concise history of your family. You took a lot of [unintelligible] I am curious about things that you remember growing up on pretty large. The Wolf ranch was pretty large and pretty

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prominent in that area. What was it like growing up on that kind of a ranch?

KB: Well, lots of fun and lots of hard work, good times. I used to help my dad ride all the time. I was a cowgirl till I got married. Always worked in the hay field. I started out as a, we called it a stacker team driver.

DH: I found out all about that stuff from Velda-

KB: And I graduated from that and I was put on a sulky rake and then I graduated from that to the buck rake and that's how we put up our hay, and I even helped my dad stack hay once in a while.

DH: Did you?

KB: It was fun but it was sure lots of hard work.

DH: How about your friends? Did you have lots of friends over?

KB: Yes. Well, we didn't have too many close neighbors. They didn't have too many children but we'd get together and have weinie roasts and things like that. But it wasn't a lot of things to entertain us in those days.

DH: You know, part of the reason I do this is for people who are never going to know anything about Medano country personally, you know, and they can read Louis L'Amour's books, but he doesn't get quite new anymore.

KB: Yeah, that's right.

DH: And one thing that applied is that well, people, a generation before you, of Paul's age, you know, their socializing was about social [unintelligible] or thrashing up here in the fall or roundup and I'll bet you guys had roundup here. You had a roundup as well?

KB: Yes.

DH: How long did you ship your cattle out from childhood?

BB: [unintelligible] for sure.

DH: [unintelligible] of the coal mining town?

KB: Yes.

DH: And when did the mines open up there?

KB: I don't know. I sure don't know, Debbie.

DH: Evidently quite a while ago. Would it have been before the turn of the century, is it that old?

BB: Yes.

KB: I bet it is. Because I was born at Maytham, CO, a coal mining town.

DH: Where's Maytham?

KB: It's on beyond Tioga-

DH: It's-

KB: In the area, yes. It's just several miles from Tioga. I was born at the home of my aunt, delivered by the Tioga doctor.

DH: Oh!

KB: Fallet who was the doctor at Tioga at that time.

DH: Uh huh. So many people I don't think they ever asked their mothers about how they got here.

KB: Right. (laughing)

DH: Their mothers just didn't want to remember.

KB: That could be.

DH: [unintelligible wondered what you're alluding to is that the tent of Gardner who stopped at an early age station [unintelligible

KB: This article was written by Lida Myer in 1959-

DH: Yeah! She would be related to Mulder, am I correct?

BB: She would be Zula Myer-

KB: Sister-in-law.

BB: Sister-in-law. [unintelligible

DH: Alright. Is she still alive?

KB: No, she's not.

DH: Ok, cause I know Zula and two of his sister in laws and they have three, several, but Zula and two more who are still alive.

KB: Ethel.

BB: Ethel is one.

KB: She's in the nursing home in Trinidad. [unintelligible

DH: One's in Denver.

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BB: Oh, that's Albert Marce.

DH: I thought that was really neat because she'd been none of them? None of the three ladies where you were related, from all over [unintelligible all married to Myer brothers.

KB: Debbie, I thought you might like to hear about the Spanish holiday they used to have in Gardner.

DH: And that's spelled GALLO.

KB: That's right.

KB: In the early days of Gardner, the Spanish people held a two-day holiday known as Gallo Day, meaning 'The Day of the Cock' or rooster. The first day, July 25, was the Vio Gallo Day. The proper name for the day was St. James Day. It came to be called Gallo Day because on that day, they would bury a rooster in the sand with only its head sticking out. Can you imagine?

DH: Not really. That sounds awfully cruel.

KB: The men would race on their horses leaning from their saddle to try to grab the rooster and when one did get the rooster, the others would chase after him. (laughing) The next day, the 26th, known as St. Anna's Day, the women would try their skill at the same rooster grabbing but in later years, the state's Humane Society put a stop to the event. After that, gunny sacks, instead of roosters were used.

DH: Took all the fine ladies.

KB: Right. On both days, they had horse races, dancing and other activities. During recent years, there have been no celebration on these days. I vaguely remember the celebrations in Gardner but I was pretty young then so I don't remember too much about that.

DH: Do you remember any of it?

BB: A little, but not too much. We never did, I remember they used to have the rodeos down there but the Coyote Days, we never did go to that too much.

DH: That was pretty much strictly Spanish-

BB: It was, yes, and we never went to that.

DH: Was there hard feeling between the Spanish people and the white people as there were-

BB: Yes, there really was. They were friends, yet they weren't friends.

DH: You didn't actually socialize with each other?

BB: No, no, we didn't. They went their way; rest of the people went their way.

DH: It must have been quite a few of them though to have this kind of gathering. It sounds like it would entail-

BB: There was, yeah.

KB: There was always a lot of Spanish people in Gardner.

DH: Uh huh. What brought them there?

BB: Well, a lot of them had little ranches, you know-

KB: They had little ranches-

BB: Little ranches up and down the Huerfano, and that's really what brought them there. There's no mining or anything right in that area.

DH: I didn't think there was but I wasn't sure.

BB: Just ranching.

KB: This article might tell something, Debbie. You're more than welcome to read it.

DH: Oh, that would be so great.

KB: It was written by Lida Myer in 1959 and it tells about the first school in Gardner and about a doctor that arrived there and an epidemic that hit the Gardner area and then a bad flood they had in 1911, so I'm sure you'd enjoy reading this article.

DH: Oh, yes! That 1911 flood was either the same year or the year before when the reservoir broke up there on the [unintelligible Hill.

KB: I think that's right.

BB: That's when the reservoir in Huerfano broke, the one they call Goose Lake.

DH: Oh, was it?

BB: I'm pretty sure it was that.

DH: Well, this one, if I remember correctly, broke in-

KB: October 1911, whenever the cloud burst in the Sierra blocked the mountains and the heavy rain that continued for several days.

DH: This is when the flood happened and I wonder, no the watersheds are different. I suppose the two would not have been connected because all the water here would have run eventually north.

BB: Yes, they would run-

KB: got turned around. This article says that it washed out two large reservoirs at the head of the Huerfano releasing all the stored water which then rushed down the Huerfano causing damage in the Valley estimated at \$500,000.

DH: My word, in 1911, that was a terrible amount of money.

BB: I didn't know of two, but I knew the one was called Goose Lake.

DH: Well, Bud, tell me about your family. I want to hear about working on the JM too.

BB: Well, Debbie, I really don't know too much about my family. Now I've only got, let's see, one uncle left, well, two uncles. But one lives out, he was in California, but now he's in-

KB: Oregon.

BB: Oregon. I'll check with this one uncle, see if maybe he can give us, you know, some information on my grandad, grandmother and that, you know. On my mother's side, in this one article where it said Engleschmidt, you know, well, that was my grandad.

DH: Oh, I see. Your mother-

BB: Yes, she was a Schmidt. They owned the place just, oh, it's about four miles west of where Paul Wolf lived. He had a ranch up there. Then, they homesteaded that, and then after they left, well, my uncle Albert Schmidt, he run it for, well, he owned it for long years, and then he retired. Do you remember when he retired?

KB: I don't. He sold up.

BB: He sold out to Gerondsonville.

DH: Oh.

BB: And then another uncle had a ranch west of the Yurtson place. [unintelligible yes, real good.

DH: I bought an eight track, you know, and I'm going to try and get copies off of this is mine I want to get. I told her I'd try and get it copied on that and there's some friends' recorder and she could listen to it.

End of recording.