

Summary of Oral History Interview *West Custer County Library District Local History Collection*
Oral History Collection

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Summary of Oral History Interview with Dora Knuth Lange

Dora Knuth Lange was interviewed in early 1967 in Westcliffe, Colorado, where she shared her memories of the German Colony's settlement in the Wet Mountain Valley, her family's history, and the early Lutheran church.

Arrival of the German Colony in Custer County

Dora's parents immigrated to America in 1868, initially settling in Chicago. Due to her father's health issues, they joined the German Colony migration to Colorado in 1870. The group, consisting of about 14 families, traveled by oxen and wagon, eventually settling in the Wet Mountain Valley.

Upon arrival, the settlers established a communal system where resources such as flour were distributed by a designated overseer. Dora recalled a story her mother told about an encounter with a Native American who entered their home and admired her baby. The man, who enjoyed buttermilk, was given some before leaving peacefully. The exact tribe of the Native Americans in the area was unknown.

The German settlers initially attempted a communal lifestyle but abandoned it after a couple of years, transitioning to individual land ownership. Many of the families homesteaded in the Colfax area and surrounding lands.

Formation of the Lutheran Church

Religion was central to the German settlers, and the first Lutheran congregation was established in 1872 with 14 families. Their first pastor, H.W. Tayman, traveled on foot from Nebraska and faced opposition when attempting to preach in Pueblo, where he was threatened with hanging. Eventually, he settled in Westcliffe, where he helped establish the congregation.

The first church was a simple aspen pole structure, later replaced by a more permanent log building. The congregation continued to grow, leading to the construction of the larger Valley Church in 1888. By 1917, the current Lutheran church in Westcliffe was built, with its steeple reaching 96 feet high.

Early Education and Life on the Homestead

Dora attended the Knuth School, walking two miles each day. The school year was only four months long due to a lack of teachers and financial constraints. Subjects included reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and hygiene. Most of the teachers were men, though some women also taught.

As the youngest of eight children, Dora worked alongside her father on the farm, taking on responsibilities typically handled by men. She plowed fields, harvested grain, and managed livestock. The farm produced oats, barley, wheat, and hay, which had to be cut and stacked by hand.

Community and Church Involvement

Social life revolved around the Lutheran church, which hosted annual Christmas programs with decorated trees and candlelight services. Dora recalled that early Christmas trees were lit with real candles, which, though beautiful, posed a fire hazard. Despite these risks, no accidents were ever reported.

Dora married at age 18 and continued to be active in the church and farming community. The Hope Lutheran Church remained a strong presence in Westcliffe, with continued financial support and active congregational participation.

Legacy and Reflections

Dora's account provides a detailed look at the struggles and resilience of German immigrants in the Wet Mountain Valley. She emphasized the importance of faith, education, and hard work in building a lasting community. Her memories capture the transformation of the valley, from its early days as a communal settlement to a thriving agricultural and religious community.

This summary created with ChatGPT.