HISTORY OF WYOMING

Oral History

Janie Allen
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ORAL INTERVIEW

Mrs. Letitia Roberts Meacham,
Longtime resident of Rock Springs, Wyoming

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By Janie Allen
Mrs. Lettie Meacham has been a resident of Rock Springs, Wyoming for most of her life. She was born in Trimdon Grange, County Durham, England on April 14, 1906, to Isaac Roberts and Janet Howie Roberts. Isaac Roberts, a coal miner, was of Welch descent, while Janet Roberts was Scotch-English.

While in England, they had eight children: Hugh, Percy, James, Isaac, Jane, Willie, Margaret and Letitia. Born in the United States were Mary Elizabeth, Sara, Arthur, Gilbert and Thomas. Four of their thirteen children died in infancy. Mary Elizabeth and Sara died on the same day of whooping cough.

In September of 1906, the Roberts family came to Rock Springs, Wyoming, from England. Lettie was only four months old. They arrived at night and when day break came, Mrs. Roberts went to the window, turned to her husband and said, "My God, Ike, where did you bring me to?" From this negative impression of Rock Springs grew a family with deep roots here. Of the nine surviving children, only one (Percy) would eventually reside elsewhere. The others remained here as did their children and many of their grandchildren. Thus a true heritage was formed for the Roberts family in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

Originally the family lived in what was called number four, an area that was mostly all foreign residents that did not speak English. Mrs. Roberts, because she had never heard anyone speak in another language before, was frightened. She was so unhappy in her new surroundings that one day while "Pa" was at work she was offered a place in what is called "the barracks" and moved that very day! When "Pa" came up out of the mine the kids all met him and said "Pa, we don't live here anymore, we live downtown." Pa was thrilled!

The barracks were originally constructed for the Army troops brought in to control the "Chineese Massacre" of the late 1800's. When the Army troops were moved out, the Union Pacific Coal Company took them over as employee housing. They stood on Bridge Avenue until the 1960's. There were rows of employee houses and larger houses for supervisors. It became a "mini community" of it's own. The Robert's house was four rooms with two coal stoves. Lettie remembers, "We were never cold, we might have been hungry when Pa didn't have good work, but we were never cold."
Pa Roberts was a "timber man" in the mines. His job was to prop timber to hold caves in the mines so men could work. He was hurt once in an explosion but never seriously. His job was one which required long hours when there was work and had time spans when there was little to do.

Lettie remembers the ambulance passing the barracks on the way to and from the mine. All of the women would run to the street and watch until the ambulance went by and came back to see who had been hurt.

When a man was killed in the mine, the community marching band would come out (especially for "Slav" funerals) and play funeral songs all the way to the Mountain View cemetery at the top of A Street. As they came back from the cemetery they would play dance songs.

In the early days of Rock Springs, coal mines were the main economic source and therefore were very important to the people. Each mine was distinguished by a number and the housing area around that mine then assumed the mine's number. Lettie recalls that it was very common to say, "I live at number six or number one," rather than giving an address. Everyone would automatically know exactly where you lived.

Every day at 6 am, 11:30 am, 12 pm, 4 pm, and 7 pm mine whistles blew to mark the hour. The whistle at seven had a pre-determined code they would blow to indicate which mines would work the next day. All the town would stop at seven to count the mine whistle.

Eight-Hour Day (in April) was a major celebration in early Rock Springs. It was a celebration of the date the unions were able to successfully establish an eight hour working day for miners. Any time beyond that was paid double time. A parade was held for Eight Hour Day and a festival was held. Lettie remembers her father, a strong union member, would go to the union meetings and the family would all wait because they were never sure if would come home "mad or glad." Another accomplishment of the union was to keep children out of the mines entirely.

The Union Pacific Railroad built a huge building for the employees to hold meetings and celebrations. The Old Timers Building, as it was called (now part of Rock Springs Civic Center), was the center for community activities. Once a year "Old Timers Day" was held in honor of retired miners. A huge banquet was served, a parade held, public games were played all day. The Old Timers Building housed the banquet. Flags from every nationality represented were hung, fifty seven in all. Thus came Rock
Springs' nickname "The Melting Pot of the Nation." It was heralded by the media of the time as having more different nationalities than any city or town in America.

Labor Day was celebrated by all the town and sponsored by the Union Pacific Railroad. Free movies, meals, rodeos were just some of the activities. Rodeos were a major event; the townspeople were the observers, however, while the rodeo cowboys and stock were brought in on the train. Lettie recalls that people here have worn cowboy clothes all along but "not like the drug store cowboys now."

Moose Lodge was an active force in the city. They did a lot of charity work such as orphan homes and homes for families that have lost the head of the household. Every summer the Moose Lodge held a picnic in Green River for all of their members. They would ride the train to Green River and home again. "That was the only way we ever saw Green River," Lettie recalls.

There were only a few automobiles in Rock Springs when Lettie was growing up. They did get a car when she was about twelve years old. She recalls that she learned to drive then so she could take her father to work and drive the family car home. She could fix flat tires and most other problems with the car because she had seven brothers and always helped them work on the car.

Halloween was a time that was fun for the children of Rock Springs. Outdoor bathrooms were tipped over and general mischief was common. One day Lettie's brother was "caught" in one. Windows were soaped, people were scared, but it was all in fun. They didn't have trick or treats, they just had tricks.

Each summer the Honey Dew Wagon would come to clean all the out houses. The townspeople would shut all the windows and doors and stay indoors all day. To this day, Lettie reports, she can't eat a honeydew melon because she remembers the Honey Dew Wagon.

Black people would associate with white people but "they had their own place." On Eight Hour Day the blacks had a dance in one place while the whites had a dance in another. Nationalities were not discriminated against in Rock Springs. Dego (Italian), Bohunk (Hungarian), Limsey (English) were terms used openly with no maliciousness.
As a child Lettie recalls that the other children made fun of her because she was a foreigner (not born in America). She recalls with delight what her father told her to tell the kids when they made fun of her. "Tell them when you came here you had clothes on - when they came they were naked."

As a child, Lettie recalls playing "anti i over" at the barracks. One team would throw the ball over the barracks and when the other team caught the ball they would chase the first team all the way around the barracks. If they caught them, they won, if not, they lost.

During World War I every one here was patriotic and did as much as possible. Lettie had two brothers in the war, one in the 91st division and one with a supply train. They met by coincidence in France. The younger brother wanted to run away, but the older brother told him, "You don't do that, Percy, you stick it out." The younger brother was missing for four months and never would talk much about his experience when he came home.

Omitted inadvertently from the tape was the fact that Lettie's father was the acting U. S. Marshall in the mines during the war and was even shot at once by a radical. Her mother spent hours knitting scarves and socks for the dough boys (soldiers) during World War I. Lettie was proud of this.

Armistice Day was an occasion of joy in Rock Springs. "Everybody was kissing everybody and it lasted for four days."

Right after WWI, Lettie recalls her brother-in-law, John Buxton, was given a job with the Game and Fish Department and was shot and killed while on duty. He went to arrest a young man and was shot in the stomach. His wife (who was pregnant) and young daughter were with him at the time. Passers-by took them to the hospital and identified one of the young men who were with the murderer. He was arrested after he shot at the sheriff who arrested him. He was tried in Green River and given twenty years in prison. In four months he was out on a work release and ran away "to the old country" - Europe.

Lettie was married to Reuben Meacham and they have two children, Jane Shirley and William Henry.
The depression wasn't as bad here as it was other places because everyone helped each other out according to Lettie. The barracks were on the highway and the Roberts family would "see the darnedest sights you ever saw...people pushing buggies, carrying kids...going out to California or somewhere else." In Rock Springs there was a doughline (breadline) to feed the hungry folks, but "most people cared about one another." This seems to be characteristic of Rock Springs.

World War II brought worry to the citizens of Rock Springs just as World War I had. People worried about their young men, the mines went "full blast" and patriotism ran high.

Isaac Roberts, in very poor health, retired from the mines with a retirement of $40.00 a month. This was prior to black lung disabilities and other benefits.

About 1950 most of the coal mines shut down, miners were laid off and everyone thought Rock Springs would be a ghost town.

In the 60's the trona mines began to open up and a little later came Jim Bridger Power Plant. Rock Springs was in for another boom period. Rock Springs natives were of mixed opinions about the boom and influx of outsiders.

Lettie and her husband managed a motel at this time. One of the problems the boom had for them was the hookers and pimps that followed the single labor force into town. "It was rough" Lettie recalls. "They'd come in on Thursday, stay Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and then take planes out to San Francisco, Salt Lake and Chicago." When she found out who these pimps and hookers were, she knew that she didn't want them staying there but wasn't sure how to get rid of them. In a discussion with an F.B.I. man, she found that she only needed to say all her rooms were reserved. She was relieved to know that she didn't need to rent to them.

In general, Lettie felt that the boom wasn't all that bad. As motel manager, she rented to a lot of nice people and families who came to look for a place to live. "They were good hard-working people, but you have a lot of riff-raff, too."
Fifty years from now Lettie predicts Rock Springs will be a nicer town. She feels people can grow nice gardens and trees if they try harder. Her yard is lovely and green because her husband works hard at it.

Regarding the future in Rock Springs, Lettie said, "Years ago everybody said it is going to be a ghost town when they laid off the miners and I said it will never be a ghost town! My father said Green River and Rock Springs will meet one of these days - it'll be one town. He said we're rich in minerals in this state -- and that was many years ago."

The wisdom and strength of the past has created understanding and roots in this region for Mrs. Meacham and her family. This type of roots and these types of families have come to create something in Rock Springs that cannot be seen or understood by a person's first viewing of the city. Upon first seeing Rock Springs, Janet Roberts said "Oh my God, Ike, where have you brought me." This is the impression of any newcomer to this area. But the Roberts family was made of stout-hearted, strong-willed people who made a home in a city where "everyone cared about one another" enough to endure and overcome many hardships. This is the stuff that the Rock Springs this writer knows and loves is made of.
6. Names of brothers and sisters (and to whom married):

Born in England -
Hugh Roberts
Percy Roberts
James Roberts
Isaac Roberts
Jane Roberts
Ng Roberts
Margaret Roberts
Letitia Roberts

Married -
Faye Jacobsen
Buena McGee
Dorcas Dunn
John Buxton
Died in infancy
Died in infancy
Reuben Meacham

Born in Rock Springs, Wyoming -
Mary Elizabeth Roberts
Sara Roberts
Arthur Roberts
Gilbert Roberts
Thomas Roberts

Died in infancy
Died in infancy
Unmarried
Aili Mataainen

14. Children (names, dates of birth, grandchildren, etc):

Jane Shirley Meacham Beveridge, 09-02-25
William Henry Meacham, 04-04-27

Grandchildren:
Jane Marilyn Beveridge Allen, 02-02-50
Robert Scott Beveridge, 10-12-62
Amy Jo Beveridge, 02-01-65
Evan Arthur Meacham, 07-07-50
Teresa Meacham Radazinner, 09-25-51
Kimberly Meacham Primavera, 03-05-54

Great Grandchildren:
Andrea Jane Allen
Ryan Gene Allen
Eric Wallace Allen
Suprena Radazinner
Jessica Meacham
Shelly Meacham
Billie Rae Meacham
Jason Chandler Primavera
NAME: Letitia Roberts Meacham

PRESENT ADDRESS: 602 McKeehan Ave., Rock Springs, Wyoming

1. Present profession or occupation: Homemaker

2. Occupations followed in the past (give dates):
   Store clerk, hospital housekeeper, motel manager

3. Date of birth: April 14, 1906
   Place of birth: Trimdon Grange, County Durham, England

4. Date of moving to Wyoming: September, 1906

5. Full name of parents (give mother's maiden name)
   Isaac Roberts - Welch
   Janet Howie Roberts - Scotch - English

6. Names of brothers and sisters (and to whom married):
   See attached sheet

7. Schools attended (give dates):
   Washington Elementary

8. Places of residence in Wyoming (give dates):
   Rock Springs, Wyo. (1906-1950),
   (1967-1968), Rock Springs, Wyoming (1968-)

9. Military service (dates, awards, area served, rank, etc.):
   None

10. Political offices held (give dates):
    None

11. Political affiliation:
    Democratic

12. Religious affiliation:
    L. D. S.

13. Marriage (spouse's name, date and place of marriage):
    Reuben L. Meacham, May 19, 1934

14. Children (names, dates of birth, grandchildren, etc.):
    See attached sheet

15. List of clubs and societies of which you are a member:
    Royal Neighbors, L. D. S. Church, Senior Citizens Center