

LP2009.013.210

Summary of Oral History Interview with Fred and Mary Vahldick

Fred and Mary Vahldick were interviewed about their family's history in Custer County, Colorado, particularly their German immigrant roots and early settlement in the Wet Mountain Valley. Their discussion includes detailed recollections of ranching, homesteading, water rights, and changes in the local landscape.

Family History and Immigration

Fred's grandfather, Frederick William Vahldick, immigrated from Germany and was part of the German Colony that settled in the Wet Mountain Valley in 1870. He homesteaded a large piece of land separate from the main colony settlement, down in the Hillside area. Over time, he expanded his landholdings, acquiring over 1,000 acres, including significant water rights.

Fred's father, William Frederick, was born in 1872 and took up ranching. His family endured hardships, including the deaths of siblings in infancy. Fred's grandmother, after losing her husband, remarried to an Englishwoman who had been their housekeeper.

Homesteading and Land Development

The Vahldick family played a key role in early ranching and land development in Custer County. They navigated homestead laws that allowed settlers to claim 160, then 320, and eventually up to 640 acres as grazing land became available. Fred himself homesteaded near Querida, and his family controlled over 900 acres of land, including mineral rights.

Water rights were a significant issue in the valley, and Fred's grandfather had to purchase additional rights to secure irrigation for his land. Water was essential for agriculture and cattle ranching, and disputes over it were common.

Ranching and Agriculture

The Vahldicks were heavily involved in sheep and cattle ranching. In the early 20th century, the valley supported large herds of sheep, with Mexican shepherders brought in for seasonal work. Wool production was a major industry, and carloads of wool were shipped out of the area. However, as predator issues increased and labor shortages grew, sheep ranching declined, giving way to cattle operations.

The family also experimented with phosphate fertilization to improve hay production. By applying phosphate to their fields, they increased their hay yield from 60 tons to over 380 tons, allowing them to pay off their ranch and expand operations.

Community and Historical Changes

Fred and Mary described how the Wet Mountain Valley changed over time. In the early days, settlers relied on oxen for transportation, and early homesteaders lived off the land. The valley once had a thriving cheese factory, lettuce farms, and extensive hay production.

One of the major shifts they witnessed was the decline of small, independent ranching operations as younger generations moved away, and land was sold off for development. They also discussed historical events like the grasshopper plague that devastated crops and how their family adapted to the challenges of ranch life.

Legacy and Reflections

Fred and Mary reflected on their 50-year marriage and their deep connection to the land. They shared humorous and touching stories about their family, neighbors, and the unique challenges of ranching life in the high country. Their interview provides a rich historical perspective on the resilience of pioneer families and the evolution of agriculture in Custer County.

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