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Oral History Collection

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Donley, Barbara Louise

Late July, 1967

Interviewed by Arlie Riggs

Unidentified speaker: In Wetmore, Colorado, late in July, in the summer of 1967. The subject of the interview is Mrs. Barbara Lou Donley and Mrs. Riggs is asking the questions.

BD: Yes, I'm Barbara Louise? Donley. I was born in Pueblo December 9, 1917. I moved here on? with the exception of having been to school and working all of my life practically and my grandfather bought the ranch from the Blake family in 1917 and we moved up here in the spring of 1918.

AR: You were pretty small then?

BD: Yes, year and a half old, I think. Mother and daddy moved up with a team and wagon, very muddy spring, and when Mother got settled up here, she said she would never move again and she didn't, so we've been here all this time.

AR: She was able to fulfill the prophecy. I think everybody says this after they move, don't you? You've never had the experience of moving.

BD: Except from Pueblo out here. We came, my husband and I, came out here in 1945 and we've been here since that time as ranch managers while my parents were alive and then, after my mother and father died, we took over the ownership and management of the ranch.

AR: Now, your grandfather, we'll back up a little bit to when he bought the ranch. How large was the ranch?

BD: The ranch was about 2000 acres when grandfather bought it and my father added approximately 1000 acres, so it's about, a little more than, 3000 acres of owned land now.

AR: What type land is it?

BD: Actually, it's grazing land with very few acres of irrigated and cultivated land. Most of it is, well, we have lots of scenery, rocks, brush and trees and pasture land and just this here, by the road, is our only irrigated land and we have alfalfa and no longer raising grain except on a rotation basis. Most of the fields that were formerly cultivated are now planted in permanent pasture.

AR: I see. Approximately how much irrigation?

BD: We have about 65 acres of irrigated land.

AR: Is that a big problem to irrigate?

BD: Yes, it is. It is and the fact that our watershed in this whole Hardscrabble valley is not very large and

the creeks run dry frequently, usually by the middle of June everyone is out of water, particularly in the younger ditch rights. Now the ditch right on this place is number 8 on the Hardscrabble. It was taken out in 1868 and the ditch right on the Arkansas is 39, so it's an early ditch right but even so, although we're entitled to a foot and an eighth of water, frequently, we have no irrigation and this is a real problem.

AR: Sure, because if you have absolutely no irrigation from June on, there's no problem.

BD: Yes, that's true.

AR: Has this changed, the water problem, has it become worse during your lifetime?

BD: A great deal worse. As a child, I can remember with the exception of the drought in 1933-35, no years when we weren't able to irrigate all of our hay land and within the past ten years, there have been, 8 out of the last 10 years, when we haven't had irrigation water. Now some of it is due to a conservation practice which benefits the country, because we have ponds above us, and the beavers have also come back in the creeks which is a joy and a delight to everyone. But at the same time, it impedes the early spring runoff so that the younger ditch rights no longer have water.

AR: I see. Right now, we're going to go back a little in history. I wanted to explain the snap and the crackle in the background is a beautiful fire going and we refuse to move from this very lovely den so we'll just go on from right here. Will you start with the history of your family?

BD: I might tell you first of all about my paternal grandparents, Elizabeth and William Henry Billington. My grandfather Billington came from upper New York state, near Troy, NY. He was the son of Robert Billington, who was a mercenary in the Civil War, a mercenary soldier. He'd been hired to fight. My great grandfather Billington was killed eleven days after he went into service which orphaned my grandfather and his brother. Grandfather was quite an unusual man. He immediately went to work as a door-to-door paper salesman and went up through the New England states. I can remember hearing the family talk about how poor they were. Frequently, he put newspapers under his bed, between the mattress and the springs, to keep out the cold. He skated a great deal back in New York because there was so much water. I don't know at what age he came to Colorado but as a very young boy, probably in his teens and I think he landed in Denver in 1872. I can remember his saying that his first work in Colorado was helping to dig the foundation for the Denver Union Station, the railway station in Denver. Following his work as a laborer, he enlisted in business school and went to school at night and came I think to Pueblo in the late 1870s or early 1880s {sic}. He worked up as a clerk, a shipping clerk, for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company and was eventually General Manager of their company stores and managed the store in Pueblo and supervised all the stores in the region. We have a number of old records from the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company showing his travels, as far as Gallup, NM and all over the state of Colorado. My grandmother Billington, whose maiden name was Elizabeth Fass, was the daughter of German political refugees. They came over in the, oh, probably 1840s because my grandfather, Robert Frederick Fass, was not in sympathy with the political movement in Germany. They settled in Milwaukee, WI. My great grandfather Fass eventually became an alderman and a councilman and I'm told that some of the old bridges have his name on the cornerstone. Great grandmother Fass never learned to speak English, and German was spoken in the home and grandmother Billington even, I can remember how she transposed her sentences and had quite a marked German accent. My grandmother Billington and her sister, Emma Cooper, came to Pueblo in the 80s and grandmother and Aunt Emma were dressmakers. She and my

grandfather met and married and had three children, my father Robert Frederick Billington, my aunt Charlene Henderson Cooper Billington, and another aunt, Wilhemina Emma Billington. Grandfather Billington and grandmother Billington built their own home at 1014 Lake Avenue in Pueblo. Grandfather continued to work for the Colorado Supply Company until about 1914 when he was, a change of management, dismissed him from his job and he became part owner of the Rood Candy Company. He worked at the Rood Candy Company from probably 1918 with Mrs. Aaron A. Rood and his son Jesse Rood, who were pioneer Pueblo businessmen until my grandfather's retirement in the 20s. Grandfather was very interested in Pueblo and the surrounding country and he actually bought this ranch as a speculation venture. He was quite farsighted. He drew up brochures of the ranch showing places where you might have a landing field. He wanted to have a dude ranch and he had all sorts of schemes. However, my father was so interested in the ranch and my mother loved it and grandfather never found a buyer that quite measured up to be able to pay the amount of money that he wanted out of the place, so the place at the time of my grandfather's death, was passed on to my father. At the time my father died, he left it to me and to my son, Robert Billington Donley.

My mother's parents came, my mother's father, James Sheffield, was from Tennessee. He served in the 13th cavalry of Tennessee and was very proud of having been a Civil War veteran, fighting on the northern side and he was most demanding that this inscription be placed on his tombstone. He didn't care whether or not his birthdate or his right name was on the tombstone but he's buried in the little New Hope cemetery down here near Wetmore and the 13th cavalry is very evident on the tombstone. He actually came out, following the war, in a wagon train with Mr. J.V. McCandless, who is I believe, the founder of Florence, CO and grandfather Sheffield and Mr. McCandless owned a good deal of land on the west end of Florence. Grandfather Sheffield sold his and ran a blacksmith shop in Coal Creek during the early days and then, he sold that after his marriage to my grandmother Sheffield and moved to a little ranch about a mile south of Wetmore which my mother owned at the time of her death and which I inherited from her. Grandmother Sheffield came from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Strong family, her maiden name was Selena Strong Sheffield, were Pennsylvania Dutch and there's a good deal of family history about them in Bucks County, PA. There were many, many Strong's and a very artistic family. My grandmother Sheffield was a cousin of Sam Hartsell who had the big ranch in South Park. The family used to gather and talk about the family history so often that my father felt that every other person in the county was a Strong.

Mother was born, my mother Ruby Sheffield Billington, was born in Coal Creek. Grandmother Sheffield had a daughter by a previous marriage, Kitty Sherry and then she had another son, an older brother of my mother's, Clyde Sheffield who was at one time county commissioner in Custer County. The family moved to Wetmore I think in about 84, I think mother was about, no I beg your pardon, they must have moved in about 87 because my mother was born in 1885 and I think she was about two years old when they came to the little ranch above Wetmore. The place was originally known as the West Heifer Ranch and it is only about 160 acres. Grandfather and grandmother Sheffield were able to bring up their family there by just hard work. Mother and Uncle Clyde and my aunt Kitty went to Pueblo to school, to grade school. Aunt Kitty took care of the children in town, her two younger brothers and sisters, and Aunt Kitty and my mother graduated from Centennial High School. Mother graduated in the class of 1905 and she later went

to work for the Traction Company, which is now the Southern Colorado Power Company as bookkeeper and then, when her mother's health failed, she came back to the ranch.

My father graduated from Centennial High School with the class of 1907. He went on to Colorado College for a year, then came back to work as a salesman at the Rood Candy Company and following that, he came out to a ranch in the Wetmore area. The ranch was the old Breese homestead, which my grandfather bought, probably in about 1907 or 8. It is now the Trinity Ranch which the Episcopal Church is developing above the ranch where Mr. J.L. Draper lives. My father lived on this ranch off and on. He actually came out for good to the Wetmore area in 1912. Prior to that time, he'd take a short course up at the agricultural school in Ft. Collins. Grandfather Billington had always been interested in ranching and he had bought the earlier in his career the Sam Curless Ranch down on the St. Charles, which he and my grandmother's brother, Fred Fass, ran and which is still in the Fass family.

My mother and father were married in 1916 and then moved to the Blake ranch as I have said before in 1918. I would like to tell you a little of the history of the Blake ranch because it is a fascinating place. It has only had the two owners, the Blakes and the Billingtons. When my husband and I were looking over the old maps of the ranch following my father's death, we found that it had originally consisted of 23 homesteads which is amazing to think that there were probably from 15-20 families living on this ranch during, prior to the 70s. Annie E. and Charles Blake were pioneer families and were pioneers actually and came out to this country following the Civil War. Mr. George Blake was a cattle buyer and consigned stock for sale to the Civil War troops, to the army troops during the Civil War and Mrs. Blake came, I believe, the family came originally from Pennsylvania. Mr. George Blake settled and helped to build the now present settlement of Denver and Blake St. in Denver is named for the family. Mrs. Blake at one time owned a great deal of property in southwestern Pueblo and many, many of the old abstracts will show the name of Annie E. Blake. They came out to this country and started building up the land here in 1872. Gradually, they had a number of sons and the sons homesteaded various pieces of property right around the immediate vicinity. Mr. and Mrs. Blake I believe took out the homestead where this present house stands and I have heard some of the Blake relatives say incidentally, some of them come back each year and we're always happy to have them because we enjoy sharing their ranch with them. That when Mr. and Mrs. Blake first came, they camped under the big pine tree, which still stands in our front yard and Mrs. Blake said, as they were camping there, several Indians came by. I think they were Arapahos because the Arapahos used to come up from the plains and used this front range as their hunting ground. Mr. and Mrs. Blake built the house, the logs of which are in our present house, and they were, that house, the original Blake house, was a two-story house with a fireplace in each room and it was built in the 80s probably, the late 70s or 80s. The Blakes themselves took down that house and built the present house which we live in although there are some additions to it, in 1910. In addition to that, they had built the big red barn, the horse barn, which still stands, in good shape and is put together with wooden pegs.

I don't believe there were many other buildings on the ranch when my grandfather bought it and my father moved here. But the hand-hewn logs in the house are still seemingly sturdy and we hope they'll last our lifetimes at least.

AR: Do you know where the logs came from?

BD: They were cut on the plains and they were in that, when my mother and father added a couple of rooms to the house, they took down, they took logs from an old homestead which has now been added to the ranch but which originally belonged to the Barton family and they used the hewn logs that were in the cabins back there, in this house. Can you think of anything I've

AR: Ok, let's talk a little about the ranching and farming in contrast. Then and now

BD: Then and now. Of course, things always appear more interesting in retrospect I think but during my lifetime, there have been a great many changes in the operation. I can remember when the cattle drives used to come through here, particularly from the Tompkins Ranch, which is now the Mountain Meadow Ranch owned by the Everhart family. They used to corral their cattle here because this was a halfway point between here and the Hill Ranch in Silom and the corrals would be full of cattle. They'd drive them down with the cowboys and leave them here overnight, or perhaps a day or two to rest, and then take them on to Silom, to the Hill Ranch. Now of course, they're trucked up so that we don't have to get out and fix the fences and stand at the open gates and help them through which everyone did at that time.

The harvesting is a great deal different. We used to grow a great deal of grain on the ranch and the, we'd bind it with a binder and have many a big crew to shock it in the field and certainly there's nothing prettier than a field of shocked grain, but since we no longer have grain, we don't have the big crews, and when we do have grain, my husband runs the little combine so it's done in one operation. In the fall, hopefully just before snow flew, when I was a little girl, the thrashing crews used to come through with the big thrashing machines and at that time, we also had a big crew. My mother was an excellent cook, and in those days, the crews used to come and stay all night and stay until the harvesting was done so that everybody, my father was up at four o'clock fixing the flatiron? In the kitchen stove, and mother was up shortly thereafter and we had oatmeal and hot biscuits and eggs and bacon or sausage and coffee at six o'clock in the morning and then everybody, the men all had to get up and milk and feed the teams. We always had a barn full of horses and it seems awfully lonesome down there now, not to see any horses. When was a child, I used to go down several times a day and feed the horses a handful of oats and they'd get so they, our barn has a double line of stalls which are now vacant but all the horses used to stick their heads out over the stall and my father used to complain because he could hardly get through. I'd always bend down, several times, giving them a little nibble during the day. It was exciting to me as a child when the haying crews came. We cut the hay with horse drawn mowers and then it was raked with a horse drawn rake and then shocked. The men would come and shock it and it was dried in the field in shocks and then put up in big blue stacks with buckracks and teams or with slips, which are a little board platform on two poles that were dragged, right along the ground and one man drove the team and two men usually put it on the slips and as a child, I used to go out in the field and ride out on the slip, on the empty slips back on the loose hay and I spent the whole haying season riding back and forth. Some of the loose hay was put in the hay mows in the barns with slings, which are ropes or chains, sort of a cradle, and the hay was piled on it and the slings were wrapped around the loose hay and it was pulled into the barn by a horse who was at the end of the rope pulling it up on a pulley and dumped in the barn and then scattered by a man in the barn. Usually, we had a balky horse who would stop in the middle or, and load the hay, dump the hay at the wrong place and I thought that was exciting. It was terribly aggravating to the crews because then they would have to repile the hay and put it on the sling and get it into the barn,

The stacking was done sometimes the same way, sometimes they used a buckrake which is a long rake with sharp teeth which scoops it up and it was put into the stacker, which was a buckrake stacker, the same teeth in reverse, and then thrown up on the stack. The men who shocked hay and put it on the slips and also the stackers were very skilled. They knew exactly how to pick it up. You had to or you'd break your back.

End of tape.