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Summary of Oral History Interview with Walter and Frieda Hanssen

October 6, 1980

Interviewed by Deborah Hood

Walter and Frieda Hanssen were interviewed on October 6, 1980, at their home in Westcliffe, Colorado. They shared memories of their family history, homesteading experiences, and life in the Wet Mountain Valley.

Frieda Entz Hanssen was born in 1914 near Holcum, Kansas. Her parents, originally from Missouri and Indiana, moved to Colorado in 1918, traveling in a covered wagon. They homesteaded 360 acres north of Westcliffe, where they lived in a simple cabin and relied on dry farming. As a child, Frieda attended Chandler School, a now-defunct mining town near Cañon City, before completing her education at Ula School.

Walter Hanssen was born in 1905 in Silver Cliff. His parents were German immigrants who met and married in Rosita. His father worked as a carpenter in the mines rather than as a miner. Walter grew up in Silver Cliff, attended school there, and later worked as a truck driver and carpenter before joining the Soil Conservation Service. He completed his high school diploma in 1944 while teaching manual training at Custer County High School.

The Hanssens recalled hardships during the Great Depression, including droughts and economic struggles. Walter was fortunate to maintain a steady job as a truck driver, earning \$85 per month. The federal WPA program provided jobs for many, building roads and bridges, while families survived through farming, bartering, and government commodity programs.

During World War II, Walter was too old for military service but had family members who served. They remembered rationing, particularly for sugar, gasoline, and clothing. After the war, shortages continued for several months before supplies normalized.

Walter worked for the Soil Conservation Service for 26 years, helping ranchers with erosion control, water management, and pasture improvement. He observed major changes in ranching, including the shift from small homesteads to larger operations. The removal of the railroad in 1938 ended the valley's truck farming industry, as produce could no longer be shipped efficiently.

Frieda worked as a homemaker and later became a seamstress, specializing in wedding dresses. The couple had one daughter and two granddaughters. They reflected on the valley's transformation over the years, noting changes in farming practices, technology, and community life.

Their interview provides a detailed look at early homesteading, economic survival during tough times, and the evolution of agriculture in Custer County.

