

HISTORY OF WYOMING

ORAL HISTORY
BIOGRAPHY
OF
NETTIE PETERSON MILLER

INTERVIEW AND BIOGRAPHY
BY
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As the cold Wyoming winds blew, we sat in the warm and cozy living room of Nettie Miller. She lives in Irwin Towers, a five story apartment complex for senior citizens in Douglas, Wyoming. It was in this setting that eighty six year old Nettie Miller told me her life story.

Alice Nettie Pauline Peterson was born November 7, 1896 in Orin Junction, Wyoming. Her mother was from Denmark and her father came from Sweden. They met in Omaha, Nebraska, then worked in the corn fields of Iowa before coming to Wyoming. They were married in Douglas, where her father helped in the blacksmith shop building sheep wagons.

Nettie's earliest memories are of Orin Junction and the trains. Three trains met there and had to be greased and fixed. They provided most of the jobs in Orin Junction, which was a very small town and had only a few families living there. A big hotel in town fed all the people who came in on the trains.

Nettie's family lived in a section house right next to the railroad tracks. The house was a plain, two story clapboard with a large kitchen, parlor, and upstairs bedrooms. The beds were made out of straw, and were accessible only by a ladder. Water was brought into the house from a well outside. Bathing was done once a week in a tub in the kitchen, because it was the warmest room in the house. They had an outdoor toilet and used old catalogs instead of toilet paper. Nettie believes that using those catalogs caused a lot of cancer.

Groceries were ordered through the train service and were brought in on the train from Nebraska. Nettie's father provided fresh fish for the family by setting lines in the river. He would go back to get the fish very early in the morning, before the rest of the family was up.

Clothing was made by her mother, from old clothes her aunts would bring in. Her mother would "rework" them to make clothing for the children.

Nettie is the oldest of five children and had a lot of responsibility at home. Her jobs included washing and ironing. She would come home from school each day to a stack of dirty dishes, waiting to be washed. Her mother was too busy sewing to get them done.

Every weekend they had to clean cupboards and wash windows to get ready for the next week. The trains ran very close to the house so there was always a lot of dust on the windows. Nettie recalls that every time a train would go by, the children would run outside to wave to them. She still loves the trains, and likes to go down and watch the coal trains as they go through town.

Nettie remembers her father playing the mouthharp for dances at the section house, while someone else played guitar. She says they were old fashioned dances and everyone attended, even the children. She always had a pretty dress and her hair curled to go places. Her mother curled her hair by rolling it up on rags.

The section house had a big fenced yard and the children were taught to stay inside the fence. Other children would come over to play games such as hop scotch, hide and go seek, and drop the handkerchief. The latter was played by the children forming a circle. One person would go around the circle, then would drop the handkerchief behind someone and run. They had a St. Bernard dog who stayed in the yard. Occasionally, a rattlesnake would come into the yard, but the dog protected the children and no one was ever hurt.

The school in Orin Junction was at the top of a hill, and all the grades were in together with just one or two teachers. Nettie recalls throwing rocks down the hill and hitting her sister on top of the head. She says she "got a whippin' " for that.

Christmas was a very special holiday for Nettie as a child. Her father would cut the Christmas tree and put it up just a little before Christmas. The tree was strung with popcorn and cranberries. Everyone had new clothes to wear and she looked forward to the special programs at school. Nettie doesn't remember what kind of presents she received, just that she always got something. The meals were, "not so much rich stuff" but cake and either chicken or turkey.

Birthdays were celebrated much as the children today celebrate. They would go to the child's house, play games, and have home made ice cream.

Nettie does not remember much sickness, but recalls that they "doctored" at home, unless it was too serious. In this case, they would have to go to the doctor in Douglas. The only way to get there

was on a hand car on the railroad tracks. The sick child was put in a box, then her mother would pump on one side and her father on the other. She also recalled traveling this way to a circus in Douglas.

There were no churches in town, but Nettie remembers the Lutheran preacher from Douglas coming to their home sometimes to conduct services.

One of the most exciting things Nettie recalls, is when a tribe of Indians came by their house. She says the children were so afraid that they hid behind her mother's apron. This was the first time they had ever seen Indians. Her mother spoke with them, and although they were friendly, the children were still too frightened to say anything.

The family moved to Glenrock when Nettie was ten years old, where her father started a blacksmith shop. He mostly shoed horses and made brands for the ranches in the area. Glenrock was a coal mining town and was "pretty wild" compared to Orin Junction.

Nettie later worked as a housekeeper and cook, but also had to work at home doing washing and ironing. Her mother was not in good health, so Nettie did most of the work.

Preston Henry Miller had a house and barn close to Nettie's home, and this is how she met her future husband. He originally came from Virginia and worked for Higgins Sheep Company as a camp mover for the sheep camps. He lived in the mountains and only came into town every week or two. Preston and Nettie went together for a long time. He had a "real nice horse and buggy", and would take her for rides out to the country to visit people they knew.

They were married in Douglas in 1918, in a very simple ceremony. There was no family present, only her brother and another person to stand up with them. Following the ceremony, they went right to the mountains.

Preston and Nettie lived on Deer Creek, where they built a log house and barn. There were lots of trees and Nettie says it was quite a sight to see the sunrise and sunset. The nearest neighbor was about four miles away, and they would have to ride horseback to go visit. Sometimes cow punchers from the VR Ranch would come by and stop in for coffee. There were times, though, when Preston and Nettie would be alone for months at a time without seeing anyone. They had no

electricity or phone. Heating was from a big wood burning cook stove. Every evening, Nettie and Preston would saw wood with a long saw, she on one end and he on the other, until they had a big stack of firewood. The laundry was done by washing the clothes on a hand wash board.

They would bring in a supply of food to last through the winter. Preston would hunt for sage chickens and go fishing. There were no fishing licenses at that time, and they would fish by just reaching under a bank and grabbing a fish. There weren't many deer because the coyotes would kill them. He would hunt for weeks and never find any. They would freeze the meat by hanging it outside. Nettie provided fresh vegetables from a garden, which she watered from a mountain spring.

She says the winters were terrible. The snow would drift up against the windows, and had to be shoveled away to keep them clear. Nettie pieced quilts to keep busy during the long winter months.

Preston took care of all the finances, because he did not feel that was a woman's place. Nettie says, "In them days they looked at us that way."

When it was time for their child to be born, Preston took Nettie to her mother's house in Glenrock so the child could be delivered by a doctor.

After their son, Preston, was born, they returned to the mountains until he was ready to start school. At that time, they moved into Glenrock, bought six acres and kept milk cows.

The depression was "poor times" according to Nettie. Her husband had to find work outside the farm to try to make money. He would fix fences on different ranches and help move sheep camps, but he didn't make much.

When asked about Glenrock itself, Nettie recalled that before World War I, the town had board sidewalks and lots of coal mines. For a long time, the only church in town was the Episcopal Church, where she received a bible for perfect attendance. Eventually, the Community Baptist Church was established and, says Nettie, that is where most people went. She remembers church suppers and getting together to make things for Christmas.

World War II was a sad time for Nettie. Both her brother and her son enlisted in the Army, but her son contracted polio just before he was to go overseas. He was affected in his shoulder, and was sent to Denver, then to Hawaii for treatment.

One of the most difficult times in Nettie's life was thirty years ago. Her husband, Preston, had cancer quite severely. When the pain got to be too much he shot himself. This was a rather difficult subject for Nettie to talk about.

Besides her son, Nettie has a daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and two grandsons. She enjoys them very much, and she always looks forward to seeing them.

Nettie believes the future of our country looks bad, with a possibility of war and trouble. She says it certainly is a lot different from when she was a child. She thinks that radio and television have brought about a bad change because of children seeing too much fighting. At the same time, however, she says it would have been nice to have in the mountains.

One of the major changes she has seen is in the weather. She has never seen the leaves on the trees react like they have this year. Because we had an early frost, the leaves just turned brown and curled up. She also mentioned the damage being done by tornadoes, but recalled how bad the hail storms could be on the mountain. Nettie Peterson Miller will be eighty seven years old on her birthday, and says that "time is just going too fast". After visiting with this lovely lady, I could only wish that, for her, time could stand still.