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Bet Kettle

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Talk about Frances Kettle presented to the Custer-Fremont Historical Society

Unidentified speaker: We're privileged tonight to have Elizabeth Kettle speak on Frances Kettle that was raised in South Dakota. She majored in journalism at the University of Missouri, married Ben Kettle in 1964 and raised their family here on their ranch. For five years, she was chairman of the Accountability Committee, six and a half years, more, on the school board, four years as President of the school board. Ben and Bet are lifetime members of the Fremont-Custer County Historical Society and so will you all please welcome Bet Kettle. (Applause)

BK: Thank you, Aunt Frances would be amazed to see this many people show up on a cold night to hear about a spinster school teacher. Of course, she was considerably more than that, probably Aunt Frances, Frances Evelyn Hill, was the First Lady of Custer County. I think she earned that title and she dedicated all of her life to education. She had a kind of an interesting history, but we'll get into that, and I told Irene, the only I didn't like about history was trying to remember all the darn dates. I'm faking part of these because I don't know. If you don't know, just say so, but the ones I have I think are accurate. Aunt Frances' grandparents immigrated from Guyverston? Lincolnshire England to Canada sometime in the late 1860s. Robert and Sarah Madison Kettle and they had seven sons and three daughters. One of the sons was married, John Kettle, brought his wife and went to Canada and somewhere in the early part of 1870 they had contacts with some cousins that had been converted to the Mormon church while they were in England and had come to this country and there's stories about adverts and sailing boars and hand carts and all of this kind of stuff.

But somehow this branch of the family ended up here and they notified the family in Canada that there was kind of a nifty place called the Wet Mountain Valley and they might be interested in taking a look at it. So, Will Kettle, who was Aunt Frances' father, came down from Canada and I think kind of paraphrased his Mormon cousins and looked around and said 'this is the place.' And he sent back to Canada and the rest of the family, except one brother, moved down there, settled at Ula and took up homesteads. The brother they left behind was great-uncle Tom. He and his family stayed in Canada and Estelle Cooke who was Polly Campbell's mother knew the Tom Kettles when she grew up on Canada. And Estelle said 'oh, I know Mr. Tome Kettle'. Will Kettle was unmarried at that time and he left behind a fiancé in England so he went back to England in

May of 1872 after they had a cabin, and several cabins built. There were six of them on San Isabel Ranch that were all homes for the brothers and the sisters, married his fiancé, brought her back to the valley and there they stayed.

Will and Isabella had six children, of which four survived and on the seventh childbirth both mother and baby. So, Will Kettle was left with three daughters, a two-year-old son to raise and did quite a manful job (family humility) quite a remarkable gentleman. Grandad didn't have a lot of education as we think of it. Probably 8th grade would be maximum. His wife was the daughter of a rector and school teacher and she got quite a bit more formal education. She spoke French, played the piano, she wrote poetry, as most Victorian ladies did in those days, and I have some of her poems, and was a very accomplished lady from what we know about her. But she died in childbirth and all the children, except Charlie, which is Ben's dad, were born in the living room of our house, the headquarters of San Isabel Ranch and all of them are very good (unintelligible) plus all the in-laws and outlaws and family married into 'em and so they stayed.

Will Kettle was involved in a general merchandise store. He did a little mining, very little, and mostly just developed into a pretty prominent rancher. He served in the state legislature, sometime in the 80s I think, but like most young people of that age in England, particularly in rural England, when he finished his minimal education, he was pressed as a cobbler, and he learned the cobbler trade and after he was established in Ula, he set up a cobbler shop. And Ula of course is Nellie Camper's house which was the old stage stop and there was a little main street with a blacksmith shop, feed store and that kind of thing right there. And Will Kettle made shoes and mended shoes, and got established that way.

But he and Isabel both where education and success were synonymous. And they'd go out for culture in the home and they firmly believed their children should have all the education possible. So, all six, four of the surviving children, were college graduates and went on to different professions. Ben's mother's an engineer and Sarah the oldest daughter, was the head of the Modern Language Dept of Colorado A&M for 30 some years and they had quite a history in education. Of course, that was Aunt Frances' life.

But I think that one little interesting thing just tonight, going through these little notes, Aunt Frances graduated from high school, of course there was no high school in Custer County at that time. She graduated from high school in 1911 in Ft. Collins. Obviously, she went with her sisters while she went to high school. She was 22 years old. She was born in 1889 and she graduated, and I have the graduation program in 1911. Do a little math, 22 years old. What she did in the intervening years, I don't know. Then I got to speculating a little bit that in those days, people with an 8th grade certificate could teach and I know Gussie Schooly told me one time that Aunt Frances used to teach at Ula in summer school so it's possible she was teaching when she was only 14 or 15 years old. Which really goes back, huh, babe? (laughing)

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But she went on to Colorado A&M* (Agriculture and Manufacturing) where all things mining was, mechanical, excuse me, Agricultural and Mechanical), graduated there, and the first formal teaching job, I don't know quite how this works, unless it's substitute teaching, was in 1918 Wyler. I know Eula Strayer's mother knew Miss Frances in high school in Wyler. Her major was in what they called the Home Sciences, you know, was Home Ec, with a minor in general science. She taught biology and she was at variety, and then she took up with the Erie, which is a coal mining town north of Denver and was there for several years. Then she came back here and taught high school in the Canda building. And the first high school class in 1924 graduated. In that interim, probably summer school, cause they did a lot of summer school in those years. She taught the first graduating class. Then of course, she moved on into teaching in high school.

One picture is Aunt Frances at the age of five and this picture is a tea that was given for her on the 50th anniversary of her history in education. She became Superintendent of Schools. She succeeded Georgiana Kelly. Now that's a little confusing. Georgiana Kelly was a cousin. She stayed, of course in those days, superintendents were elected. So, she was elected as County Superintendent of Schools whenever, early enough so that she got into the battle of consolidation of the rural schools and according to the little clipping that you gave me or one of the papers, they were 20 of them. Betty, I think, thinks there might be one or two or three more, I don't know. These rural school districts. But each one had a district, each one had a board, each one (unintelligible). So, she marched around to all these schools and sold the idea of consolidation and it was a battle. It was definitely not something that a lot of the old timers wanted to see happen but Miss Frances was very persuasive, very sweet, very accommodating, and she always got her way (laughing). She was a Kettle and we tend to be just a little bit stubborn, and she stayed in there as long as it took, and finally got it done. But she was, in fact, when I came here in 1964, and that was many years after they abolished the election of school superintendents, on the first ballot that I voted here, it said 'Should Miss Frances Kettle be retained as County Superintendent?' and it was a unanimous yes. In other words, they were going to see that Aunt Frances had a job and a livelihood as long as she was in this valley and we did.

But she did a lot of things besides teach. Aunt Frances kind of believed that the children in the valley did not have the opportunities for what she considered cultural education. The school board, like all school boards, including mine, were a little bit tight. In fact, her brother was on the school board for a while and when Frances was elected the Superintendent, Charlie said, 'well, I'm sure she'll be fine but she has no business sense whatsoever. We'll be broke.' Of course, there were people like Olan Canon who were treasurer of the boards and they kept her in line because, if the children needed something, she was going to get it for them. And if the board wouldn't pay for it, she'd pay out of her own pocket. And she did this for years and years and years. \\

She would do things like, if she had children that qualified for the state spelling bee, which was always in Denver, Aunt Frances would get them there, pay for their stay in Denver, pay all the expenses, year after year after year. Just so they had the opportunity to go. She discovered early on when the high school started having Junior-Senior proms that her girls, a lot of them, couldn't afford, and didn't have formals. So, they would all sit down with the Sears and Roebuck catalog and pick out the fabric they liked and Aunt Frances would order it and then she would help them make the dresses and then she would pay the bills. And if the boys didn't have suits, and usually they didn't, because they'd outgrown them and one suit of clothes was kind of all you got, she would somehow or the other, boys would end up with at least sports jackets and slacks. They would learn the etiquette of boutonnieres and ordering corsages, filling out dance cards and even learning to dance.

She used to have formal dinners. She used to have some informal ones too, didn't she, Dave? And we'd all walk out of there, woo woo woo, she loved to cook. But she would take her seniors and they would invite guests, male companions, suit and tie, or coat and tie were required, and girls wore dresses. The younger home ec kids would plan and serve an eight-course dinner at Miss Frances' house. You know, there'd only be six or seven girls in the graduating class in those days and the kids would come in, fresh out of the country, and here'd be lace tablecloth, a candelabra, full course dinner and there'd be chargers on the plate. They'd never seen chargers before. Fine china served each dish, eat little things like, what do you tell a kid from the country to do with a shrimp cocktail when you serve him with a fish fork? Neat things like this and the final piece of her whole thing, and I have them, there are some bowls about this big around and they're paper-thin, etched, placed on a server with crisp white doily, tiny slender slices of lemon and warm water. What are these things, do you drink it, what do you do with it? It was their introduction to finger bowls.

Her philosophy was, if they went somewhere else and advanced in life, they were going to have these things and seven separately cutlery services. Wine was served in etched, very delicate etched wine glasses, not wine, grape juice or apple juice. The full complement of water glass, and the whole thing, and it was just mind boggling. When these kids did get out later on and go to college and be invited out, they wouldn't be embarrassed. I did that with my children too and it was very good for them. Then there was the (unintelligible) if you didn't know about Aunt Frances' tennis court.

*Now Colorado State University