Clint Heiner (CH): This is Clint Heiner for the Cache la Poudre Oral History Project, and today we are interviewing Mary Kerbel, and let’s just start.

Mary Kerbel (MK): Ok.

CH: When and where were you born?

MK: I was born in Fort Collins, June 17, 1928, on West Vine Drive.

CH: How long have you been connected in one way or another with the Cache la Poudre River?

MK: All my life.

CH: What childhood memories do you have of growing up along the river?

MK: From the time I can remember we went on picnics, we went up to the waterworks, we traveled along the river, picnicking, and wading, and fishing. Basically, that’s what we did. When I got to be a teenager I worked up the Poudre at Glen Echo. And for two summers worked up at Glen Echo, and used to help fishermen find places to fish down where the good fishing holes were. And I always had the privilege of dressing the fish, you know.

CH: What’s it? I guess that’s it.

MK: That’s it; I guess that’s it.

CH: What fascinated you about the river as a youth?

MK: Oh, the sound, and the cleanness of it, and the rushing of the water. It was so relaxing and pretty all the time.

CH: Yeah, it’s beautiful, especially up the canyon.

MK: It is, oh yeah. Just a little bit before, just a little further than Glen Echo there is a big bend that I used to walk every night after work, and sing, sing to the top of my voice because it was so beautiful.

CH: Um, what are your memories, or do you have any memories of different cultural groups that lived along the Poudre?

MK: On the actual Poudre itself, you mean like the Mexican people, and the German people that farmed?

CH: Yeah.

MK: I married a German man, but most of the farmers were German, and then, of course, the Mexican people came in and helped with the crops. And I had good feelings about all the people. I didn’t have any animosity against anyone. Everyone seemed like everyone got along fine.

CH: If you left the river area, where did you go and why?

MK: I never left. We always stayed here; I always stayed here, never left here.

CH: If you were involved in agriculture, how did farming and ranching change for yourself and your family over the years?

MK: I think when they decided to dam up Horsetooth; make Horsetooth for the farmers….

CH: For the Big Thompson Project?

MK: Uh-huh. That was Big Thompson wasn’t it?

CH: Yeah.

MK: We depended upon it when we had the droughts; it was terrible. At the time when the drought was the worst, in the ‘50s and ‘70s was it?
CH: Yeah, and I’ll ask you about that.
MK: Ok, all right.
CH: What sort of agriculture was your family involved with?
MK: I was a city girl and I married a farm boy whose family raised sugar beets, and barley for Coors, we fed cattle, we had a big feed lot, sunflowers, beans, and wheat. And, everything was irrigated except for the wheat.
CH: How did other uses of the river affect your life, like industries, cities, and recreation?
MK: How did it affect my life, other industries?
CH: How did other uses of the river besides agriculture, like industry and the growing cities, did that affect your family’s life on the Poudre?
MK: I don’t believe so. We still go up to the Poudre, and we still enjoy it. Of course, there is more people, there is more traffic, which makes a difference. It is not quite as quiet as it used to be.
CH: How has the sale of agricultural water by Poudre farmers affected farming and ranching?
MK: Here, it has been devastated as far as I’m concerned because there isn’t water left, most of the farmers have sold their water, us included, we sold the farm, and, a big part of it belongs to the university now, CSU. But, it’s not like it was, that’s for sure. Of course, the agriculture isn’t here anymore. If there is any growing of anything it’s out on the big plots, out where they irrigate with big sprinklers and irrigation wells and things like that. But, it isn’t like it was, it’s just gone.
CH: And, in that way, I think it’s just a sad thing.
MK: It is. It really is!
CH: Agriculture is the main reason why people started settling in this area to begin with.
MK: Absolutely.
CH: Like the French Canadians coming down, and the German-Russian workers.
MK: Absolutely.
CH: That’s why they settled in this area and the Poudre was a big part of it.
MK: Uh-huh.
CH: Uh, how did your life on the river change as a result of drought?
MK: We became more careful with our water sources. Most farmers aren’t wasteful people, but I think they became more cautious and watched more carefully which way the water went and where it was supposed to go. I think that is the main thing, more cautious.
CH: How did the return of the wet cycles change life again?
MK: Well, then again you became a little more lax [Laughs].
CH: [Laughs].
MK: The grasses got green and you didn’t have to worry about the irrigation. Of course, this is an irrigation area. You know, you don’t have a crop unless you irrigate it. Whether there is a drought or not a drought, you need that water to make your crops grow. It’s not like in Kansas or Nebraska where they depend on the rain fall, you know, here you irrigate to get your crop; either with a sprinkler system, or tubes, or dams, cement ditches, or whatever.
CH: Do you have any memories of the droughts of the ‘30s?
MK: No, I was just little, I didn’t know then, at all.
CH: What about the 1950s?
MK: My grandmother used to talk about the drought in the thirties, how they used to have to wet rags and put them in front of the windows to keep the dust from coming in; especially if they had little folks, they had to keep that dust out; it must have been horrible compared to what we….We
think we have it bad now, but at least we have our air-tight houses and things like that, we don’t have that.….  
CH: What about the droughts of the 1970s?  
MK: I can remember that very well, I remember that very well. But, up in this area we were lucky because we did have the North Poudre water, which was good, more so than it was South, even South of Fort Collins; it’s better here. As long as we could handle the irrigation, we had a crop.  
CH: They usually have me ask that just because these droughts, as you probably know, devastated a lot of the agriculture.  
MK: Oh yeah, definitely.  
CH: Because of the droughts a lot of the farmers had to either leave, or they had to sell their farms.  
MK: That’s right, that’s right.  
CH: Another thing that I had to do some research on is water law, and that is just….  
MK: That is really complex; it really is….It is so complex.  
CH: Coloradoans take their water really seriously, and I think they should.  
MK: Well, they should, absolutely. I can remember when we sunk a well to irrigate for supplement water, that was kind of a good feeling to have that back up when there wasn’t enough water out of the ditch. We have always been cautious about our water though. You know now, even in our own little yard, we own only four acres here now; and our well has dried up because there is no water to feed the underground springs, so our well is dry. So, I’m not sure we will even have a yard next year because of that, and we have always had a big green, lush yard. And, that is minor compared to putting food on the table, but that’s what happens….You dry everything up and there’s nothing left. And, so many of the farmers have sold their water South, to Denver and places like that, so, there’s not water here anymore.  
CH: That’s what I was just going to mention, that what I was finding is that a lot of Fort Collins water is….They sold their rights to different cities, and even, as a whole, the state has sold a lot of rights to other states.  
MK: I know, I know.  
CH: Wyoming and Nebraska have sued Colorado for water rights because it gets so….  
MK: I know, and it’s just the tip of the iceberg. The more people we have the more the laws will be enforced.  
CH: How has the river channel changed over the years?  
MK: I don’t think the channel itself has changed, the river itself, I don’t believe it has changed. I think it is still just like it was. We still get in the car and drive up where we were. There is more houses, there is more people living along there, but the channel itself hasn’t changed.  
CH: How have various structures on the river, like roads, bridges, diversion structures, sewage treatment plants, how have they affected the ecology on the river; affected things like plants and animals?  
MK: You know, that I’m not sure. I don’t know what big structures we have up the Poudre. We have the dams up above, which we have had, but I don’t know what structures. I can’t think of any thing like that.  
CH: Are there animals, or anything else that you remember growing up along the river that you don’t see anymore?  
MK: No. I think I’d probably run for my life if I saw a bear [Laughs].  
CH: [Laughs].
MK: We had porcupines and skunks, and beavers. Of course, there is a lot of deer, and we have a waste disease right now with our deer….That’s kind of scary. It is a disease that the animals have picked up. They found, I think in the last week, they were talking about some elk that they had found dead somewhere up here, and they were wondering what caused their death, they were wondering if that was maybe this waste disease that had hit….But, it’s really, really bad.

CH: Do they thing it’s because they were drinking out of the river or….?

MK: Oh no, no. I don’t think that, I think that it’s something they just got, I don’t know. You would have to do research on that, I don’t know where. But, I do know that it was really bad up at Red Feather and places like that.

CH: I remember reading just recently in the paper how they dammed off a section of the Poudre so they could test for pollutants.

MK: Oh really?

CH: Did you read about that?

MK: Yeah I did. Also, there was something that was up there that spilled.

CH: Yeah.

MK: What was it?

CH: Well, they think it was an oil like substance.

MK: That’s right.

CH: From I can’t remember what it was from.

MK: I can’t either, but I remember reading about it and I thought well, what in the world. You know, you can’t imagine what could be up there.

CH: I can’t remember if it was from a mill or….?

MK: What mill?

CH: Well, there is the Ranch Way Feeds.

MK: Oh, that’s right down here though.

CH: Yeah.

MK: Right down here in Fort Collins, yeah.

CH: But, that’s not what it was.

MK: It was up higher.

CH: Yeah. Hopefully they can detect whatever it is and get it taken care of.

MK: Oh yeah.

CH: How has the emergence of the environmental movement affected usages of the river for yourself and others?

MK: You mean such as the waste and things like that?

CH: Yeah.

MK: See, as far as I’m concerned, I think everyone should be careful and watch what they are doing and have a place for things, but I’m not sure what it would be that would affect me. Because see, I don’t live up there. I can remember when we used to live up at Glen Echo though; I remember we were so careful. We used to have someone who would come and remove the outhouses and things, someone would come and take care of that. They had to be really careful where they would put those outhouses along the river. I can remember that, but what it is now I do not know.

CH: Ok. They generally like me to ask that because of all the waste that people throw in the river.

MK: I just can’t imagine that. I just can’t imagine it!

CH: I know!
MK: Just like I said, when I was young and would walk along that river it was so clean. There was no trash, no nothing. It was so pretty. And, I don’t know why people do that, even out here. I don’t understand why they can’t keep their container in their car until they get where they are going, I don’t understand.

CH: Between here and Fort Collins, between Fort Collins and Greeley it’s kind of becoming a problem.

MK: Oh, it’s a problem up here too. It’s terrible. If I were younger I would go out every week and clean the bar pit, but I can’t do that anymore.

CH: Yeah.

MK: We never used to have anything, nothing out there.

CH: That’s good.

MK: Of course, now they are building, and when you build you got all this trash coming across the road; the builders and things like that, and, the people, the people are trashy too.

CH: The environmental movement has made some progress, but there is still a lot to be done as far as keeping the trash out of the Poudre.

MK: Oh yeah.

CH: What are your thoughts about future changes on the river, first of all, the sale of water to other cities?

MK: I don’t think so. I don’t think they should, I really don’t. Maybe I’m selfish I guess.

CH: And that’s….Most people feel that way.

MK: Yeah. Leave it, leave it, leave it like it is.

CH: What about prolonged drought?

MK: This is scary, and it seems to me with the more people we have, the more bodies we have that need this water, I would think maybe the droughts would be even more severe, maybe I’m wrong. But, if we are using more of everything, there is going to be less of everything. I sometimes think we should curb the amount of people that come into the area, but how do you do that?

CH: I know. It’s scary, because, where are we going to get the water?

MK: That’s right. You know, they are going to build houses across the road. They are building houses North of us.

CH: Oh really?

MK: They can’t here, because we signed a document that said this would always be a farm. It is forever going to be a farm here. But, these people have got the lawns that they want, they have got their toilets they want to flush, their showers, their cars that they want to wash, the clothes they need to wash, the baths, the showers, everything…there is less, they want more.

CH: That is just a huge problem.

MK: Yeah. When we were first married we always had a cistern, in fact, we still have one out here, we don’t use it anymore, but we had a cistern. And, once a week Earl (her husband) would go to town with the tank, get water, bring it home, and we would get by a week on one tank of water in our house. And, we were raising little girls, and we would bathe. Of course, in those days we would put the little girls in the tub all at once. But, we watched our water so we never used more than one tank of water a week. We never let the faucet run, never let the faucet run, ever! You turn the water on for what you want, and when you are done, you turn it off. And now faucets run all the time, you know. Think of yourself, even when you brush your teeth.

CH: [Laughs]. I know. I’m guilty of it too.

MK: We are just wasteful people.
A lot of people don’t have any appreciation of not only where their water is coming from, but also where their food comes from.

That’s right. That’s true. Well, it gets into the grocery store, you know, that’s where it comes from [Laughs].

I try to gain a better appreciation for it.

Doing what you are doing now, you are going to be thinking more, possibly. You’ll think more when you turn the faucet on to shut the water off when you are brushing, and you don’t have to have it going while you are brushing, you know, and just things like that.

What are your thoughts about the decline of the farming community and the rise of the suburban communities?

Well, you know what I said, it just makes me sick. I can get by with the highway noise better than I can with the people noise. We have always been so free out here. We can do what we want, and I guess I’m selfish there, I just miss….

[Pause].

Are there any additional questions that you might want to address that I have not covered?

I think you have done really well. I think the main thing is conservation. I think that is the biggest word you should have on this thing, from the Poudre to the…everything, just conservation. And, you know, even now, even in Denver when you listen to the news they say well, you know, you don’t have to worry now because we got plenty of water in this reservoir.

That doesn’t make sense, if you are short of water, when there is a drought you should protect what you have, don’t you think?

Yes. And if we don’t start making strives towards doing something about conserving then we are going to have to make more projects to get the water from the western slope to where most of the population is on the Front Range….And, that causes other problems.

Oh, there are so many problems.

Because then the people on the western side of the divide get angry, and there are lawsuits.

Uh-huh. Someone once said one time, many years ago, that there would be more wars, there would be more fights over water than anything in the world. And then sometimes I think, we have got all these oceans, why can’t we pipe all that water from the ocean out here and desalt it, or take the salt out of it or something. You know, do something. They pipe oil all over. Why can’t they clean water and pipe water….I get to thinking about things like that sometimes because we are desperate here.

I don’t know. Do we ever use ocean water?

No, no! Not that I know of. I talk to my husband and he says it costs so much, well, I would think that would be….There is lots of water there, but they need to get the salt out before we could have it, you know? Surly, they have got some desalter or something. They can go to the moon!

[Laughs].

You would think they could take the salt out of the water.

With all of the technology….Because, like you said, they spend billions doing the same thing with oil, trucking and piping it all over the world.

Right, right!

Would you have any photographs or historical materials that involved your life on the river?

I may have, but not right here today. I’d have to go dig them out, yeah.
CH: Just in the last closing question: what ideas or events do you think should be interpreted when we set up this Poudre Heritage Corridor?

MK: What ideas and events?

CH: Yeah, is there anything that you feel should be included in the interpretation?

MK: I think the history of the Poudre itself should be number one, so that people will become aware of what we have here. I think people will bring ideas. You need the people to bring the ideas. Discussion groups and things would probably reap a lot.

CH: Ok. Well, that’s all we have.

MK: Ok.

CH: Thank you so much for allowing us to do this.

MK: Well, I didn’t have a lot. [Police siren interrupts]. He [husband Earl] has so much more knowledge about the actual irrigation and all that sort of thing because he grew up on a farm.

CH: Who is this?

MK: My husband.

CH: Oh, ok.

MK: And he is a good farmer. His dad was here from Germany, he was an immigrant. And, they worked hard; they were a hard working people. But, he would know so much more than I can interpret.

CH: Would it be ok if I maybe gave his name to my professor.

MK: Oh yeah. You would be happy with what you would hear from my husband.

CH: Ok, yeah!

MK: Because I know I said to myself, I wonder how come they called me, he's got more knowledge about this than I do [Laughs].

CH: His name is Earl?

MK: Right, uh-huh.

CH: Kerbel?

MK: Uh-huh.

CH: Ok, I’ll mention his name and maybe we can set up another interview.

MK: Because it might be kind of fun. You know, I was telling him this morning, I said well, he’s going to ask about people, and I said there was the Germans and Mexicans, and he says well there was also the Swedes, there was a lot of Swedish people around, you know, around here too. There was the Johnson’s and all the others that made this country what it is.

CH: Yeah, because they were doing beet farming all the way out past Greeley.

MK: Right, right.

CH: The German-Russian immigrants. They make up such a huge part of this culture.

MK: Oh yeah, right, they did. I remember when I was a little girl my mother used to….We lived in town, we moved to the East part of Fort Collins, and we had a house on the corner. And somebody said, oh you don’t want to move out there where all those German-Russians are. And, I remember my mother said, you know, they are the best people. They keep their things clean. They do their job, and they keep their nose out of other people’s business. And, I can remember that so well, and then I ended up marrying one, so….

CH: They worked so unbelievably hard.

MK: Oh yeah, they did, they did! Well, you know, this is the thing; we have talked about it, like Earl said when he used to go to school, all he could think of is going home and harnessing the horses so he could work. Go home from school to harness the horses. And of course, there were
times that he couldn’t even go to school, he had to stay home and work beets. They had to be out
of school different times of the year for that. They worked hard.

**CH:** I read a book called, *The Second Hoeing*, and it was just amazing.

**MK:** Oh yeah, it’s true.

**CH:** I think I remember one woman would bring her child to the fields.

**MK:** Oh yeah, well, Earl’s mother did.

**CH:** And she would put her baby at the end of each row.

**MK:** Uh-huh.

**CH:** And, she would dig her plots….

**MK:** And then go back….

**CH:** And then take her baby and put it on the next row.

**MK:** Yeah, yeah. Well see, with Earl’s older sister, his mother had her in the field and she
sunburned her one time really bad. She didn’t have her covered right. And they worked very
hard.

**CH:** Ok, well thank you so much!

**MK:** Well, thank you for coming by.

End of Interview