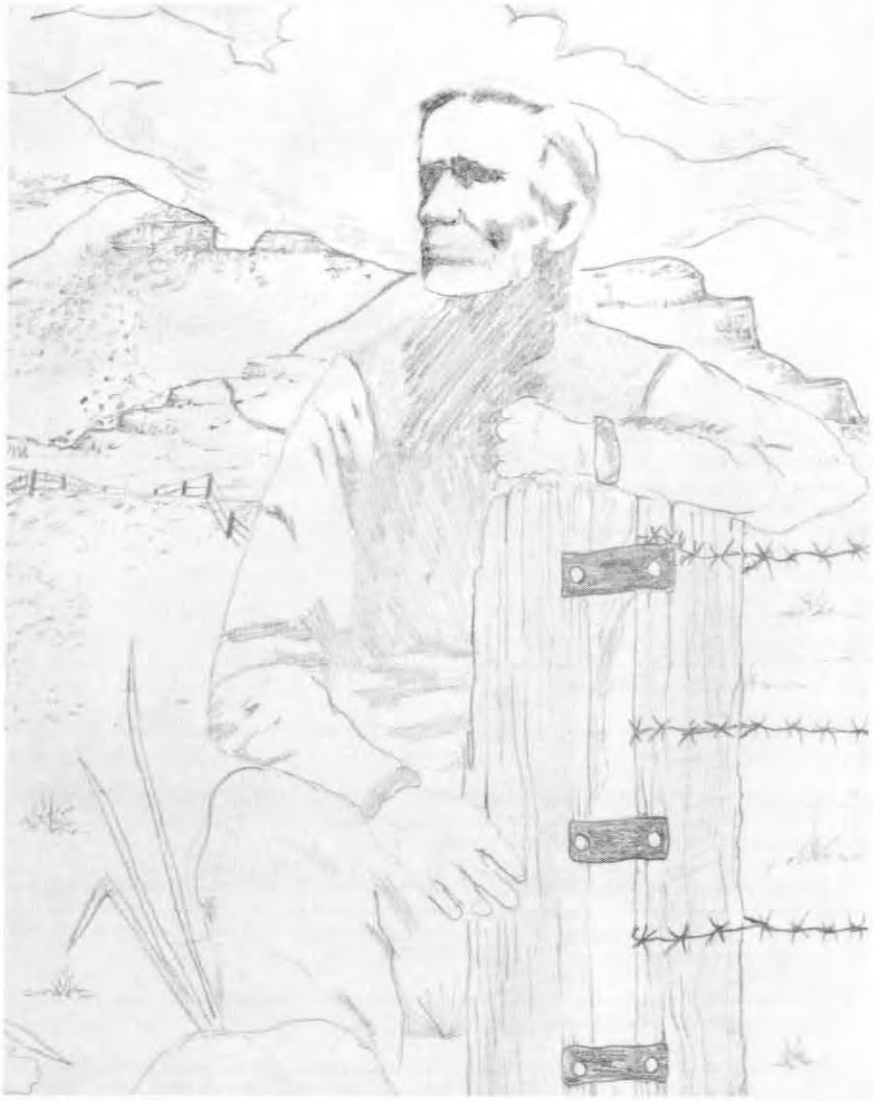
JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN SLOPE

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1 **WINTER 1994**



MESA STATE COLLEGE

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Mesa State College
Journal of the Western Slope
P.O. Box 2647
Grand Junction, CO 81502

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JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN SLOPE

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THE COVER: The drawing of Ole Gunderson is by Kurvin Willis and Eric Mena, students at Collbran Job Corps.

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Author's Notes

I grew up and lived nearly all my life in the safety and security of the Plateau Valley. I stand in awe of pioneers like my great grandparents, Ole and Mary Gunderson, who showed such strength and courage in forging a new life. They brought their children across the ocean and struggled against incredible odds to build their dreams into reality. The legacy my great grandparents passed to me is one of love, roots, and the power of dreams. This legacy of strength, courage, roots, and dreams I pass now to my children Carrie, Chuck, and Lisa Nichols.

I wish to thank the following people for their help, patience, and love: Edwin and Norva Gunderson, Evelyn Heuschkel, Eleanor Nichols, Carrie, Chuck, and Lisa. Thanks also to my students Kurvin Willis and Eric Mena for their wonderful art work.

(Photo courtesy of Edwin and Norva Gunderson)

The town of Collbran, Colorado circa 1914.

The Blind Immigrant

by Susan Nichols

The Plateau Valley, nestled on the western slope of Colorado, is bordered on the north by the Battlements and to the south by the Grand Mesa. Once part of the Ute Indian Reservation, it was opened to settlement in the late 1870s. According to local legend, the United States government ordered the Ute Indians out of the valley in 1879. The Indians stalled for time by claiming they were unable to gather their horses. They left the valley in the fall of 1881, in their wake setting the grass of the valley floor ablaze.[1]

The Plateau Valley is a land of diversity, from sagebrush lowlands to aspen- and pine-covered mountain meadows. This is where Ole and Mary Gunderson chose to bring their family in the spring of 1888. It would be a land Ole Gunderson would come to know through the feel of the earth in his hands, the smells of the air, and the words of his wife and children.

Ole Gunderson, son of Gunder and Ingeborg, was born December 16, 1852, in Faldalen, Norway where he spent his childhood. As a young man, he worked in the timber industry of Sweden for two years, then moved back to Faldalen to work in area coal mines. Ole married Mary Evans (born May 2, 1849) in 1873.[2] Making their home in Faldalen, the Gundersons had three sons: George (born May 10, 1874), Edwin (born May 12, 1878), and Tom, who died in infancy.[3]

The Gundersons decided to leave Norway early in 1882. Ole quit the mine, intending to leave for America, but two days later he was called back for a few days of work. As he entered the mine on that last day, a charge of dynamite inexplicably exploded in his face. The explosion totally destroyed his eyesight and left him badly wounded. Ole never said much about the explosion except that jobs were scarce and a lot of

unexplained accidents occurred during that time. He was grateful to have lived while others had died.[4]

The mining company paid only a portion of the doctor bills and from then on survival became a family affair. At age eight, young George went to work doing odd jobs to help support the family. Though not fully recovered, Ole returned to the mine within a few months. The only job he was able to do without his sight was to sort coal by feel and to feed the crusher. It became Edwin's responsibility to lead his father to work in the morning and home again in the evening.[5]

In 1885, Ole and Mary renewed their plans for a new and better life in America. They decided to leave Norway to escape the hardships and to keep their children out of the coal mines. It took another two years in the mines to get enough money together for the journey. Early in 1887, Ole returned from the mine for the last time, ready to take his family to America where he planned to join his brother John in Colorado.[6]

The family boarded a ship and left Norway in 1887, leaving behind a life that Ole rarely spoke of afterward. If asked, his usual reply was, "Why should I talk about a place that nearly starved my family to death?"[7] Little is known of the journey except that icebergs threatened the old ship, rubbing the paint from its sides as it forced its way slowly through the water. The family landed in America at Ellis Island, New York.[8]

From New York, the family travelled by train to a farm near North Platte, Nebraska, where they stayed with Mary's sister and her husband. This flat, treeless prairie with its hot summer wind was a far cry from their home across the sea.[9] They continued their stay for a year, learned to speak English, and became familiar with the American way of life. While there, the boys worked very hard for the family's room and board. They were put on big work horses to herd milk cows from sunup to sundown. They learned quickly that if they got off the horses, they couldn't get back on, so they spent long days riding after the cattle.[10] In the early spring of 1888 they planted corn, placing pumpkins and squash between the corn plants. When they thought they were finished, their uncle went to town to get more corn for them to plant. The boys had heard they were leaving in a few days, so they took the last sack of corn and buried it in a hole. They spent the next few days playing down by the river, while everyone thought they were working all day in the cornfields.[11]

The family left Nebraska bound for Colorado in the spring of 1888. They were in a train wreck near Salida, Colorado. Mary was injured (extent or type of injuries unknown) and six of the eight trunks were destroyed. Nearly all their possessions were lost.[12] They boarded a relief train and travelled through Leadville to Glenwood Springs where John met them with a team and wagon. They spent one night camped near New Castle, a mining town of tents and saloons. The last part of their journey took them over the wagon road from Silt to the Plateau Valley where John had established his homestead on Brush Creek.

John had planned to locate his brother on a homestead near his own (later the Griffith place), but high water prevented them from crossing Buzzard Creek. As Ole stepped from the wagon, he listened to the description, felt the earth in his hands, and smelled the sagebrush. The trials and successes of a new life lay ahead, a life that would bring both hardship and adventure to the blind immigrant.

The family camped on the banks of Buzzard Creek and decided to homestead there. Ole homesteaded the family's first 160 acres under the Homestead Act of 1862 (Patent No. 1324).[13] The Homestead Act authorized settlement of public lands, required settlers (citizens or those who intended to become one) to reside, cultivate, and improve tracts of 160 acres. After living on the land and farming for six months, he could buy the tract for $1.25 an acre.[14]

The Gundersons learned many pioneer lessons through trial and error during the first few years. They lived in a tent for the first few months while Ole built a log cabin. Mary and the boys led Ole to the trees, which he selected for size by feeling the trunks, cut them down and notched them with an ax. Ole, with John's help, put up a two room log cabin which would serve as the family home for many years.[15] Later the same procedure was used to build the barns, the corrals, and fences. It is said that Ole felled two trees in the exact spot for a bridge across Buzzard Creek.[16]

Besides working on the cabin, the family had to begin improvements and cultivation of the land. Ole, Mary, and their sons worked with grub hoes to clear away the sagebrush and oak from the sloping hillsides and cut grass for winter feed with hand sickles along the sloughs in the creek bottom.[17]

That first summer Ole and Mary purchased three milk cows. The cows provided cream from which Mary churned butter, which was taken to New Castle to be sold to miners working in the Elk Mountain

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting:

CERTIFICATE

Whereas

Copy of Land Grant Certificate issued to Ole Gunderson, June 11, 1895.

Coal Mine.[18] Mary kept her butter sweet by stopping at every little spring along the road to dampen the towels that covered the butter. This extra effort brought a flood of miners to buy the sweet butter.[19] These trips were family affairs: the boys drove the team, while Ole helped control the young horses and pushed the wagon up the steep places. The money from the sale of the butter was used to buy needed food and supplies.

The diet that first year was simple. They raised a small patch of potatoes. The family did not own a rifle, so they relied on passing neighbors to supply them with wild meat from the abundant deer herds. This did have its drawbacks. The Gundersons didn't know that venison needed to hang for a few days before being eaten, so they would eat their fill and suffer the "consequences" for several days — a pioneer lesson learned the hard way.[20]

Mary learned another of those pioneer lessons when she decided to make deer hide pants for the boys. She made the pants out of green hides, not realizing that hides needed to be cured and tanned before they were used. After a few days the pants were stiff and able to stand by themselves. The boys hated those pants, but they had to wear them — it was all they had. Unbeknownst to their parents they tried everything to put holes in those awful pants. They would sneak to the barn and spend every free minute taking turns sitting on and peddling the stone grinder to get a hole. They were not successful.[21]

Spring of 1889 was full of promise. The cows each had a fine healthy calf. One cow had her calf on the wrong side of the creek. Ole crossed the creek on a log and carried the calf back to the corral.[22] Two cows were milked and one cow was used as a nurse cow for the calves. Mary had resumed making butter again for sale in New Castle until two cows died. They had eaten larkspur, a beautiful but deadly flower of spring.[23]

Game was plentiful during the spring and summer. With the purchase of a Sharps rifle, Ole could now provide meat for his family. Hunting, however, took on a whole new meaning for Ole, George, and Edwin. The gun was too heavy for the boys to carry or handle, so their father carried it. When the boys spotted a deer, Ole knelt down and laid the gun along his back and shoulders while the boys aimed and fired the gun.[24]

Work continued on the land throughout the spring and summer. Large areas were cleared of sagebrush, oakbrush, and rocks. The cleared ground was planted with small grain, corn, and new grasses, all

Buildings on the original Gunderson homestead as they appeared in July 1994.

(Photos courtesy of the author)

of which needed irrigation. Ole established a number one water right from Buzzard Creek to provide water for his land. Digging the ditches brought another challenge to Ole. In order to put the ditches on the correct flow and grade, he stood barefooted in the cool water, feeling the swiftness of the flow over his feet. As he went along he marked out the ditches, which he and the boys then dug to the proper depth.[25]

Ole began to add to the cattle herd with calves purchased both from small local ranches and the big cattle outfits. Many of the larger outfits worked their way up through the valley from the deserts of Utah in the spring to summer pastures in the high country. Some of the big outfits running in the valley during this time included the Dudes, J. F. Brink, the Bogerts, and the Harrisons.[26]

As the number of cattle grazing on the open range in the valley increased, the early settlers began to register brands with the Colorado State Brand Office. The brands established ownership of the cattle and made identification easier during the fall roundups. The law required that each cattle owner record his brands with the County Clerk and Recorder and the state. Some of the early brands recorded in 1888 and 1889 included the Hawhursts "Box" brand  , David Anderson's "A Bar One"  , Bill Kenney's "W K"  , John Durant's "Triangle"  , John Brown's "Open H" , and Sam Kiggin's "S K"  .[27] The big outfits that came to the valley from the Grand Valley and eastern Utah in the summer ran under such brands as the Nuckols' "Bar X"  and "Box Spur"  , Brinks with the "B"  , Harrisons' "Two Bar H"  , and Bill Ditman with the "Slash V I"  .[28]

The Gundersons needed a brand and ear marks to identify their increasing cattle herd that ran with other valley cattle in the summer. On July 10, 1899, Ole registered the stock brand "O E L" and an "over slope" ear mark with the Secretary of State in the Colorado State Brand Book .[29]

Things were going well for the Gundersons. The boys were able to attend school by means of skiing or riding horseback. They attended school at Vega or Clover from late fall to early spring. They each graduated from eighth grade. Ole felt education was important for his sons as well as for other children. Later he helped start and construct the Highberger School which was located near the ranch.[30]

In May of 1899, George, with Edwin's help, homesteaded two tracts of land on Collier Creek, one of forty acres and one of 160 acres, north of Buzzard, three miles from the home ranch. There were not

STOCK BRAND.

Know all Men by these Presents, That ____________________

____

of____________________in the County of____________________

and State of Colorado, desiring to avail____sel____of the provisions of an Act of the Twelfth General Assembly of the State of Colorado, entitled "An Act to Provide for the Branding and Marking of Live Stock, for Taxing Brands and Marks and for the Recording of Brands and Marks, to Prevent the Defacing of Brands and Marks, to Provide Penalties for Violations thereof, and to Repeal all Acts and Parts of Acts in conflict herewith," Approved April 6, A. D. 1899, do____hereby make, execute, verify and forward to the Secretary of State of the State of Colorado, in accordance with the provisions of the Statutes of the State of Colorado in such case made and provided, a certain fac-simile of a brand duly recorded in the State Brand Book in the office of the Secretary of State of the State of Colorado on or prior to the 6th day of April, A. D. 1899, and now used by____________for the purposes of marking and branding live stock in the State of Colorado, and which____________now claim____the exclusive right to use. The following is a fac simile of said device or brand, viz.:

BRAND.	EAR MARKS. (To be used in connection therewith.)
OEL	

In Witness Whereof____have hereunto set____hand____and seal____this____________day of____________A. D. 1____

____________________(SEAL)

____________________(SEAL)

____________________(SEAL)

STATE OF COLORADO, }
COUNTY OF ____________ } ss.

____

____________________, of lawful age, being____________first duly sworn, on oath depose____and say____as follows:____________now the lawful owner____of and have the exclusive right to use a certain device or brand used for the purpose of marking and branding live stock in the State of Colorado, a fac simile of which is set forth in the foregoing instrument; the said device or brand is____brand, and it was duly recorded in the State Brand Book in the office of the Secretary of State of the State of Colorado, on or prior to the 6th day of April, A. D. 1899.

____

____

Subscribed and sworn to before me this____________day of____________A. D. 1____

My____________commission expires____________A. D. 1____

____

____

NOTARY PUBLIC

This instrument may be verified before any officer authorized to administer oaths.

Copy of Stock Brand Certificate issued to Ole Gunderson July 10, 1899.

many places left near water when George homesteaded this ground under the Homestead Act of 1862 (Patent No. 1535 and 1536).[31] George and Edwin worked together to build a log cabin, fence the property, and clear the land, making the improvements required by law. George was not interested in farming and ranching, so he left the details of the land and cattle business to Edwin. George enjoyed a more carefree life working for other people or on the ranch. This arrangement would last through the years as the ranch continued to grow and prosper.

Early in 1900 Mary's health began to fail. It was thought she had never fully recovered from the train wreck twelve years before.[32] The closest doctor was in Grand Junction, over forty miles away. Mary was placed on bed springs which Ole held on his lap for the long rough wagon ride to DeBeque where she was put on the train bound for Grand Junction. The doctor was unable to do anything for her. She was taken home where she passed away February 17th that year. For Mr. Gunderson the loss of his wife was "far harder to bear than the loss of his eyes."[33]

Ole and Edwin continued to live on the home place after Mary's death. Ole took over the cooking and house work. He enjoyed the excitement of fall roundups. Cowboys stayed at the ranch and he played host, "serving cakes and light bread that were hard to beat, and his meat and rice dishes were the second helping kind!"[34] He enjoyed having guests. He told of offering a stranger a room and a meal one day, only to have the law ride in looking for the man the next day. The law man returned a few days later without the outlaw, who had escaped over the Utah line.[35]

Ole, Edwin, and George continued to build the cattle herd. On December 26, 1901, George registered his own brand, "Bar G Bar" -G- with the State of Colorado.[36] Two years later, in February 1903, Ole filed for one of the first cattle grazing permits issued in Colorado. He was authorized to pasture one hundred head of cattle on the Battlement Mesa Division (No. 9) Forest Reserve from April 1, 1903 to November 15, 1903.[37] The Cattle and Horse Grazing Permit was required after Congress enacted legislation in June 1897 and amended the regulations on December 23, 1901. The legislation and regulations closed the open range that had allowed free grazing. The newly enforced law required proof of ownership and limited the number of cattle each ranch could run on government-owned land. In January 1904, Ole requested and received an increase on his grazing permit, totaling 150 head of cattle .[38]

CATTLE AND HORSE GRAZING PERMIT.

No. 142 ACT OF JUNE 4, 1897.

Department of the Interior,

GENERAL LAND OFFICE,

Washington, D. C., January 30, 1904.

Under Department regulations, as amended December 23, 1901,

Mr. Ole Gunderson, of Collbran, Colorado,

is hereby authorized to pasture One hundred fifty (150) head of cattle

and ____ head of horses

within the Battlement Mesa (Division 2) Forest Reserve

from April 1, 1904, to November 15, 1904:

Provided, That the animals shall not intrude upon or to which this permit does not extend; any place of public resort or reservoir supply, nor upon any of the areas, localities, and tracts described as follows, to wit:

Branded: left side O E L

This permit is issued on the condition that the said Ole Gunderson,

has, by his application No. 142, dated Dec. 17, 1903, agreed to fully comply with all and singular the requirements of any law of Congress now or hereafter enacted relating to the grazing of live stock in the forest reserves, and with all and singular the requirements of any rules or regulations now or hereafter adopted in pursuance of any such law of Congress, and that he or his employees engaged in caring for the animals while on the reserve, will extinguish all fires started by himself or by any of said employees before leaving the vicinity thereof, and to cooperate generally, so far as possible, with the forest officers and rangers in protecting the reserve from fires and depredations, and that as soon as the said animals shall enter the reserve, and thereafter, to notify the Forest Supervisor in charge of their specific location, giving a description of the range occupied: *Provided*, That this privilege is extended with no obligation or agreement to maintain an exclusive possession upon any part of said reserve to any one person or firm, nor as to adjustment of any conflict as to possession.

For a violation of any of the terms hereof, or of any of the terms of the application on which it is based, or wherever an injury is being done the reserve by reason of the presence of the animals therein, this permit will be canceled, and the animals will be removed from the reserve.

Approved: ____, 190__.

Secretary of the Interior.

Commissioner.

Copy of Cattle and Horse Grazing Permit issued to Ole Gunderson January 30, 1904.

As the number of cattle increased, the need for land also increased. Edwin took up a homestead in the section just south of the original homestead. On December 27, 1909 Edwin filed on the adjoining 160 acres under the Homestead Act (Patent No. 99124).[39] With the help of his father and brother he built a small cabin and began improving the place. He would go up to the cabin at dusk, light a lamp, scatter dirty dishes and clothes around the table and floor, then sneak back after dark to spend the night with his father.[40] This place was used to pasture cattle so the fences were built to join it with the home place for easy access.

During this time, Ole and Edwin became citizens of the United States (their naturalization papers were later lost in a fire).[41] George missed the ceremony. He was a character who never minded having a friendly drink or two. He had a "good time" in town the day of the ceremony and lost his "sense of direction".[42] This would later cost George the cattle permit he had received. The permit was taken away from him before World War II by the United States government because he was not a citizen.[43]

George had a carefree spirit and occasionally it got the better of him. Once on the way back from a trip to Silt to buy groceries, he stopped to have a few drinks with some men he had just met. At sundown he started for home. As darkness closed in, he decided to stop for the night and camp out. He found a nice little clearing with a creek flowing through it, and his horses liked the spot, so he made camp. The next morning he woke to find himself camped seventy-five yards from his own cabin![44]

Ole decided to return to Norway in the spring of 1911. His family was on its own: Edwin had announced his engagement, George was doing well, and John had sold out and moved away. Ole was now ready to return to his homeland, perhaps to stay. Edwin accompanied Ole on the trip. They visited Sweden and Norway during the summer and fall, but when Edwin returned home, Ole was with him. He decided that Norway had changed too much while he was away (he had not changed but Norway had).[45] Martin Gunderson, Ole's cousin, came back with them.

Ole, Edwin, and Martin travelled to Colorado City where Edwin married Ruth Kesterson on November 23, 1911.[46] Leaving Edwin with his bride, Ole and Martin returned to Plateau Valley where Ole immediately began building an addition to the family home. This included a porch and a new room for himself.[47]

When Edwin and Ruth returned, she turned the bachelor quarters into a home again and helped Edwin take care of his father. As they continued to maintain the home place, there was always the thought of adding more farm and grazing land. In 1912 Edwin and Ole acquired the Dinwiddle place five miles east of Collbran and established another homestead.

The latest homestead was established under the Desert Land Act of 1877. The Act authorized the homesteading of 640-acre tracts of arid public lands. Edwin registered the claim, built a log cabin for his family, and began property improvements (Patent No. 039617).[48] Edwin and his father moved the family back and forth between the place on Buzzard Creek and the new homestead for two years until the new house on the Dinwiddle place was completed.[49]

In addition to helping build the new house, Ole made the installation of a Delco light plant his special project. He did not understand electricity and thought that the electricity would run out of the light socket if a switch was left on while the bulb was being changed.[50] The only help he needed to run the plant was for someone to read the gauges so he knew when the batteries needed changing. Changing the batteries required the motor to be turned off and restarted, which Ole managed on his own. Once the plant broke down and a mechanic was called in to fix it, but he couldn't find the problem. With his hands, Ole felt the parts of the engine and discovered two teeth missing from a sprocket. After the sprocket was replaced, the light plant worked and remained the source of light until electricity was brought to the house years later.[51]

Edwin established his own cattle brand in 1914, the "V V Bar"  [52]. He had responsibility for not only his own cattle, but George's and Ole's, too. During the fall, the cattle were driven either to Silt or DeBeque where they were loaded in railroad cattle cars and shipped to Denver. The other men of the valley joined in the cattle drives, taking two or three days to cross the Upper Sunnyside to DeBeque. For two years DeBeque was the largest shipping point in the state; it reached its peak in 1918, then ranked second for the next nine years.[53] Edwin usually made the trips to Denver to sell the cattle at the John Clay & Company Stock Yards. He was gone for four to five days, riding in the caboose or in an old worn out passenger car.

Unable to go on the cattle trips, Ole always kept up with cattle prices. He could quote the prices of all grades of beef cattle during the

(Photo courtesy of Edwin and Norva Gunderson)

Ole Gunderson with his grandchildren Edwin, Jr. (father of the author) and Evelyn.

(Photo courtesy of Edwin and Norva Gunderson)

Ole Gunderson with his granddaughters Mary and Ruth.

(Photo courtesy of Edwin and Norva Gunderson)

Ole Gunderson with his grandson Edwin, Jr. (father of the author).

shipping season. He could also figure hay tonnage and prices faster in his head than someone with paper and pencil.[54]

He was always interested in world and local affairs. He took the Faldalen paper for years, having Edwin read and translate the news of his friends. He kept a radio in his room to listen to the news and for entertainment such as boxing matches. Fight nights brought local bachelors Oscar Carlson and Billy VandenHovel over to the house. The party was held in Ole's room while the family below listened to the stomping and laughter going on upstairs.[55]

By this time Ole was loaning money to his friends and neighbors to buy land and livestock. Ole was always ready to help anyone who needed it. In 1917, he helped organize the Stockman's Bank of Collbran. After the bank was organized he served on the board of directors for many years. His son Edwin would later serve as bank president.[56]

Another change for the Gundersons was the purchase of their first car in 1917. Edwin and Ruth both learned to drive. Edwin would "motor" the family to church or to town. He would take the car to work on the upper places when the roads were passable. When Edwin was gone it was up to Ruth to do the driving. She would take Ole where he wanted to go, but when they stopped he would reach over and check to make sure the engine was off (key in the correct position) and that the car was in gear.[57]

Even with the car, Ole often walked the five miles to Collbran. Remarkably, he seldom got lost once he learned the lay of the land. The only time he did get lost going to Collbran was when a man told him, as a joke, that he was going the wrong way. The family found him some hours later, heading home having figured out the "joke".[58]

Over the years the cattle industry had its ups and downs. The Gundersons always tried to maintain quality cattle that would have high market value. Cattle trends continually changed in popular breed, size, and weight. Hereford cattle became the trademark of the Gunderson ranch. During the lean years, bulls were traded with neighbors and during better times new bulls were purchased to avoid genetic inbreeding.[59] These efforts ensured top quality cattle and maximized their market value.

Ole, George, and Edwin continued to add to their land holdings. Between 1920 and 1936 they purchased over 2580 acres of land.[60] These additions adjoined their existing properties, making management more efficient. Later, tracts of land were purchased on the Upper Sunnyside for spring pasture and to hold the cattle overnight in the fall

The Gunderson family's first car circa 1917. (Photo courtesy of Edwin and Norva Gunderson)

on their way to the DeBeque shipping yards.[61] Ole began the tradition of referring to each place by the name of the previous owner or the man who homesteaded the land. There was the Campbell place, the Hutton place, McAlarys', Manspeakers', and Carters' to name a few.

In March of 1938 a fire nearly destroyed the house on the Dinwiddle place. Edwin had left for the day to feed at the "upper place" and to check on George. Fortunately Jim Severson, one of the ranch hands, spotted the flames while feeding cows. Extensive damage was done to both the first and second stories of the house, but Ole, Ruth, and the children were unharmed.[62] The house was rebuilt around the one room that withstood the fire due to its thick log walls.

Ole spent his last years with Edwin, Ruth, and their five children, Mary, Ruth, Evelyn, Edwin Jr., and Velma. He enjoyed visits with George, friends, and family. He died November 10, 1939 at Faith Hospital in Collbran after a three-week illness. As in life, George and Edwin were at his side.[63]

The legacy that Ole left behind has survived for 104 years. The log cabin and barns still stand, water flows through the ditches he dug, and the cattle graze under the original permits. The small homestead of 160 acres is now a progressive cattle ranch of over six thousand acres. The ranching industry continues to change and the Gundersons meet each challenge head-on, perhaps the greatest legacy of all.

Susan Nichols graduated from Mesa State College in 1993 with a degree in History. She teaches at the Collbran Job Corps Center in Collbran, Colorado.

NOTES

[1]Donna Helen Young, et. al., *The Plateau Valley Story: A Colorful History* (1965), 1.
[2]Ruth Gunderson, "Ole Gunderson, 1852-1939", (diary, 1945), 1. (Hereinafter, Diary).
[3]Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel*, 11 November 1939.
[4]Interview with Edwin Gunderson, Jr., Collbran, Colorado, 26 September 1992.
[5]Diary, 2.
[6]Ibid.
[7]Interview with Evelyn Heuschkel, Grand Junction, Colorado, 28 September, 1992.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Diary, 2.
[10]Gunderson, Jr.,interview.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Diary, 2.
[13]United States Government, Land Grant Certificate No. 1324, 1895. (Original petition, 1888).
[14]Kenneth J. Sire, *The Red Book*, Bureau of Land Management, Phoenix, 4.
[15]Diary, 2.
[16]Helen Young, *Skin and Bones of Plateau Valley History* (Grand Junction, CO, Wilson and Young, 1976), 55.
[17]Gunderson, Jr. interview.
[18]Heuschkel interview.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Gunderson, Jr. interview.
[21]Ibid.
[22]Ibid.
[23]Diary, 3.
[24]Gunderson, Jr. interview.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Norman Hill, "A Few Thoughts of the Early Years," diary in his hands, 1940.
[27]Ruth Gunderson, journal entry in her hands, March 1934, (Hereinafter, Gunderson journal).
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[29]State of Colorado, Stock Brand Certificate, 1899.
[30]Diary, 3.
[31]United States Government, Land Grant Certificate, No. 1535 and 1536, 1899.
[32]Heuschkel interview.
[33]Diary, 3.
[34]Ibid.
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[36]State of Colorado, Stock Brand Certificate, 1901.
[37]United States Department of the Interior, Cattle and Horse Grazing Permit, 1903.
[38]Ibid.
[39]United States Government, Land Grant Certificate, No. 99124, 1909.
[40]Interview with Edwin Gunderson, Jr., Collbran, Colorado, 3 October 1992.
[41]Gunderson journal, 1934.
[42]Gunderson, Jr. interview (3 October 1992).

[43]Ibid.
[44]Ibid.
[45]Gunderson journal, 1934.
[46]Ibid.
[47]Gunderson, Jr. interview (3 October 1992).
[48]United States Government, Land Grant Certificate, No. 039617, 1912.
[49]Gunderson journal, April 1940.
[50]Heuschkel interview.
[51]Gunderson, Jr. interview (3 October 1992).
[52]State of Colorado, Stock Brand Certificate, 1914.
[53]Young, 23.
[54]Interview with Edwin Gunderson, Jr., Collbran, Colorado, 7 November 1992.
[55]Heuschkel interview.
[56]Gunderson, Jr. interview (7 November 1992).
[57]Heuschkel interview.
[58]Gunderson journal, April 1932.
[59]Ibid.
[60]Gunderson, Jr. interview, 3 October 1992.
[61]Ibid.
[62]Grand Junction *Daily Sentinel*, 4 February 1938.
[63]Gunderson journal, 10 November 1939.

I Don't Even Hear the Trains Run Anymore

By Russell Twitchell

Author's Note

The initial purpose behind this study was as a course requirement in qualitative research. The reason I chose this particular subject is because of my indirect involvement with the railroad through friends and family members who, since the turn of the century, have worked for the railroad in various capacities. I discovered that hardship can take forms less obvious to the eye than physical danger; there are others much more damaging, and not as easily defined.

I've been thinking about the interview I gave you before. You made me real angry.

How?

They really did us bad. The whole buyout deal. They really hurt us.

This was the beginning of my last interview for this research project. It caused me to step back and reflect on how the whole project had gone, from beginning to end.

My initial project had been centered around the Rio Grande Railroad and the former railroaders who had taken what was called a "buyout" - which translates to being paid a certain amount of money not to work for the railroad. The concept of "buyout" is not new; it has been employed by various other companies in the U. S. What underlies the concept is the need by a company to trim its costs by whatever means possible, and I feel safe in saying that cutting

the labor force is the quickest and most well-known possible means.

The Rio Grande effected a buyout in 1991, cutting the labor force by a noticeable degree. Because the buyout was limited to — in large part — men who had spent most of their working lives in service to the railroad, I was curious about their lives from that time until now; in other words, how had they adjusted to what could only be viewed as a foreign way of life? What direction had their lives taken, and what were they doing?

I admit when I started this I had made a presupposition: that the transition from one way of life to another was not a difficult one; after all, it is only a simple job change. I've spent a great deal of time thinking about this and cannot think of another case where I could have been more wrong. This was not an everyday occurrence; it was not a simple job change, and the transition has not been easy, if made at all.

My research was done from January to April of 1994. It consisted of ten interviews, including three follow-ups, with men employed by the railroad during the years 1973 — 1992, all approximately forty-five years of age — some younger, some older. To the best of my understanding they all share one common opinion in particular: if given the chance to work for the railroad again, not one would take it.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Where the buyout begins, for all practical purposes, is with the purchase of the Southern Pacific — a railroad line that had been on the skids financially since 1981 — followed by the purchase of the Rio Grande — a railroad that had been a money-maker for years — by one man: Philip Anschutz. With the combination of these lines, cutbacks had to be made in order for a profit to be realized. One of the cutbacks came when the Department of Transportation put into effect a device attached to the last car of a travel-ready train, what has become known as a "black box." It is an electronic device designed to detect any malfunctions with the train while traveling, sending signals to the power-unit, or engine, and monitored by the engineer. What it did to the labor force was make it possible to remove the traditional caboose, eliminating the need for a brakeman in the rear of the train. This appears to have been an insufficient cut in labor, for shortly after, a "voluntary" buyout was initiated to reduce it even more. This buyout was offered to employees who were not scheduled to retire soon, and a fixed number of offers were extended:

Yeah. That part was a lot of uncertainty, a lot of worry, you know, people just didn't know what to do, and this buyout was kind of a. . .they called it a "voluntary" buyout, but there was wording in there that said if we didn't take

(Photo courtesy of Barry Michrina)

The "black box" which eliminated the traditional caboose.

the $60,000 and if they didn't get enough men to take the buyout, then they'd start forcing guys to take it for $45,000. But after they got everybody signed up, they said 'this is strictly voluntary' so we weren't qualified for unemployment or nothing like that. As far as we were concerned, it was an involuntary buyout. It was forced.

The analogy "smoke and mirrors" seems appropriate. What the rest of my interviewees told me backs up the sense of uncertainty toward the future. For some there was the appearance of no alternative but to take the buyout as offered, since they would be removed from their jobs in another fashion, or their jobs would disappear altogether. This was not necessarily the truth. Some would have been able to keep the job they had, at a price, but they weren't aware this was the case. It was a matter of making the future look dismal enough that no one would hesitate at the option of a buyout. And for the most part this tactic worked. Some were aware of the option of staying. As one put it:

About a year before all this happened I was told by the yardmaster that me and [another employee] would be the next to be promoted. And I found out about a month ago that the other guy and someone else did get promoted, so the long and short of it is, it could be if I were still down there now, it's likely I'd be there with a really good job, making about $48,000 a year. . .and the conditions would be much worse, and I wouldn't want the job.

Part of the confusion lies in the handling of the situation by the union itself. As a kid I remember my grandfather, who spent much of his life working for the railroad, talking with pride of those years. I had always believed the railroad to be more than a job — it was a conviction, a way of life, something you did forever, without fear of losing your place. The union gave that way of life the strength to stand up to anything; however, it was the consensus of my interviewees that when Anschutz bought the railroad, the union strength died:

Because you had union protection. Supposedly. But you paid forty-some dollars a month. But there was no union, no teeth. They sold you down. I paid them to get rid of my job.

But the Rio Grande management was eventually going to change anyway because the union was slowly ceding to all these business demands.

The last strike we went on lasted nineteen hours, I think, and they forced us to go back to work. When that happened, well I thought, we're powerless. They're gonna do with us what they want, and that's exactly what's happening.

What had been for years an autonomous world, what I suddenly realized could be classified as a separate culture, complete with a job security that could not be shaken, had become a place of doubt, of insecurity for the future.

No one knew what to expect, save for the fact the job would never be the same. I heard a note of sadness in one interview:

The Rio Grande was a railroad that was owned by people who cared. Had a long, good history. It's part of America. Or was — I guess it's not anymore.

GOLDEN HANDCUFFS/REACHING FOR THE GOLDEN GRABIRON

The choices for these men were simple. One: they either took the buyout that was offered, which was comparatively nothing to what they had put into their jobs. It consisted of a lump sum — approximately $60,000 (this varied) — from which Federal taxes were subtracted. Along with taxes a large amount was taken for Railroad Retirement. What was left came to a general sum of $38,000 (again with variation). This was what the average of nineteen years of service came to be worth. The buyout contract had stipulations: you could not work for the railroad in any capacity — subcontract or otherwise — for at least five years (after my interviewees read the initial draft of this paper, there was some uncertainty concerning the length of time mentioned); you could not draw unemployment for a long period of time, on the "understanding" this was a "voluntary" buyout. For some, who have known no other work, this became a living hell. Several of my interviewees told me they could read the newspaper and find ex-railroaders listed under D.U.I. arrests. For these men, the transition is not over.

Two: they could refuse the buyout, keep their jobs, and hope for the best. A phrase that came up concerning this alternative was "Golden Handcuffs." It refers to those men who, for one reason or another, could not conceivably take the buyout and survive. Financial responsibilities including school-age children, mortgages, debts accrued over the years, and medical expenses for family members, kept these men tied to the job with no way out. It also refers to those who felt they had no marketable potential for the outside work force. The level of education plays a major role in this, along with job skills that do not translate easily to an average job market. This was an option fraught with uncertainty itself. To keep the job, you might be required to relocate on a moment's notice, moving your family at your expense. Or you might be laid off. From what I have gathered, the rules and regulations governing the railroad have changed to such an extent that it is more than possible to violate one with no prior knowledge of its existence. And to this extent, you lose everything, with nothing left to show for it.

Three: an alternative to the buyout that took me by surprise, though on

(Photo courtesy of Barry Michrina)

Grabirons used to board a train.

reflection I cannot help but admit it is more than viable. This one is known as "reaching for the Golden Grabiron." A grabiron is a metal handhold attached to the side of a railcar, used in mounting a moving train. "Reaching for the Golden Grabiron" refers to the possibility of grabbing onto the handhold, only to have it pull out of the car, causing you to fall from a moving train, leaving you by the side of the track, injured for life. As in many workplaces, the railroad pays workman's compensation for injuries received on the job. If an injury is severe enough, a settlement may be large enough to cover the rest of the workman's natural life. In many cases the injury is legitimate, but in some it is not. And for some of these, I cannot help but feel they were justified. To illustrate, I will pose a hypothetical situation. I take the position of a man about fifty years old. I have worked for the railroad for over twenty years as a brakeman, making the run between point A and point B, about seven hundred miles round trip, through mountainous terrain, for most of those years. It's a physically taxing and dangerous job, and over the years I have damaged my back, my knees, etc., not to a great extent, but enough for me to notice every time I get out of bed. All I've ever wanted was to do the best job I can and reach retirement. Suddenly, I'm faced with the probability that my job may change — I may be forced to work in the yard as a switchman, in order to keep my job. I know physically I will not be able to handle it, and I believe I may lose the job because of this. The money offered with the buyout is not enough for me and my family to live on, but I can afford the chance of no money even less. My options: take the insufficient amount offered; take a chance on nothing; or get injured on the job and get a settlement and pension.

For some, the latter is not only a matter of survival, it is also a statement of anger and frustration. It is a way of getting a part of their lives back, a compensation for what *they* paid to the job. This alternative method, to be sure, was not and is not an easy one to employ, and does take a certain amount of chance. There is the risk of injuring oneself to the point of having no life to speak of. And this risk was part of the decision by many not to go this route. For many it was a matter of ethics and morality that prevented consideration of this method. Of the three choices, this was the least taken, but it has to be considered a choice, nonetheless. And those who took it, I will suggest, saw a lack of ethics not in themselves, but in the corporation:

But you know — I'm going to make a statement here; I feel that the company is at fault to a point, because of the disgruntlement, I guess that's the proper word, of employees seeing such a deterioration of putting thirty

years in and just absolutely being destroyed. I think some of these guys, who had dedicated their lives to the railroad, felt like if the railroad could do this to them, well then, they'd do something to get some of those years back. I couldn't do it, it's just not for me. I left a lot of bitter people down there.

Part of the responsibility lies with the company. With the cutback in the labor force came the need to cover the same jobs with fewer men. Men were being pushed into performing delicate and dangerous functions with less rest time. Men were doing jobs they were not qualified to do, out of company need for someone to fill a hole left by cutbacks in labor. This caused the level of safety to go down. One of the informants said: "They wanted to make a point that they no longer needed those jobs, no matter how much it cost them down the line." On this point, and regarding safety conditions in general, all of my interviewees agreed.

WAVE AFTER WAVE

Many of the men who took the buyout, according to a few of my interviewees, saw the 1991 buyout not as the end of a bad situation, although for them it was, but as the beginning of a continuation of cutbacks. This has been attributed to the fact that the railroad appears to belong to one man who has only profit in mind:

And the people that run the railroad are not people that were switchmen or brakemen for years and then moved on up through the ranks — the people that run the railroad are not railroaders; they're businessmen, and it's a business.

With this in mind I have been told the Rio Grande is looking to cut more jobs. And as I understand the situation, those men who did stay with the railroad may be looking at the same situation they were in, in 1991.

At the beginning of this project I expected to find ex-railroaders in new work settings, comfortable with the outcome, and their years with the railroad merely a thing of the past. I was wrong. It is not a thing of the past; it lives with many of them. There are questions that have not been answered; how did one man gain that much power; why did the union fold, so to speak, under pressure; why did it happen in the first place? I cannot answer these questions yet, but I can show, to an extent, what has been the aftermath.

I asked each man I interviewed if he had any regrets about his decision to take the buyout. There were several. One mentioned the loss of the time off he once had. Most said they missed the men they worked with. Considering

the amount of closeness and camaraderie and loyalty to each other for so long this is no surprise. But no one regretted leaving the railroad. And, if given the chance, would not go back. I have been told some of the jobs have been offered back, but in light of what went on prior to and since the buyout, none even consider returning. It is believed, and not without merit, that it would only end in the same fashion.

The buyout gave many the chance to start life over. And it gave them a personal sense of self. The buyout put all of them at a loss financially, but that drop in paychecks was worth the gain in mental and physical health and happiness some say they now have:

I'll never make that kind of money again, but I don't care no more — there's more to life than just a dollar bill.

Not everyone is totally content:

The money gets to be important, but as you get older the money's not that important. I'm a lot more humanistic than I was, so I guess that's a good part. I'm not as happy as I thought I'd be, though.

Most agree that the years they had with the railroad, as demanding as they were, were great years. Their overall regret is not necessarily what happened to them, but what happened to the railroad itself. One man commented:

. . . there were people who said 'if you had told me five years ago the railroad could be like this, I would have called you a liar, and would have defended its honor.'

For the amount of loyalty and dedication I felt from these men for the railroad they were once a part of, I believe the pride and honor in that statement was total. They have all begun new lives; they all have new direction and purpose. Some are willing to forgive a wrong done to them, some are not, but none will forget. A few have started their own businesses, a few work for others on their own terms, a few are getting by until something more meaningful comes along, and some have not recovered.

This project brought to the surface in a few, if not all, of my interviews, anger, frustration, and to some degree, sadness that had been put away and for this I apologize to each. At the same time they showed me my own ignorance of the buyout, and for this I am grateful. What needs to be done now is for this awaremess to be brought to the surface in others, for this is not an isolated case. There have been other buyouts, in other corporations, and many more people affected in this. This has been an account of one.

Russell Twitchell is a student at Mesa State College working toward degrees in Anthropology and Archaeology.

Gandy-Dancer to Shoe Clerk

by J. R. Kirkpatrick

Editor's Note

The following memoir was written by Mr. Kirkpatrick during his free time on the job. His abiding interest in history led him to write for several local and national newspapers and magazines. Mr. Kirkpatrick passed away March 6, 1994. It has been my pleasure to work with Mrs. Wilma Kirkpatrick in order to publish this work in the Journal of the Western Slope.

The year was 1936. I was out of work, almost penniless, and deeply discouraged. At every Grand Junction store where I applied for a job, the answer was the same: no one was hiring. When a friend told me the railroad wanted men, I was skeptical. With little hope, I walked to the Denver & Rio Grande offices at the depot.

"Yes," the man said, "we're hiring an extra gang for eastern Utah. Gandy-dancin'. Bring a bedroll and work clothes. The train will leave at 10:30 tonight."

There weren't many opportunities for travel or broadening experiences during those times. I didn't know what an extra gang was and had never heard of gandy-dancin'. But I had a job!

The Great Depression was stifling the country. When I graduated from Delta High School in 1932, there was neither part-time work nor money for college. But when the Forest Service transferred my father to Grand Junction a year later, the larger town offered more possibilities. I was hired as janitor at

the First Methodist Church — sweeping, dusting, rearranging furniture for weekly group meetings, shoveling snow, and firing the furnace in winter.

With that small income, and a good deal of help from my parents, I had a year at Grand Junction State Junior College in 1934-1935. Classes were held in the two-story Lowell Elementary School at Fifth and Rood. Although the building had been condemned as unsafe for children, it was considered sturdy enough for college students. Even now I can recall the shocking transition from high school to college freshman. It was more than being addressed "mister." At the end of my first class, Miss Mary Rait gave the next day's assignment in Economic History of England and the United States. The first three chapters of the text, to be followed by a quiz!

Lighting was inadequate, and restrooms child-size and primitive. There was no carpet on the creaking, uneven floors, no cafeteria — not even lockers. Sometimes students worried that sagging stairs might collapse, leaving them stranded in a top-story classroom. (Several years later the second floor was razed and the ground floor remodeled. It is now City Hall.)

An older man with a family to support was given the Methodist Church job, and my schooling ended. By late spring 1936, even sporadic part-time work had dried up.

As soon as I boarded the train that night, real-life education abruptly began. Obviously the car was a worn-out reject from regular service — faded and ripped upholstery, flaking paint, cracked windows. The floor was littered with cigarette butts and trash. It stank of unwashed bodies.

Men sprawled in the seats, most of them asleep. Their clothing was tattered and soiled; unshaven faces bristled like stubble in a wheat field. Some took both sides of the double benches, while others curled up on one. Using his shoes for a pillow, one man's dirty bare feet dangled over the aisle. I quickly revised my definition of hard times.

I found a seat and dozed fitfully, waking at every stop. Some time after midnight, the train halted in the Utah desert. Amid considerable confusion, eight of us were ejected into the darkness. We watched the train pull out, then stumbled toward a string of boxcars on a siding. Banging on doors evoked angry replies and, finally, directions to a sleeper car with room for us.

Groping my way into gloom brightened only by weak moonlight, I located an empty bunk. I shoved my suitcase underneath, unrolled my blankets, and discovered the mattress was bare boards. I was tired. Lulled by a chorus of snores, I let sleep take me.

When the wake-up gong sounded at six o'clock, I had time to look over

GRAND JUNCTION STATE JUNIOR COLLEGE

STUDENT'S PERMANENT RECORD

Name of Student Kirkpatrick, James Richard 522-10-1829 Date of Birth Nov 1, 1914

Name of Parent or Guardian Mr. and Mrs. E.J. Kirkpatrick Nationality American

Parent's Address 636 Hill, Grand Junction, Colorado Occupation of Parent [illegible]

FRESHMAN YEAR 19..-19..				SOPHOMORE YEAR 19..-19..			
Dept. No.	Course Title	Hrs.	Mrk.	Dept. No.	Course Title	Hrs.	Mrk.
	Fall Quarter				**Fall Quarter**		
Chem 1a	Inorganic Chemistry	(4)	W				
Math 1	College Algebra	(3)	F				
Engr 1a	Freshman English	3	B				
Ec 2a	Ec Hist of Eng and U S	3	C				
Hist 1a	Modern European History	3	C				
PEm 1a	Physical Ed. (Men)	1	A				
	Winter Quarter				**Winter Quarter**		
Eng 1b	Freshman English	3	B				
Ec 2b	Ec Hist of Eng and U S	3	C				
Hist 1b	Modern European History	3	C				
PolSci 1b	American Government	3	C				
PEM 1b	Physical Ed. (Men)	1	A				
	Spring Quarter				**Spring Quarter**		
Engr 1c	Freshman English	3	B				
Ec 2c	Ec Hist of Eng and U S	3	B				
Hist 1c	Modern European History	3	B				
PEM 1c	Physical Ed. (Men)	1	A				
Pol Sci 1c	American Government	3	B				

Copy of J. R. Kirkpatrick's report card from Grand Junction State Junior College circa 1914.

my new home. Double-decked bunks lined each side of the sleeper car, with an aisle down the middle. There were several dirt-streaked windows. Space was planned for sixteen men, though not all bunks were occupied. Neither lockers nor hooks for clothing were provided, but few men had possessions to store. One man had no blanket; he slept under newspapers for warmth.

Not until that evening did I learn there were no shower facilities.[1] A few battered enamel wash basins allowed rudimentary face-and-hands cleanliness and cold-water shaves. A water tanker accompanied the sleeper cars.

Fifteen minutes after reveille, the breakfast gong rang. The meal was filling, but not fancy. Hotcakes, oatmeal, cornflakes, fried potatoes, bread and butter. Potent coffee needed thinning with water or much-diluted canned milk. This was standard breakfast fare, I soon learned. Beans and potatoes, and occasionally stringy beef, were mainstays at dinner and supper. Dinner dessert was usually pie.

At seven o'clock, the straw bosses called us out of the sleeper cars. It didn't take long for a greenhorn like me to learn gandy-dancin'. The work was hard, but the monotony was worse.

The extra gang worked with a section gang, men experienced in track maintenance. First, a few men dug jack holes, small excavations between every eight or ten ties. Then came the jack crews, who placed heavy jacks into the holes to raise a rail to specifications set by a level-board man. The latter used a tool with a bubble, similar to a carpenter's level.

Wielding short-handled, square-bladed shovels, the gandy-dancers moved in. We tamped gravel or slag into the raised space under each tie, especially the areas that supported rails. It took me nearly all morning to learn a rhythm that did the job without wearing me out. The "dancin'" part of the slang phrase made sense, with fifty-odd workers performing awkward, jerky movements in unison. A long-defunct producer of railroad tools, Gandy Manufacturing Company of Chicago, lent its name to the first part of the term.

Following the gandy-dancers came the "dressers." These three or four men scraped surplus slag from ties, and leveled the shoulders from tie-end to ground. At a distance of 2600 feet, crews were guarded by flagmen at either end who set torpedoes on the rails to slow trains coming through. A foreman and several straw bosses oversaw the work.

This was gandy-dancin'. Twenty-five cents an hour, ten hours a day, and usually seven days a week. Pay was deducted for meals. There was no shade, and the desert sun bore down. One man moved up and down the line of workers with a five-gallon galvanized bucket of ice water, doling it out in a common-use ladle.

Most of the men were drifters. They would work a week or two, draw a paycheck, and hop a freight. More than once, a hobo signed on, spent a night in the sleeper car, and worked one day, reasoning that three meals were sufficient pay. From the 12th to the 23rd of June, 133 names were put on the board roll with a normal crew numbering 60, including the bosses. Sunday work was time-and-a-half pay. But on a no-work Sunday, the men had the usual amount deducted for meals, while earning nothing. Some shouldered their bedrolls Saturday night and moved on.

Here was a cross-section of homeless America — old-country Mexicans, blacks, Mexican-Americans, whites — even an Indian who claimed to be a Sioux chief from South Dakota. They came from all walks of life. There were ex-servicemen, youths from CCC camps, farmers, salesmen, and many I never identified. Two freely admitted they were ex-convicts; rumors hinted others bore the same stigma. One young man was obviously mentally unstable, and authorities were contacted to remove him from this environment.

A Mexican National with whom I worked was an old-timer on the extra gang. He showed me a half-dozen paychecks he had accumulated, all of them endorsed. When I told him anyone could cash them if he lost them, he shook his head in disagreement. When the gang reached a larger town, he told me, he would buy money orders and mail them to his family.

Profanity was the basic language, and more tall tales were spun than Baron Munchausen ever dreamed. After work, bull sessions were the only entertainment. No one produced a deck of cards or a pair of dice. Yet there was an unwritten code of honesty. During my month on the gang, I heard no reports of theft. A man's past was his own business. The men got along.

There was a memorable "night on the town" after the first payday. The equipment and sleeper cars had been moved to a siding nearly three miles from Thompson, and about half the men hiked to that outpost of civilization. A few cashed their checks, bought necessities, and returned to camp. But most gathered at a cafe where 3.2 beer was served. I played a pinball machine; after about fifty cents worth of nickels, I learned a way to jiggle the table base for free games.

Before long, several men found a cafe where whiskey could be bought — illegally, of course — and the party's tempo rose. By closing time at midnight, the revelers were rowdy and quarrelsome. Outside, another man who did not drink joined me in herding the celebrants to the siding. We supported two who were nearly out on their feet.

It was more than an hour before camp quieted. Next morning at breakfast, appetites were meager, while black coffee sustained most of the men who

had visited Thompson.

I worked most jobs: gandy-dancin', water boy, timekeeper-helper, and kitchen flunky. Hours were longer in the kitchen car, but the food was better. The cook ate from the bosses' larder; once he fried a steak for me.

I made a trip to Grand Junction on one of our no-work Sundays. Having listened to endless tales of hopping freights or riding the rods, I crawled aboard a slow-moving freight train on Saturday night. Just behind the coal car, where the sides curve inward a little, is a small platform the hoboes call the blinders. For most of the night I hung on grimly — there wasn't room to sit. When I dropped off the noisy, swaying platform in the Grand Junction yards, I had trouble walking a straight line. In the depot restroom, my reflection in a mirror resembled someone made up for an old-time minstrel show.

The Indian — we called him Chief — was one of several friends I made. Working with oil paints in the evenings, he created delicate pictures on small flat rocks — cactus and desert blooms and an occasional Indian in war paint and feathers. When I took my Sunday trip home, he asked me to pick up tubes of several tints. Returning, I caught a ride on a work train, and brought him his paints. As thanks, he gave me three of his paintings. (Though the colors have faded, they remain silent reminders of my days on the extra gang.)

I gandy-danced for another week. Then a letter came: my application at J. C. Penney had been accepted. Could I report for work next Monday?

Going home this time, I hitchhiked.

Penney's was another world. No more radical disparity could be imagined than that between gandy-dancer and clothing store employee. Yet when I was hired, my duties were more physical than cerebral.

"Stock clerk" encompassed a multitude of chores. I was broom pusher, window washer, and errand runner. For back door merchandise deliveries (freight, railway express, parcel post) I signed receipts, checked invoices, and unpacked cartons. Using a hand-cranked, changeable-type machine to print labels, I pinned or stuck price tags to each item. When they were called for, I carried goods to each department and stocked the shelves.

In 1936, J. C. Penney occupied only a fraction of the space it was leasing when the store moved to Mesa Mall in 1981. Except for the cashier's mezzanine platform, all departments were on the street floor. Narrow and crowded, the stock room was squeezed between the shoe department and the alley. To the west, separated by a common wall, was the Golden Pheasant Cafe's kitchen, from where ferocious cockroaches burrowed into the Penney building.

J. C. Penney's advertisement as it appeared in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, *January 1937.*

James C. Penney opened the first Golden Rule Store in Kemmerer, Wyoming in 1902. His policy, radical for those times, was cash payment for good quality, low-price merchandise. Almost at once he drew trade from area miners always in debt to the company store at month's end. The Grand Junction store, established in 1912, was number thirty-three in the chain.

After a few months I clerked on Saturdays and other busy times. Penney's had no sales, only "special events." The company did no billboard or radio advertising and newspaper ads were few, the New Year's White Goods Event usually being the largest layout of the year. Hours were long: 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 or 7 p.m. weekdays, and until 10 or later on Saturdays. For farmers and a good many townspeople, Saturday combined shopping and socializing. The same frustrating customers visited on the street corners until 8:59, then hurried into the store just as the doors were closing. While they dawdled, I swept floors.

C. P. Ellsworth was store manager; Roy Shanks, assistant. I learned to fit shoes under Emerson Class's tutelage, and moved up to full-time clerk. Men's work shoes were easy to sell. Usually the customer knew his size and the style he wanted; many never tried them on.

With women and children, though, real salesmanship was necessary. Often a lady chose a style, and Penney's didn't have her size. Or she tried on several pairs, found nothing she liked, and visited Gordon's, Montgomery Ward's, or Benge's. Most children were easy to work with. Once Mother gave her approval to a particular shoe, I put the youngster's foot on a measuring stick, determining the size, and brought out a half or full size larger than the measurement. Parents agreed; the extra shoe length provided a happy medium between foot growth and the time the shoes wore out.

When making a sale, the clerk wrote a ticket, put coins in a threaded hardwood cup, with bills and ticket secured in a steel clamp at the cup's bottom. Twisting the cup into a wheeled lid, the clerk pulled a wooden handle on a leather thong, and the cup rode a pair of taut wires to the cashier.

Since paired wires stretched from each department, a stranger would be startled by the noisy overhead flight of wooden cups. More alarming was the racket when a cup broke loose, scattering coins. Only once during my stint with the company did I witness a direct hit. A part-time shoe salesman, waiting for change, took a solid, bloody blow to the head.[2] Luckily the missile missed his glasses.

Suggestive selling was a religion. If I sold a pair of shoes, I suggested house slippers, socks, or shoe polish. Sometimes I made the extra sale, more often not. Besides salary (I started at $75 a month), there was a bonus benefit for sales above a preset level. Supersalesman Tony Alexander in Men's Suits

earned a bonus most months.

There were no credit cards, no catalogs, no computerized cash registers that automatically took stock. At inventory time, the store stayed closed on December 31 and New Year's Day. Everyone counted merchandise for two days, sometimes working until two o'clock in the morning.

But no one complained — not loudly, anyway. Jobs were too hard to come by. Besides, Penney's training was the best. Those days, store managers started at the bottom and worked up.

With war clouds looming, the valley's economy brightened somewhat. But there was a down side. The national fishbowl lottery in 1940 foretold the order in which men would be drafted into military service. My number was a low one; it made me the first Penney's man called. I joined the Navy in early 1942.

At war's end, I returned to Penney's for most of a year, though I knew I wasn't cut out to be a salesman. With the Great Depression over and business beginning an upturn, I took the examination for post office work. I was hired in 1947, and a different kind of career than that of my youth began.

NOTES

[1]Memory failed me here. After telephone calls to John Schoening and Bob Ross, retired railroaders, I confirmed there were no shower facilities. OSHA was years in the future.

[2]Bill Ratekin, for whom Ratekin Towers is named, was augmenting his school district salary.

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