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THE COVER: Jim Murray graduated from Mesa State College in May, 1990 with an A.A. in commercial art. He is the advertising manager for the Fruita *Times.*

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A Twentieth Century Stopping Place: The St. Regis Hotel 1893-1990

by Juanita Moston

Juanita Moston graduated from Mesa State College in May, 1990 with a B.A. in history. Among her many activities, she is active as a volunteer for the Museum of Western Colorado.

When historian Gene Fowler wrote, "The story of Greece is in its temples; that of America is in its hotels," he must have had Colorado in mind. When travel was arduous, and often dangerous, travelers wanted to rest in comfortable rooms. Most hotels spared no luxury in the Victorian style, with a ladies' entrance separate from the bar, and private parlors. Other hotels, however, charged as little as fifty cents a night for just the bare necessities. In these establishments, one might sleep on someone else's sheets.[1]

Many of the early hotels, such as the Jerome in Aspen, the Teller in Central City, and the Hotel de Paris in Georgetown, where beds could be folded down by day to make writing desks, are now museums, preserving a way of life that saw diamond dust mirrors transported intact over rough mountain passes by ox cart. Others like the Windsor in Denver, the Columbian in Trinidad and the Tabor Grand in Leadville are but memories or empty shells, their stories told only on paper.[2]

As early as 1884 at all major railroad depots, agents for the railroad or 'runners' for hotels were on hand to care for a tourist's baggage. If a lady accompanied a tourist, frontier hotel keepers urged that they wire ahead so the best room in the hotel could be prepared.[3]

Most hotels stood in the center of town, close to public transportation such as stage coaches or the railroad depot. A hotel is not as fortunate as an industrial concern which, when business declines, can reduce its inventories and cut costs. A hostelry's inventory is represented in a certain number of saleable rooms, a perishable commodity that is used up with the passage of time. The room that is saleable today must be sold today, or its value is gone forever. This being the case, hotels, rooming houses, and other lodging establishments located in or adjacent to the high traffic areas of a city.

The first hotel in Grand Junction was the Grand Junction House (later called the Randall House), located at the corner of Colorado Avenue and Second Street. Opened January 14, 1882, it was managed by William Green.[4] Within ten years of Grand Junction's founding, three hotels and restaurants and seven saloons were among a total of sixty-eight different businesses in the city. By 1890 horse-drawn streetcars were in place, and the population was 1,005.[5]

By the turn of the century Grand Junction became the hub of Colorado's Western Slope, partly because it stood midway between Denver and Salt Lake City on the main line of two railroads, the Denver and Rio Grande and the Colorado Midland. In addition, Grand Valley fruit was of the highest quality, and auxiliary industries supported a large fruit and agricultural industry adding to the commercial activity of the city.[6]

As Grand Junction developed there were no paved roads and only a few sidewalks. Men in boots and women in high-top shoes were forced to do their best with roads and trails that were either muddy quagmires or feather beds of dust, depending on the weather.[7] After 1909 an electric car system covered the city and extended for fifteen miles both east and west.

On March 22, 1893 William H. Neff, owner of a hardware business in Grand Junction, his wife Allie, and Anna Scott, a widow, bought the lot at the southwest corner of Fourth Street and Colorado Avenue from Grand Junction pioneer businessman Benton Canon.[8] The selling price for this lot in the heart of Grand Junction's business district was $1,250. On this property they planned to build an elegant hotel, catering primarily to traveling salesmen or 'drummers'. Construction on the new hostelry began in 1893,[9] and in 1895 the Grand Hotel and Restaurant opened for business.[10] The stagecoach came to the hotel as one of its main stops, and an electric trolley transported travelers from the railroad depot to the front door. Horse-drawn street cars on Main Street advertised the hotel with the sign, "Take this car to the Grand Hotel".[11] The hotel was modern for the time, and included good

built-in fire protection.[12] The people of Grand Junction considered the establishment an elegant addition to the city.

The hotel stood on piling and a mostly brick foundation, with the center of the building supported by concrete piers. The building was of wood construction, with bricks and mortar placed between the studs and held in place by nails driven through studs. Brick and mortar was an accepted form of insulation at the time.[13] Corrugated metal facing covered the exterior of the building. This, too, was a common feature of construction in the late nineteenth century.

Neff's management of the Grand was short-lived bcause he accepted a position in Denver, Colorado with the Elaterite Rubber Manufacturing Company and left Grand Junction.[14] But since no mention of Mrs. Neff leaving with him was found, and management of the hotel remained listed as Neff and Scott, it is possible that Mrs. Neff remained to run the establishment.[15]

In 1901 the listing of management changed to Edwards and Wells, Proprietors; rooms were advertised at two dollars and the hotel was "renovated and refurnished."[16] Almost each following year management changed, until October 3, 1904 when Harry Robert Burnett, Sr., bought the property for nine thousand dollars from William Neff, his wife Allie and Anna Scott.[17]

Before buying the Grand Hotel and moving to Grand Junction in 1904, Burnett had owned five hotels in Nebraska. He also owned the Glenwood Hotel in Glenwood Springs for a time.[18] He had the reputation of being a very good 'boniface', or innkeeper.[19]

The Grand Hotel was a dignified two story building when Burnett purchased it; nonetheless, he made improvements. The old metal facing came down and was replaced with a white brick facing on the street sides.[20] Trees were planted to shade the sidewalks, a plot of grass was available for Sunday afternoon strollers, and a wooden sidewalk was built to accommodate strollers.

Little is known of the early social life at the hotel, but it apparently had a massive bar and a ballroom for nightly dances. Burnett advertised the hotel as being on the European Plan, having "every essential feature of the first-class modern, metropolitan hotels. The lobby, in Mission style, makes an attractive and comfortable lounging place for the guests." There was a ladies' parlor off the lobby, and the sample rooms used by traveling salesmen on the ground floor were large, well-lighted and ventilated, and were provided with telephones and convenient access. These sample rooms afforded ample accommodations for displaying the largest lines of merchandise. The hotel was a headquarters for commercial men and was recognized as a leading hotel of western

(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, Collection F340)

Horse-drawn streetcar in front of the Cannon Building on Main Street.

Colorado. Around the hotel was an area alive with saloons and businesses frequented by miners, ranchers, and farmers.

The hotel's restaurant, The Flemish Dining Room, opened directly from the lobby, and the excellent cuisine, a la carte service at popular prices, met with general satisfaction and attracted numerous diners. A 1904 advertisement in the *Daily Sentinel* indicated choice selections for Sunday dining: la belle creole, consume St. Ignace, celery, queen olives, chow chow, baked salmon, oysters a la paulette en caison, green apple fritters with wine sauce, and roast prime beef au jus. To finish the meal diners chose among apple pie, lemon cream pie, chocolate ice cream, and angel food cake. The beverage choices were tea, coffee, noir, and milk. For such a repast patrons paid just seventy-five cents.[21]

In 1904 Burnett built a complete third floor onto the existing east wing of the hotel.[22] Steel beams (still visible in the west side of the east wing), placed twelve feet apart over the old hotel portion, supported the addition. The third floor contained twenty rooms, four with connecting baths, one with a bathtub, and the balance equipped only with lavatories. Also, there were two toilets, a store room, a closet with a wash bowl, and a stairway which led to the roof. The hotel was now called the New Grand Hotel, to confirm the new management and physical improvements.

On October 2, 1906 Burnett bought twenty-one feet of land west of the hotel from Annie Wright,[23] to accommodate a two story west wing, which would give the hotel a total of twenty-eight rooms on the second floor, four with connecting baths and the remainder with lavatories. There were also a linen storage room, a fire closet and two storage closets. This addition provided room on the first floor for a larger dining room, an eighteen by twenty foot store room, a sample room, pantry, kitchen with a cement floor, and a liquor store room approximately six by ten feet. These changes gave the building a U-shaped configuration. Business grew and the hotel became a social center for local clubs and civic groups.[24]

In 1908, the hotel was remodeled at a cost of $30,000, and the third floor and white brick facing were completed. Burnett decided the hotel should have a different name as well. He selected St. Regis to commemorate the refurbishing.[25] Burnett and his wife Alda ran the hotel, with Mrs. Burnett managing the business end of the operation. St. Regis payroll records of the period provide insight into the costs of labor. The books show Elmer Porter as cook at $2.66 per day; Colored Porter, $1.00 per day; Pantry Girl, $0.83 per day; Bus Driver, $1.00 per day; Clerk, $1.00 per day; and Chamber Maid, $0.83 per day.[26] Mrs. Burnett, a capable businesswoman, died in 1919.[27]

(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, Collection 2HA334C)

Harry Robert Burnett, Sr.

Before prohibition the St. Regis boasted an elegant bar, operated by J.E. Dulmaine. Bottles for the bar were produced with the St. Regis logo and Dulmaine's name on them. Some of these bottles apparently traveled considerable distances because a half-pint refillable bottle, with a screw cap closing, was unearthed in the late 1980s near Gunnison, Colorado.[28]

Grand Junction's population had increased by 1908 to approximately 7,754 people.[29] The gentlemen of Grand Junction gathered at local restaurants, the Senate Bar, or in the lobby of the St. Regis to discuss business and politics over whiskey and cigars. Travelers, businessmen,

and entertainers made the St. Regis their headquarters during brief stays in the city.

One such man was Major John M. Burke, an advance-man for Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World Show who registered at the St. Regis Hotel on August 31, 1908. This colorful character gave the "United States" as his residence.[30] Burke expressed surprise in finding such an excellent hotel as the St. Regis in a city the size of Grand Junction. The prosperous appearance of Grand Junction impressed him, and he said it was one of the best towns for its size he ever visited.[31]

In the first decade of the twentieth century the St. Regis hosted meetings of civic groups promoting the Grand Valley's economic development. A highway promotional group called the Pathfinder held many meetings at the St. Regis and discussed the development of state roads from Grand Junction to Montrose and to the Utah state line. In later years Charles Vail, Director of the Colorado Department of Highways, made the St. Regis his headquarters while on business trips to the area. Vail Pass would later be named after him.[32]

Non-commercial travelers also found the St. Regis a convenient and comfortable stopping off place. In 1910 Mr. and Mrs. Henry Louis Senter, of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, parents of Mrs. Alta Barbour, a current Grand Junction resident, were traveling from their home to California on their honeymoon. Railroads routinely made overnight stops for guests at that time. The Senters spent a night at the St. Regis before going on the next day to California. Mrs. Barbour remembers her parents speaking of the hotel in complimentary terms.[33] However, by the 1930s that had changed. As a new high school graduate, Mrs. Barbour remembers that her parents did not want her visiting the St. Regis, because it was a "rough place to go."

The St. Regis was listed in the Midland Trail Tour Guide of 1916 as an A.A.A. hotel, with a fine cafe.[34] The hotel advertised rooms for "$1.50 per day and up, with a bath $2.25 per day, a cafe in connection, and sample rooms on the main floor." These rates continued to be advertised until 1931.[35]

On September 19, 1920 Harry Burnett sold half interest in the St. Regis to his son Harry Earl Burnett, and retired.[36] He bought the family home at 515 Seventh Street from Albert Sampliner, who owned, along with his cousin Joseph, the Sampliner Clothing store, which eventually became Brownson's.[37] Prior to living in this house, the family had lived at the hotel.

On January 15, 1924 a major fire broke out in the west wing of the hotel at about 7:30 p.m. The origin of the fire was thought to have

(Photo courtesy of *Daily Sentinel*)

An ad from the Daily Sentinel, *1908.*

been in a defective flue. Even though the hotel was built with adequate fire control facilities, the fire had burned between the walls for some distance and had done considerable damage before being discovered by the senior Burnett. Inspection showed the entire two story west wing would have to be rebuilt; the west half of the front of the hotel and its furnishings were heavily damaged. The east portion containing forty rooms suffered only slight smoke damage. Just the day before the disastrous fire, work was completed on laying new carpet and rugs

in a number of rooms that were damaged by the fire. There were no injuries reported as a result of the fire.[38]

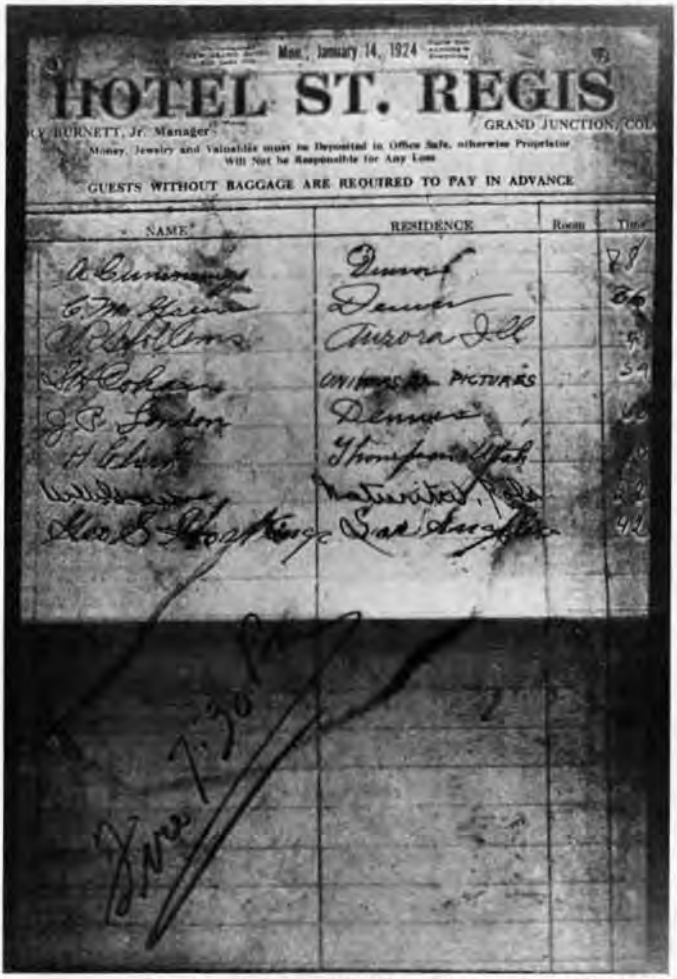
Nine days after the fire, on January 24, 1924, Burnett reopened the hotel with forty usable rooms. The fire did an estimated $20,000 in damage. Burnett remodeled the entire inside of the building and eventually had fifty-two rooms available.[39]

The St. Regis fire was one of three bad fires in Grand Junction in the winter of 1924, with the others occurring at the Hampson Store and St. Mary's Hospital. An extremely cold winter that year caused people to overtax their heating systems in an attempt to stay warm.[40]

On August 23, 1924, Harry Robert Burnett died at St. Mary's Hospital following surgery.[41] Harry Burnett, Jr. kept his half of the hotel, and the other half was divided among Hazel and Gertrude, the senior Burnett's daughters, and his widow Sarah. Harry Jr. later acquired full ownership of the hotel by buying out Hazel and Gertrude, each for $1,000 and Sarah for $3,000.[42]

Grand Junction had grown to over 10,000 people by the 1920s and enjoyed various forms of entertainment and recreation. The Avalon Theatre opened in 1923; William Moyers donated $25,000 to the city of Grand Junction to build a swimming pool in 1922;[43] and the ballroom in the Margery Building held dance marathons. By 1924 people could roll back the rugs in their living rooms and dance to music broadcast live by KFXJ (later KREX radio) from location on the second floor front of the St. Regis Hotel. Rex Howell was the owner of the station and its announcer.[44] The Armand de Beque dance band broadcast from that location every Saturday afternoon for a year or more. The station acquired two or three bedrooms on the second floor which were remodeled into a studio. Band leader Armand de Beque remembers that the room from which the broadcast originated was so small there was hardly enough room to play. Harry, Jr. and Nancy Speck, a De Beque girl who played in the dance band, later married.[45]

Burnett threw his hat into the political ring in 1934, campaigning for the office of Secretary of State on the Republican ticket. The only candidate from Western Colorado running for a major post in state government, Burnett was described as operating "one of the most prosperous hotels in Western Colorado" and was a Past Exalted Ruler of the Grand Junction Elks Lodge.[46] Though Burnett won the primary election leading his ticket state-wide in total votes, he lost the general election to Democrat James H. Carr.[47] Shortly after the election, Carr was indicted by a grand jury for taking kickbacks from a Denver liquor business with which he was involved. Burnett was asked to take



(Courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, Collection 85.118)

The St. Regis register for January 24, 1924, noting "Fire 7:30 p.m."

the office, but he declined, stating that since he had not won the election, he did not want the job.[48]

At the end of Prohibition, Grand Junction's first 'cocktail lounge' appeared in the St. Regis Hotel.[49] The Oriental Room and Cocktail Lounge opened in 1936 and featured a full line of imported and domestic wines, beer, and mixed drinks. One drink was even named "Harry's Morning Pick Me Up!"

Elmer Mills was a long-time employee of the St. Regis. In 1933, during the Great Depression, Mills started working as a bellhop at the St. Regis, with his pay consisting entirely of tips. Three years later he convinced Burnett to give him an eight dollar a week wage to complement the tips. Mills also drove the hotel bus, picking up people at the railroad station. He was such a good salesman for the hotel that Burnett found it necessary to buy a larger bus to accommodate the increase in customers.

By 1940 Mills was Desk Manager, a position at which he worked twelve hour days, seven days a week, for $10 a week plus tips. On this he supported a family of two children. Burnett gave his loyal employee a sizeable check following the birth of each of his children.

For a time, Sue Kelley, widow of Mills, also worked at the hotel as a maid, and sometimes helped in the kitchen. She recalled that during the Second World War Grand Junction was a rest stop for military pilots shuttling airplanes from one coast to the other. They usually slept only about four hours at the hotel before moving on. She changed linen in the rooms after each one left, as often as four times a day. Military personnel from Pando, the Tenth Mountain ski training facility near Leadville, also stayed at the hotel while in town.[50]

Life at the St. Regis during the 1930s and 1940s was seldom dull. When the Cole Brothers Circus came to Grand Junction in 1940, a trained elephant was brought through the double front doors of the hotel, given a pen and allowed to sign the guest register! The publicity was wonderful, but Burnett worried that the animal would damage the beautiful hardwood floor in the lobby.[51]

Burnett was involved with many clubs and organizations in Grand Junction. He helped to bring baseball pitcher Whitey Ford to Grand Junction to pitch for the Eagles baseball team at the end of World War II when other pitchers were still involved with the war effort. He also bought the uniforms for the Eagles Drill Team members.[52]

The hotel was the scene of several suicides; one person hanged himself, one jumped from a second story window into the inner courtyard area, and another set his bed on fire.

L.E. (Bill) Ellicott, who stayed at the St. Regis in 1944, remembers the hotel rooms were not air conditioned, but in general he felt the hotel was "nice enough."

Harry Lloyd Burnett, son of Harry Earl Burnett, assumed management of the hotel in the early 1950s. Because of the uranium boom, business was very good. Rooms were filled up early in the afternoon. The three sample rooms that ran the length of the west wing

(Courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, Collection 2HA17)

Harry Earl Burnett

were remodeled to enlarge the bar area. Business was so lively that it was not possible to keep cold beer on hand at all times.[53]

In the late 1950s, Burnett was offered $495,000 for the St. Regis, but he refused the offer. During this time, he did some remodeling and installed an elevator in the hotel.[54] Because there were so few rooms with bathroom facilities, rates and income were low. Rooms without a bath rented for $2.50, and those with a bath rented for four dollars.

The uranium boom saw the building of a number of motels in Grand Junction. Their competition and a smaller transient population in the community caused the occupancy rate at the St. Regis to decline. Gross income began to level off by 1958, with bar business being the most profitable part of the operation.

Then both the bar and the room rental decreased, and by 1960 the hotel ledger registered an $8,000 loss.

Rumors about prostitution also plagued the hostelry. In earlier years, it was said Harry Earl Burnett was willing to provide women for customers if they requested them.[55] While manager of the hotel, young Burnett was called to Denver before the U.S. Court to identify a man from Utah charged with violation of the Mann Act. The accused had stayed at the St. Regis, but was arrested for prostitution activities at a location on Orchard Mesa outside the city. Burnett knew the man brought women from Utah to pursue the oldest profession, but allowed him and the women to stay at the hotel. However, Burnett would not allow them to conduct their activities in the hotel. Consequently, they opted for an Orchard Mesa motel location. A hotel rule prohibited women in the bar, which was separated from the lounge by a heavy velvet curtain over the doorway. The bar, a stand-up bar, contained no chairs. Burnett apparently allowed gambling to go on in the bar.

There was no dress code in the 1950s, but jackets, ties, and ladies in nice dresses were accepted. Poor persons were simply priced out of the bar. A bottle of beer cost as much as two dollars to discourage the undesirable trade.

Harry Earl Burnett died in 1960 at the age of 66. His estate was handled by the United States Bank of Grand Junction. Prior to his death, he was despondent over the death of his wife, while emphysema weakened and discouraged him. Burnett had lost interest in keeping the hotel up to its previous high standards, and the hotel operated at a loss during the last two years he owned it, posting an $8,597.40 loss in 1958 and an $8,874.03 deficit in 1959. From January 16, 1960 to February 3, 1961 when the bank managed the business, there was a net loss of $8,586.51, including $1,271.39 in unpaid real estate taxes.

Before Burnett's death the United States Bank had considered buying the hotel, demolishing it and installing a drive-up bank at the site. When Burnett died and the property went into the estate, the bank, having a conflict of interest problem as the manager of the estate, gave up plans to buy the hotel.

At the time the hotel was renting fifty-two rooms, eleven with baths and eighteen with water closets. There were twelve tubs, fifty-five lavatories, six kitchen sinks and one urinal. The hotel had only eleven rooms with private or connecting baths; the other rooms had only lavatories, and the only public bath tub was on the third floor.

By this time, the once elegant hotel restaurant sold more liquor than food. When the kitchen was inventoried for the estate, few kitchen items for food preparation remained. Because state law required

(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, General Collections)

The La Court Hotel, a longtime competitor of the St. Regis, as shown in an early 1900s postcard.

establishments that sold liquor to also sell food, the rumor was that if a customer ordered a meal it would be brought in from the nearest restaurant, then served to the customer on the pretense that it was prepared in the hotel kitchen.[56] During the time the bank handled the property the bar was not operated.[57]

The United States Bank of Grand Junction advertised the hotel for sale in 1960, but there was little interest in the property. The bank then offered the hotel for sale on a bid basis. Only one bid was received after the court agreed to an independent appraisal, and the hotel was sold in 1961 to A.W. O'Brien and Amos and Roland Rasso for $45,000. The fair market value of the building was established at $27,240 and the land was valued at $4,120. The remainder of the value was for the good name of the hotel.

Harry Lloyd Burnett had expected to inherit his father's estate. However, when the will was read it was learned that he would receive only $1,000 cash. Burnett stated in his will:

> It is my intention by the terms of this will to specifically disinherit my adopted son Harry L. Burnett except that I give, devise and bequeath him a specific bequest of $1,000 if he survives me. I direct this disinheritance for many reasons personal to me not herein set out and because of my said adopted son's expressed declaration that he does not consider me as his father, and because I have very adequately cared for said adopted son up to the time of the making of this will.[58]

Burnett left $10,000 to his sister Hazel Strasser; $5,000 to Edith Walbridge, a sister-in-law; $5,000 to his brother-in-law Dr. Wilbur Hards; $2,000 to his nephew West B. Hards; $5,000 to a stepdaughter, Oryl Vallier; and $3,000 to his friend and long time desk clerk at the hotel, Elmer Mills. The family home and furnishings at 515 North Seventh Street were left to Hazel Strasser. Burnett also provided for his two grandchildren by establishing a $10,000 trust for each of them.

Burnett also set up the Clara and Harry Burnett Memorial Trust, which would receive any other monies involved in the estate. The will provided that Hazel Strasser would get half of the income of the trust until her death, then her children would divide their mother's half among themselves. Edith Walbridge would receive one-eighth of the trust, but upon her death it would revert to the trust. Burnett's grandchildren, Kathy and Robert Burnett, would each get one-eighth as well. But, "if all die first it goes to the use and benefit of the education of underprivileged children of Mesa County."[59] Harry Earl Burnett was well known in Grand Junction for his work in charity. For over 30 years he extended aid to the poor of Mesa County, in amounts said

by friends to have been considerable. When the bills were all paid and the will settled there was a final cash summary on May 22, 1961 of $8,618.80.[60]

In 1962 Catherine Blackshear leased the hotel from Amos Raso and O'Brien and operated it for the next twenty years. Hazel Strasser, Burnett's sister, had been a customer in Blackshear's beauty shop, and she encouraged her to lease the business. Raso and O'Brien tried to sell the property to Blackshear but failed. By the time of the Blackshear lease the building needed some major repair work. The bank had estimated in the appraisal of the property that it would require an investment of $25,000 to put the building into good order,[61] but this seems to have been an underestimate.

Blackshear spent $70,000 on remodeling when she took over the operation. Removal of structural support beams on the second floor of the hotel caused the ceiling to sag due to the weight of the third story. Workmen had to do emergency repairs to replace and strengthen the structure to keep it from collapsing.[62]

During remodeling a sunken bar was created in the hotel, pool tables were added, and the dance floor was moved.[63] A beauty shop was put in on the first floor of the east wing. About twelve years later, Blackshear spent $50,000 on a second remodeling.

For a time, the bar receipts totaled $3,000 a week, though dance bands were also costing upwards of $1,200 to $1,500 a week.[64] Blackshear hired a "Las Vegas cook" to run the kitchen and began serving meals, but later closed the restaurant because the cook was not a good manager, and it lost money. After the restaurant closed, meals came from the bus depot, a block away, and were delivered "down the alley" to the hotel.[65]

There were no problems in keeping rooms rented, but the hotel was not very profitable and without the bar there would have been no profit. There were fifty-two hotel rooms rented weekly at rates from fourteen dollars (without a bath) to thirty-two dollars (with a bath). Some rooms rented for as little as three dollars per night. Others were rented to permanent guests.[67]

In the years following Burnett family ownership, the St. Regis lost its former respectability. Neighbors complained about the noise coming from the bands playing in the bar, the fighting, and the general decline in the calibre of clientele who came to the area. The Melrose Hotel, built in 1911 on the same block as the St. Regis, registered numerous complaints against its rival for disturbances over the years.[68]

The La Court Motel, newer and nicer, and only two blocks away, took some of the customers. The new interstate highway and the new

motels along it took business away from the downtown area. All this took a heavy toll on the St. Regis in its waning years.

On March 15, 1982, O'Brien and Raso sold the hotel to Russell W. and Dolores M. Olsen, for $225,000.[69] Their ownership was short and they made no significant changes in the hotel or the business. Olsen, who was in the oil industry, planned to use the hotel as a place where oil field workers could stay and find job information. However, the oil decline stifled that plan.[70] The Olsens lost the hotel in a Sheriff's sale on February 22, 1985 and O'Brien and Raso took it back.[71]

In March 1986 heirs of O'Brien and Raso gave the building to the Grand Junction Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.[72] The Elks had no plans for the building and discussed razing it and making a parking lot for the lodge. Money for restoration was not available, and the hotel was used as a tax write off until it was sold to Jack Elliot, a member of the Elks Lodge, on May 12, 1988.[73]

Elliot planned to revive the ninety-seven year old hotel, as a hotel and a Gay '90s style restaurant and lounge.[74] As a first step in renovation, over 300 tons of debris were removed.[75] The interior structure shows evidence of the previous fires in the hotel.

Until Elliot began work on the building, it had stood empty for years. The vacant structure became a favorite haunt for hide-and-seek playing youngsters and a haven for vagabonds. The hotel still had some furnishings in it at this time, making it a nice place for homeless people to use to escape from the elements. In one incident, in March 1986, four young men were arrested inside the hotel,[76] and charged with breaking and entering among other things. However, charges were dismissed because the building had been entered many times previously. The doors were unlocked and access could be gained through the roof, via the gazebo, which the Burnetts had used as a sleeping area during the hot summer nights in the hotel's grander days.

Today remodeling of the old hotel proceeds at a snail's pace. Yet there is hope that one day the elegant old St. Regis will be restored and receive a new lease on life, and that a bit of downtown Grand Junction's history will flourish again as a reminder of the prosperous times of the pre-automobile age.

(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, General Collections)

The St. Regis about 1950.

NOTES

[1]Sandra Dallas, *No More Than Five To A Bed, Colorado Hotels in the Old Days* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. xi.

[2]Colorado Traveler, Historic Inns and Hotels (Frederick, Colorado: Renaissance House), travel brochure.

[3]Frederick E. Shearer, ed., *The Pacific Tourist* (New York: Adams & Bishop, Publisher, 1884). Introduction.

[4]*Denver Times,* 1 December 1896, p. 159.

[5]Richard E. Tope, *Objective History: Grand Junction, Colorado* (Grand Junction: Museum of Western Colorado, 1984), p. 73.

[6]An undated advertisement about the St. Regis, printed in the style of a travel advertisement. Copy provided by Mrs. Hazel Strasser and in possession of the author.

[7]*Daily Sentinel,* 4 July 1976, Centennial/Bicentennial Edition.

[8]*Grand Junction News,* 22 April 1893. Benton Canon would later go on to be a partner with H.A. Spencer and A.V. Lane to incorporate the Grand River Ferry Company and to put a ferry boat at the Narrows, where the proposed Plateau Canyon road was to end.

[9]Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1893.

[10]*Colorado Mining Directory* (Denver, Colorado: Colorado Directory Publishing Co., 1895).

[11]*Daily Sentinel,* 8 February 1961.

[12]R.T. Mantlo interview by author, 3 January 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[13]This was clearly visible to the author when on a tour of the building in August 1989. The contractor, Tom Sherman, stated that when the wallboard was removed in some places the mortar fell out as well. The portion of the building that had not been bricked over on the outside still has the original tin facing on it. As part of the current renovation, the foundation was reinforced by placing railroad ties under the main support of the building, raising it by 1½ inches.

[14]*Daily Sentinel,* 20 March 1895.

[15]*The Colorado State Business Directory, with Colorado Mining Directory Department, Denver Colorado* (Denver: The Gazatteer Publishing Co.). Management of the St. Regis and the dates of the directory's publications are listed as follows:

1895 – Neff & Scott
1896 – Grand Hotel, Neff & Scott, Prop.
1901 – Edwards & Wells, Prop.
1902 – Grand Hotel, Thomas Chambers, Prop.
1903 – The Grand Hotel, Thomas Chambers, Prop.
1904 – Grand Hotel, E.W. Jordan, Prop.
1905 – Burnett, Harry, Prop. New Grand Hotel.

[16]*Ibid.*

[17]Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, *Records* Book 98, p. 361.

[18]Correspondence with Hazel Strasser, Amarillo, Texas, sister of Harry Robert Burnett, 21 November 1989. Letter in possession of the author.

[19]Sumner & Horn, *The Booster Book* 1905.

[20]*Daily Sentinel,* 8 February 1961.

[21]*Ibid.*

[22]*Ibid.*

[23]Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, *Records* Book 114, p. 349. On October 2, 1906, Harry Burnett and Alda Burnett, his wife, purchased the east twenty-one feet of Lot 14, Block 124 from Annie Wright for an undisclosed amount of money.

[24]*Daily Sentinel,* 8 February 1961.

[25]Harry Lloyd Burnett interview by author, 3 October 1989. Burnett stated there was a city-wide contest to select a new name and the St. Regis was it. However, Hazel Strasser, Burnett's sister, stated that Burnett just liked the name and picked it himself.

[26]Records are in the possession of The Museum of Western Colorado, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[27]Correspondence with Hazel Strasser, 21 November 1989. Letter in possession of the author.

[28]Michael C. Miller and L.D. (Bill) Ellicott, *Imprints in Glass and Pottery: Aspen to Grand Junction,* Undated Publication, Copy Number 193, p. 109.

[29]Tope, *Objective History.*

[30]William L. Tennent, "The Day Buffalo Bill Came To Town," *Museum Journal* (Grand Junction: The Museum of Western Colorado, 1985), Vol. 1, p. 5.

[31]*Ibid.*

[32]Harry Lloyd Burnett interview by author, 3 October 1989, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[33]Alta Barbour interview by author, 18 January 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[34]*Midland Trail Tour Guide, 1916* (Glorietta, New Mexico: The Rio Grande Press, Inc., 1916) pp. 61, 134.

[35]*Colorado Business Directory,* With A Complete Classified Directory of the Entire State, Including Mines, Reduction Works, Estates, etc., 59th Annual Volume.

[36]Mesa County Clerk & Recorder, *Records* Book 249, p. 44.

[37]*Legacy, The Journal of The Museum of Western Colorado* (Grand Junction: Museum of Western Colorado, 1988) I:2. Calendar for the month of June.

[38]*Daily Sentinel,* 15 January 1924.

[39]*Daily Sentinel,* 8 February 1961.

[40]*Ibid.*

[41]*Daily Sentinel,* 24 August 1924.

[42]Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, *Records* Book 270, pp. 145, 146, 147.

[43]Harry L. Burnett interview by author, 3 October 1989. William Moyer lost his fortune and The Fair Store during the 1929 Crash and lived room and board free at the St Regis hotel until his death in 1943.

[44]*Mesa County, Colorado: A 100 Year History (1883-1983),* (Grand Junction: Museum of Western Colorado, 1986), p. 29.

[45]Correspondence with Armand de Beque, 17 August 1989. Letter in possession of the author.

[46]*Daily Sentinel,* 30 October 1934.

[47]*Daily Sentinel,* 7 November 1934.

[48]Burnett interview, 3 October 1989.

[49]Correspondence with Hazel Strasser, 21 November 1989. Letter in possession of the author.

[50]Sue Kelley interview by author, 8 March 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[51]*Daily Sentinel,* 3 August 1940.

[52]Kelley interview.

[53]Burnett interview, 3 October 1989.

[54]Sue Kelley, widow of Elmer Mills, said the elevator did work up to the time her husband left the hotel, and that it was used when Mrs. Blackshear had it. However, the Nisley appraisal of the property stated it was never finished.

[55]Catherine Blackshear interview by author, 25 January 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado. Blackshear ran a beauty shop for several years before taking over the hotel and she remembers a customer who admitted working for Burnett while working at a local bank during the day.

[56]Herb Bacon interview by author, August 1989, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[57]Letter from the United States Bank of Grand Junction, to Mr. Miles Kara, Judge, Mesa County Court, Grand Junction, Colorado, regarding the Estate of Harry E. Burnett, Dec., 6 February 1961. A part of the file record of the will of Harry E. Burnett. Letter on file at the U.S. District Court Archives, Denver, Colorado.

[58]Direct quote from Harry E. Burnett's will, dated 4 September 1959. Document on file at the U.S. District Court Archives, Denver, Colorado. The will was contested by Harry L. Burnett. He attempted to discredit Hazel Strasser by saying she used undue "psychological influence" over the senior Burnett during a period when he felt his father was ill and could be easily influenced. Harry Lloyd Burnett also had problems with his father over the "policy and direction" of the hotel.

[59]*Ibid.*

[60]Court records included in the Harry E. Burnett will, dated 4 September 1959. Document on file at the U.S. District Court Archives, Denver, Colorado.

[61]Letter from United States Bank of Grand Junction, Grand Junction, Colorado, to Mr. Miles Kara, Judge, Mesa County Court, Grand Junction, Colorado, Regarding: Estate of Harry E. Burnett, Dec., February 6, 1961.

[62]Blackshear interview, 25 January 1970.

[63]*Ibid.*

[64]Catherine Blackshear interview by author, 26 January 1989, Grand Junction, Colorado. Blackshear said she went home every night with a headache for over five years, because of the loud country music the customers liked.

[65]*Ibid.*

[67]*Ibid.* When one customer was late in paying his bill she remembers keeping his dentures until he paid up. She had given him twenty-four hours to pay the past due rent, and he kept stalling. When she took his teeth he realized she was serious and came up with the money within five hours.

[68]Betty Davis, owner of the Melrose Hotel, interview by author, 12 January 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado.

[69]Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, *Records* Book 1375, p. 526.

[70]Blackshear interview, 25 January 1990.

[71]Mesa County Clerk and Recorder, *Records* Book 1539, p. 384.

[72]*Ibid.*, Book 1665, p. 407.

[73]*Ibid.*, Book 1692, p. 741.

[74]*Daily Sentinel*, 24 August 1989. Elliot also owns the Dollar Saver in Grand Junction.

[75]Tom Sherman, contractor for Jack Elliott, August, 1989.

[76]Pat Hambrick interview by author, 23 January 1990, Grand Junction, Colorado.

Johnson's House of Flowers
A Family Tradition

by Lillian Blackman

Lillian Blackman graduated from Mesa State College in December, 1990 with a B.A. in history and elementary education. Currently, she is a substitute teacher for the school district, looking to become a full time teacher.

In the small towns and cities of pre-World War II America, family-owned businesses were the backbone of local commercial economies. Such businesses succeeded largely because their owners willingly sacrificed a life of ease and vigorously applied the work ethic. Many such businesses eventually succumbed to the onrush of large national companies; the few that survived have become something like historical artifacts, the remnants of a bygone era. Such a survivor is Johnson's House of Flowers, a family-created business in Grand Junction, Colorado, that prospers in spite of the changing nature of retailing patterns.

The business was founded by Stephen B. Johnson, born to a Louisville, Kentucky farm couple in 1891.[1] In 1909, young Johnson enrolled at Oklahoma A and M College in Stillwater and graduated in 1912.[2] Until his junior year in college, Johnson's area of study was animal biology. However, a scheduling conflict in a required class changed all that. Placed in a botany class, he became excited about the plant world and shortly began to pursue a career in horticulture.[3] During his years at OAMC, he met Myrtle Lewis, whom he married in 1912. The couple eventually built Johnson's House of Flowers, a business founded on a forty-six year husband-wife partnership.

After college the young couple moved to North Dakota where Johnson obtained a teaching position at North Dakota Agricultural College.[4] He and his new bride remained there a short time, then

moved to Tucson, Arizona, where Stephen taught horticulture at the University of Arizona from 1914 to 1917.[5]

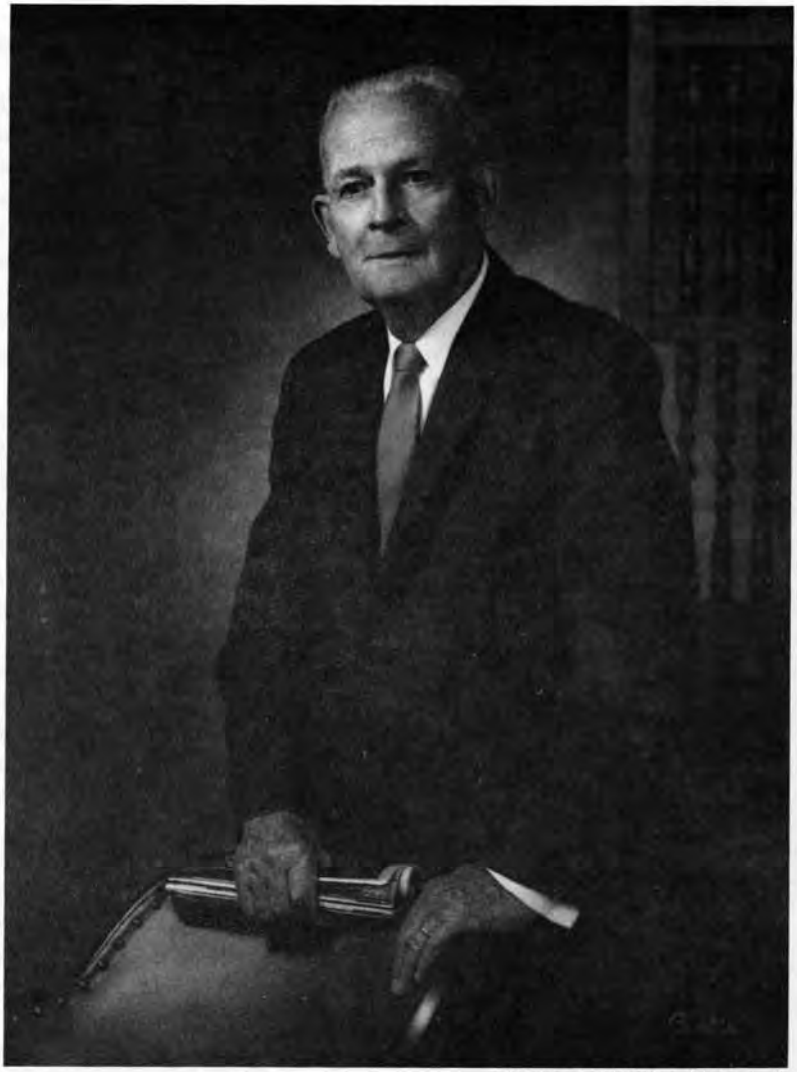
The Arizona heat soon proved to be unbearable for the Johnsons. Fred Fields, Johnson's brother-in-law and friend, offered and Johnson accepted a job in a hardware store in the small western Colorado town of Olathe.[6] However, Johnson's enthusiasm for working in a hardware store did not last long. He began dreaming of owning a floral shop. By this time the Johnsons had two children, Don and Stephen, Jr., so Johnson wanted to establish himself in a business that would provide financial security for his family. Accordingly, the couple made plans to make a move and try their hand in the business of growing and selling plants and flowers.

In 1918, the Johnsons moved to nearby Montrose, Colorado, where Stephen secured a position at Montrose High School, teaching Botany and General Science. He hoped to save enough money to start a floral business.[7] During the summer of 1919, Johnson's dear friend and former employer, Fred Fields, made a trip to Oklahoma. There he persuaded Myrtle's brothers, Allie and Lloyd Lewis, to lend the young Johnsons $3,000 to start a greenhouse in Montrose. There was no security for this loan, but the Lewis brothers put one stipulation in the contract: the business was to be in Myrtle's name.[8]

With the loan, the Johnsons purchased the Benson property at West Main and Maple in Montrose. It included an old house and six lots that could be used for further expansion. Johnson ordered materials for a greenhouse from Ikes Braun Greenhouse Manufacturing Company in Chicago.[9] Continuing to teach full time at Montrose High School for two years, Johnson operated the greenhouse at night, while Myrtle ran the business during the day.

In the beginning, business was very slow for the Johnsons. Customers had little money to spend, so the Johnsons established a barter system for those who could not afford to pay with cash. Often one live chicken was exchanged for a dozen carnations.[10] Their customers consisted mostly of other merchants, and there were charges on most accounts. Stephen Johnson, Jr. recalls his father's policy for collecting unpaid accounts.

> As a convenience for his customers, and to assure we could remain in business, Dad would have me collect from the merchants on Main Street at the first of every month for the previous month's charges. Since it was the heyday of silver dollars, I would make the rounds, and when my pockets were full, I would make a trip to the bank.[11]



(Courtesy of Stephen Johnson, Jr.)

Stephen B. Johnson, Sr., founder of Johnson's House of Flowers.

In 1923, while in Montrose, a third son, Bob, was born. As the boys grew older, they too helped out in the flower business. Stephen, Jr. was given a four-by-four-foot corner in the greenhouse, where he grew parsley to sell to the meat markets. He also worked in the floral shop after school and all day Saturday for fifteen cents an hour. In the spring, he sold seeds on consignment for a few pennies a pack.[12] Being involved

in the family business proved to be rewarding for Stephen, Jr., leading in time to a partnership with his father.

In 1936, the Johnsons decided to open a greenhouse in Grand Junction. Their oldest son, Don, was planning to be married, and he would operate the business in Montrose.[13] Stephen, Sr. came to Grand Junction intending to buy out Watson Floral Company, but Jake Watson, the owner, turned down his offer.[14] Another prospect, a greenhouse owned by Jimmy Arcieri, was then explored. The greenhouse was located at Seventh Street and Struthers Avenue. Johnson purchased the property from Arcieri in December, 1936.[15] Simultaneously he leased a store at 455 Main Street, at the present site of Woolworth.

The Johnsons divided the store on Main Street into two twelve-foot store fronts. Piney Seals, a man who shined shoes, paid a small rent for half of the space. The other half contained a flower shop with living quarters in the back.[16] The greenhouse was located more than a mile away from the shop. During the winter it was Stephen, Jr.'s job to walk the mile at 3:00 a.m. to shovel coal and pull clinkers from the furnace, a procedure that protected greenhouse plants from the winter cold.[17]

At first the Johnsons had misgivings about moving to Grand Junction.[18] It was during the Great Depression, and the economy was suffering. They knew the community held florists in low regard, and the business community also was not very receptive to new competition. Although they knew times would be hard, they opened for business in Grand Junction on February 14, 1937.[19]

Business was slow but steady in their floral shop. Stephen, Sr. and Myrtle both worked very hard. Dedicated to their new business, they were always looking for ways to please their customers and improve their methods. Up to this point area florists, including the Johnsons, had always sold unarranged cut flowers for those wishing to send cheer to someone in the hospital. The nurse on duty would place the flowers in a Mason jar for the patient. The Johnsons decided to capitalize on this and began to make up flower arrangements. Empty motor oil cans were collected from local gas stations, washed out, and wrapped in decorative foil. The flower arrangements were placed in the decorated cans for delivery.[20]

The Johnsons adjusted to their new life in Grand Junction, and in 1937, Stephen, Sr. ordered a delivery car to help out in the business. They also had a local school boy, Lonnie Jaynes, pedal his bicycle to deliver flowers to St. Mary's Hospital, then located at Twelfth and Colorado Avenue. Although they were doing well at their present

location, it was a little crowded for the young family. Stephen, Jr. climbed a ladder to sleep on top of the refrigerator, because there was no extra room for a bed.[21] They decided to look for a new tract of land for their greenhouse and "put all their eggs in one basket."[22]

Myrtle found the new location on North Avenue. The tract of land consisted of one and a half acres and a house, the present location of Johnson's House of Flowers, the oldest business on Grand Junction's North Avenue.[23] Stephen, Sr. and Myrtle paid $2,500 for the tract of land,[24] which they purchased from John Groner on June 17, 1937.[25]

Fellow business associates warned Johnson that he would go broke, moving away from the downtown shopping area. But Johnson was convinced that business would grow if he made the move.[26] He moved his family into the house, and began tearing down the greenhouse on Struthers Avenue to reconstruct it on the new site.[27] Stephen, Jr. recalls the decision to move their business:

> People told us we would never make it if we moved away from Main Street. North Avenue, at the time, was considered outside city limits and in the country. The only attraction North Avenue held was that it was on the road from Fruita to Palisade. But my father was determined to make it work.[28]

The Johnsons supplied all the labor on the building, working many long, hard hours. They hired a night fireman to build bench legs for soil boxes, so they could begin planting. Hand post hole diggers were used to place over two hundred posts, so the process was a slow one. Also, over five thousand panes of glass were washed and placed in putty. Myrtle managed the shop downtown while the construction was going on. The business on Main Street remained in operation for another two years.

Anxious to finalize the move to North Avenue, the Johnsons borrowed $3,000 to build a flower shop along with the greenhouse.[29] The supplies they needed were purchased from Independent Lumber Company, and since they were buying their supplies from the company, an architect was made available to do the planning, free of charge.[30] The Johnsons constructed the flower shop themselves, as well.

There were other plans to work out, such as water supply. In order to irrigate their plants, a water line had to be brought from Twelfth Street, across what was then an alfalfa field. This work was done by Clarence Galvin, at a price of fifteen cents a running foot, three feet deep. A parallel irrigation ditch caused this trench to collapse frequently. But Galvin cheerfully redug it, elevating ditch digging to a professional level.[31]

The new location for their business seemed to be going well, until a fire swept through the greenhouse on the morning of October 31, 1940.[32] The fire, believed to have started in the stoker, then spread to the coal bin. The boiler room was destroyed, as was a Pontiac automobile and a portion of two glass greenhouses. A sack of potatoes in the car trunk was well baked from the fire. Since it was Halloween, materials ordinarily left outside had been moved into the greenhouse to avoid vandalism.[33]

Although the greenhouse was considered outside city limits and out of the fire department's jurisdiction, Johnson's House of Flowers was considered an industrial plant, and there was fear of the fire spreading to other properties.[34] Still the Johnsons had to pay a fee to the Grand Junction fire department for putting out the fire. The price of the fee was derived by the following equation: the total cost of the fire department's operation, divided by the total cost of the fires to which they had responded. It was a high price to pay, but the fee was negotiable.[35]

After the fire, repairs were made right away, and the greenhouse was back in operation by Christmas.[36] The shop on Main Street continued business as usual. Willy Arcieri volunteered to hand feed the boiler each night and keep the greenhouses from freezing. Arcieri then did his own work in the daytime. Years later, Stephen, Jr. partially repaid the debt by night-firing when Combs Gardens in Fruita suffered a fire.

By this time the country was moving toward World War II. The Johnsons had been growing vegetable plants, as well as flowers, and they were called upon to grow more tomato plants. There was an increasing need for tomato plants for farmers who were selling tomatoes to the local cannery. In order to meet this demand, four large cold frames were installed for growing tomato plants.[37]

A year and a half before Pearl Harbor, Stephen, Jr. left the family business to go to California, to gain experience in working for others. He began working for Lockheed Aircraft, producers of fighter planes.[38] At the request of Lockheed officials, Stephen remained with the company during World War II, to help with the war effort.

With Stephen, Jr. gone, Bob off to medical school, and Don operating the shop in Montrose, Stephen, Sr. and Myrtle were left to operate the business alone. The only other male working for them was Glenn McElhiney, a deaf-mute. Although he was excellent help, his handicap limited the kinds of work he could do. (McElhiney has remained with the firm until the present day. He is retired, but comes to the shop several times a week.) During this period, the Johnsons worked sixty hours a week, and had little time for anything else. They

(Courtesy of Stephen Johnson, Jr.)

New floral shop as it appeared two years after the 1940 fire.

eventually hired Jim Groves, later a distinguished Colorado attorney and judge, to help out.[39]

While in California, Stephen, Jr. met his future bride, Marolyn Mackemer. Married in Illinois, the couple returned to Grand Junction after World War II ended.[40] Johnson's House of Flowers had prospered, despite the war, and Stephen and Marolyn came back to work in the business, continuing the tradition of husband-wife partnership until the deaths of both Myrtle and Marolyn disrupted the pattern. On January 2, 1969, Myrtle Johnson passed away.[41] The partnership now included Stephen, Sr. and Stephen, Jr. and Marolyn. But a year later Marolyn became ill and died also.[42]

Despite the personal losses, the business continued to prosper and grow, in part because the Johnsons were always open to new ideas and innovations. In the mid 1950s, a colored fiberglass greenhouse designed to protect foliage plants from sunburn was

(Courtesy of Stephen Johnson, Jr.)

Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Johnson Sr. on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary.

added. Stephen, Jr. believes the firm was the first greenhouse in the state to use fiberglass as a greenhouse cover.[43]

The next decade brought even more changes. In the early 1960s, evaporator coolers were installed in the greenhouses, another pioneering first in greenhouse technology.[44] The Johnsons got this idea from a salesman from Guthrie, Oklahoma. Stephen, Sr. made a trip to Oklahoma to look at an operating system before returning home to install their own systems.

The 1970s brought changes in the personal lives of both Stephen, Sr. and Stephen, Jr. In 1973, Stephen Sr. married Harriet Webster and in August of that same year Stephen, Jr. married Anita Nickels.[45] These marriages restored the husband-wife partnership that had been disrupted by the deaths of the Johnsons' first wives, and continued until the death of Stephen Johnson, Sr. in January of 1985.[46]

In 1981, the Johnsons again added on to their business, replacing the forty-one year old shop with a new 5,000 square foot structure, to meet the increasing demand for plants and flowers. Their dedication and hard work was often recognized in the community. In March of 1983, they were presented the "Outstanding Community Citizens" award by the Grand Junction Area Chamber of Commerce.[47]

Johnson's House of Flowers continues to prosper, growing approximately 90 percent of all material it sells. A member of the Florists Telegraph Delivery Association (FTD) since 1920, the firm has been honored by FTD with a ranking in the top 500 member florists out of a total membership of 23,000 in terms of total outgoing orders.[48] FTD records show Johnson's House of Flowers to be the oldest FTD member in Colorado.

The firm currently employs between sixteen and twenty people including designers, growers, and sales people. Like all florists, their most demanding holidays are Valentine's Day, Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter. During these busy holidays, Stephen's wife Anita works in the shop. Weddings, funerals, and the spring planting add to the firm's vigorous business activity.

Incorporated in 1978,[49] the tradition of a family operated business continues. The firm is now owned by stockholders, but all stock in the corporation is owned exclusively by family members. These members include Stephen Johnson, Jr., his daughter and her husband, Betty and Richard Emerson, and another daughter, Judith Martin. Johnson and the Emersons are active full time members. Martin and her children, as well as the children of the Emersons, are active part time.

Johnson's House of Flowers, a landmark located at 1350 North Avenue, continues as a locally owned business, the handiwork of a creative and hard-working family, who defied critics, made changes, sought innovation, and succeeded.

(Photo courtesy of Stephen Johnson, Jr.)

Older photo postcard of Johnson's House of Flowers, circa 1950, describing the business as "located across from beautiful Lincoln Park. Over 20,000 square feet under glass, consistently producing the finest in cut flowers and plants for the retail trade."

(Photo courtesy of Stephen Johnson, Jr.)

Johnson's House of Flowers after the 1981 remodeling.

NOTES

[1]*Daily Sentinel,* 21 January 1985, p. 6B.
[2]Stephen B. Johnson, Sr., "Eight Decades of Memoirs," unpublished, Mesa County Library, Grand Junction, Colorado, p. 86.
[3]*Ibid.*, p. 85
[4]*Ibid.*, p. 93.
[5]*Ibid.*, p. 119.
[6]*Ibid.*, p. 119.
[7]Stephen Johnson, Jr., interview by author, Grand Junction, Colorado, 5 June 1989.
[8]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 201.
[9]*Ibid.*, p. 129.
[10]Johnson interview.
[11]*Ibid.*
[12]*Ibid.*
[13]Stephen Johnson, Jr., interview by author, Grand Junction, 12 January 1990.
[14]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 201.
[15]Warranty Deed, Book number 361, p. 95. Mesa County Court House, Clerk and Recorder's Office, Grand Junction, Colorado.
[16]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 203.
[17]Stephen Johnson, Jr., interview by author, Grand Junction, 28 September 1989.
[18]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 201.
[19]*Daily Sentinel,* 15 March 1983, p. 6.
[20]Johnson interview, 28 September 1989.
[21]*Ibid.*
[22]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 215.
[23]Johnson interview, 5 June 1989.
[24]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 208.
[25]Warranty Deed, Book number 370, p. 459. Mesa County Court House, Clerk and Recorder's Office, Grand Junction, Colorado.
[26]Johnson interview, 5 June 1989.
[27]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 211.
[28]Johnson interview, 5 June 1989.
[29]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 215.
[30]*Ibid.*
[31]*Ibid.*, p. 212.
[32]*Daily Sentinel,* 31 October 1940, pp. 1 and 11.
[33]Johnson interview, 12 January 1990.
[34]*Daily Sentinel,* 31 October 1940, pp. 1 and 11.
[35]Johnson interview, 28 September 1989.
[36]*Ibid.*
[37]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 305.
[38]*Ibid.*, p. 222.
[39]*Ibid.*, p. 230.
[40]*Ibid.*, p. 232.
[41]*Daily Sentinel,* 3 January 1969, p. 3.
[42]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 305.
[43]Johnson interview, 12 January 1990.
[44]*Ibid.*
[45]Johnson, "Eight Decades of Memoirs," p. 322.
[46]*Daily Sentinel,* 21 January 1985.
[47]*Daily Sentinel,* 15 March 1983.
[48]Johnson interview, 5 June 1989.
[49]Stephen Johnson, Jr., interview by author, Grand Junction, 24 March 1990.

Solid Cold: A History of the Grand Junction Ice Houses

by Pamela Bouton

Ms. Bouton has lived in the Grand Valley for fourteen years and is a student at Mesa State College. Currently, she is student teaching at Fruitvale Elementary and will graduate in May, 1991 with a B.A. in elementary education and a major in history.

Introduction

They rest as silent reminders of an industry that time has passed by. Motorists travelling the Fifth Street viaduct hardly notice the four rectangular concrete foundations in the Denver and Rio Grande train yard of Grand Junction, yet those foundations played an integral part in the growth of the railroad, the fruit industry, and the Grand Valley. Until 1972, when the last structure was torn down, ice houses – huge wooden buildings with high, thick walls – stood on these cement foundations. These structures stored ice used to cool railroad cars and keep the fruit of Mesa County fresh on trips to distant markets. Hundreds of men used to line the loading docks and packing sheds every summer to ice down thousands of railroad cars, a task eventually made obsolete by packing machines, automatic conveyor belts and refrigerated rail cars. The story of Grand Junction's ice houses makes up an interesting part of Grand Junction's history.

Historical Notes

In the early days of the West, transportation determined whether towns lived or died. Grand Junction, Colorado and the development of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad (D&RG) is a case in point. Grand Junction was founded in September of 1881 by a group of men

headed by George A. Crawford, a man who had been elected governor of Kansas.[1] Shortly after its founding, a one-half interest in the Grand Junction Town Company was sold to General William J. Palmer's Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. The D&RG's narrow gauge railroad arrived in Grand Junction in late 1882, and by 1890 the standard gauge Colorado Midland and the new standard gauge D&RG mainline over Tennessee Pass both came to Grand Junction. Service from Salt Lake City came on the newly widened Rio Grande Western Railroad.[2]

Completion of the rail line into Grand Junction heralded a period of expansion. Good transportation enabled agriculture, and the fruit industry in particular, "to blossom" in the area. Buildings were hastily built, land values and sales increased, and a miniature boom was experienced by the one hundred fifty men and two women of the small town.[3] By the end of 1882, 524 hardy souls called Grand Junction home.[4] In February 1883, the state legislature created Mesa County with Grand Junction designated as the county seat. The Rio Grande built a three-story "Queen Anne" style depot in Grand Junction, reportedly the third largest depot in the state at the time.[5] The town became a major rail center, solidifying its importance to the railroad and the region.

The gold and silver discoveries in the Colorado Rockies during the 1880s brought thousands of people to the state, many of whom passed through Grand Junction on their quest for riches.[6] The railroad system expanded to meet this new demand and bolstered Grand Junction's importance. The most long-lasting and important change, however, took place in the orchards and fields of the Grand Valley.

Extensive irrigation projects turned the once arid, sage-covered salt flats into fertile farms and orchards. Orchard crops, peaches in particular, enhanced the valley's prosperity. Grand Valley produce went by railroad to as many as thirty states, as well as Mexico, Canada, England and even Australia by 1907.[7] The Grand Junction Fruit Growers' Association, organized in 1904, shipped over 1,150 car loads of fruit on the Rio Grande in 1907 alone.[8] After 1910, crops from Fruita were added to the totals as an interurban rail line serving the lower Grand Valley began hauling peaches to the Grand Junction yard for shipping.[9] But it was the ice-cooled refrigerator cars of the ART (American Refrigerator Transport Company) which allowed the fruit to reach the big markets in fresh condition.[10]

As a company, ART began in 1881. It was reorganized under the same name in 1898, and the majority of the stock and control from then onward was under the Missouri Pacific and the Wabash Railroads,[11] a part of the Jay Gould railroad empire. The ART company

owned thousands of cars, and as late as 1929 had nearly ten thousand. Some of these were leased to private lines (which was the case for the ice harvest) and did not carry ART lettering but the initials of other entities.[12]

The ART, hired by the D&RG, not only loaded the ice during the harvest, but also transported it from the mountains to the ice houses in the winter months.[13] An early photograph shows crews at the ice shed breaking up blocks of ice and dropping the chunks into the ice bunkers of each refrigerator car. These cars were iced in Grand Junction, sent to one of the many sites in the valley, and filled with fruit. Cars then returned to Grand Junction for re-icing before starting to market.[14] Peach harvest in late August and early September required concentrated labor and hundreds of ice-filled railroad cars.

Ice House History

On a cold Colorado evening more than one hundred years ago, the Scovill family of Grand Junction perused the *Farmer's Almanac,* which predicted that the next summer would be a warm one. Therefore they planned to put up some ice.[15] The cold weather had formed a thick layer of ice on the Grand River and the lakes in the area. To harvest ice, the Scovills harnessed horses to a sleigh which had planks added on both sides to form a box to hold blocks of ice. Ice tongs, a hand ice saw, a couple of axes, and a big ice chisel all went into the sleigh. The Scovill men clambered aboard or walked behind the sleigh as they made their way to the river.

The first task was to open up the river by cutting a square hole in the twenty-inch-thick ice. Slowly, water seeped into the chiseled hole. Great blocks were cut from the solid cold surface and floated into the widening hole, there to be pushed into position with pike poles and grabbed with ice tongs. The ice blocks were then ready to be moved up a ramp onto the planked deck which had been built the previous year. Horses stood with the harness fastened to the tongs by a long chain, patiently waiting for the command to pull the block up the incline. Later, all the blocks would be loaded with the tongs onto the sleigh. Hitched to the sleigh, the horses moved into position near the deck. A small platform eased the job of getting the blocks onto the sleigh. Each one hundred pound block slid easily on the planked surface.

The loaded sleigh then went to the ice house, a four-sided wooden structure with a packed earth floor covered with sawdust. The men used a block and tackle to ease the ice from the sleigh into the house where the men "walked" the blocks into place, using fresh sawdust for insulation between layers.[16] When the last block was in position, the

(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado, Grand Valley Water Users Collection 80.115)

Crews at the ice shed breaking up blocks of ice and dropping them into the ice bunkers of refrigerator cars.

men stood on top of the tons of ice and admired their work. The day had not been an easy one but the thought of a hot summer day, a glass of cold buttermilk, and a dish of fresh sugared strawberries cooled in the icebox made it all worthwhile.

Many families in Grand Junction repeated this pattern in 1882, for ice stored in ice houses was the only method of cooling food in summer. The editorial staff of the Grand Junction *News* indicated the need for a large-scale ice house in a series of issues beginning in late 1882.[17, 18] "We understand there are some parties in town preparing to build an ice house. We hope this is true, as ice will be a very necessary article here next summer."[19] A month later, another notice appeared: "Every farmer and especially every dairyman, ought to put up a supply of ice, and this is the time of year to think this matter over and make preparation for it."[20] By mid-January 1883, the appeal became more pointed. "Who will be the enterprising man or firm to build an ice house?" In the same column, the questioning continued:

> Where is our ice house? Is it possible that some of our young men who have nothing much to do, will let the winter pass by without putting up an ice house? Here is an excellent opportunity for somebody.[21]

The following week, the *News* kept up its challenge:

> Why will many of the idle men about town complain about having nothing to do, when a good "fat thing" can be made by building an ice house and filling it for next summer's use? We have splendid ice in the river now and it may be the last one we will have this winter.[22]

Such appeals caused Steve Scovill to build the first private ice house in Grand Junction at 527 Colorado Avenue.[23] In late January, local merchants Frazier and Coleman built a larger community ice house near the railroad tracks. This ice house had a capacity of three hundrd tons of ice,[24] which made for a good beginning.

In 1890, a large ice house appeared on a plat of the Grand Junction rail yard. Although no record of the ice house in the late 1800s or early 1900s can be found,[25] a 1907 plat of the railroad yard depicts three separate structures near the present location of the concrete foundations.[26] The demand for ice was obviously growing and being met by new facilities at the train yard: packing sheds, ice storage and refrigerated rail cars, or "reefers" as they were called by railroaders.

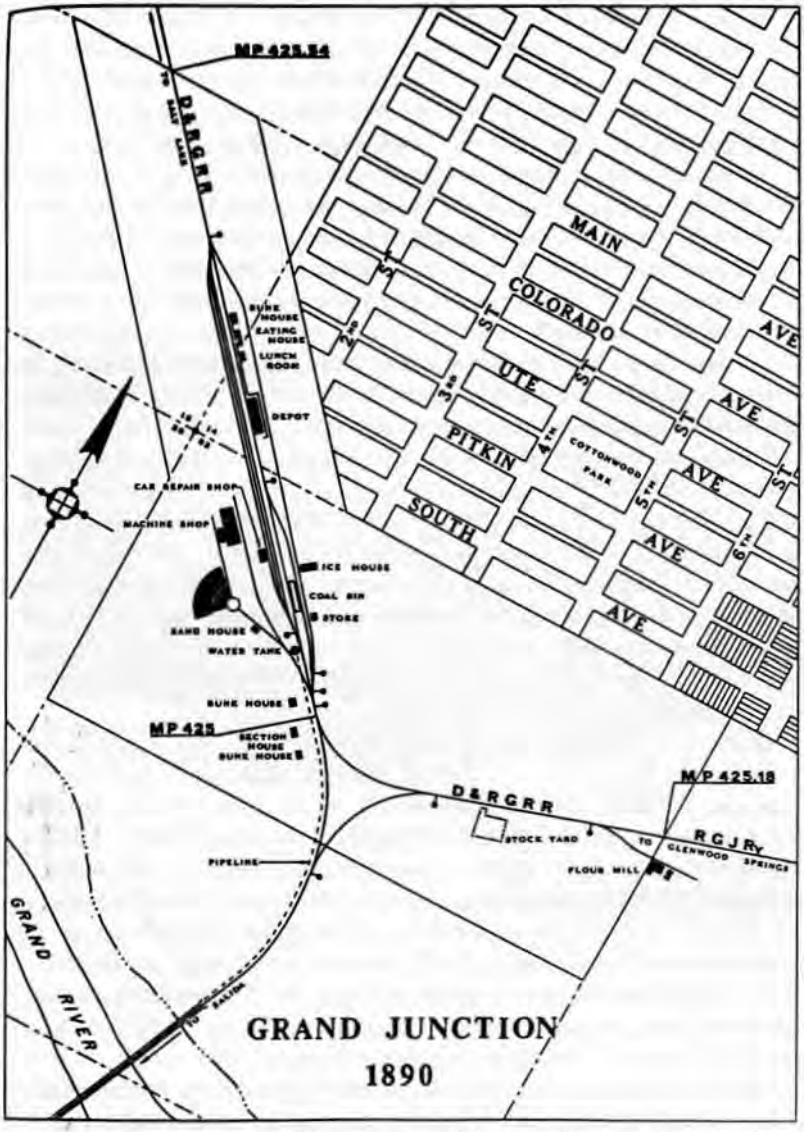
The growth and productivity of the ice houses were stymied on several occasions by fires that ravaged the structures. A disastrous fire, the largest one in the history of Grand Junction, burned ice houses, the freight depot, and several merchandise cars and their contents on

September 23, 1918. The blaze, of unknown cause, engulfed an empty ice house and resulted in losses of over $150,000.[27] Discovered at 2:45 a.m. near a spot where another fire had started only two weeks before, the fire spread rapidly, fanned by high winds. Sparks from the fire carried for blocks into Grand Junction. Miraculously, no fires started anywhere else in town. Low water pressure and intense heat from the sawdust-filled walls and tar paper roof kept firemen at a distance. Elberta Francis (named after the peach) recalled seeing the flames of the burning ice houses as a child from her home on Orchard Mesa Heights and said "it was a most colorful fire."[28] Of the four thousand tons of ice stored at that time, all except twenty-five or thirty car loads were lost in the blaze.[29]

To the credit of Grand Junction and the Rio Grande Railroad, an ambitious rebuilding program began shortly after the fire. This effort produced four separate ice houses, each sitting on a $15,000 concrete foundation and having walls built of two sections six inches apart and filled with sawdust.[30] A tar paper roof covered the identical 120 foot long by 80 foot wide by 40 foot high ice houses, each capable of storing up to thirty-three thousand tons of ice.[31] Located in the center and rear of each building, facing tracks, was an enclosed spiral slide with chutes at separate levels. Ice blocks passed through the chutes and spiraled down the slide to a platform outside where workmen loaded them onto a conveyor belt to the icing sheds. From there the ice went into the bunkers of the "reefer" cars.[32]

Disaster struck the new ice houses on April 12, 1921, when a fire, perhaps started by tramps, caused $30,000 damage to one of the structures.[33] Though the concrete foundation survived, the frame walls and roof were heavily charred. Firefighters were thankful that there was no wind to fan the flames and spread sparks to surrounding buildings. The *Daily Sentinel* reported that a "solid cake of ice from thirty to forty feet in height stands this morning inside the partially destroyed walls of the building. This ice will be used as rapidly as possible, and it is believed that much of it can be salvaged."[34] The burned ice house was rebuilt and the twenty-five thousand tons of ice in the other three houses were used in the harvest that summer.

More improvements were made to the train yards in 1926 with the addition of fifteen hundred feet of covered loading docks. These docks, situated on the north side of the tracks across from the ice houses, were high enough off the ground to enable workers to load ice into the tops of the ART rail cars. The loading docks were themselves damaged years later when high winds blew down six hundred feet of the tall, wooden structures in 1969.[35]



(Photo courtesy of Museum of Western Colorado Archives)

Section of an 1890 plat map of Grand Junction made by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Co.

(Photo courtesy of Air Photo)

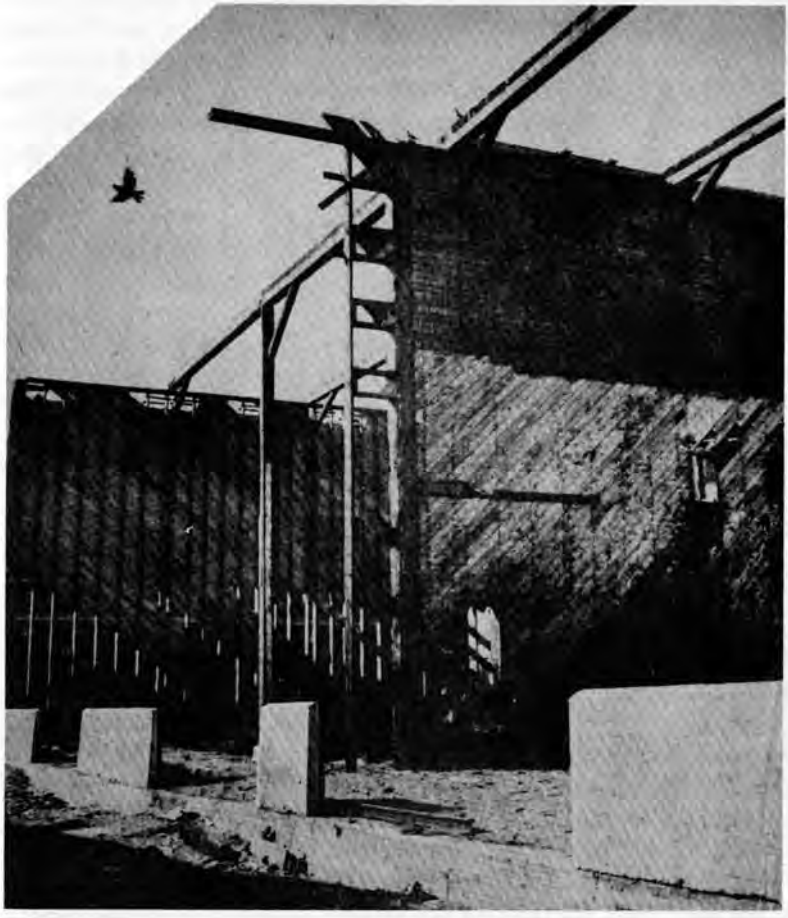
An aerial photograph of the same area of Grand Junction, 1963. Note the ice houses at the top of the photo, just above the Fifth Street Viaduct.

A third ice house fire, this one on December 17, 1931, was started by an explosion of the gas tank of a small tractor stored in a shed adjacent to one of the ice houses. The hot embers and gasoline landing on top of the house caused the tar paper roof to ignite and resulted in the destruction of not only the ice house, but 3,900 tons of ice stored inside. According to the *Daily Sentinel*, ". . . temperatures which hovered at zero brought great hardship to the firemen, because ice formed on their clothing as they directed streams of water on the fire."[36]

The front page of the *Daily Sentinel* on August 30, 1947, flashed the headline "Fire Destroys Ice House." This time the walls of the #1 house were damaged and the roof was completely burned off, although some of the lumber was salvageable. The early morning blaze resulted in $45,000 worth of damage to the building and the ice which was valued at $16.00 per ton by the Gore Ice Company.[37]

The history of the ice houses themselves is interesting; however, the ice houses had a human side, since people harvested the ice and worked in the ice houses, packing sheds and loading docks. As the demand for more ice grew, the Rio Grande Railroad played an important role. Not only did the ice travel to Grand Junction on Rio Grande tracks, but its employees cut the ice every winter from ponds high in the Rockies, such as one in Gore Canyon above Kremmling, Colorado. Every winter, workers flooded Gore Pond, a man-made reservoir, to a depth of fourteen inches. Ice crews, wearing plenty of warm clothes and boot cleats, made their way onto the pond with the tools of the trade: jig saws, circular saws, snow tampers, pike poles, needle and spud bars, and scrapers. After scraping off the loose snow, they scored the surface in two foot squares. A jig saw was used to cut the ice into thirty foot by ten foot squares which were broken off and floated to a conveyor where the slabs were lifted from the water. Each block went through a planer which shaved it to size and sometimes corrugated the top to keep the blocks from freezing together when stored. The 300 pound ice cakes moved by conveyor to waiting freight cars which then traveled the 150 miles to Grand Junction's ice houses. Forty-two cars could be loaded in a normal day, a total of 1600 to 1800 tons of ice. The Gore Pond contained enough ice to cut 240 ice cakes during the ice harvest.[38]

Occasionally, the routine haul of ice-filled freight cars from the mountains to Grand Junction became exciting for the railroaders. Murl Francis and Walker Johnston, both retired railroaders in Grand Junction, remembered the story of the Pando runaway train.[39] Pando, located at 9000 feet elevation and about twelve miles above Minturn, Colorado, was another site where ice was harvested for the Grand Junction ice



(Photo courtesy of the *Daily Sentinel*)

This Daily Sentinel *news photo shows the last Grand Junction ice house during demolition.*

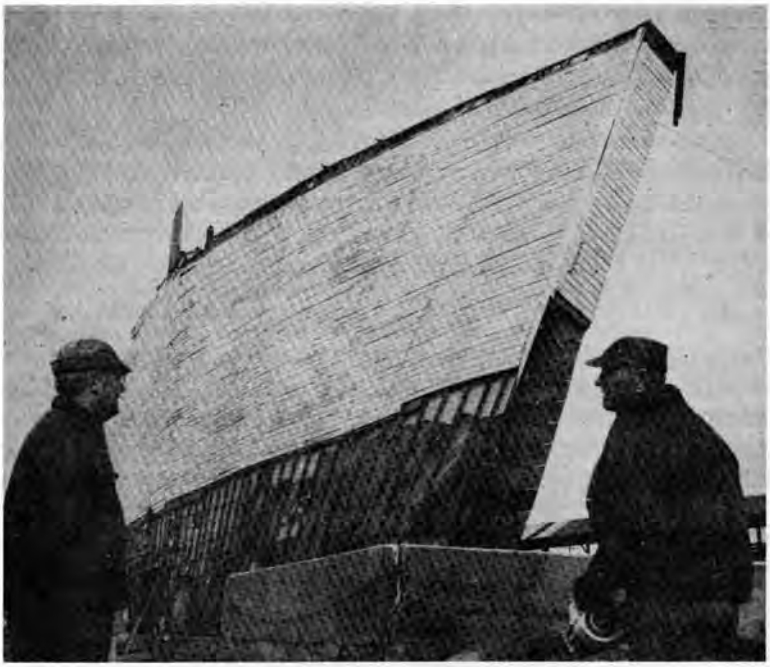
houses. On this occasion, the train crew from Minturn had hauled empty cars to Pando, loaded the ice, and had started back down the three percent grade with thirty-five cars of ice.[40] As the train picked up speed, an air brake application was made with the brake valve when a short exhaust sound was heard. There was no air; the train was making a steep descent with no brakes. Earl Roberts, a fireman, jumped from the engine and landed feet first in the willows and six feet of snow

along the Eagle River. By the time he pulled himself from the snow and walked back to the track, the train was long gone. Engineer Herb Glessener had leaped from the train soon after Roberts, and the head brakeman had also unloaded. The conductor and rear brakeman cut the caboose from the train and used the hand brake to stop it. The fully loaded ice train roared down the grade another three miles before it jumped the track and plowed into the depot at Redcliff. The locomotive, completely covered by snow and ice, could not be seen. A search was made for it west of Minturn before the wreckage was located. Fortunately, there were no injuries involved in the wreck.[41]

Agent Carl Lomax recalled another bit of history relating to the ice houses. Lomax, working for the D&RG in Kremmling, said that the most interesting ice harvest for him was one during World War II when German prisoners of war came by train to Gore Pond to harvest ice.[42] In the summer of 1944, these men helped harvest peaches, pack the crop, load the railroad cars and then ice the cars for shipment. These prisoners of war lived in the old CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camps in Fruita, Palisade, Grand Junction and Montrose. Prisoners in Delta were housed in the old Holly Sugar complex. The prisoners, mostly captured from Rommel's Afrika Korps, were "loaned" to individual peach growers and returned to the camps after working in the orchards all day.[43] Walker Johnston remembered prisoners of war being hired by the Denver & Rio Grande to work both the harvest and the ice dock operations. Even during a time of war, friendships were formed that went beyond national boundaries. Olis Kordon, a former prisoner of war, was one of two prisoners who returned to Grand Junction with their families to start a new life. Kordon eventually became the head custodian at Grand Junction High School and has remained close friends with Walker and Rose Johnston.[44]

When self-contained refrigeration units appeared on railroad cars in the early 1960s, the need for storing large quantities of ice disappeared and ice houses became outdated. Small amounts of ice sometimes needed could be met by portable icing cars or commercial ice suppliers. The ice houses were under-utilized and became a fire hazard. The ice houses had no roofs, doors, or security; consequently, transients frequently entered the buildings, where they built fires for warmth, and smoked cigarettes and cigars which they often dropped in the sawdust-filled buildings.[45]

The railroad sold the right to demolish one of the ice houses to Les Lupton and in 1961 the walls were torn down on ice house #4, the house closest to the Fifth Street viaduct.[46] The huge wooden beams used in the ice houses were not destroyed; they live on today in the



(Photo courtesy of the *Daily Sentinel*)

This January 8, 1972 Daily Sentinel *news photo shows Van Gardner and Burton Burckhalter during the demolition of the last of the Grand Junction ice houses.*

form of rafters in the Vega Lodge and Resort at Vega Reservoir, and in Mr. Lupton's own home.[47]

The second ice house to fall under a salvage operation occurred in 1966 when William G. Romager took down house #2.[48] Again, most of the sturdy frame of the ice house was saved and the lumber found new uses in homes and sheds across the Grand Valley.[49] In the fall and

winter of 1971-72, Van Gardner and Byron Burckhalter, both retired railroaders, salvaged the last two ice houses in Grand Junction.[50] The men took the better lumber from the remaining structures, leaving the concrete foundations in place.

Usefulness of the houses ended on September 1, 1973, when the Rio Grande eliminated icing refrigerator cars for perishable shipments.[51] Ice docks, ice men, ice ponds and ice houses became obsolete. Today all that remains of the ice houses are the high concrete foundations visible today from the Fifth Street viaduct.

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