

BARBARA EKKER
interviewed
by
Dee Ann Finken
on
August 4, 1977
CRC-M2

CHARLES REDD CENTER FOR WESTERN STUDIES
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
SAN RAFAEL SWELL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEWEE:

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DATE:

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PLACE:

Hanksville, Utah

SUBJECT:

History of San Rafael Swell

F:

This is an interview with Barbara Ekker on August 4, 1977 in Hanksville, Utah which is located in the eastern portion of Wayne County.

We would like to start out with just your background. Tell me

about your parents. How did you get to Hanksville? Who were your

husband's parents?

E:

My father was Virgil Fay Baldwin. He was born July 1, 1888 in Washington County, Ohio. He married my mother, Lillian Agnus Falconer, born September 15, 1900 in Nebraska, on September 11, 1929. She was in Omaha, Nebraska. My father came to Utah in the early 1900's to join his older brothers, Clarence and Dennis Baldwin in Moab. They began the Moab Garage and Transportation business there. My father and his brother, Clarence, built the first paddle-wheel boat to be used on the Colorado River in 1925. They built this craft to haul drilling equipment and supplies to oil drilling operations down river from Moab called the Shafer Wells. Dad later owned and operated the Moab Garage in Green River until his death in 1962.

My mother passed away with pneumonia in 1936 when I was just two years old. Her sister, my aunt, Helen Falconer, came from Nebraska and raised my older sister, Bonnie, and myself.

My husband is Jess Ekker. He and I were married in 1954. His father was Cornelius Ekker, son of John G. and Marie Catherine Van Tol Ekker. They were early pioneers in Hanksville. Jess' mother was Edna Gibbons Ekker, daughter of Charles Albert and Julia Stoddard Gibbons, also Hanksville early pioneers. Charles Gibbons had the first store in Hanksville in the 1800's. Ebenezer Hanks, the founder of Hanksville arrived in this valley in 1882 and died two years later. Jess has eight brothers and three sisters. His father died in 1952 of asthma after being in the mining business most of his life. Jess'

mother died in August of 1977. Jess and I have seven children, Neva Fay, Rita Ann, Sybil Marie, Justin G., Jodi General, Jason Robert, and Cameron Jess.

Jess' grandfather, Charles Gibbons, captured the famed wild stallion, WILDFIRE, that Zane Grey later made into a book after interviewing Gibbons on the trail while both were traveling to Salt Lake. Gibbons was also active in the mining business and was one of the founders, discoverers of Temple Mountain which is rich in uranium and located in Emery County. Other locators were Abe Glassman and Pete Riley. Gibbons hauled ore in the Silver Reef area before coming to Hanksville.

Gibbons sold supplies from his Hanksville store to Butch Cassidy and member of his Wild Bunch. Butch worked for Gibbons after he ran away from his home in Circleville and began his outlaw career soon afterwards. Charlie Gibbons and his son-in-law, Cornelius Ekker, located many of the claims in the Henry Mountains south of Hanksville. In the early days they mined ore for the vanadium, not the uranium. But after shipping their ore to Shaddick Chemical Company in Denver they learned that Madame Curie of France had taken samples of their ore to France to use in her studies of radium.

Gibbons sold his store, livery stable, and boarding house to John Garritt Ekker and his sons, Andrew, John, and Cornelius and moved to Green River where he again was in the mercantile business. It was during this time from 1910 to 1914 that the Ekkers' had the pony express mail contracts between Green River and Hanksville, Hanksville and Hite, and Hanksville and Torrey. The distance to Green River was sixty miles and took two days. Nelius, as he was nicknamed, would leave Hanksville at 7:00 a.m. and ride his horse, either a Hamiltonian or a trained broomtail, to the ranch on the San Rafael. This was about forty miles and could be covered in eight hours. There he would change horses and take the mail sack and travel on to Green River. The ranch at that time was owned by Nougier, who I believe were French. Then the next day Nelius would leave Green River and arrive at the San Rafael Ranch and change horses again for the ride to Hanksville. E. H. McDougall was the postmaster in Hanksville at the time and stated that Nelius' time never varied more than fifteen minutes, depending on the weather conditions.

During these pony express days, there was a lot of ranching on the San Rafael desert. This Nougier (pronounced Nuggie) was a sheep-man. His ranch served as a postoffice and general store for the other sheep and cattlemen in the area. A fellow by the name of McMullen bought out Nougier and many Hanksville and Green River young men worked for him like Frank Hat, Horace Ekker, Andy Moore, and Arthur Ekker. These Ekker men are my husband's older brothers. Andy came into this country from Texas when he drove a herd of cattle from Texas to the San Rafael for McMullen. Later Moore's, the Gillies and others were ranching on the San Rafael.

F: Was there mining on the San Rafael?

E: Charles Gibbons and Mr. Abe Glassman located the original Temple Mountain claims. They were called the "Mountain King", "Gateway" and "Rex" claims and were jointly called the "Vanura" claims because they were mined for vanadium ore. Peter Riley also had claims in the area which overlapped the Gibbons-Glassman claims. In 1937 Glassman retained an attorney, Mr. C. F. Humphrey, from San Francisco, to protect his interests. At that time it was agreed that Glassman interests were 51 percent, C. F. Humphreys cut himself in for 22 1/2 percent, Charles Gibbons was cut to 16 1/2 percent after once owning a half interest and Peter Riley got 10 percent.

Then later Frank Hansen, a Price, Utah attorney, filed suit for Late Hunt, Moroni Hunt, claiming a portion of Temple Mountain. Then an A. L. Tomlinson, F. B. Hammond and another attorney, Therald N. Jensen came in for a share. Jensen later sold his interest to Mr. Lawrence Migliacchia. Then the interest changed to Glassman, Gibbons, Riley and Humphreys at 59.94 percent, Hunt and Hansen interests, 28.00 percent, Leslie Tomlinson interest, 3.53 percent, F. B. Hammon 3.53 percent and Davis and Migliacchia, 5 percent. Then Jensen and Frandsen said they hadn't been paid for their legal work and so they set down and took 7 1/2 percent each for their pay.

In May 1950 an agreement was entered into with the Consolidated Uranium Mines, Inc., a Nevada Corporation, whereby the properties at Temple Mountain were leased for ten years on the basis of a payment of a royalty equal to 10 percent of the net mill returns for the sale of the ore. So on October 15, 1951, the following royalties were distributed. For the Glassman, Gibbons, Riley, and Humphrey interests Therald Jensen was paid the amount of \$64,911.26. To Hunt, Hansen there was \$30,322.23 paid. To A. L. Tomlinson was paid \$3,822.77. The same amount paid to F. B. Hammond. Lawrence Migliacchia and F. B. Davis paid \$5,414.68. Later these royalties were paid to Edna Gibbons Ecker, Charles' daughter, as Charles Gibbons had died in 1952. Mr. Peter Riley also passed away and his daughter, Mrs. Florence Howland received his share. The original Temple Mountain claims were located in 1904 by a Hatch.

F: Do you know of other families on the San Rafael?

E: Daniel Sinclair Gillies came to the area in 1900 with his family from Circleville. He was a Scotchman. He had been the postmaster in Circleville. He was Butch Cassidy's uncle. His sister was Annie Campbell Gillies Parker. Gillies operated a 1100 acre cattle ranch on the San Rafael but built a home in Green River for his wife and so his children could attend school. Gillies died in 1907. At the time Green River was a well established community and one of the few non-Mormon towns in the State. Except for the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad it was somewhat isolated from the rest of the world.

F: Did the outlaws hide out in the San Rafael?

E: It was in April of 1897 that Butch Cassidy and Elzy Lay robbed the Castle Gate payroll and the \$8,000 in gold and silver was taken to

the famed Robbers Roost. At this time the Halversons were ranching on the San Rafael. The owner was Chris Halverson. There was a controversy at the time if Halverson gave the outlaws fresh horses to carry out their robbery. Chris's son, Harold, always stated that his dad had not aided the bandits.

F: What is the history of the famed Robber's Roost?

E: Joe and Millie Scart Biddlecome came into the area in 1906. They had lost a baby daughter, May, while living in a tent along the river bottom. Their daughter Pearl was born in August of 1907. Joe built a small cabin on Harris Bottom. He later moved Millie and the girls to Hanksville for the winter months. Hazel was their third daughter who was born in February of 1910. Joe tells of Noe Aubert and Big Henry Dussere who had sheep herds on the San Rafael at that time and who wintered their sheep in Happy Canyon. Even though these men were normally to detest each other, Biddlecome and the Frenchman got along fine. Friendships spanned their lifetime even when one ran cattle and the others sheep.

The oldest ranch on the San Rafael was settled by the Halverson brothers. Later it was sold to Bill Tomlinson. His wife was named Martha. She had been raised in an orphanage in Salt Lake after her father, a Warner of Woodside, died. Martha and Bill had two daughters, Wilda and Muriel. Tomlinsons moved their cattle to North Springs and built a cabin at Twin Seep. The Biddlecomes were at their cabin at Crow Seep. Bill never made it in the cattle business and later moved to the Thompson-Sego area and worked in the coal mines there.

The original water troughs at the Roost had been put in by Bernard who was a foreman for Buhr in the 1890's. Bernard and Joe Sylvester had fenced a plot thirty feet square where the spring gushed from the hillside. Jack Cottrell replaced Bernard after he married Lida Ellen Tomlinson. He moved his family to the Roost. Two or three years later Jack Moore became foreman and worked till Buhr sold out and left the country.

F: Who was Buhr?

E: He was an eastern tailor who came into this area for health reasons. He raised fine horses. There were some thirty head of horses on the San Rafael in the 1890's. There was desert broomtails which watered along the San Rafael. They had manes and tails that touched the ground. These were hunted and corralled by Springville Riding Clubs until a law was passed that protected these animals as well as the wild burros.

F: Was there any drilling for oil on the San Rafael?

E: Colonel Tasker came into the country around 1906 or 1907. His interest was oil and mining. His son Harry, later, left a herd of horses in Millard Canyon that Joe Biddlecome bought for \$100

for the lot. There was a cable-tool vintage drilling a well at French Seep around 1919. It was promoted by a T. C. Conley.

F: Do you know of others who ranched or worked in the San Rafael area?

E: Joe Biddlecome spoke of an Ern Wild, a childhood friend from Emery County that had his cattle on the San Rafael. There was Rod Swasey. He took a bunch of mares into the area in 1904 to raise some mules. The horses got into the loco weed on Sams Mesa and most of them died. Swasey put some good horses on the San Rafael with strains of Appaloosa.

F: Do any places carry names of early settlers?

E: There is Hans Flat named after Hans Anderson, a red-headed Irishman who worked for Joe Biddlecome. He played "spoons" but his spoons were two sections of cow ribs. There was the Chaffins and the Tidwells which I'm sure left their names on landmarks. Andy Moore arrived in that area in 1920 and set up camp under The Ledge and Tidwells moved into the high part of the Spur about the same time. There was Clyde, Delbert, Leland, and Adolph. Their father, Frank and another brother had died in 1918 during a flu epidemic. Lou Chaffin had three sons, Fawn, Ken, and Clell who rode with the cattle while two younger sons, Ned and Gay, were too young to do much with the herd.

F: How did one get from Green River to the San Rafael?

E: The road was dirt and went via of the mouth of the San Rafael and Keg Springs, up the long Antelope Valley then over into the Cedars and then to Roost Flat. There was a CCC road out of Hanksville through the Flat Tops and up Sweetwater Hill onto the gravel North Springs benches.

F: How did the Robbers Roost change ownership from Biddlecome to Ekker?

E: Joe Biddlecome died in June of 1928 following complication from a tonsilectomy. Millie, his widow, and Hazel, her daughter leased their cattle to Art Murrey. Fear was married to Mel Marsing and they leased the range from Millie and Hazel as Murrey had taken the leased cattle to Dead Horse Point. In September of 1929, Mel Marsing died of blood poisoning from a leg injury and Pearl too became a widow with two small sons, Joe and Jack to raise. Pearl married Slim Baker and sold out to her sister, Hazel and her husband, Arthur Ekker. Pearl moved to Oregon and it was there in 1933 another son, Noel, was born that Christmas. She and Slim divorced and she was to raise three sons alone. Hazel and Arthur Ekker had four children, Eddyjo, Evelyn May (called Tiss), Gaye, and A. C. Hazel died of emphysema in 1969. Arthur married Lela Wilcox Anderson in 1970. In 1970 the Utah Cowbelle Association honored Millie Biddlecome on her 86th birthday. She passed away in 1976 just seven years to the day of her daughter, Hazel's death. Pearl Baker resides in Green River and is a great writer and has published many

books on this area of the state.

F: Did Butch Cassidy travel the San Rafael area?

E: There is a well known poem called "Heavy Holstered Men" by La Mont Johnson that tells of Cassidy's travels and begins "North of the Henry Mountains and South of the San Rafael is the burning Sinbad Desert where a stranger dares not dwell."

F: Does any of your family know Cassidy personally?

E: Jess' mother, Edna Gibbons Ekker Phillips Robison (she was married

three times), played jacks with him on the dining room floor of their boarding house when she was a child and the jacks were \$20.00 gold pieces. We're still close friends of his sister, Lula Parker Betenson, of Circleville, who is ninety-three. She has written a book with Dora Flake called, My Brother, Butch Cassidy and it is a best seller. She relates of his return to Circleville and death in 1939 in Oregon of pneumonia. Lula was honored in New York when the movie, "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid" was first shown. Robert Redford and Paul Newman treated her like a queen.

Edna Gibbons Ekker tells of Butch and his gang members coming

into the boarding house to eat. Butch never allowed them to wear their guns in the house or use foul language around Mrs. Gibbons or Edna and her sister, Dora. It was during one meal that one of the gang members, wearing his guns, was pulling himself up to the table, when his gun caught in the side arms and whirled and went off sending the bullet through the ceiling. Gibbons and his wife rushed upstairs as that was where the daughters were all asleep and found the spent bullet just inches from Dora's head on a pillow. This is what prompted the rule, "No guns in the Gibbons home." Edna always told the story of Butch riding into the yard and handing the reins of his horse to another rider and saying, "I'm going in to play with the girls." We always had to remind her to tell everyone she was just a child.

F: Is the Gibbons place still standing?

E: Harold Ekker, Edna's oldest son, has a ranch on the place now but the old buildings were burnt down several years ago when some grandsons were smoking and caused a fire.

F: Do you know anything about Matt Warner?

E: Only what I learned from reading his book, Last of the Bandit Riders. He has a daughter, Joyce Warner, that is still to be living in Price, Utah.

F: When did the outlaw period end?

E: I doubt if it ever will. When tourists come through Hanksville they

always ask, "What do you people do for a living?" The standard answer to raise their eyebrows is, "We steal from each other."

F: Honestly what do you do for a living?

E: My husband has mined uranium ore since he was a child I believe. He is always telling our children about leading a pack train of horses out of their claims to the nearest road with pack pannards full of high grade ore. He was always barefooted and never wore shoes until he went to school. Then he'll jokingly say, "No, I don't think I wore shoes till I went in the Navy."

I worked with him in this mining business until the older girls started school. Then I stayed home and only joined him during the summer months at camp.

Just after Jess and I were married we ran a bar in Green River and what memories we have of that place! Jess' friend, Pat Gahagan, ran a bar in town and ours was in Elgin across the Green River in Grand County. Jess leased it from Kay Hatch before we were married. I was working in Denver at the time for a telephone answering service. I had graduated in 1952 and had gone to the University of Utah on a Home Ec scholarship. I was valadictorian of my class. I was editor of the school paper and wrote a column of Green River news for the local papers. I still do this each week.

We moved to Hanksville in 1955. We mined claims in Shoot-A-Ring Canyon when Neva, Rita, and Sybil were pre-schoolers. We survived a flood down Hansen Creek and watched the resort at Bullfrog Basin grow. Our first son, Justin, began life sleeping in a dresser drawer at Shoot-A-Ring Canyon. It was shortly after our fourth daughter, Jodi, arrived that I began doing the hourly weather reports from Hanksville. The FAA airport, built here in 1945 as an emergency station, was discontinued in 1965 and both Jess and I trained to do weather reporting. We're still doing it today. Reports are phoned to Salt Lake. I also did the weather reports for four years on an environmental study for a proposed coal power plant to be located northwest of Hanksville. This site was changed to Delta, Utah. I sample the Fremont River at Caineville weekly and send off balloons for an Oklahoma company for another environmental study.

Our two little sons, Jason and Cameron arrived in 1974 and 1975. They are just a year apart. Our oldest daughter is married to Ben Pace of Loa and they have a daughter, Farah. She was born in 1976. Our second daughter, Rita Ann, married James Lewis in 1978 at Rainbow Bridge on Lake Powell. It was the first such formal wedding at this National Monument. Sybil, our twenty-one year old daughter works for Energy Fuels Nuclear at their ore buying station ten miles south of town. Justin is a 6 foot 3 inch lad weighing 230 pounds. He wrestles for Wayne High School.

Jess is presently mining claims in Red Canyon in San Juan County.

His brother, Ted, the youngest of the twelve Ekker children, has been gold placer mining at the Ekker claims in the Henry Mountains. Harold, the oldest son, is a Wayne County Commissioner, Horace is a retired State Road employee and runs cattle in the Henry Mountains. Arthur, who owned the Robbers Moose died last July of a heart attack. Ritter is retired as Highway Department foreman in Hanksville and is mining the claims his grandfather owned at Temple Mountain. Reba is married to Ray Bennett and lives in Denver. Darys owns a trailer court in Hanksville and is a former justice of the peace and government trapper. Julia is a retired registered nurse and lives in San Diego. Glen is the Highway Department foreman in Bicknell. Bruce lives in Reno and is retired from the Federal Aviation Administration. Gladys is the youngest girl and she and her husband, Roy May, are the developers of a new town sixty miles south of here near Bullfrog called Ticaboo. It will accommodate some 800 mill and mine workers for Plateau Resources, a uranium firm.

Grandma Edna died in 1977 after a very active life. She lost her first husband, Cornelius in 1952, she lost her second husband, Harry Phillips in 1954, and her third husband, Martin Robison in 1972. She was a lady who knew Butch Cassidy, the pioneer life and a wedding trip to Cuba with Phillips. She is given credit for delivering most of the Hanksville residents when she was a midwife, running a cafe business for years with Nelius and a bar with Mart, and donating a building for Hanksville's first medical clinic. In addition, she was Hanksville's bicentennial queen. She served with the Red Cross and was a member of the Green River Medical Board. She lost her mother when she was young. Her father, Charles Gibbons, married two other wives, Hattie Morrison and Alta Anderson, but neither made a home for his daughters. They lived in Provo with aunts and uncles, who practiced polygamy, and married early. Edna was just sixteen when she married Nelius Ekker. The Ekkers were originally from Holland and were converts to the LDS Church. Andies Ekker is presently the Netherlands Ambassador to the UN and makes his home in McLean, Virginia. His eighty-seven year old mother and brother live in Holland as do his two children.

I'm the keeper of the records for this family. I just finished the Gibbons and Ekker genealogy for books to be published. Now I have to work on the Baldwin-Falconer line on my side. Since the Falconers were run out of Scotland for stealing water and changed their name from Drysdale, it has run into snags. I'm always re-searching a project.