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AN INTERVIEW WITH VIOLA HIRNI

by

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Viola Hirni, a wife and mother of two small children, was taken from her five bedroom house, her friends, and her business and suddenly brought to Rock Springs, Wyoming. The year was 1970, and the local economic boom had been in progress for about six months.

Viola was born and raised in the Panhandle of Texas. She and her husband lived in New Mexico. He was offered a promotion from Frontier Airlines if he would move to Rock Springs. When they arrived to check out the town, they could find no place to stay. Viola and her family had to drive to Salt Lake to find a motel.

Viola's first impression of Rock Springs was a feeling of desolation. They brought up a twenty-three foot trailer which was to be their home for one and a half years. There was no housing available so the trailer was parked north of town. The conditions were very poor with no utility hook-ups. They used a generator for electricity and a propane tank for gas. Since the tap water looked like Alka Selzer, they hauled in bottled water. Also, Viola's husband had to empty the sewage every ten days. Since telephones were nonexistent, people communicated with CB radios. Viola explains how they would leave them on all the time and just call out a name until that person would realize that the call was for him.

Viola says that she cried everyday for six months

after moving to Rock Springs. She describes an average day as, "getting up, try to get a glass of water, look at the dust on everything, walk outside to feed the dogs, fall in ten feet of mud, and go back in the house and cry some more." The whole place was dirty with mud everywhere-knee high, cold, and slimy.

The shopping was atrocious. They could not buy clothes or toys for the children. For example, the children needed rubber boots for walking to the school bus, but the stores did not have them. Most things were bought by catalogue. Rock Springs had a tiny Penney's store, but the demand outstripped the supply. It was first come, first served.

Shopping for groceries was a bad experience. Viola was spoiled by the large variety offered by big city stores. However, Rock Springs was different. The Safeway store was filthy, had low quality food, and had frequent shortages. In contrast, Ben's grocery store was very clean, but quantities were low, and the prices were high. Viola really noticed a jump in their food bill. She says that she would fill her cart with the same items that she had bought back home, but the cost was considerably more. When the weather permitted, they would drive to Salt Lake to buy food by the cases as well as to shop for clothing.

Viola describes the town as "unrefined." In the past,

she had attended the ballet, the symphony, and Broadway shows. In Rock Springs, family entertainment switched to arrow hunting or shooting rabbits and prairie dogs. Activities involving the children were scant. When she and her husband would dance at the Kasba, she would be one of three or four women customers compared to two or three hundred men.

In Rock Springs, Viola had to dress differently. She describes the people as barbaric. She could not wear dresses because "men looked at you like you were something to be ravaged right there." They would follow her around and want to touch her. She was appalled by how the women dressed as they "wore men's Levi's and down jackets and looked like football players." She soon adapted to their way of dressing. She donned boots, Levi's, and down jackets.

After arriving in Rock Springs, Viola learned a hard lesson in how rough the town was. Once, when she was shopping at the grocery store, she saw a woman that was following her. She claims that the woman weighed nine hundred pounds. The woman had mistaken her for a lady who had been going out with her husband. She hit Viola in the face, knocked her down, and pounded her head against the floor. She started to hit Viola with her fist, but someone stopped her. Only then did she realize that she had the wrong lady.

Viola says there were fights frequently in grocery

stores, gas stations, bars, and many other establishments. She attributes the fights to heavy drinking. She explains, "The bars were always full morning, noon, and night because the men worked in shifts so they (the bars) were always busy. There was nothing else for them to do." She also states that the violence occurred because there were no women to control the men.

Viola uses the word "isolated" to express how she felt. The local people were "standoffish". The outsiders brought a lot of money into the community. They liked the money but did not seem to accept the newcomers. The newcomers had to stick together. For instance, union members such as pipefitters and electricians stayed in their own groups.

The community was very transient. One may be talking to a man one day, expecting him to be in town for at least another year. However, he would be gone by the next day. Viola felt bad because she wanted to be the one that was leaving.

Housing was short because outsiders arrived so fast. Many people with and without children camped in tents. Their condition was made worse by hauling in water and facing cold weather. The Bureau of Land Management would try to remove these campers, but in many cases the laws were not enforced. To this day, many small trailers can be seen at Point of Rocks.

The move to Rock Springs affected Viola's two girls in that "they became less prissy ladies and became more tomboys." In appearance, the schools looked terrible, but they had high standards. There were few girls in the classes. The children gave up some of the extra activities they had been involved in, but they "make due wherever they're at."

Viola was divorced shortly after moving to Rock Springs. When asked if she felt that coming to Rock Springs had anything to do with the break-up, she said it had sped things up. She had become more independent and matured faster with these people. She stayed in Rock Springs because she had no other place to call home.

Viola describes single life as being "tough, very hard." She did not date. Most of the men were married but lied about it. There was no way of knowing which ones were really married and which ones were not. Viola says that some of the attention given to a single lady was "good for the ego," but she knew that most of the men were here to make money and leave. She states, "I wasn't going to let them take my heart with them."

Viola explains the problems with dating. "If you went out, you heard your name a hundred places. If you didn't go out, you heard how awful you were, and stuck-up, and conceited, and a maybe lesbian. So you were

damned if you did and damned if you didn't." She told of a time when she was sitting in a bar with some friends. They heard a guy talking about a woman named Viola. He told the others what a good time he had had with her. Viola did not even know the guy.

The bars were the only socialization there was. Often the men would ask Viola if she prostituted herself. She says, "It was something you learned to cope with." She says you either laughed it off or got angry and slugged them. She learned that most of the men here at that time were "gross and ignorant." She tried to stay away from them by saying, "You seek out the kind of company you want."

Most of the men came to Rock Springs to help to build the Bridger Power Plant. They were the ones who came without their families and did not put anything into the town. They took what they could and got out. A few men did bring in their wives and children and stayed to help build the community.

The women of Wyoming are a tougher breed. They have to be tough, aggressive, and independent. They do not "take much from men." They have had to make due with the situation given them. Viola says, "If men weren't around to do it, they did it themselves."

Job opportunities for women were usually limited to store clerks, waitresses, and bank tellers. While

still married, Viola made wool shirts for friends of her husband. The shirts sold for sixty dollars and were in great demand because of the short supply of clothing. In 1972 she started working at the Outlaw Inn as a bartender. She finds that people are prejudiced against her because she works in a bar. The drinking men feel she is "fair game," and some women think themselves better than her.

The minorities were mostly made up of illegal aliens. They were used for cheap labor in such jobs as maid work and tearing down buildings. Viola explains, "Somemone was paying someone to keep them." The unions did not like minorities, but "if he proved to be a good worker and they survived the harassment and physical abuse these people took, they were probably accepted."

Viola was working at the outlaw Inn when the television crew from 60 Minutes came to Rock Springs. The employees were supplied with the names and pictures of the crew and the undercover Federal agents. She says, "We were briefed as to what to talk about and to remember our company loyalties so not to get oursefves in a bind or we would be out of a job." She did not like 60 Minutes singling out Rock Springs and inferring it was the only city with crime and corruption.

Viola is acquainted with several prostitutes. She says they are not ashamed but proud of what they do. "They think it is an O.K. way to make money." They have

furs, nice cars, and a place to live. The pimps do not allow free lancing in Rock Springs.

Viola mentioned some of the places they worked which included Kilpeppers, Giovale's, Hilton, and downtown houses. She is not against prostitution and says, "anytime you have open prostitution, it keeps your sex crime rate down."

Viola is more aware of the drug problem now than when she arrived in Rock Springs. She feels most people use them for recreation and to relax. It does cause violence, and it is harder to identify a person on drugs than one using alcohol. "Booze you can smell, drugs you can't." A major problem is cocaine. "You can get it anywhere you want, it's no problem."

Viola believes the crime and corruption in Rock Springs is no worse than in other places. She spoke of the incident when Ed Cantrell shot Michael Rosa, an undercover police officer, in self defense. She and her daughters were staying at the Silver Dollar the night the shooting supposedly took place. She was only one hundred yards away from the spot, yet heard nothing. She does not believe it happened the way Cantrell said it did. Some of the men that worked at the coroner's office told her they did not think the shooting occurred in the car. They found only one splash of blood in the car. Viola adds, "You don't fire a big caliber gun into a person point blank without splashing brains

and there were no brains in that car. There was no blood on the back of the car or anything." When asked what she thought had happened, Viola responded, "Michael Rosa was a drug pusher. I don't know if this had anything to do with it. You could ask any high school student at the time where you got drugs and they told you from Michael Rosa's men." She found it hard to believe that Rosa was doing anything connected with his job at the time of his death.

Viola describes Ed Cantrell as "a man that was born a hundred years after his time.. He's a range rider and still believes in the code of the west." She told of a man at her place of work that was arguing about the price of a drink. She said, "Ed immediately jumped up and grabbed the guy by the lapels and was shaking the tar out of him. I had to calm him down." of the shooting incident she says, " I don't know what prompted him (Cantrell) to kill Michael Rosa, but it was pretty smart of Jerry Spence(his lawyer) to get him off."

Until recently, Viola has not been involved in politics. She is a registered Democrat, but is probably "a closet Republican." She helped in a 1984 election campaign as part of a college class project. She would like to see more women involved in politics and is planning to continue taking an interest in it. She states, "Now that I'm awake, I'm not going to fall back asleep."

She has considered running for the city council.

Viola is proud of calling Rock Springs her home. She wants to continue being an active participant of the community.