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Summary of Oral History Interview with Alma Voss Eikelman

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Interviewed by Donna Hood

Alma Voss Eikelman was born on September 23, 1899, in the foothills west of Westcliffe, Colorado. She grew up in a large German immigrant family as the only girl among seven brothers. Her parents, Herman and Emma Voss, lived a rugged, self-sufficient life in a log cabin on their farm. The family grew vegetables, raised livestock, and attempted to cultivate peanuts, but they rarely had surplus crops to sell. Instead, most of their produce was used to sustain their own household and livestock.

Alma's father emigrated from Germany in 1879, first settling in Ohio before moving west to Denver and eventually Custer County. He farmed throughout his life and later moved to Silver Cliff, where he spent his final years. Alma recalled that her father and other German settlers preferred to homestead in the foothills rather than in the valley due to land availability. Many early German immigrants formed close-knit communities, often remaining separate from outsiders.

As a child, Alma attended a small schoolhouse several miles from home, walking the long distance each day. She described a strict teacher who intimidated students and even engaged in physical altercations with older boys. Education was inconsistent, with school lasting only three months a year, and older boys often staying in school well into their late teens. Despite these challenges, Alma was determined to further her education. She worked as a live-in housekeeper and babysitter in Florence and Cañon City to pay for high school, frequently moving between households that needed domestic help.

After marrying Oscar Eikelman, Alma embraced the demanding life of a farmer's wife. The couple raised four daughters while managing their farm, which produced vegetables such as peas, lettuce, cabbage, and cauliflower. They attempted different agricultural ventures, including turkey farming, but struggled with unpredictable markets. Labor shortages during World War II made farm work even more difficult, as hiring workers became nearly impossible. Seasonal workers, including groups of Mexican laborers, were occasionally available, but some left without notice, leaving entire crops unharvested.

In 1942, Alma and Oscar moved into town, where she took on various jobs to support the family. She worked tirelessly doing laundry for multiple households, ironing at night after long days of washing. Before purchasing a washing machine in 1939, all of the family's and hired workers' laundry was done by hand. Despite the hardships, she took pride in her work and in providing for her children.

Alma reflected on the drastic changes she witnessed over her lifetime. The Wet Mountain Valley, once filled with small family farms, had transitioned to larger ranching operations. She noted that weather patterns had changed, with winters becoming less harsh and snowfall less frequent than in her youth. She also described how Westcliffe had evolved from a lively town with multiple stores, butcher shops, and businesses to a quieter place with fewer merchants. She lamented the decline of locally owned stores, expressing a desire for more community-run businesses to return.

Through all the hardships of homesteading, farming, and economic struggles, Alma maintained a resilient and practical outlook on life. She summed up her philosophy with the phrase: *"It's a great life if you don't weaken."* Her interview provides a vivid account of early ranching life, the impact of German immigration on the region, and the endurance required to build a life in the Wet Mountain Valley.

