

Dorothy Wither

A Pioneer Childhood

by Rick Tibbetts

"Life was hard then," recalls Dorothy Wither, life-time resident of Steamboat Springs, recalling her childhood and the early days of the town. Dorothy has seen great change in the town and its way of living- from a pioneer town to a modern community. Dorothy takes great pride in her family and its history. She has traced her family tree generations back and keeps good track of her large family today.

Dorothy now--

A picture of Dorothy as a small child.



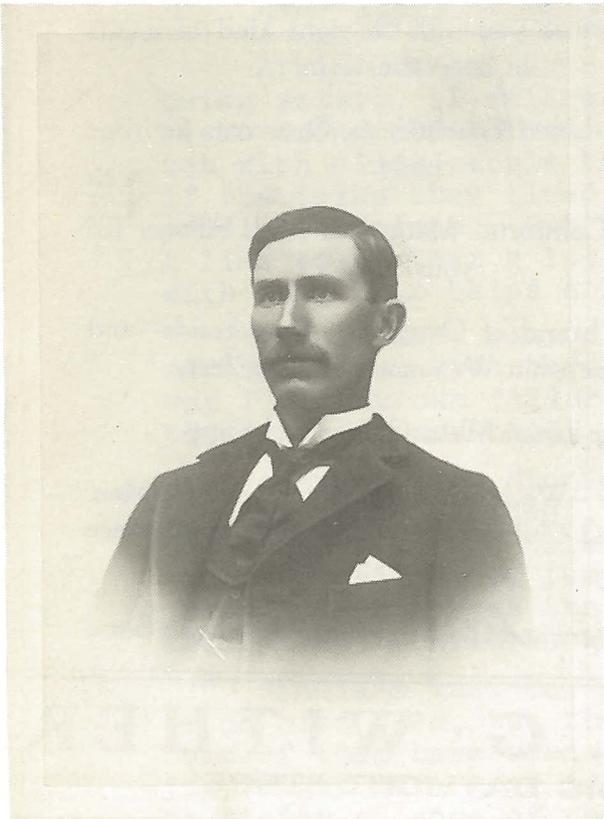
Archie Wither Comes to Steamboat

Dorothy's father was Archibald Wither, an emigrant from Scotland. There he had been a pharmacist and had graduated from the University of London. He was one of the many people who felt there was a better life to be found in America. He left Scotland in the mid 1880's and settled in Canada. While living and working there he received a letter from his brother, George. George Wither had been traveling in Africa and South America, from there traveling to the United States. He came to Steamboat from Denver and wrote his brother "the gold is practically hanging off the trees".

At that time the site of Steamboat Springs was regarded as a mining prospect. "That's why they came to this country - because of mining," Dorothy speculates. Later it proved not to be so. The mining in Steamboat was poor, but the pasture land and the mineral springs promised well for cattle and people too.

Archie Wither came to Steamboat as George had suggested, arriving on a freighter on July 4, 1889. "My dad took up the homestead up on Emerald Mountain and had a ranch there- he proved up there in 1898. He would take a team and go down into town." He and his brother set up a homestead near a spring, on a hill overlooking the few buildings of the town. Archie "did everything he could find to do" and soon became involved in many community activities: he helped build the Congregational Church, and with a few other men built the first road leading into the town from Buffalo Pass, using shovels and picks.

Two more Wither brothers, Peter and John came to Steamboat eventually, but only Archie and George decided to settle here.



Archibald Wither

Archie's first store in Steamboat.



Hahn's Peak

After about eight years of living in the town, the two bought a store in Hahn's Peak, a successful mining community about thirty-five miles northeast of Steamboat.

The store supplied miners with wholesale goods, "All the miners from the surrounding hills would go to the store for barrels of flour, slabs of bacon, coffee and beans. They would pay in gold nuggets which were sent to Denver to be assayed and changed for money."

At the time when Archie and George lived there, Hahn's Peak was the county seat. In the autumn anyone who was involved in a court case had to come and be present. "When they'd have court, everybody would come. It was in October, and they say there'd be at least a thousand men that would come to that and bring their own tents, and, of course, they'd come by team. George Wither served as treasurer at Hahn's Peak for a number of years, besides minding the store.

Every week Archie would take a wagon and team and go to the town of Wolcott to buy supplies, taking three days to get there and back with the freight.

Wagons were also used to deliver groceries. The buyer would call or visit the store with their list, and it would be delivered to them later in a wagon or a sleigh in the winter. Milk was delivered in a similar way.

A Bumper Crop

And we have all kinds of machinery, such as Mowers, Binders, Tedders, Sulky Rakes, Sweep Rakes, Stackers, and a full line of repairs for same. In our dry goods department we have marked prices down very low on all summer goods, such as waists, wrappers, and all summer piece goods; also all muslin underwear. It will be to your interest to call and inspect them.

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We can furnish you with the right kind of goods to keep you warm

Men's Pelt-Lined Coats, Vests, Overcoats for your body

Blankets, Comforts, Mattresses and Pillows for your bed

American brand of Overshoes---no seconds---and Sheepskin Wanagans for your feet

Fur-Lined Mitts, Gloves and Caps

Underwear---We have anything you want for Men, Women and Children in Union and Single-Piece Garments

Furs, Sweaters and Cloaks at the Old Reliable Store

A. & G. WITHER
BIG DAYLIGHT STORE

While in Hahn's Peak Archie met Pearl Carleton, a young woman who came by stage to the town on her way to Steamboat to attend a 'normal school' where two weeks of training, those trained could become teachers. Pearl was born in Iowa in 1882. Her family moved to Nebraska. There her mother died when Pearl was ten. Her father went to Washington, and she was raised by her aunt and uncle, with her older brother and a cousin. This family moved to Snake River in northwestern Colorado.

Snake River was a poor community, with so few cattle that they were never butchered, but left to breed. In the autumn all the men in the town would have a big kill of wild game - elk or deer - or whatever else they could shoot" - to be divided up among the families.

Dorothy remembers that in Steamboat there was a fish catch every year at Fish Creek. "In October they used to have a day and everybody would go and get their fish and take them home to salt them down." The fish were called graling, and the days in the autumn when they were most abundant were called "the graling storm".

In both towns, Steamboat Springs and Hahns Peak, transportation was a problem, especially in the wintertime. Homes were not often close together except in the town, and families and homesteaders had a long way to travel to town and to other people's houses.

In winter sleighs and teams, cross country skis and horses were used, but the trips were few. In summer, after the long wait, wagons could be used again. "We could hardly wait in the spring for the snow to go," Dorothy recalls, "Years ago I'd be climbing through some of that snow to get all the wildflowers."

The Steamboat Merchantile Company.



Often ranchers and their families were isolated for many months at a time, unable to travel very far. That is why old timers will speak of 'going out to Denver' and 'in to Steamboat'. Another expression used is 'wintering' somewhere. That expression "refers to people who often came in to Steamboat to run cattle, then leave in winter, when there is no way for them to make a living."

Mostly "the ranchers would come in the fall and buy all their groceries to last them the year", and some would come in the spring.

Archie and Pearl were married in 1899. Their first child, George, was born in the cabin with the help of a local woman. Dorothy's family still owns the cabin at Hahn's Peak where Archie and his wife kept house.

In 1902 Archie sold the store, and the family moved down to Steamboat. He bought a house on the corner of Main Street, there their second child, Eva Dorothy, was born. In Steamboat they also bought the second A & G Wither Store, but even while they were running it, the Wither brothers were making plans to build a bigger store across the street.

Dorothy began school in 1910, attending a three story wooden school for all grades, one of the few buildings in a small town, with dirt streets, wooden sidewalks and no water system. The school first began with only one teacher - Miss Merrill, "a pioneer teacher who taught for years in this country".

Teachers, she says, were expected to lead disciplined lives because their conduct was an example for the children, "very different from now." The faculty of the school increased as the number of students did. After a big graduation ceremony held for junior high, when Dorothy was in the ninth grade, the school burned down.

Fires at the time almost always destroyed the building entirely, "All you could do was watch." The courthouse at Hahn's Peak where her uncle George worked, and the Cabin Hotel, where Winter Carnival ceremonies were held, burned down also.



Dorothy with her
brother George

Archie Wither's
family



Classes were held at various people's houses until a new and better school was built. Dorothy moved to the new school then, which was made of stone and had a gymnasium. All the students enjoyed playing basketball there. Basketball was the most popular sport then, and most of the town turned out for the games- the girls played boys' rules and sometimes traveled by train to towns near Steamboat to challenge their teams.

Dorothy can recall her school days with amazing clarity, especially all the grade school activities, and what the school children did during different times of the year.

Recreation

Besides school Dorothy occupied herself with many types of recreation. Skiing, swimming, hiking and riding were all very popular. The many mineral springs and Yampa River in Steamboat provided excellent swimming which Dorothy often indulged in during the summer.

In 1910 or 1911 a bathhouse was built at the springs on the hill, and swimming there became very popular. "Of course, you wore long black stockings and bloomers and a top that came clear down to your knees, and everything was knitted. We also did a lot of hiking and horseback riding."

"I started to ski before I ever went to school. I had these home-made skis. It was a means of transportation in those days." Wherever they had to go that was the way they went, "We were all very much involved in skiing."

The first pair of skis that Dorothy ever saw was at her father's store. She and her brothers often skied on long wooden skis on a hill by their house. The skis were attached by a metal clasp and a leather thong which was wrapped around the leg.

Before the skis were purchased they were always weighed to make sure they were of equal weight when the skier went off jumps.

The first Winter Carnival, an annual celebration of winter, was held when Dorothy was in grade school. On that occasion marchers on skis paraded down the snowy street to the Cabin Hotel, where Dorothy and a number of other little girls stood on the large staircase to greet the Carnival Queen. All the girls, in white dresses wore a long pink ribbon that connected them by bows on their shoulders. "The woman who was in charge of this had had a real dream. I never will forget this, I hated it so."

Wagons and teams were used as the main source of transportation for pleasure as well as business. Dorothy remembers her father riding with them on Sunday afternoons. Her father would say if she and her brother could both bring him four leaf clovers he would hitch up the surrey and take them for a ride - they were usually lucky.

Frank Potts, a relative of Dorothy's on her mother's side owned the first automobile in Steamboat. Automobiles could be used only in summer, in the winter they would have to be put in a shed. When spring came the owner would put the battery back in and reinflate the tires. Then they could be driven in the melting snow, if the way was broken by a 'go-devil', a horse driven device that resembled a plow filled with rocks.

Steamboat Mercantile Co.

In 1910 Archie and his brother built Steamboat Springs Mercantile Co., using materials bought mostly in the town. "My dad believed you should trade at home. He said if you couldn't support the community you lived in, you shouldn't live in that community - He bought everything for the store here. He firmly believed that to build a community you bought everything you could there. This attitude was typical of pioneers." Archie bought lumber from the local sawmill, bricks from the kiln on the edge of town, and stone from a quarry on a nearby hill. Only nails, glass and steel beams were purchased from Denver.

"It was one of the biggest general stores in the county. It had everything from threshing machines to toothpicks, they used to say."

The upper floor of the building was first used to hold dances, then business offices, then rented rooms.

From 1914 to 1918 Dorothy's father served as mayor of Steamboat as well as taking care of his store. Dorothy says public office was just something a responsible member of the community would take on along with his regular activities. During his last term, Archie defended the controversial dancing camp in Strawberry Park near town - Perry-Mansfield, when it was called indecent because the girls did not wear dresses. Mr. Wither logically stated that the enrollment helped the town's economy.

"People's sense of loyalty in a small community isn't anymore - it's different from one who's been raised with it - I can see it more." Speaking of her father, Dorothy says he had a "belief in the community" - without this belief Steamboat would never have grown or prospered as it did.



Dorothy still lives in Steamboat and runs a clothing store, The Dorothy Shop, on the space where her father's store stood.