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### **Summary of Oral History Interview with Wilbur Miller**

Wilbur Miller was interviewed on June 5, 1990, at his home in Westcliffe, Colorado. He shared his family's history, experiences growing up in the Wet Mountain Valley, and the changes he witnessed in ranching, education, and local businesses over the years.

### **Family Background and Settlement in Custer County**

Wilbur's grandfather moved from Norborne, Missouri, to Custer County in 1913 due to his wife's asthma. His mother's family, the Kitzmans, were early settlers in the Willow district of the valley, arriving with the German Colony. His grandfather, Henry Kettlar, was one of the wagon drivers who led the colony from Chicago to Colorado.

Wilbur was born and raised in the valley, growing up on a ranch near Hermit and Kettle Lane. He attended the Adobe School, a small rural schoolhouse, where for a time he and his twin sister, Wilma, were the only students. Later, he attended the Lutheran school in Westcliffe before graduating from Custer County High School in 1948.

### **Ranching and Community Life**

Wilbur grew up working on his family's ranch, where they raised cattle and harvested crops such as lettuce, peas, and cauliflower. He recalled how produce was packed and transported to town, where it was stored in ice houses before shipment. His father bought farm equipment from local hardware stores in Westcliffe, including John Deere and International Harvester dealerships.

He also described the impact of unpredictable weather on farming, particularly the risk of hailstorms damaging crops. Ranchers took chances each season, knowing that a single storm could ruin a harvest.

### **The Railroad and Transportation**

Wilbur remembered watching the train come into town and seeing it turn around on a turntable near Westcliffe Milk Products. The railroad played a key role in transporting agricultural goods but was eventually dismantled in the late 1930s. Despite growing up around the train, Wilbur never rode it himself.

He also recalled the arrival of electricity in 1946, when he helped run wiring through his house, and the installation of the first telephones in the area, which didn't reach his family until after he left for military service.

### **Military Service and Education**

After high school, Wilbur joined the U.S. Air Force to avoid being drafted into the Army. He trained as a navigator and radar specialist, serving at various bases, including Guam. After his military service, he pursued a degree in mathematics at the University of Washington and later worked for Boeing as a research designer.

Eventually, he returned to Colorado, earning a master's degree in applied mathematics from the University of Colorado and a Ph.D. in mathematics, animal science, and economics from Colorado State University. He worked as a professor at the University of Southern Colorado and as a visiting scientist for CSU, consulting on agricultural and economic modeling projects.

### **Ranching and Legacy**

Despite his academic career, Wilbur remained committed to ranching, running about 600 head of cattle and producing 550 tons of hay annually. He balanced his scientific work with full-time ranching, ensuring that his summers were dedicated to the land.

Reflecting on the past, he noted how Custer County had changed, with fewer family-owned farms and more new residents unfamiliar with the area's agricultural traditions. He spoke fondly of community events, early schooling, and the resilience of the ranching families who built the valley.

His oral history provides a unique blend of personal, agricultural, and technological history, capturing the evolution of life in the Wet Mountain Valley over the 20th century.

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