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Armstrong, Bill and Minnie

Summary

Bill and Minnie Armstrong, lifelong residents of rural Colorado, exemplified the enduring spirit of early 20th century American pioneers. Bill was born in 1914 near Ilse, Colorado, at the old McCormick place. His parents, Joe and Mary Armstrong, were immigrants from England and Scotland, respectively. Joe, born in 1869, came to America as a stowaway with two uncles, seeking better opportunities after working for meager wages in England. Mary moved to America with her parents, initially settling in Scranton, Illinois, before moving to Colorado. The couple married in Rockvale, Colorado, in 1893, where Joe worked as a coal miner before transitioning to ranching.

Bill grew up on his family's ranch and spent his entire life working in agriculture. Starting with 100 head of cattle, he also cultivated corn, oats, barley, and potatoes to support his livestock and sell for profit. Despite the demanding work schedule that limited his formal education to the 5th grade, Bill's dedication to ranching remained steadfast. His early years were marked by the challenges of rural life, including the two-day trips his father made to transport potatoes to Rockvale by horse and wagon. Tragedy struck the family when Bill's father died in 1933 and his oldest brother George was killed in a haying accident in 1946.

Minnie Kelling, born in 1910 in the Colfax area, had a similarly rural upbringing. Her family was integral to the local school system, with her mother boarding teachers and her father serving on the school board and teaching for a semester. Minnie graduated from high school in 1926 and later ran Min's Café in Westcliffe from 1933 to 1944. Her family's livelihood included producing butter and eggs for sale, and they bought their first automobile in 1918 from hay sales. Minnie's father also served as the local water commissioner for 25 years, demonstrating the family's deep involvement in community affairs.

Bill and Minnie met at a square dance after World War II, and they married in 1948. Though they had no children, their lives were rich with community engagement. They were active participants in local social events like dances, box socials, and church activities. These gatherings were not only sources of entertainment but also vital for fundraising to maintain community facilities such as the schoolhouse. The Armstrongs' home life and social interactions reflect the tight-knit and self-sufficient nature of rural communities during this era.

Their story, detailed in reflections from the 1976 Custer County Bicentennial-Centennial celebrations, underscores the resilience and commitment required to thrive in early 20th century rural Colorado. Despite the hardships they faced, including the harsh conditions that led Bill's family to temporarily return to mining, the Armstrongs persevered. Their lives were characterized by hard work, strong family bonds, and a deep connection to their community, embodying the pioneering spirit of their time.