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Summary of Oral History Interview with Archie D. Hess

April 1967

Interviewed by Arlie Riggs

Archie D. Hess was interviewed in April 1967 as part of a historical taping series in Westcliffe, Colorado. A long-time resident of Custer County, he shared his experiences working for the U.S. Forest Service, developing the Rainbow Trail, and living in the Wet Mountain Valley.

Hess, who spent years among the Sioux in South Dakota, was given the Sioux name *Wytotallyshonkakaw*, meaning "wild horse." He moved to Custer County around 1916 and worked as a carpenter, builder, and rancher. His career with the Forest Service began in 1925, and he played a significant role in the construction and maintenance of the Rainbow Trail, which runs along the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He described the labor-intensive process of clearing trails using hand tools, dynamite, and pack horses. His crew built trails to alpine lakes before completing the main Rainbow Trail between 1926 and 1927.

Hess emphasized the importance of conservation and proper trail maintenance, noting how early crews strategically designed trails to prevent erosion and ensure longevity. He also described encounters with wildlife, including beavers, mountain marmots, and Canada jays, and how some animals, such as chipmunks, became camp nuisances.

Aside from his work in forestry, Hess was a skilled carpenter who built several ranger stations, including the one in La Veta. During the winters, he focused on construction projects and worked on his homestead. He and his wife, Josie, managed a successful ranch, raising Hereford cattle and growing potatoes, peas, and lettuce.

Hess also shared stories of early Custer County life, including his time in the Black Hills as a teenager, where he worked as a cowboy and wrangler. He recalled working for a prominent cattleman and developing a strong connection with the land. He later homesteaded in Colorado, eventually expanding his ranch to 4,000 acres.

The interview also touched on community history, the challenges of farming in the valley, and the evolution of land management practices. Hess expressed concerns about modern conservation efforts and the need for better education on protecting natural resources.

His memories provide a rich account of early forestry work, ranching, and the rugged lifestyle of early settlers in Custer County.