

Thursday, May 29, 1980

Tape #1039

I am in Broomfield, Colorado, at 236 Iris, and I'm talking to Mr. Thomas Knill. He's an old time resident of Lafayette. This is an ongoing project of the Lafayette library to interview the older people of Lafayette and the vicinity to get their recollections of what has gone on. Mr. Knill, you were born in Lafayette.

Knill: I was born here on February the 18th, 1909. And the house that I was born in then was a two-room house and it was, well, there's a root beer stand on the road just as you go into Broomfield and it's the little house directly east. Well, it's built onto now, now, but that just had two rooms there. That was on Emma Street. When I was a kid we didn't pay any attention to the names of the streets. My dad just moved there after they were married. They lived in a tent house. That's wooden floors, wooden walls with a tent top. They moved there and that's where I was born.

What was your father and mother's names?

Dad's name was Thomas J. Knill--that's for Jefferson--and mother's name was Minnie May Holten (her name before she was married.) She was born in Streeter, Illinois. She just died here shortly after the first of the year and she was 90 years old. Now my dad was born in Erie, Colorado. He was the first white boy born in Erie, Colorado. My granddad and grandmother came from England, or from Wales, really, to Pennsylvania to work in the coal mines. And then he heard of the mines opening up out here and he came to Erie where some of the first mines in the state were located. And then they later moved to Marshall and lived in a little old stone house in Marshall. Right now, out in my flower bed, I have a stone that was the step for the stone house they lived in and that's about all I can tell you about mother and dad.

When did he die?

I think he died in 1956.

Where did you go to school?

I went to school in Lafayette. One of the things that I can remember and it always sticks in my mind, is at the old school house we used to have drinking fountains outside and in the winter time they'd get you to go up there and try to get a drink from that and you'd stick your lips on that. And then I can remember they had the maypole dance and all of that. I can remember quite a bit about that. And then, my first year in high school, we went to the new high school then which was west of the old high school, and I can remember--oh, I graduated from the high school there and went on to the school of mines in Golden and was married there.

Do you remember any of the children that you went to school with in Lafayette?

Oh yes. Ervin Moon, he's dead now. Tom Davis, there were two Graham boys and Leona Reese and Verna Stubbs and I can't remember right off the rest of the girls. Oh, and Earl Rather, I remember him. After I went from Lafayette we moved to Golden and I was married there. I was actually married in Brighton but I met my wife in Golden. She was from Pennsylvania and she came out here to go to DU and she was going there when I met her.

What year did you graduate?

I graduated in 1927.

Do you remember some of the teachers?

Oh yes, I can remember the math teachers name, but he scared mathematics into me. I think his name was Tweed. And I remember Miss Blakeman. She was our class sponsor and I remember Julia Harman which was our English teacher. But I can't remember the rest of the right off now.

How many people graduated that year?

There must have been around 12 or 13, I can't remember right off.

You mentioned you were married in Brighton--how many children did you have?

Well, I have five children. Four girls and one boy. Ida May Foster--she was the oldest girl. She was married and her husband was killed in Viet nam. She lives with us here. Then, my boy is Thomas J. Knill and he lives with us here. Ruth Ann Kennedy, who is married and lives in Dacona, Colorado. Eleanor Shule, who lives in Boulder, and then Dorothy Jean--everybody knows her by Duffer and it's pretty hard for me to remember her name cause we all called her Duffer. She lives east of Longmont.

Your children are all close to you?

Right.

Is your wife still alive?

Right.

This year you will have your 50th anniversary. --When you were a child in Lafayette, can you tell me something about the town?

We lived on what used to be Main Street and the store on the corner was Berns Grocery Store. There's now a furniture store there or something. We lived the third house down toward the old Simpson Mine and I can remember Dow's Drug Store on the south side of the old Main Street. Next was the post office and old Dave was the post master. Then the Hub Store, then Tommy with the barber shop, then there was Skells Bakery and I might have missed one store but anyhow there used to be a store there--Sam Lucock's. He had a clothing store and in connection with it was the mortuary. Next to that was the old company store and, then the bank on the corner. Then across the street and up toward the top of the hill was Smith's Drug Store and south of Smith's was the old

telephone office--I'll tell you something about the old telephone office in a minute. Then going on up the hill was Dan Jones' Livery Stable and then the Moon Butcher shop and then Bill Moon's place and then there was a church on the corner. I can't remember which denomination it was. Going across the street there was Sam Burgs house. By the way, she was one of my teachers I think in the Third grade. Then Mrs. Kettle's Store and then on up I can't remember. Now the store that I couldn't remember down there was a pool hall. If you came on the other side of the street, from Burns' store going up, there was Mayhoffer's Boarding House and there there was Weber's Livery Stable. But it burned down and they built a garage in there. And then there was Joe Brian's shoe store and then I can't remember what was on the corner and across the street was Vanderburg's Store and then next to them going up the hill was a pool hall with a bowling alley in the back end of it. Then a little restaurant kind of thing and then a house and then the old theater was there. Across the street and going toward the highway was the old union hall and then there was houses on up. I can remember up along the highway the old saloon halls.

What did you do in Lafayette for entertainment when you were a child?

Well, Walt Webb and Wes Webb and I used to trap muskrats. In fact, I used to ride a bicycle out to the Broomfield slew and trap muskrats up there. We used to trap out around the old Van Lake and Erie Reservoir and places like that. Oh, and then we played marbles and a few other things that kids did.

Did you ever work in the mines in Lafayette?

The first mine I worked in in Lafayette was the old Blue Moose. Now that's long gone. I never worked down in the Simpson. But the first mine I ever worked in I was a Sophomore in high school and it was the Shamrock Mine over by Frederick. By the way, that was the last mine I ever worked with my dad and that was just before he died. During the early days they had a medicine show come around there. And it was on a Model T and the sides came down in the back and they had it on the corner by Bermont's store and they were there for two or three nights and they had a sign painter who painted all of the signs on the windows. He painted the signs on the bank and then they all apparently left. A week or so after they left, they blew the front of the bank out and got away with all of the money. I told you about the telephone company there, they cut the telephone wires and there was a little old town marshall--I can't remember what his name was--but they put him into a banana crate. Now a banana crate was a thing about 15 to 20 inches in diameter, also tall. They put him in that. They apparently ran down our alley and we had a dog and he was chained to the back fence. He was barking and apparently one of those fellas got ahold of the dog and was choking him. My dad went out the back and he thought he recognised the fella that was painting the sign

and that's the last I can remember about that.

Where was the old Blue Goose Mine located?

It was south of Lafayette and east of the Strathmore Mine about half a mile. It was not part of the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company. Starting from Baseline Road and coming round to the south and east, there was the Standard and the Capital and the Simpson Mine, the Blue Goose and the Strathmore. Then on the other side from Baseline going around was the (?) mine. Well, they moved the house, but the museum in Lafayette used to be at the (? Patfield) Mine. And then coming up the highway where you turn to go to Boulder there used to be the Old Mile High Mine. In there and then up by the electric plant which is long gone now, was the old electric mine. I've got maps of all of those mines and the underground workings. And with these books right here, I can tell you the amount of coal taken out of each one of these mines.

How long did you work in the mines?

Well, from my sophomore year in high school until probably five years ago. I used to measure up royalty for the Union Pacific Coal Company in a lot of the mines around here. The last mine that I worked in by myself after my dad died was the Old Washington Mine over on Washington Street there by I25. I measured up the royalty there for Roy Need (?). Tell me something about the labor problems around the mines.

Well, the first thing I can remember, we lived in Tom Frowles (?) house. Now, I can't tell you the name of the street, but it was across from the old Moon house and in between our house and the next house there was just room for a walk. This was during the strike and they supposedly had a machine gun in the tiple of the old Simpson Mine and it looked right straight down our street so we slept in the basement. It was a dirt cellar. We were sleeping down there one night and I can remember hearing a commotion between the two houses and that night my dad warned me. He said, "now don't tell anybody anything about what you heard or who you saw or anything." The next day mother was out there washing up the blood. Somebody had got beat up in the place--I know who the guy was that was beat up and I also know who beat him up now but I didn't back then. My dad warned me not to say anything about it.

Do you recall any of the other problems that they had around?

After I moved away from Lafayette and went to school up in Golden I worked in coal mines in Weld County outside Oak Creek and of course they had ^{wobbly}~~wobbly~~ (?) strikes out there.

You're writing a diary.

I have kept a diary since 1930 and it fills probably 40 books--those field books they used in surveying. That is a daily diary and I've missed only one or two days and then I've filled those in at times after. The diary goes to my oldest daughter. I keep

it in my room and nobody looks at it--I don't even look at it, unless I want to find something in particular.

Now, you have some other projects going.

I've been trying to write a book on Colorado and I've got quite a few things indexed. I talked to Alan Swallow who died here last year. He told me how to get it together to print it. He printed alot of history books and he said that this could be used as a reference book in the high school. To date, I've got over 14,000 items cataloged. I've got alot of ghost towns, how they were founded and what they were all about. I've got another deal on all the odd facts in Colorado. In other words, where the first legal execution was held, who formed the first union, things like that. And then I've got an alphabetical listing of all the towns and every place in the state that has a name or has had a name. I can tell you when it was first settled, how it got its name, where it's located by section, township etc. I can tell you who serves it with electricity gas and so on, how it's served by transportation. And then I've got quite alot of dope on the early mistresses in Colorado and some research up around Leadville and Pueblo. It's pretty nice to read. One of the things I remember about Lafayette was the hose cart races. The reason I tell you about that is ^Maddie Silks who was one of the famous madames in the west, married a fellow who ran on a hose cart team up at Georgetown. So that he wouldn't be contaminated by any of the gals, she bought him a ranch up by Fort Morgan and kept him and alot of horses out there. Did I tell you about going to the mine in a cart with my dad? Well, whe I was real little, dad used to do the surveying in the mines at night so that they wouldn't interrupt the work. I remember riding from Lafayette to Marshall and there weren't any defined roads. We just went over the top of the hill. I'd sleep in the engine house where it was warm by the boilers. Then when he come out, I'd get in the cart and ride. Dad used to tie a lantern under the seat and the spokes would throw shadows out among the prairie as you come home and that used to kind of scare me at night. I remember another time about going over to set the stakes for the opening of the old Columbine Mine. We didn't have our cart then and we never had a car so we rented a rig off of Dan Jones. Dad and I are going over in this rig and, just before we got there, we lost a wheel and we had to get up and walk a quarter of a mile to get to where they located the Columbine Mine. We set the first stakes for the mine. We also set the first stakes for the Highway Mine. That was south of Lafayette. I worked in the State Mine. That belonged to Peltier and Nesbin (?). By the way, Peltier, or some relative of his, used to own a salloon in Lafayette. From the traffic light, it was the second saloon on the west side of the street.

They were all on the west side of the street.

Yes. Mrs. Miller, who was Lafayette Miller's mother set up in all the deeds that there be no liquor sold east of the highway. I remember during the bootleg days some people in Lafayette, some of the heirs still live here, were caught bootlegging and there was a big lawsuit as to whether they could--whether that would revert to the miller estate. I don't know how that ever came out.

When you were working in the mine, what kind of work did you do?

Surveying. Engineering and surveying. This was even before I went to the school of mines. I began surveying with my dad before I was even in high school. Then, later on when I went up to the school of mines I got out of two or three classes due to the fact that I had taken that. I got my licence while I was still going to school. Later on I took an examination for teacher's certificate and I taught at the vocational school in Lafayette. I taught mine surveying and how it relates to people that work in the mine. What the mine surveyor did and what they were supposed to do and how it should all work together. I taught one year out there. While I was up at the school of mines I taught better than two thirds of the students that went to school there from 1927 to about 1934. I tutored descriptive geology and that's how I made my money to go to school. When you got out of school did you follow the surveying business?

I got out of school and the depression was on. It was pretty tough so I started working out at Lowery Air Force Base. When I retired there 31 years later, I was chief engineer and had done all the construction on Lowery. You can look at my things along this wall and find the awards that I got. I taught school at night out there. When I went out to Lowery I got out on WPA, for \$55 a month. Later on I got on civil service and did real well--lots of awards. One award I really liked was I set up the fire department and rescue department at Lowery. I enjoyed my work out there but the days got pretty long and the nights got longer.

What happened out there during WWII?

During the war I went , I think about a year and a half, without a Saturday or Sunday off. Just before I retired I finally got paid for it and paid real good because they paid me at my retirement wage instead of the wage I was getting then. You told me before we started a little story about Carl Akers. I'd like you to tell me that again.

I did some research on different religions in the state and I gave him quite a bit of dope for that. Also, made some corrections on what he made of the Spanish caves in southwestern Colorado. I called him and his girl said he didn't make mistakes and he researches pretty thouroughly. I let it go at that, but he called me a few days later and asked me about it and how I got my information. I gave him the dope that I had about th

early religions in the state. For the book that I'm getting together, I have quite a bit of information from the University of New Mexico. Through the librarian, her brother worked for me at Lowery, I got quite alot. I got alot of the original Mexican land grabs, alot of the original maps of those and I've been collecting odds and ends. The early part of this year there was a lady here who went to school in Denver at night and she took Colorado history and I got a perfect grade. Her professor came out and I gave him alot of information that I had and he gave me alot.

Are you still in contact with Mr. Akers?

No, oh that's been about seven years ago.

Now, you have some contact with the weatherman?

Stormy gave me alot of information on the highs and lows for each county and the number of growing days for each county and so on, which I've worked up into seperate county books I plan to get together. Out at Lowery at the end of the day we always had to put in the high and low temperature and the amount of percipitation and so on. I'd call up the weather station in Lowery and I'd remember his voice but I couldn't place it until I saw him on TV.

What do you think of the changes that are happening in Lafayette?

Well, I don't know. You know when I was young here, the lower part of Simpson Street was the main part of town and you got up on Public Road and that was the highway and there wasn't much up there except maybe one or two pool halls. Another thing I can remember when I was a kid, my aunt and uncle lived just west of the root beer stand--they owned that corner there. I can always remember on the fourth of july we'd all go down there and they would have the Denver to Cheyenne road races. That was a big thing. They would all say, 'oh, he was going 60 miles an hour!' I can remember the highway used to go up and around the cemetery and before they cut off part of the corner of the cemetery, one of them turned over there and it was quite a thing to go up and see.

As far as the businesses that you named earlier, how do those compare to those we have today?

Well, when I was young there was probably three places you could buy gasoline.

At Weberg's garage, (of course, the livery stable burned down and the garage was built there) at Bermont's store and probably up on the highway someplace. But, at the company store, Mr. Autrey was in charge there and you could buy shoes, clothes, groceries and meat. Then Bermont's used to carry clothes and shoes. Not meats, but canned goods. And I can always remember Joe Brown's Shoe shop cause when I was a kid some of the older men used to hang around there. My mother said stay away from there--they talked pretty bad sometimes. The same with the blacksmith's shop. Now, Abby Nelson and George Nelson

used to own the blacksmith shop. I got tanned more than once listening and going up there.

Where did Mr. Bermont have his gas pump?

It was on Main Street about half way in front of his building. You had to get out there and pull the lever back and forth and pump it up by hand. Then, he'd watch the gallons as it came down.

Do you remember the pool hall or confectionary that was under the bank on the corner?

The bowling alley was on the other side of the street up from Bermont's Store, not under the bank.

Well, now there were two lanes under the old Rocky Mountain Store.

I don't remember. I remember above the old Rocky Mountain Store they had the lodge rooms. There were the Odd Fellows, and the Rebeccas, Woodmen of the World, the Nations, the Eastern Star and I can't remember any more than that.

What do you think the growth will do to the city of Lafayette?

Well, I wouldn't know. In fact, I wouldn't even make a guess. If it's like a lot of mining towns, they're lucky to be in existence today because alot of towns are long gone.

Do you think the mining will ever come back?

Pretty near all of the coal was worked out around the Lafayette area. South of where the old railraod used to cut across to Public Road there, south and west, there's some more coal left--part of the old Strathmore Mine. I've got a map that shows the coal left in there and it's about seven feet left. I've got 700 and some drill hole logs in this area around here that shows where the coal is. In fact, under Broomfield, right where I'm sitting now, at about 700 feet deep, it's broken up. Now what I mean by broken up is it's not a continuous vein. There's 14 feet of coal.

Do you think it is economically feasible to get the coal out?

Not right now. Strip mining is a lot less than shaft mining. One other thing, about two years ago, Public Service or the Interstate Gas Company, came and wanted to know from me what mines were worked out and whether they pulled the pillars etc. And one mine that they wanted to know particularly about was the old Mile High Mine and that was by the Boulder turn-off on the highway. I looked on the old map and there was quite an area under there at the time ~~of~~ the last map was made that was still standing on pillars and there was no evidence of caving--that they might use to store gas in.

Did most of the mines pull their pillars?

Right, now I think the Simpson pulled most of its pillars. In fact I can remember when we was kids there was a big laughing matter about it that you wake up in the morning and maybe couldn't get the door open, you could here it cracking and you'd have to saw off the bottom of the door and that,. And there's been some cave-ins in the streets. Just lately here, a year or so ago, around the old air shaft caved in.

Do you think in the next few years that there might be more of that.

I doubt it very much. The geology in the area is such that it's already settled. It's already taken place--most of it now. There may be an area where they left alot of stumps and it was holding up but might break through later but, I doubt it.

How many grandchildren do you have?

Eight and two great grandchildren.

Tell me about those buildings you built?

I started here about three or four years ago making them for kids in the neighborhood. I've made over 400 little buildings. And I've sold quite alot of them. That's the first building I ever made and it's the church up at Fairplay. But I make the rest of them and just give them to kids. I make little dobie houses out of cardboard. Everybody in the neighbor saves me cardboard and cereal boxes. All these little outhouses, I've got to make 80 of them. My oldest daughter works for a sorority house up at CU and they're going to give the to the girls.

Now these that you make for the museum in Lafayette, what kind of houses are they?

I made them just from memory of the buildings on the Main Street in Lafayette.

I'm sure you remember Bill Moon who just passed away?

Yes, the Moon's are related to me. In my junior year in high school, I stayed with aunt Lizzie Moon. I lived there with them. My folks were in Wyoming at the time and I didn't like it up there so I came here and I worked for my room and board there and I ran the Moon picture machine, the show there at night. I used to take the cows down to the slaughter house.

Is there anybody in Lafayette that you used to be friends with that still lives there?

I haven't been out around there very much. I went out there to the museum when I took that little house out the other night, and that was the first time I'd been out there to stop in years. Viola Reese and Verna Stubbs still live there and ^{Leona} Dalona Shroeder. The two Graham boys. The Graham Clif Alderson married, it's her ~~bro~~ brother and her cousin that graduated with me.

Did you ever belong to the fire department?

No, but I used to like to watch their races.

Along time ago I heard they had quite an initiation? Anything else you would want to comment on. What do use this scanner for?

To find out what's going on in the county. This one here gives me the weather and this of course is a short wave radio and I can listen to soccer games in Brazil and I can understand enough Spanish to know what they're saying. This is just a CB. When I used to go out to get stuff for my books, I'd go into an old newspaper office and take my recorder and read what I wanted to record and type it at home.

How far away is the book from publication?

If I could get somebody to type it maybe a year. I've got alot of stuff that are just in notes still. Have been working on the research about 15 years.

Can you tell me the story about the boy that was kidnapped?

This is a diary that I've got, from the University of New Mexico and while I was studying the religions in the state I had a Spanish boy work for me who had a relative at the library of the University of New Mexico, and it was a story about getting the religions in Southern Colorado and the Penetengies (?) were along the southern border of Colorado and then up around the San Luis valley, the eastern part of the valley was mostly Catholic and the western part was Presbyterian and the southern part was mormon and Catholic. He got me a copy of this diary and I read it and had to return it. There was a Spanish at Fort Garlin and a couple of Presbyterians kidnapped him and took him to the western part of the county. Later on they sent him down to Las Vegas, New Mexico and he became a preacher in Presbyterian religion. This is all taken from his diary. He and his family; he was going up to Pueblo to take the ministry there but was waylaid some place north of Walsenburg and south of Pueblo. They killed his wife and one of his children and he got up to Pueblo with one of his other children. This is his diary but it was kind of hard to read because one-third was English and the rest in Spanish, which I can speak a little bit.

Did you ever do any work around Walsenburg and Trinidad?

Before I went to work out at Lowery and between the time I got out of school I worked for the highway planning survey and I had all the roads on the east and west line through Denver all of the roads south and it took me a little over a year to ~~log~~ drive and log all those roads. You had to have half the front seat of your car taken out and there was a thing connected to your speedometer cable and it was magnetically controlled so when you turned the corner it turned the corner. You had a map and you went on those maps

I did that for around a year and a half.

You keep your self real busy

I'll show you some doll houses I made for my granddaughter. They're one inch to the~~f~~ foot.

It's been a pleasure talking with you. We've been talking with Mr. Tom Kneil. He lives in Broomfield but was born and raised in Lafayette.