

Lavonna: My name is Lavonna Lathrop and I'm the interviewer, and the interviewee is Mr. George Oyler. Today is February 25th, of 2005. So we can begin. I think that's all the introduction I really need. We're doing this, it's called the oral history project through the Salida library, and it's connected with Historic Salida Inc., which I'm a member of.

[00:00:30]

Now, this picks up really good, so you can go ahead and start as far back as you can remember.

George Oyler: What do you mean? Since I came here?

Lavonna: Where you came from, that would be good, and then just, you know.

[00:01:00]

George Oyler: Okay. I'm Georgie Oyler and I came to Salida in 1951 from North Platte, Nebraska, where'd I'd been managing a paper for a corporation there, and I purchased The Mountain Mail and I ran it for about 20 years. And I purchased it from John M. O'Connell, and I've live in the same house for all these years. No, I take it back, I lived for a while over the newspaper office in an apartment up there with my wife and family. And then we bought this house out on Rainbow Boulevard, and I've been here since.

[00:01:30]

[00:02:00] Other than running the newspaper and operating it, I retired to a ranch that I had down in Bear Creek, which is about a mile and a half below Salida, and up the Bear Creek Gulch. And I tried actively to run cows and be a rancher but I never was very successful at that because I couldn't tell one cow from the other, but I had a lot of fun doing that and those were actually the best years of my life, because I was outdoors and riding horseback, and with land here and over in the San Luis Valley, and they were the best years of my life.

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[00:03:00] Not that I haven't had a good life all the time, but those were enjoyable years. Since then, I've been retired and I haven't done very much. I sold the place down in Bear Creek when I retired, but I retained some property in the San Luis Valley, and I frequently go over there just to get away because I don't have any cows or anything else anymore. That's about it, I lost my wife about six years ago, and we had two children; Brocky Oyler and Court Oyler, whom we adopted out of Kansas.

[00:03:30]

Lavonna: Where at in Kansas, may I ask?

[00:04:00]

George Oyler: Lawrence, Kansas. And, we saw both of them through school, and they both live here in Salida, for which I'm grateful. Other than that, I guess I've just had a normal life that anybody could have. But I'll be 90 years old in February, I guess it's already passed so I must be 90, no I'm 89, I'm sorry, 89. Did I say where I was born? I was born in Collinsville, Oklahoma, 1916, so I think that makes me 89.

[00:04:30]

Levana: 1916, did you say?

George Oiler: '16.

[00:05:00]

Lavonna: Okay, '16, okay. Well, that's great George. Can you speak a little bit about what interested you here, what your activities were, and about maybe some of the buildings downtown that you remember? Or just different little things like that.

George Oiler:

[00:05:30]

Yes. I came here from Leith, South Dakota, where I was running a newspaper for a corporation and I purchased Mountain Mail, and Salida isn't much different today than it was then. As far as growth is concerned, I think the population has stayed about the same but Salida was a railroad town when I came here, and most of the people who were employed worked for the railroad or derived a living indirectly from the railroad, by what the railroad people spent. I'm not sure, Salida was just a modest town, but a good town, but not an exciting town; there were not murders or anything like that around here. We lived a pretty pleasant life. Enjoyed this elevation of 7000 feet.

[00:06:00]

[00:06:30]

Lavonna:

Were you ever interested in hunting or fishing?

George Oiler:

[00:07:00]

Oh yes, I hunted. I hunted antelope over on the east side, and I hunted deer and elk over here, mostly in the San Luis Valley however, and I had lot of fun doing that. And my wife would go hunting with me too, she didn't carry a gun, but she liked to go and she had good eyes for game, so she was welcome, and we did all right.

Lavonna:

And you ate the meat? This was your means of food? You ate the wild meat?

[00:07:30]

George Oiler:

Oh yeah, we always had the meat processed, and enjoyed that very much, but it wasn't the main source of food by any might or means because some days I didn't get anything. But it was a great hobby anyway, and this is a good place to go hunting, and we attract a lot of out-of-state hunters in the Salida area.

Lavonna:

[00:08:00]

When you first arrived here and started living here, what was the tourism like? Were there a lot of tourists that came through, was there many motels for them?

George Oiler:

[00:08:30]

When I first came here we didn't recognize tourism as probably one of our most important assets, but it became that over the years. There wasn't as much travel in those days as there is now, and people didn't move around quite as much as they do. I remember the first vacation I think my folks

ever took, we lived in Kansas and my dad wanted to go to Colorado. That was my first trip to Colorado, we came out here in an old open sedan Buick with a soft top on it, and no curtains on the side, and we prowled around Colorado, and that was my first visit to Colorado.

[00:09:00] I newspapered in Nebraska and in South Dakota, and I always worked for somebody else, and I decided I'd like to try one on my own, and so this one was for sale from Bob and Lee Abbey, who were from Kansas, and they were anxious to get rid of the paper, so I bought it and then later on I bought The Monte Vista Journal and The Del Norte Prospector, and I newspapered in San Luis Valley too. But I had sold the Salida paper first and I kept the other two for eight years after, I think I sold them in '78. And then I retired and messed around with the ranch.

Lavonna: So you just had cows?

[00:10:00]
George Oyler: I had cows for a while, but as I said I couldn't tell one cow from the other so I didn't think I was very successful at that. I rode horses and had horses and that was a different life than newspapering, so I really enjoyed that.

Lavonna: Being outside probably was ...

[00:10:30]
George Oyler: Yes, being outside, and I liked that. I guess I liked the role of cowboy, I wasn't very good at it but it was lots of fun.

Lavonna: I'm sure. Okay. Is there anything else that you can remember that would be interesting for this interview? Like, Brock and Court was involved in school activities I'm sure.

George Oyler: Oh yeah. Both of them were active in school and graduated from Salida, and the Brock went on to university and finished there, and Court went a little while. I had a stepson too; Lance, by my second wife, he was her son, and we sent him to Adams State for a while, he graduated also from Salida, I think he was born either in Leadville or in Salida, and both Brock and Court were born here.

[00:12:00] And I had two girls by a previous marriage, and they didn't live with me except for a short time. When I had The Mountain Mail they were with me, but the obviously wanted to be with their mother, so although I had custody of them I gave them to her. And that was a good thing that I did I think, it's pretty hard for a man to be a mother to two girls. So, that worked out all right. My ex-wife is still alive, and I don't see her except she and one of my daughters, Dina, live together and we're amiable, we don't associate but certainly we speak to each other, and so it's worked out all right. I hate broken homes but sometimes they're necessary I guess.

[00:12:30]

[00:13:00]

Lavonna: I've wondered about, now you came here in 1951, that's when you moved to Salida. Was this Rainbow Boulevard always Highway 50 through this part of town?

George Oyler: Yes ma'am, it was always Highway 50.

Lavonna: Okay. Were there a lot of these businesses?

[00:13:30]

George Oyler: Oh no. A lot of the town, Main Street has moved out on the highway, but it had just a couple of filling stations and a couple of motels, since then it has developed quite drastically and we have a lot more accommodations now in Salida than we had before, but the Highway, yes, was always here. This is a through Highway, from east coast to the west coast, and it's kind of a crossroads because we're kind of the center of north and south. But other than that, I don't think of anything very spectacular, I guess we had some exciting stories when I had the newspaper, but I don't remember that any of them were necessarily history making.

[00:14:00]

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Lavonna: Okay. The Hutch Ranch was down yonder.

George Oyler: Hutchinson Ranch? Yes.

Lavonna: And I hear they took their cows down to the San Luis Valley also for the summer.

George Oyler: They even rented my ranch down in Bear Creek for a season or two and ran down there, after I got rid of my cows.

Lavonna: How many acres was that, your ranch?

[00:15:00]

George Oyler: I had about a thousand and twenty or thirty. Something like that. It was known as the Jones Ranch. Roy Jones owned that and it had been in his family for quite a while, and there's an old house down there, and it's still standing. An old log house that was hand built, and we put a cement floor in it and used it for storage and feed storage, but it's a historical place. I'm rather surprised that nobody ever wanted to put it on the historical record, but I didn't ask for it or push for it or anything, because I didn't know if it was quite old enough, but it was an old, old ranch. The Bear Creek ranch goes back a long, long ways, I can't remember the first owners.

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It also included 160 acres up on Methodist, and I still own a small portion of that, I since sold that off to people who built houses up there, but I think I still have about 60 acres up there, and then about 60 acres down in what we call Silver Hills, which was the first copse west of Bear Creek. And they touched each other, my property extended from Bear Creek over to Silver

[00:17:00] Hills, or the ranch did, and so it was continuous at one time. And when I sold off Bear Creek I didn't sell this portion, so I retained some of that and have since sold some of it, but I still have a small portion down there, and I still have a small portion up on Methodist. It's a unique piece of property, it goes out on a hill just off of the highline up there, and you can look down on the city of Salida and get the bird's eye view of the whole Valley, almost all the way to Buena Vista, so I like that.

Lavonna: Now, Bear Creek, it's south, it's in the San Luis Valley, but how far S-

George Oyler: No, it isn't in the San Luis Valley, it's in the Arkansas Valley. It's just below where the old sale barn used to be down there, and you go to the right, Jim Treat lives right at the entrance of Bear Creek. There are two or three other families live up Bear Creek now, the time I bought that there was nobody living up there, and I never lived up there, I lived always out here on Rainbow Boulevard. But that's Bear Creek. And it goes way back up in there. I said no one lived there, and no one did live there, but Jack Thorn, who was, I believe a federal wildlife officer of some sort, he had 160 acres up there, and it was above my place. That was the only other owner I think in that area.

Lavonna: So, did the Arkansas river run?

George Oyler: No, the Arkansas River and the Highway are below Bear Creek, you turn to the right at the Treat House, and there's a little brick house there that Roy Jones built. I never lived in it but I owned it and I rented that to people. And then the original homestead was up above that on the same road, Bear Creek road, and it was an old log house, that I mentioned before, and I really think it had some significant historical importance in the area. But maybe no one knows about it or nobody thought about it or anything, and I never ever pushed for anything, but I'm happy to say it's still standing, and it's almost in original shape. Someone had put an addition on the back side of it and it was a kitchen, but other than that there hasn't probably been any change from the original.

Lavonna: To get to there, I'd like to write that down. Let's see, I don't think I have a piece of scrap paper.

George Oyler: It's County Road 101.

Lavonna: 101, I wondered about that. And then how far?

George Oyler: Well, Bear Creek goes clear to the National Forest, it goes up there probably six or seven miles, but my place was at the bottom of it, the very bottom. And it extends up there about a mile or a mile and a half up the road, and that was the original Bear Creek ranch.

Lavonna: That's where the cabin is that you're talking about?

George Oyler: Yes, yes.

[00:21:00]

Lavonna: Okay. That's interesting, really. We try to find places, of course, that have historical significance around the area. 291, did it always come in off of Highway 50-

George Oyler: The Valley? No ma'am. It doesn't go through, it just goes up to Bear Creek drainage and ends up there at the forest, there's no connection at the top end. You can't get out the top end, and you can't get in the top end, of course, so it's a one way deal.

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Lavonna: The 101 road, you're talking about? The 101?

George Oyler: Yes.

Lavonna: Yeah, okay. Okay, what I was wondering is, 291 that goes through town, that's 1st Street, you know 1st Street is 291, did that always come off of-

George Oyler: Bear Creek? No.

Lavonna: No, but come off of Highway 50, out there where it comes off now?

George Oyler: Yes, yes.

Lavonna: Okay.

[00:22:00]

George Oyler: Yes. That highway was always there since I've been here.

Lavonna: Always there, mm-hmm (affirmative). And at that time, that was the main business part of Salida?

George Oyler: Oh yes, yes. There wasn't too much out on the highway, just a couple of filling stations and motel is still down there.

Lavonna: Is it the Circle R?

[00:22:30]

George Oyler: No. No, no, not the Circle R. It was on east of that, on the corner. It was an older motel.

Lavonna: I can't think of the name of that one.

George Oyler: The motel? I'm trying to remember if it's-

Lavonna: It's still going? It's still a motel?

George Oyler: No, not now. I think they rent maybe part of it out to people for permanent residence. But it's on the right side as you go up towards Methodist Mountain. About where Gibson's used to be, you turn there. There's a shoe store on the right side, and you go up the Methodist Mountain road there.
[00:23:00]

Lavonna: Right. That's 107. Where that flashing yellow light is?

George Oyler: Yes. Yes ma'am.

[00:23:30]
Lavonna: Right. Oh I had a question. Oh, what do you remember about, if you could maybe do a little expanding on your memory on the railroad and when it was in operation and going through?

George Oyler: Date wise probably not. It was operating when I came here. There was a railroad, and we had a boat race train a few years, that went down and followed the race down to Cotopaxi, and they sold tickets on that. At first the railroad objected, they didn't want anything to do with that, and then finally they came to us, and I was working on the boat race at that time, and they suggested maybe they could run an excursion route down there.
[00:24:00]

[00:24:30] So they sold an excursion ticket and you could ride down to Cotopaxi and watch the boat races go down. And then the railroad, I can't remember exactly when it went out.

Lavonna: I think it was in '85 when they stopped coming out here, I think that's what I read.

George Oyler: Was it in '85? That sounds about right. And of course there's been no activity on that line since. The rails are still there.

Lavonna: Yeah. I'd love to have it, still being a passenger ... So at that time, when they would take excursion trips, there were passenger cars, right?
[00:25:00]

George Oyler: Yes. Well, maybe one, I'm not sure how many there were. The railroad didn't look kindly towards that at first, and then they kind of came around. The railroad and Salida had had a dispute over something and I can't remember exactly what it was all about. But they were at odds with each other, the town and the railroad, and the railroad was bitter about it for a while, and something changed and I try to think of their public relations director, who I would get fairly well acquainted with, that gentleman, he became quite friendly towards Salida, but there was definitely a feeling of antagonism between the two. And I think that since then it's been fully resolved, though maybe not forgotten by everyone.
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Lavonna: Do you think that was one of the reasons for the demise of it coming through Salida? Do you think that was kind of the reason?

George Oyler: Yeah, one of the railroad executives, and as I said I can't remember his name, he got up at a public meeting, during this fight, and he said he'd see grass growing in the main street of Salida before he got through with them so it was a pretty bitter fight.
[00:26:30]

Lavonna: Sounds like it. It's kind of funny and maybe, I don't know what your feelings about it would be, but it's what started the town.

George Oyler: The railroad, oh absolutely, there's no doubt about that. And I think they owned the town, I think that's why they said that they'd see grass growing in it, they figured it's disappear if they gave the word. But, it was just a statement that was made offhand and probably in bitterness of some sort.
[00:27:00]

Lavonna: Probably so, yes.

George Oyler: But Salida wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for the railroad.

Lavonna: That's right. Okay. I don't know if you know anything about this, but on 4th Street, where the State Farm Insurance building is, there's those five houses that look alike?
[00:27:30]

George Oyler: Yes, and I can't tell you about that. I have often wondered about that too, because multiple housing wasn't generally available at the period in many, many towns. This was one of the first towns that I ever saw where you had adjoining housing, and it was kind of unique, I always thought that that was kind of different.
[00:28:00]

Lavonna: Well, I have read that those were built for residences of the people that worked on the railroad. And I wondered if you were ...

George Oyler: Well, the ones on the 1st Street, or is that 2nd Street? 1st Street. They were cribs.

Lavonna: Oh, well yeah. Those down there.
[00:28:30]

George Oyler: But the ones up on, what would it be 5th or 6th?

Lavonna: 4th.

George Oiler: 4th?

Lavonna: Right across from the Alpine Park, they're 4th and F. They're all built just exactly alike, of course now they have the little-

George Oyler: Oh yeah, oh yeah. No, I'm sure that was housing. But that was there when I came.

Lavonna: Oh yeah. In fact, I've got pictures of Salida taken from Tenderfoot
[00:29:00] Mountain, and it shows those, and this was way back. It shows the roofs,
just the roofs.

George Oyler: Yeah, they've been there a long, long time.

Lavonna: Okay, you mentioned the cribs, of course, it's a popular, everybody knows
that Laura Evans was the madame, and the cribs were her girls' place
where they lived.

George Oyler: Right.

Lavonna: And it's just quite-

[00:29:30]
George Oyler: She was alive when I came.

Lavonna: Oh yeah, yeah. She died in, what was it, '52. Well It would have been right
after you came probably. I think she passed away in '52.

George Oyler: It wasn't alive too long after I came. She was a helpful community member
I think, as far as when there was a drive on for this or for that, she always
[00:30:00] participated and gave. No, she was I think probably a kind person, it was
just that period. And she probably, because of the railroad connection, I
think she probably had a reason for being here, but anyway, she's a part of
our history.

Lavonna: Oh yeah, very much so. Right. Okay. All right George, is there anything you
[00:30:30] can think of? Now, I think we've covered the paper that I sent you that
would jog your memory, and I have it right here, so you weren't born here.

George Oyler: No.

Lavonna: But you lived here since '51, that's quite something.

George Oyler: Yeah. Right. I might tell you that they weren't in existence when I came but
[00:31:00] there were actually two newspapers here. Bill McConnell owned The Mail,
and Bill Marquardt owned The Mail Record, and The Mail Record building,
which has since been enlarged several times, but was the original place of
[00:31:30] the Maruardt paper, which was The Record. And The Mail was in a building
later occupied by Stotler Motor Company, and it's since been torn down,
but it was north of the old First National Bank building down there, or it
[00:32:00] would be north of the Koster Corner, you know where Koster's office is
there on the corner, it's sandstone steps leading up there, or round steps
right on the corner of 2nd and Main.

Lavonna: 2nd and-

George Oyler: That was the Koster building. Actually, it wasn't the original Koster building, but during my time it was known as the Koster building.

Lavonna: I you say it was 2nd and F? Main Street?

[00:32:30]

George Oyler: Yes. Right across from the drugstore, the present drugstore.

Lavonna: Oh, okay. Yeah.

George Oyler: There's round sandstone steps leading up to the building. I forgot what's in there now. Antiques store?

Lavonna: Is it that gifts shop? Or, oh, oh, the liquor store?

George Oyler: No it isn't the liquor store.

Lavonna: No it's not that, or the wine store?

George Oyler: Yes, yes.

Lavonna: The wine store, okay.

George Oyler: It's the wine tasting.

[00:33:00]

Lavonna: Did you say it was called Koster?

George Oyler: Well, Koster Insurance is on the building, I believe. K-O-S-T-E-R. Harold R. Koster, was in there for years and years, and later his son Wallace Koster was in there. And since they quit it, it's become something else and I'm not sure what it is.

[00:33:30]

Lavonna: Knights of Pythias was upstairs.

George Oyler: Yes, that's what's on the top of the building, not Koster, it's Knights of Pythias. I'm sorry I confused you.

Lavonna: No, you were jogging my memory. Because sometimes we have tours of places that are above the bottom and it's called Living Above The Store, and I haven't been up there but we've had tours up the second story there.

[00:34:00]

George Oyler: Yeah, I think there's a big room up there.

Lavonna: Yeah, which was probably meetings or something, meeting rooms. Okay, George, well that's very good, we appreciate this.

George Oylar: Well, I wish I could tell you something exciting. I think there were exciting things happened here but I don't recall any of them right now.

[00:34:30]

Lavonna: That's fine. So, I'll just, unless there's something that just right comes into your mind, if you think this is about right-

George Oylar: No, I really don't think of anything, I think probably the biggest thing that ever happened around here was the development of the Frying Pan water project, and we all worked hard on that, and we had little gold frying pans.

[00:35:00]

And I'm sorry I don't have one of those, it was about a little tin frying pan, a gold frying pan about five inches around, and it was labeled, the Frying Pan, and it was sold to the merchants up and down the street to support the movement. That was the biggest thing that happened, and that was really

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the reason that I came here, was the development of that Arkansas. I had read that some place, and I thought, "Boy, that's going to be a real big deal." And I guess I thought about it terms of the big Thompson or something, and it materialized but it wasn't of any great change, anyway. I can't say that it wasn't important, because it was important, but it didn't signify a great economical boom or anything.

Lavonna:

Right, I see. Yeah, sometimes they do and sometimes they don't.