

JOSEPHINE WHITMER:

"IT WAS A VERY HAPPY TIME."

BY BETHANY CRAIGHEAD



MEMORIES

"If I could live my life over, I think I would. It was a very happy time, a congenial time. I wouldn't like right now to do some of the things we had to do then, and I'd hate to give up some of the easy things that we've got now. But I think I'd go back, I'd like to live it all over again. To come right down to it, wouldn't you like to turn the pages back for a while and try it? You know, my kids laugh at me 'cause once in a while I get lonely for the old days. I says I even get lonesome for the little (out) house back outside."

On a brisk March day, Josephine Norman Whitmer turned back the pages of her lifetime for me. Seeing the past through her eyes made me feel as if I were living it with her. In her face I could read all of the memories of her experiences, all the joys and tragedies that gave her the beauty of her character and the enthusiasm of her personality.

"My father was a butcher by trade, and at one time, won first prize at the Chicago World's Fair for butchering a beef the fastest. But in 1889, he had the misfortune of losing one arm just below the elbow in a railroad accident. He couldn't do butchering anymore, so he thought he'd try his hand at farming. He heard that Routt County was a good place to start, so he bought a team, a covered wagon, and one extra saddle horse. He loaded us all in, seven of us kids, two dogs (Smoke and Fido), and headed out from Colorado Springs for Routt. This was in 1895, and I was just six years old."

Her mother passed away in Colorado Springs when Josephine was three, so she was not with them at the time of the trip. "The trip took three weeks, and what a time we had! There wasn't much of a road, and some of the hills were so steep that the team couldn't make it up with our heavy load. It was times like this when we brought the saddle horse into service. My father would tie a heavy rope to the wagon tongue and then wrap it around the saddle horn. My brother Sam would ride the horse, and with much sweating and pulling, we'd make it to the top. Then there was the problem of going down the other side. Father was afraid that going down the team would not be able to hold the wagon back. He'd make all of us get out, except Edith who was only three, then he'd tie a rope to the back of the wagon and have us all hold on. We'd sit there a draggin' so as not to let the wagon get going too fast.

"At night we would camp and that was when we'd really enjoy ourselves. We had always lived in a town, and the freedom was so delightful!

"We landed in Trull the first part of August '95, it was 'bout half way between Steamboat and Hayden. My father and two brothers, Earny and Sam, hired out to a Mr. Dennis putting up his hay. We stayed there that summer and the next year in a cabin. It had a dirt floor and a sod roof that leaked bad when it rained.

"Then we heard of a man up Elk River that had a place for sale, and we bought that. We stay-

ed there for about a year and then my father bought a relinquishment from a man named Ed O'Neil, a veteran of the Civil War, quite crippled and couldn't keep. That was our home for many years until we moved up to Clark, married there. My father and I kept the Clark Post Office for three years. That building is still standing there on the Thornton Brown place. A man by the name of Rufus Clark was the one that started the Post Office and he's buried there in the Clark cemetery, he and his wife."

Josephine Whitmer has led a very a very colorful life. As a result, she is full of stories about her experiences. Unforgettable experiences that will touch the heart. While talking to me, she told some stories that let some of her character shine out.

"I remember a funny thing. You know, my father only had one arm. One time, my brother Sam hired out to work for a man. Well, it was in the winter turning to spring when he was done and ready to come home. He come to the other side of the river and called to my dad to come and get him with the horse. Course we only had one saddle horse and the team. Well, my father put the saddle on this one horse, and brought one across bareback. The water in the river was so deep that the horses had to swim across. My father got over to Sam, and since he was only sixteen, kind of a kid, my father put him on the horse with the saddle and set him loose. He got on the bareback horse and took the bedroll, and there he only had one arm. About midstream, a floating log hit the horse's legs and rolled him over. Sam came through all right, but no father. Finally, we saw his horse climb the bank

downstream, but still no sign of father. We thought he had drowned when at last we heard him call, he'd swam to a pile of drift wood. What was remarkable about it was he only had that one arm and still had the bedroll!"

"My sister and I were always trying something different, so one time we decided to catch a whole bunch of frogs. She wouldn't catch them, of course, so I had to wade into the swamp and get 'em while she held the bucket. After we'd caught them and had 'em in the bucket, we took them to the house and set 'em in a tin wash boiler with a rock and some leaves and things. There wasn't much place inside the house for frogs, so we made the mistake of settin' them outside my father's bedroom window. In the morning they made so much noise a croakin' that my father made us get up out a bed and turn 'em all loose! We didn't like that very good."

Josephine has always had a special spot in her heart for animals. Because there were not as many people around then, the animals became her friends. Some of her feeling I think is conveyed in the next few stories.

"We had a dog that was kind of mean, he didn't like people to come, but we sure liked him. When we got ready to get the cows in at night, we'd just go let down the pasture bars and he'd go out and bring 'em in. Sometimes, he'd be gone two or three hours, but he'd come back with all the cows and not a stray in the bunch. I guess he just knew those cows he'd done it so much. One morning we found him dead out in front of the house. It was winter and the snow was banked on either side. I think the horses came by, and he was in between there and got kicked in the head.



This is the house that Josephine and her father lived in while they were running the Clark Post Office.



Josephine is living in this house today. It is in the town of Steamboat.

I don't think that anyone would kill him, though sometimes they'd claim they'd like to.

"My oldest grandson, who'd never seen a mountain lion before, just heard talk, was on his way to school early one morning when he came back saying he'd just seen the biggest yellow cat right there in the road. It must have been a lion, but we didn't know. He said, 'I just said scat and it run across the road!' Well, his dad went down there and it was a lion track, and there my grandson thought it was a cat!

"While father was not a veterinarian, he had good knowledge of animal sickness. He was often called on to treat animals that were sick as there were no veterinarians around then. One time I remember a neighbor wanted father to come and look at his sick cow. Father went over and climbed over the fence to where the cow was, and she came out and took after him. He climbed back over the fence in a hurry. The neighbor laughed and said that he milked her and she was plenty gentle. Then the neighbor climbed over the fence and got in the corral, held out his hand and said, 'Come on, Reddy.' Father said she sure came and the man took to the fence. Anyway, the cow was left to herself and she got well.

"When we were living up Elk River, my brother Earny found a little fawn that had lost its mother. We raised it by hand and called it Midget. She would follow us to school and wait for us outside the door until we were ready to come home. She was just like a dog, and we sure liked her. It was sad when she was two years old, she died from eating too many oats when we were threshing."

Unlike many people these days, Mrs. Whitmer loved school. She would have to walk the six miles a day that she did just to get there and back. Having to walk that distance in the winter could get to be a little rough, especially with the winters here in Routt County, so school was only held in the summer. She remembers not having a mother to make their lunches in the morning, but she says they made it all right. "Maybe we didn't turn out as well as some of them, but we made it just the same." While she was in school, her favorite subject was spelling. "I remember once we had a spelling bee at school. I was just in the fourth grade and I spelled down an eighth grade pupil, but it was funny how I did it. He and I were the last ones on the floor, his name was Glenn. Well, his was the next word and they gave him apple to spell. He spelled apple A-double P, P-L-E. I spelled it A-P-P-L-E. He spelled it with three P's and I beat him! He didn't like that a bit."

When there wasn't school, Josephine said she wouldn't do much but catch frogs, ride horses, and help her father. He'd go out and get deer with only one arm. "He couldn't load it on the horse himself very easy, so I'd help him. He'd tie a rope around the deer's neck then around the saddle horn. I'd pull one side, and he'd sort of move it up. To get a deer, we didn't have to go far 'cause there was deer all around then."

Deer, elk and things like grouse were mainly what her family lived on. They had a few cows and chickens that supplied them with milk, butter, and eggs, but never much fruit. What little fruit they did have was wild, like strawberries, raspberries and choke cherries. "We never had much candy either except

for when father went to town and bought a can of Arbuckle's coffee. There would be a stick of candy in there, and you know, that's where we learned to drink coffee. We'd drink it as fast as we could so we could get that stick of candy out of there. About a few weeks before Christmas, though, the candy stopped coming in that coffee. We felt bad, but we found it in our stockings Christmas morning."

Something that Mrs. Whitmer did as a child which she doesn't regret is riding. She used to love to ride horseback, while her sister Sophie didn't. "No, my sister didn't like riding at all, she liked to go to par-

ties. Well, let her go to her parties and I'd get on a horse. I'd ride up into the hills and recite poetry. And now, I can still recite my poetry so I think I've gained right there. My sister can't go to parties anymore, but I can. I go to church parties and meetings and recite my poetry for them. I had kind of a habit ever since the time when I was a little girl. If I once see it in print and read it once, I'll remember it, never forget it. And consequently, I know a number of them. I had lots of fun doing that."

Without a mother, the art of sewing was not practiced much



Josephine is pictured here with her family. She is in the middle row, the farthest to the left. Her sister Sophie is standing in the bottom row, farthest to the right.

in Josephine's family. Instead her brother would save all the hides and horns of the deer he killed. About once a year a peddler would come around in a big covered wagon loaded with yard goods such as shoes, etc. Her brother would trade what ever he had collected for the goods, and in this way they would not have to sew.

During the winter, trips to Steamboat were rare. Instead, they would make a few trips in the summer to stock up. They would hitch up the team and start out for what Josephine recalls as being a good days trip. "The road we had to travel on went between two farms where they irrigated. The water would run across it and it would get so muddy that we'd get stuck. We'd have to get people to pull us out, and just have an awful hard time. So because it was so boggy, we didn't go anymore than we had to."

Another thing that Josephine enjoyed doing was playing the violin and organ. "We had a church which was built on what is now the Elk River Grazing Association. A man

known as the cowboy preacher got it started, and he donated the bell. I used to play the violin or organ for the meetings."

During the time that Mrs. Whitmer lived in Clark, gold was still being mined at Hahn's Peak. She recalls that it was first found in 1862, by Joseph Hahns. The peak was evidentially named after Mr. Hahns by two of his friends. They climbed to the top of the peak and took up with them an empty baking powder can with a screw lid. Inside it they wrote a note that said, "This is named Hahn's Peak by his friend Sam Doyle, August 27, 1865." Josephine doesn't remember much gold being taken from the mine, however a lot was taken from the dredges. Her brother Sam once staked a claim and later sold it for \$400.00, which then was a fairly good price.

Whenever she gets lonely for the old days, Josephine has a philosophy which she tries to follow. "I don't believe that it's best to go back. We should go ahead, you're not supposed to live in the past. The past is gone and tomorrow isn't here. A person should live in the pre-



This is a view of Hahn's Peak as it is today.

sent, that's what you are supposed to do. But so much of the time we're looking for tomorrow or remembering the past."

Josephine and her family certainly lived a full but difficult life--a life which many of today's generation could not handle. If ever we feel discouraged and that our life is hard, I think that we should all reflect on the lives of our area's pioneers. It seems that no matter how hard things got, they always felt that there was a brighter side. "We thought that the times were hard then, but I don't think they were as hard as we thought they were, not any harder than they are now. You just get used to the times."



Mrs. Whitmer



This house is the one that she most recently lived in before moving to Steamboat. It is in Clark, and her daughter in-law is living there now. In the background you can see the hills that Josephine used to love to ride in.