

LP2009.013.116

Summary of Oral History Accounts by Bet Kettle and Ruth Stinemeyer

The oral histories of Bet Kettle and Ruth Stinemeyer provide a detailed perspective on the early ranching and settlement history of the Wet Mountain Valley. Bet Kettle's account focuses on the evolution of cattle ranching in the region, while Ruth Stinemeyer's historical essay highlights the formation of Custer County, its early settlers, and the town of Rosita's role in the local mining boom.

Ranching in the Wet Mountain Valley (Bet Kettle's Account)

Early settlers in the Wet Mountain Valley were not traditional cattlemen but farmers and tradespeople who adapted to the region's harsh conditions. German immigrants in Colfax and English settlers in Ula initially brought cattle, sheep, hogs, and other livestock for sustenance rather than commercial ranching. Over time, they discovered that the valley's best crop was its natural grass and hay, leading to the development of cattle ranching.

By the late 1860s, prominent cattlemen began establishing homesteads and expanding ranching operations. Early stockmen included the Beckwiths, Myer, Chattam, Bauman, Smith, and the Kettle family. While some, like John Myer, were shrewd traders with extensive cattle holdings, others, such as Elton Beckwith, embodied the traditional cowboy image. Beckwith, originally from Maine, was a skilled horseman and roper who became a leader in the cattle industry. His family ran one of the largest herds in the valley, and he served in the Colorado State Senate.

The valley's ranching economy flourished alongside the mining industry, supplying beef, grain, and hay to mining operations. Even after the decline of major mines like Bull Domingo and Bassick, cattle ranching remained the economic backbone of Custer County. The 1960s and 1970s brought a new wave of land development, tourism, and conservation efforts, changing the dynamics of the valley once again.

History of Custer County and Rosita (Ruth Stinemeyer's Account)

Ruth Stinemeyer's family had deep roots in the Wet Mountain Valley, tracing back to her grandfather, Samuel C. Stinemeyer, who arrived in Silver Cliff during the mining boom of 1879. Her father, Edwin Hughes Stinemeyer, became a prominent attorney, advocating for water rights and local governance.

Rosita was founded in the early 1870s and quickly became a bustling mining town. Its mines, including the Senator, Pocahontas, and Humboldt, produced valuable silver ore, leading to a rapid population increase. At its peak, Rosita boasted a bank, saloons, general stores, and a roller-skating rink. However, a devastating fire in 1880 and the silver market crash of 1893 led to its decline, turning it into a ghost town.

Politics played a significant role in shaping the county. Custer County was officially formed in 1877, separating from Fremont County. The county seat shifted several times—first in Rosita, then Silver Cliff, and finally Westcliffe in 1928. Stinemeyer noted the role of railroads in the valley's development, with

General William Jackson Palmer influencing the decision to run tracks through Westcliffe rather than Silver Cliff.

Both accounts capture the resilience and transformation of the Wet Mountain Valley, highlighting the impact of early settlers, the ranching economy, and the rise and fall of mining communities.

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