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Summary of Oral History Interview with Evelyn Hanssen and Gladys Miller

September 12, 1989

Interviewed by Irene Francis

Evelyn Hanssen and Gladys Miller, sisters, were interviewed on September 12, 1989, about their family history and life in Wet Mountain Valley. Their father, a Swedish immigrant, originally worked in the Cripple Creek gold mines before settling in the valley. After the tragic loss of their mother and sister in a flood, their father brought them to live with their grandmother, Rowlina Henrietta Custer O'Grisky, who had a ranch near town.

The sisters attended Colfax School, a one-room schoolhouse where students of all grades learned together. They walked half a mile to school daily, even in harsh winters, recalling deep snowdrifts and high winds. Education was strict, with German language lessons offered in summer school at the Lutheran church. They later attended high school in Westcliffe, but financial difficulties prevented them from completing their education.

Growing up on the ranch, they had daily chores such as milking cows, feeding livestock, and gathering the animals. They also worked in agriculture, picking peas and lettuce, which were shipped out via the railroad. Despite hardships, their childhood was filled with simple entertainments, such as crocheting, playing cards, and attending schoolhouse dances.

During the Great Depression, their family struggled but always had food and shelter, which they felt was an advantage over city dwellers. They relied on homegrown food, bartering, and careful resource management. They remembered government programs like the WPA, which provided jobs but were often ridiculed as ineffective.

Social life revolved around church, school, and community gatherings. The sisters participated in Lutheran church activities, attended local picnics, and enjoyed basket socials where people bid on packed lunches to share with others. They recalled traditional dances, featuring local musicians, and the Saturday evening tradition of visiting in town after stores closed.

Both married local men—Gladys in 1936 and Evelyn in 1938. They lived on farms, raised children, and contributed to the community. Gladys worked as a school cook for over 20 years, while Evelyn's husband managed county roads. Their families endured World War II, with one of Gladys' sons serving in the Navy.

Reflecting on changes in Westcliffe, they noted how the close-knit community had faded as new residents arrived. In their later years, they were active in the Black Slipper Club, a social group formed from an old Extension Club, where they gathered for crafts and card games.

Their interview provides a vivid picture of ranching life, community traditions, and the resilience required to thrive in Custer County.

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