

The History of the Thunder Basin

Written as script by Betty Pellatz, Earl Reed and Jewell Reed

REPORTER: Goes out in the audience and gets Earl, Jewell, and Betty

REPORTER: I'm Nancy Geehan from the Bill Gazette and I would like to interview you before the Symposium gets started. I know that you are very busy but I won't take up much of your time. This is Earl & Jewell Reed and Betty Pellatz. Jewell's parents homesteaded on the Cheyenne River and Earl's folks homesteaded west of Bill. Betty is an import from Illinois but has lived on the Pellatz ranch for 50 years.

REPORTER: Earl, can you tell us a little bit about how the Thunder Basin was homesteaded?

EARL: There were several Homestead Acts, the first being the Pre-Emption Act of 1841, which entitled citizens to squat on land until it was put up for sale; then they had first chance to buy 160 acres for \$1.25 an acre. Several more acts followed; these Acts were written by eastern people with little knowledge of the arid western land. 160 acres would have made a profitable farm back east; here in Wyoming it would only support 2 cows, a calf, and a horse. So, unless there was public land available, that homesteader starved out. The Act of 1909 allowed 320 acres; it was followed by an Act in 1912, which lowered the residence requirement from 5 to 3 years and allowed absence from the property for 5 months of the year. In 1916 came the Grazing Act, which gave 640 acres,

but the Government kept all the mineral rights. These two were the most important to the people in our area. Land closer to town and flat land was filed first. Most filing in this area began about 1916, some filed and went to service, then proved up after WWI was over. The important difference (from today's viewpoint) in filing on 320 acres, you got the mineral rights and could file on an additional 320 acres without mineral rights. There were 2 filing fees that way. So many, seeing no advantage, went the (single filing) 640-acre route. Today there are oil wells setting on deeded land with federal mineral rights underneath and the surface owner would be entitled to surface damage rights only.

Only about one seventh of the State was surveyed in 1890, when Wyoming became a state. The Government let contracts to first survey townships (an area 6 miles square). Townships are numbered consecutively from South to North. Ranges are numbered from East to West. Each township contains 36 sections. A section is 640 acres and the sections are numbered from 1 to 36 with sections 16 and 36 being reserved as state school trust land. After the townships were surveyed, usually another contractor would get a bid to survey out the sections. An old friend, who homesteaded in 1916, tells this story of surveying sections: "We rode in a team and wagon with a driver, a pile of rocks, 2 fellows with chisels to mark the rocks, and a man to count the revolutions of the wagon wheel that had a red tag tied on it. It was predetermined how many revolutions made a half-mile. When sufficient turns were made he would call out and one of the men would drop out his marked rock. If the ground was flat, the rock stayed put, but sometimes it would roll a little." These cornerstones are still used today and most are surprisingly accurate.

JEWELL: Hundreds of people flocked west to free land immediately following the end of WWI (November 11, 1918). The years of 1917 and 1918 were profitable years for farming and that encouraged more people to come. My parents both homesteaded in 1917 and then my Dad went off to war. A five month period of allowed absence enabled families to avoid the harsh winters by returning to more civilized areas or work away from home for extra income.

REPORTER: What about schools in the area? Betty could you tell us a little about that?

BETTY: Small communities sprung up, often centering on a school. Some of the schools in the area were the Owens, Nachtman, Bill, Verse, Dry Creek, Dorr, Fairview, Walker Creek, O'Leary and other schools.

The homesteaders' children of the north and east part of the Dry Creek community attended the Fairview school. Dry Creek schools consolidated to a new school located just south of the Dry Creek Hall in the fall of 1929; it burned to the ground on February 12, 1936. Nobody knew what started the fire but hot coals out of the stove were suspected. Everything burned, all of the new basketball suits and all of the track equipment. While the new Dry Creek School was being built, school was held at the Dry Creek Community Hall. In the fall of 1936, Dry Creek had 43 pupils, 2 teachers and had the first 2 years of high school. The school was proud of the fact that the Dry Creek Basketball team beat the Douglas High School B Team. Electricity came through the

country about 1960. Later the school was remodeled and bathrooms were added.

When Dry Creek School quit offering high school, mother's would usually move to town with the children during the winter months for them to attend high school or the child would board with a family. School bus routes took the children to school or isolation was paid. A hardship driver's license was given at the age of 14 so that children could drive to school or meet the school bus at Bill. In 1974 a school bus from Douglas came to Bill to pick up children from the neighboring ranches to attend Junior High or High school in Douglas. This was feasible because when oil was discovered, county roads were graveled and could be driven on in all kinds of weather unless the snow got too deep. Now, in 2001, Dry Creek is one of only 4 or 5 rural schools left in Converse County.

JEWELL: The Bill School was located south of the Cheyenne River. Children would walk; ride horses or horse drawn wagons to school. So, they put their horses in the barn during the day and fed them so they would be ready to take them back home in the evening. One of our family's most told stories is about coming home from school one day: the kids saw a badger along the road so they took a rein off and caught the badger and somehow managed to get it in the wagon, snarling and fighting, and took it home where their Dad killed it, skinned it and tacked the pelt on the side of the house to dry and sold the pelt for \$12.50 (a huge amount of money in those days!).

BETTY: The first school in Dull Center was at the Dull homestead in a log building in 1919. In 1923 a frame school was built on the Harvey Nachtman homestead- it put the school half way between the Dull and Good families. It was named Bethany (school). In

the late fall of 1939 the school was moved to the Rothleutner place; there, another school building was added to the original school building. In 1951, the school building was moved back to the Nachtman ranch and renamed Nachtman School. One incident that was well remembered in the old school was when skunks moved in under the school. Traps were set but could not catch them as fast as they were moving in. The skunks would fight under the floor and were climbing up inside the wall where the two buildings were connected and they got up into the attic. The teacher said the skunks had to leave or she was going to. So the men cut a hole in the wall and Vic Nachtman's hunting dog was put under the floor to chase the skunks. As the skunks went up into the wall, the men would reach in and catch the skunks by their tail, take them outside and kill them. A total of 26 skunks were caught in this way. The building was then fixed so that the skunks couldn't climb up into the walls. It was still a little smelly for a few days but not any worse than when the skunks were there!!! In 1960, electricity was brought to the community and so to the school; it was a great day! In 1964 a water-well was drilled and restrooms were put in. The teacher lived in one room and taught in the other. In 1973, a new school was built with a large classroom with a kitchen area and a recreation room.

Education was very important to these families and it took a lot of effort on everyone's part to get children to school. Water for the school was hauled by the parents or the teacher. Schools were usually heated with wood or coal; and the parents hauled that in too.

Teachers boarded at one of the ranch homes, lived at the school or in some cases lived in a teacherage that was provided by the school district. School buildings in the 1920's were like grasshoppers, here today and gone tomorrow. When a school ran out of pupils, then the school was moved to the pupils.

The Christmas Party and the end of the school year picnic were always an important community event. School teachers were often a qualified homesteader or his wife and in some cases young women from back east came, many of them ending up brides by the time the school year was over.

REPORTER: Jewell, I've heard a lot about the Indian fight on Lightning Creek. How about telling about that? These old stories interest our readers.

JEWELL: In the Fall of 1903, a group of (Native American) Indians were given permission to leave the Pine Ridge Reservation for their annual big game hunt. They had visited the Crow Agency in Montana and were headed back through Campbell, Weston and Converse Counties, hunting along the way. White men charged that the Indians were stealing from sheep wagons, killing cows, and breaking game laws; the Indians claimed they were just hunting antelope. A sheriff's posse from Weston County went to find and persuade the Indians to return to the reservation. The posse found the Indians at a camp about 12 miles north of the Fiddleback Ranch on the Cheyenne River. Sheriff Miller presented an arrest warrant, but the Indians insisted they had done nothing wrong and surrounded the posse. Since the posse was badly outnumbered they left and spent the

night at the Fiddleback, the men there joining them on their quest. The next morning part of the Indians went east and the others headed south with 12 wagons and 120 ponies up Lake Creek, then crossed Dry Creek, Box Creek and came to Jake Mills' cow camp and sheep corrals on Lightning Creek near the Converse/Niobrara County line. The posse with reinforcements followed and caught up with them from there. It is not known who fired the first shot, but in the action that followed Sheriff Mills and one other man and three or more Indians were killed. Others were injured. The Indians fled and their chief was injured and later died. In the meanwhile, word of the fight had reached Douglas and Newcastle. The posse from Newcastle captured 19 Indians near Edgemont, South Dakota. They were tried in Douglas, but acquitted for lack of evidence that these particular Indians were connected to the killings. There is a pipestone peace pipe that was found after the battle in the Indian section of the Wyoming State Museum in Douglas.

REPORTER: Betty, what do you know about Mail Routes in the Thunder Basin area?

BETTY: In 1919, a group of neighbors in the Cheyenne River / Bill area petitioned for a post office. The neighborhood had a "sock social" and a "play" put on by the young people to raise the necessary funds. The first name chosen for the new Post Office was Barker, but there was already a post office by that name. So, they came up with the name "Bill" because there were so many men named Bill in the area. This Post Office became a reality in September 1919 in the home of a bachelor named Bill Barker. Two more post offices soon followed: Dull Center, twenty miles NE, named for several families named

Dull living there; and Verse, about twenty miles NW. A mail route ran two days a week: Tuesday and Friday from Douglas to Bill, then on to Verse and back to Douglas servicing mailboxes along the way. The mailmen also took cans of cream to the dairy in Douglas for the settlers. A separate route came from Dull Center to Bill. By 1938, the Bill postmistress had moved to another state and the Post Office was relocated to the Dry Creek store. As a young bride I remember ordering groceries; and the mail carrier would fill my order at the Dry Creek store and bring it back on the mail!

(Now in 2001), the mail route runs 3 times a week: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The Post Office at Bill was closed recently; the mail route now comes out of Douglas, picking up and delivering mail, and back to Douglas.

REPORTER: Looks at watch and says I think that's all we have time for today...