

*West Custer County Library District Local History Collection*  
*Oral History Collection*

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Comstock, John

No date

Interviewed by Irene Francis

Preliminary conversation before actual interview begins:

IF: But I mean the ones that bought the book-

JC: Yeah.

IF: They missed a lot of good folks, didn't they?

JC: Yeah, there's a lot that aren't in it.

IF: That's too bad, yeah.

JC: They, oh, about a year and a half later, the same guy came around and they started in doing it all over again, only they were going to make it more detailed, and I said, just leave me out of it. So, I don't know if they ever went through with another volume. He told me, these, you can't buy them anywhere. About all they made up was the ones they sold to people and a few copies to state libraries or something like that.

IF: Well, they really are collector's items then, aren't they?

JC: If you sold them, they would be but I don't know about that.

IF: I can remember I went to a small parochial school in northeastern CO and we had a set of these in our school. I don't know whether they'd been donated by someone or whether they school bought them.

JC: Could have been.

IF: I can't ever remember using them that much for research, but I can remember seeing them cause the covers are beautiful, aren't they?

JC: They are.

IF: Yeah, they're all done in color.

JC: But I just brought them over on account of that history of the county. This is all one book really.

IF: I see, yeah.

JC: But, it's authentic, I think.

IF: I have some quite old books that Mrs. Paxton from here in the library had given me to look through for my research and I was amazed at the things that even I know aren't right, and they were written back when people had people to ask, you know. I don't understand why there are so many problems with them.

JC: I don't either except when this feller came and talked to me, I was out in the field working, see, and stopped and talked to him and dates and things like that, I can't remember exactly.

IF: Gosh, who can?

JC: Yes, what I knew off the top of my head, you might say. If you want to take them along-

IF: Oh, gee, do you think I could and then bring them back to you in a few days?

JC: Oh, sure.

IF: Ok. Oh, that would be super. Thank you. Well, shall we start in-ok. Tell me where your family came from?

JC: Well, one settled here was my mother's father, my grandfather on my mother's side. He come from Chicago originally, his family. Had a big farm back, what's now covered up by Chicago.

IF: You were on pretty expensive land, weren't you? (laughing) But not at that time, though, huh?

JC: Well, of course, it wasn't at that time. No, it was on the outskirts.

IF: Yeah. What was their name?

JC: Kennicott, KENNICOTT. That was Frank Kennicott. That was my mother's father. It was a big family of them.

IF: Is this a relation to Kennicott copper you hear about these days?

JC: No.

IF: I see. If you're like me, it's always somebody else that has the rich relatives, isn't it? (laughing)

JC: Yeah, well, Comstock wasn't any relation to Comstock lode either.

IF: Fine. (laughing) I'm writing in kind of shorthand here but I think I have all of that down. What brought them to the Valley?

JC: Oh, we were just looking for a place to settle.

IF: Did you come out from Chicago feeling we're going to go to the Wet Mountain Valley in Colorado or-

JC: Well, uh, my grandfather had a brother who came here a year or so before he did.

IF: I see.

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JC: He started his homestead, like pre-empted it, they just did a homestead place and then he, my grandfather and some of his other brothers came out and grandpa took over for the other brothers, they took it over and, this pre-emption, I don't know if you know-

IF: Can I ask you about that?

JC: Instead of just like a homestead, they bought land for little or nothing, about \$2 an acre or something like that but then they had to go through like a homestead, had to do so much improving and so on before they got full title. But this little one that they paid for it went to the Indians, see, to, they kicked the Indians off of the reservations so this one was supposed to help take care of the Indians.

IF: Do you think it ever got to the Indians?

JC: Yeah.

IF: Did it, really?

JC: Probably more so than not. This government money nowadays, most of it's spent-

IF: Most of it goes to the office workers before it gets-yeah. Gosh, I knew my history was not complete when I was studying it or I missed part of it cause I did not know about the pre-emption. [pause] Now we're going again. We were just talking about pre-emption and that that was how your family was brought into the Valley.

JC: Yeah, of course, some of the land in the Valley was homesteaded, some was pre-empted, I don't know what the reason but that's what they did there, what grandfather did with the first land he took up pre-emption.

IF: Do you know about when this was? Just an appropriate date?

JC: Oh, about 1870. He just heard ranching which was pretty much in the early stages.

IF: There wasn't a whole lot to do in those days, was there?

JC: My mother was born 1872 here. She's probably, aside from the German colonies, she's probably the first white child born in the Valley here.

IF: I would think she was, yes.

JC: When she was born, her mother died.

IF: Oh, gracious!

JC: And she's the first grave in the Ula Cemetery.

IF: I see.

JC: When she died, my grandfather kind of went around to neighbors, you know, and William Kettle had

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just settled there. He gave the land for that cemetery and that's how it got started.

IF: Yeah. For heaven's sakes.

JC: Well, my grandfather married again later, had two more daughters. One of them never married. The other one went to school at Stanford University, married a fellow she met there by the name of Rogers and I eventually went partners with Rogers, running the ranch there. He wasn't living on it. He was an engineer. At that time, he was living in Honolulu but that's how the Comstock-Rogers came to be.

IF: I always wondered about that and I'd forgotten for just a minute, it was Comstock-Rogers.

JC: Yeah. You just have to ask me what you want me to tell you.

IF: How did your mom meet your father?

JC: My father come through here. He was from Kansas and worked for my grandfather somewhere, something like that, and they met. My mother and he, father-

IF: They had a nice courtship, didn't they? I'm a romantic at heart. I always have to learn about the courtship. (laughing) So this was, the lady who married Mr. Rogers, would have been your aunt-

JC: Yeah, my mother's half-sister.

IF: I see. How did they, how did the Rogers come to be involved with you Comstock's? How did he get back here-

JC: See, she was, her name was Anna Kennicott and of course, she inherited a share in the ranch on my grandfather's land, and prior to that, she'd married Ed Rogers and then I started running part of the ranch and after my grandfather had died, and Rogers, he went in with me, put up some money against my time and what stock I had, we just went partners from then on.

IF: I see.

JC: Right at the other peoples' share of the ranch, that's my brother and my mother, at that time, she was still living, and the sisters, Anna Rogers and her sister. So that's how he got into it and that's about all there really is to it. We been in the ranching business ever since. He died 1964 and he, two of his daughters inherited his share and they kept the partnership, I'm partners with them now.

IF: They're both still alive.

JC: Yeah.

IF: Uh huh. He must have been fairly elderly when he died. Wasn't he?

JC: What?

IF: Elderly.

JC: Oh, he was, I think, 73, something like that.

IF: Oh, not that old then really, compared to some people I've met. Now, was your father actively involved in the ranch after he and your mother married?

JC: No, and my mother and father got married, went over to Shoshone, which is over above Glenwood Springs. He had a timber claim over there and my brother, Walter, two years older than me, he was born there. But then, my father got TB and he went down to New Mexico down there, Silver City, and took up a homestead down there. At that time, that climate was considered the best in the country for tuberculers.

IF: I'd heard that. It was quite dry.

JC: Well, he went down there. My mother went to some of her uncles, my grandfather's brothers that settle near Delta and I was born there, 1905. Quick as I was big enough to move, why, my mother and brother and I went down on the train to Niche, AZ, which was the closest place that the railroad went to where he homesteaded over by Silver City, NM. He brought us there by covered wagon. We went across there, but he never got over the TB. He died down there about, oh, I guess it must have been around 1912, somewhat. My mother sold the place out and came back to the home ranch here.

IF: And you were just barely old enough to remember him, weren't you?

JC: Yeah.

IF: Was the trip by train and then by covered wagon to Silver City when you were just a tiny baby or were you old enough to remember it?

JC: Yeah, I wished I could remember that trip.

IF: That must have been a fun trip for kids.

JC: Because, I believe it was across the Navajo reservation, this covered wagon trip.

IF: Do you remember your mother saying anything about being nervous crossing the reservation? The Navajos hadn't been on a reservation all that long at that time, had they?

JC: Well, I don't know how long they'd been there but they weren't any trouble. They were peaceful. In fact, I guess we still have Navajo blankets that they traded off the Indians.

IF: Oh, my goodness, and those things are worth thousands of dollars today.

JC: Yeah, I don't know. We might get them cleaned up if they aren't too badly moth eaten. But that's where I learned to crawl, creep, see? When they started across there, I don't know how long it took them. But quite a while to make the trip. You didn't make very far with a team and a wagon out there.

IF: Oh, I know you didn't.

JC: They'd pick a place to camp for overnight. She'd get out and lay down a blanket and put the baby, that was me, on it and then, go ahead and make camp. But before they got across there, why, she had to watch because I'd crawl off the blanket and stood out through the cactus and sagebrush, move forward. (laughing) So, I don't know that that's worth very much for your history.

IF: Not very many people learned to crawl in the cactus and sagebrush (laughing) I bet those were fond memories for your mother after the trip was over with. I'm sure it wasn't easy for her at the time. Did you say, do I understand that your father went to ? to gather and then-

JC: Mesa, AZ.

IF: She wasn't traveling by herself then with you.

JC: No, we were on the train from here to Mesa and then from, he met us and we went across.

IF: I see. Did she say anything about the train trip?

JC: No, I don't remember anything about that.

IF: Because traveling by train was commonplace by that time.

JC: Oh yeah.

IF: Must not have been very eventful. I don't know if any of us today used to our fast forms of transportation would hold our patience on that kind of a train trip though. (laughing)

JC: Well, of course, I travelled on the train quite a little, not any long trips, but in my lifetime. Used to be a train in here.

IF: Yes, I knew there did.

JC: And that was the slowest thing in the world. You got on the train here and got as far as Texas Creek and then you had to wait 3-4 hours before another train would come along. (overlapping voices) Course there was a means of getting away. Nowadays, you got to have your own transportation.

IF: Yeah, yeah. I mean, this gas crunch. Some of us don't go as far as we'd like to, do we?

JC: No.

IF: How old were you when you took over running the ranch? Or part of it?

JC: Of course, when we came here, after my father died down there, came back up here, 1912-13, I was just a kid. But I was out with the men that were running the ranch, you know, out there in the way mostly, you know, all the time.

IF: I'll bet other folks didn't mind it.

JC: My father went to what they call the agriculture college, Ft. Collins, state university, you know and I

finished there in 1929.

IF: I see.

JC: Come home and started running half the ranch. It was rented out and the renters kept running the other half till 1936 which was when I went into partnership with Rogers and running the whole thing. He bought some more land up towards the mountains there which we used to call Hog Ranch. It was-

IF: Hog Ranch with two t's?

JC: HOG, Hog Ranch. A man named Shepherd started, he was from Denver. He got the guy and they going to raise hogs up there and –

IF: On the mountain?

JC: Yeah.

IF: Oh dear!

JC: Just blow the timber.

IF: I wasn't aware that hogs stood altitude very well.

JC: Well, they never got anywhere with it. The place got the name and it stuck.

IF: Oh, for heaven's sake! (laughing)

JC: It's pretty good pasture land for cattle.

IF: Is it?

JC: Yeah.

IF: I realize that when, the way I was raised too, asking what a man's acreage is kind of like asking what his income is. But for those people who weren't raised the way we were, could you tell me approximately how much mansion comes to?

JC: I don't know, about a thousand acres.

IF: That was a fairly large holding for this area, isn't it?

JC: Yeah. But the most of it is just grazing land, you know. That's all. We tried, if you know anything about the Valley, it went through the stages of trying to raise vegetables and peas and head lettuce and potatoes and we kind of experimented. All we ever did any good was raising cattle.

IF: If you can do one thing well, that's all you need, isn't it?

JC: But that's all the country's good for. Of course, they're going to make it a recreation area and chop it up into single homes-

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JC: Huh?

IF: Was your land in on the rare tube thing with the National Forest?

JC: No, we're not on the Forest. We adjoin the Forest but the whole country is getting settled up, chopped up into little small places, they won't be good for anything.

IF: No, lots of small one cow outfits maybe and that's about it, huh?

JC: Well, people just want a place to come for somewhere they think they'd like to retire here, you know.

IF: Yeah. I want to ask you about going to college. Most of the people that I have talked with who were raised here in the Valley, doesn't seem to be a whole lot of them who went much farther than the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Some did go to high school for a couple or maybe three years. Most of them very fortunate to have gone to have been able to go to college.

JC: Yes.

IF: Was it something you really, really wanted to do? Or was it just something that was accepted that you would do?

JC: Well, I wanted to, of course, and it wasn't too easy. My, in the family, we didn't have too much money. I had to work but I'd do it over again just the same way.

IF: Oh, that's super. Did your brother Walter go also?

JC: Oh, he went to high school and went one year to college and then he decided he didn't want any more college. When we got ready to go to high school, finish grade school here, and there wasn't any high school here, we went, my grandmother owned a house down in the canyon, so we went down there and went to high school, about I guess, second year or so after we started, they got the high school started here. But we went ahead and finished down there, we'd started there.

IF: How do you think, of course it may be an unfair question, but how do you think the education you were able to get in Canon compared with what the kids were able to get up here who were going to high school up here, after it started?

JC: Oh, well, it's a little hard to say, having just gone there and not gone here and haven't had any kids to go here for anything. But I doubt if it's very much difference.

IF: I was talking to Hattie Berry the other day and of course you know she taught for years and years and years and I was telling her that all things I'd read about the, they call it 'back to the roots' you know, they, the people, especially in the east and Midwest, want to send their kids back to one room schools where, mostly what they're pointing towards is individual health and the small school atmosphere where you knew everybody rather than a big consolidated schools where the kids kind of get lost in the shuffle. Necessary that I would never like to see that happen, she felt that the quality of education would deteriorate so far because the amount of classes couldn't be offered, the variety wouldn't be there, you



know. I thought that was a very interesting thought.

JC: Of course, I went to grade school, just a little one room school house-

IF: Did you go to Ula, your grade school?

JC: Ulay, uh and I believe that was better than the way the schools are now. Teachers, of course, didn't have but just a few kids going to the school, but the teacher could put in more time with each kid, getting to know them, you know, and if you needed a little extra help of some kind, why, they'd help. Where now, they go in and they exposed to it, you might say, and if it don't take, why, that's what happens.

IF: I'm inclined to agree with you. Of course, my schooling was a little bit different simply because the age in which I was born, but I did have a little bit of experience with the small school. We had two grades to a classroom and also a high school where we had 1600 people, you know. That's a little bit in between and I'm kind of like you, I'm faced with 1599 classmates, I was about ready to go back to the one room school. (laughing) Plus the fact that I think too, and I know, when I was going to high school especially, part of the reason I went and enjoyed school was because of the social activities. When you were going to school, you didn't have that many social activities, did you?

JC: Oh, we-

IF: Not directly connected with the school.

JC: A little athletics in high school but nothing like nowadays.

IF: Did you participate in sports in high school?

JC: Oh, tried to some, football, but never was very good at it.

IF: Not quite a Knute Rockne, huh?

JC: No. A skinny little country kids, you know, that ? run over.

IF: How is it that the city kids are always bigger and heavier and meaner than country kids?

JC: I don't know.

IF: It seems like it's always been that way, doesn't it? Were you treated any differently because you were from the country when you went to high school then you came from the city?

JC: No, I don't think so. There wasn't any difference.

IF: I talked to some people who said that they really did feel the difference. They were women who had boarded with people and of course, if word ever got out that you were boarding to go to high school and perhaps your classmates didn't receive you quite as well, I don't know. Kids can be awfully cruel. Gee, I was going to ask you a terribly important question and you just left. I know what it was. What do you

remember most about college?

JC: What do I remember most? I don't believe there's any one thing, much more than others.

IF: What did you think of the quality of your professors? Did you feel like they knew things that were going to help you when you came back home to run your ranch?

JC: Of yes, yes, they did.

IF: It would seem perhaps that the quality has deteriorated over the years. I definitely felt that some of them didn't know anything that was going to help me when I left.

JC: Well, awful lot of differences in the different professors for that matter.

IF: I can imagine.

JC: We had some of them that I didn't think knew anything or if they did, they couldn't teach it. But the others were, some of them were real good.

IF: What about, what did you do for fun when you went to college? Did you rope calves or were you active in rodeo club or livestock club or anything?

JC: We didn't do very much of anything for fun. Of course, I belonged to Livestock club and I didn't join any fraternity, any social fraternity. We just were pretty busy with the school work. Weekends, just whatever come up, what to do.

IF: I'm not asking you if you drink but was Ft. Collins dry at that time? Or did they change the ruling on that later. Of course, part of that-

JC: It was still prohibition time.

IF: I was just going to say, it wouldn't make any difference, did it?

JC: Oh, there was moonshine, liquor around, but there wasn't very much drinking amongst the students.

IF: Most of them were there to go to school, weren't they?

JC: Yeah. Of course, now, I haven't been back there as I said, I graduated in 1929. I went back for Homecoming Day the first two Homecoming. I haven't been back there since. Of course, at that time, they was 12-1400 students. Now, jeez, I don't know, 25000 or something like that.

IF: 18,500, I think.

JC: Oh, the school grounds of the college farm and everything is from what people have told me are so much bigger and all, I wouldn't know the place. Where'd you go to school?

IF: In Ft. Collins.

JC: Is that where you met Keith?

IF: He was just leaving and I was just arriving. We almost missed each other.

JC: Where did you come from before you went to-

Tape stops and restarts.

IF: Do you remember what the women's building was called?

JC: Oh, Emmons Hall, I think.

IF: My mother stayed in the Emmons when she went there, yeah. I just heard recently that they had a fire at Emmons, but most of it is still just office buildings. Several of her classes were in Gutenheim Hall. I think it would have been near. Either that or they were just building it about the time you were there.

JC: Yeah.

IF: I Don't when the Science building went up. You wrote that science building is on the oval and I think some classes are still taught in it. I know I had three classes in that science building. You know, they just built the brand-new hospital and it's way out on the other side of town. (laughing) How often did you get to go home when you were in college, just for the summers?

JC: Just for Christmas vacation and then spring vacation.

IF: And did you take the train to and from Ft. Collins?

JC: Usually, a time or two. One time I come back to Canon City with a boy for school that had no Model T Ford, you know.

IF: I bet the trip took almost longer than the train trip, didn't it?

JC: Yeah.

IF: It was a fun trip.

JC: One trip, it was about 20 below zero when I left Ft. Collins in the morning and had a heck of a time getting that old Ford started, you know. We had two more fellows went to Cripple Creek who we come to Colorado Springs to take them up to Cripple Creek and come down the canyon, Phantom Canyon Road there. Middle of the night-

IF: I've heard that that's not a road that a lot of people like to drive in the middle of the night.

JC: No, kids that age, you know, they'll try about anything.

IF: I bet it wouldn't find your stuff.

JC: Of yeah, it did.

IF: Did the car you were in have a heater?

JC: Pardon??

IF: Did the car you were in have a heater?

JC: No, no, it didn't even have a top on. (laughing)

IF: Oh my! (laughing)

JC: I rode in the front seat with the guy that owned the thing and it wasn't too bad there with the windshield but the back seat, they had to cover up with blankets.

IF: And then came down-

JC: Yeah.

IF: Oh gracious! Was that the white Christmas break?

JC: It was Christmas vacation, yeah.

IF: Have the cattle you bred mostly been commercial cattle or have they been registered?

JC: Just commercial cattle, Herefords.

IF: Did you ever have any feeder calves or anything at stock show?

JC: No, never took anything there. We had good cattle, but not fancy enough to go to stock show.

IF: Some of them we saw this year, I wish people had taken that advice to heart. Did you go any time at all just to see what was there?

JC: Oh, stock show? Oh yeah, I've gone to stock show pretty near every year for a long time.

IF: I thought you had.

JC: Yeah.

IF: Changed a bit, hasn't it?

JC: Oh yes, boys changing all the time.

IF: Were they able to get Willard Sim's books, book, 10 days in January? Did you happen to see a copy of it?

JC: No, I didn't.

IF: Why, you know he's that, well, I can't remember his title right now, but he kind of runs the show there. I'll bring you the book by sometime. I think you might enjoy reading it. I think it's kind of memoirs,

more or less.

JC: I saw something about it, Has he finished it>IF: Mm hmm. Yeah, I guess he finished it and got it published just in time to be distributed at stock show.

JC: OH, well, I didn't see anything of it.

IF: I haven't read it it cover to cover yet but I've leafed through it. It looks really interesting. Looks fun to read. I'm sure that a lot of things he talks about in there you will have seen and will remember.

JC: Yeah. I remember there was the guy before Sims, I can't think of his name right now.

IF: Now, one of them was Charlie Kirk. Do you remember him?

JC: No, this was a different one.

IF: Charlie retired, of gosh, must have been five years ago and he is quite elderly. He's only about as tall as I am, probably doesn't weigh as much and his son had taken over part of lah's work there at stock show when he. You know, this isn't on the subject at all, but I've always wondered, do you know where this picture was taken that is right here in front of us? Of the cattle in the meadow?

JC: No, I can't say.

IF: I've never, I don't know the mountains well enough to figure out which mountains those are.

JC: It's just –

IF: Well, anyway. I won't take up a whole lot more of your time. Kind of interested in, do you remember having changed here in the Valley concerning cattle ranching?

JC: Changed? Well, of course, when I first came here was just the last days, you might say, of the open range, the, from, well about where we live, our place, from there on north to the Arkansas River was all open country and people just run cattle out there.

IF: So, you actually held roundups in the fall and so forth?

JC: Yeah, roundup. Just a couple in my time. Of course, they threw that country open to homestead, to which it should never have been, but they did, you know. And the dry farmers, people that thought they could come in and dry farm there because they dry farmed somewhere else and it would work. You know, they got enough rain, enough moisture. So, they came in and took up practically all the country and fenced it up and plowed up the draws and the best parts of the grass to try to raise grain or something in. They all starved out of course, they couldn't make a go of it and so then, there was different people kept putting together a little more and more of it to get big enough spread to run some cattle on. So, after that was quite a change to that when that all took place you know, they homesteading and then the going back into just grazing land again. I tried raising head lettuce and peas, only had, the railroad was still in here and they had what they call vegetable sheds, a couple here, one down in Hillside where they floated these vegetables into refrigerator cars and they was a cook outfit.

They put up a lot of ice here in the country and iced those cars. Then they, the railroad, went out and so that about finished the vegetable business.

IF: What did those people do when they could no longer sell their vegetables?

JC: They went through a stage when pretty near everybody was milking cows here and then. Everybody had a little bunch of beef type cattle and then they had a bunch of milk cows and they milked cows, sold cream. They went out in the cream can pretty much and then its kind of, some of the biggest ones of them kind of got into the business of milking that dairy in a pretty big way and they was milk trucks come in, hauled the milk out to Colorado Springs and places.

IF: Oh, I see. This is the dairy building that's here in town on the west side of town came into being?

JC: Yeah, they, that was Bachelor's Dairy, they called it. They bought milk sometimes, made ice cream and so on and, but more and more of the milk was shipped out. But then it got to be so much government interference, inspectors coming in and inspecting these dairy barns and making more improvements. Everybody got disgusted, quit that, and it's kind of drifted back into cattle and of course, it's what it is now, cattle and hay.

IF: Yeah, we were talking about when the land was open range. You came back in what, 1912?

JC: Uh, '12, '13.

IF: You would have been about seven years old.

JC: Yeah.

IF: What do you remember, I guess, what maybe sticks in your memory as a little boy when the country was open range?

JC: Well, nothing much. (overlapping voices)

IF: How many men did your grandfather employ at that time?

JC: Well, at the time, we come back, at that time, he had, he'd retired, you might say. He was renting the ranch out to renters.

IF: Oh, I see, I misunderstood.

JC: Before he run it, of course, when he was first ranching, first putting up hays, they did it all by hand, you see, and he'd have 12-15 men during the haying season. That is, they had to load this hay on wagons, haul it in and stack it by hand and, but time to time, we got back here and they were using, oh everything was done with horses. There weren't any tractors but they did have the buck rakes and stackers to put the hay on the stack.

IF: And all hay was stacked loose at that time. You didn't have stationary bailers.

JC: No, the hay was all stacked loose. They sold, there was quite a lot of hay sold but they bailed it out of the stack during the winters you see, stationary bailer pulling-

IF: Just a minute. I'm going to turn this-

End of recording