



INTERVIEW WITH RAY STWALLEY

“Session One – The Early Years”

“So my people became farmers and ranchers and did some mining. I guess everybody that came to Colorado, “Mined Once”.” – Ray Stwalley

Ray Stwalley is my neighbor and is a Colorado native. We sat down recently to let Ray do a little reminiscing about the mountain west of his younger years and his youth in New Mexico. Ray is also somewhat of an historian, so he will share some documented history and family experiences about this part of the west.

Marv: Ray, tell us a little bit about your boyhood years, in the west.

Ray: Having grown up in Salida, Colorado & a town in New Mexico, called Truth or Consequences, I became aware of the difference in age between the two states. You have this history, of the Conquistadores that goes back, to the 1500s in New Mexico, whereas, the settlement date, in Colorado, was around 1860. Pike came through in 1806. This was a different time line. The “Pikes Peak or Bust,” of 1859, with the gold rush, is regarded, as old, in Colorado.

Ray: My mother use to tell the joke about the Englishman that came to Colorado; He asked to see something old, so they sent him to Central City. His comment was, “I thought this was old, this is only Victorian.”

Ray: I think we in the West have an attitude that the Civil War or maybe the Mexican War is that point in which the world starts. When I moved to Kentucky, I passed a college that was established in 1790. “Oh yeah, this was part of the real world in 1790.”

Marv: It was the West.

Ray: Exactly, it was the West in 1790.

Ray: So I think the real west and the west people read about, were two different things. This impression that in the 1800s everybody walked around with a navy colt, a Winchester tied to their saddle and there were gun fights in the streets, is largely myth. The cemetery records of Buena Vista, Colorado, in the 1880’s, show that one man was shot to death. He was shot, supposedly, by a drunk in the saloon. The West wasn’t quite as violent a place as the Dime novels or Hollywood would have us believe.

Marv: When you look at the head stones, at the Fort Union grave yard, in North Dakota, the most frequent cause of death was “Consumption.” That’s where Sitting Bull surrendered along with a lot of colorful history, however it may not have been the “Shoot ‘em up place,” that was often depicted. However, it was frontier and there’s something different about the frontier.

Ray: I recall reading in one of Bruce Catton’s books, “The Army of The Potomac Trilogy,” that then got me hooked on the Civil War, he makes the comment about the western migration and said, “Cowards never started and the weak died on the way.” That gave an attitude in the West that was different. The troops from the West had a different attitude than those from Pennsylvania, New York, etc. That was, “We got out here and fought the Indians and no one else was here when we got here.” They forgot that

one hundred years earlier that's the way it was on the east coast. So we get to the 1870s, with Colorado formed as ranching, farming and mining country. Folks like the McPhelemys, Irish immigrants, came to this new west after finding that the mill in Massachusetts wasn't much different than the mill in Ireland. Now these were not young people, when they came to Colorado in the 1870s. They came because it was better than a mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. So they became farmers and ranchers and did some mining. I guess everybody that came to Colorado, "Mined Once."

Marv: It wasn't easy

Ray: Well my family on my mother's side, my great grandfather and grandfather came around 1894. They came because there was no work in Missouri. It was a financial panic (recession). They were brick layers that came to Cripple Creek. My grandfather went into the mines and didn't stay long. The legend is that he got buried in a cave-in and survived so he said that was enough. My great grandfather established a brick works in Salida, Colorado, in the 1895-98 time period. So the red brick buildings in Salida came right out of my great grandfather's brick plant. The old part of the Salida courthouse was fired by my great grandfather. Also the high school prior to the present one was fired by him.

Marv: One of the things that I remember, as a young boy, was that the small town merchants seemed to do better financially. I think they came with some cash and new how to leverage it. Most of the farmers were poor or certainly "cash poor." I guess they still are today. I know that the merchants provided credit and carried farmers until they had a crop. So they had to be a judge of character, as well. The two brothers that ran our grocery store owned a lot of farm land, as a result of the 1930s when a lot of folks gave up and left.

Marv: Ray, I'm intrigued with the western attitude to "stick it out," however, on the other hand, most of those people didn't have good alternatives anyway.

Ray: My dad's father grew up in western Kansas and he and my grandmother moved to Colorado, about the time that WWI started. They homesteaded in eastern Colorado, along what he called "The Picket Wire," which was the "Cowboy" for Purgatory. Apparently the cowboys translated Purgatory, as "The Picket Wire." This was south of Las Animas, Colorado. He eventually broke his back and moved to town. I used to joke that I came from all that made Colorado. My dad's family was homesteaders on the plains, my mom's family came to mine and then my grandfather went into railroading and worked for the Rio Grande. He apparently decided that shoveling coal into a steam engine was better than mining.

Marv: Do you have a perspective on the differences between Mountain people and plains people?

Ray: I think the irony to me is, I kind of think of myself as town people. I was town raised in Salida, Colorado, as a little kid. Salida was a unique opportunity, at least for me, it was small enough where, as a kid with a bicycle I could be anywhere in town in 10 minutes. When I was a kid, children under 10 were not allowed to go north of 1st Street. So, folks ask why, and I say because, north of 1st was Front Street. Front Street had "Houses of Ill Fame," saloons, pawn shops...

Marv: All the interesting places.

Ray: Now everything south of 1st Street is where the churches held sway.

Ray: Often we would go across the C Street bridge to the railroad yards and get run off by the "Railroad Bulls," but also to fish the north bank of the Arkansas because we thought it was better fishing over there.

Ray: When we left Salida, the railroad shops were closing, so we moved, as the railroad was phasing out in Salida. So I remember Salida as a railroad town with a lot of train traffic and round houses. The fathers of half the kids I knew worked for the Denver, Rio Grande railroad.

Marv: Was that narrow gauge?

Ray: It was all standard through Salida. Beyond Salida, to the west, it was narrow gauge. Marshall Pass was still open so it went over the pass to Gunnison, Montrose and on to Grand Junction. Also down south to Durango.

Marv: I think the intent was go get to Santa Fe but never did.

Ray: Well, they got to Española, N. Mex. The ultimate intent of the Denver and Rio Grande was to go to El Paso and into Mexico. General Palmer was cut off by the Santa Fe, Railroad, and with the need to make a living with his railroad, when they got to Pueblo, Colorado, gold & silver strikes has just been made at Leadville. So they turned west, to go after the traffic from the mines. The Santa Fe went over Raton Pass and on southwest. The Colorado Railroad War, which Hollywood made a big deal of, "Had few shots fired," my grandfather said.

Marv: Was this in the Canyon then?

Ray: Supposedly they fought in the Royal Gorge. My grandfather, who worked for the Denver and Rio Grande, at the turn of the 20th century, knew some who said they may be exchanged two or three shots. So, if you take the excursion train through Royal Gorge, they will point out a hillside fortification that was supposedly built by the Rio Grande to keep the Santa Fe out. When the Rio Grande won the line in court they established the station in Salida. They were great town developers with Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Salida & Grand Junction, as examples. They had a massive real estate arm that would sell town lots, in all these locations.

Ray: So, for me, growing up in a railroad town, you always heard train whistles, and Salida, Colorado, was defined by the sound of the "Rotary Dumper." The rail traffic through Salida was from the Monarch Limestone Quarry hauled on narrow gauge gondolas down to Salida. The gondolas were rolled through the rotary dumper, which dumped them into standard gauge hopper cars. Very noisy! The hoppers were steel, so dumping limestone into this steel box would be a whomp! Whomp! Whomp! This would go on daily but they were courteous enough to not start dumping before 7 in the morning.

Marv: Where was this hauled to?

Ray: The limestone was hauled to the iron furnaces in Pueblo, Colorado. The Rio Grande had a relationship with the Colorado Fuel and Iron. There had been an iron mine in the 1890s – early 1900s above a place called Turret.

Marv: I wonder if somebody from Colorado Fuel and Iron wasn't on the board of directors of the Rio Grande.

Ray: Well there were these industry relationships. At any rate, there was an iron mine above Salida. So if you go up to Turret today, you'll see this big hole in the ground, with this starkly blue lake. The word is, "Don't get in the water." The Rio Grande built a 7% grade line to Turret. A 7% grade is unheard of in railroading, unless you're cog. Coming down it in the era of manual brakes, required a brakeman on every car. Each brakeman had a length of ash 3 feet long that he would stick this pole in the brake wheel. Then they would lean on this ash pole all the way down from Turret. It was said that you could see the sparks from the brakes all the way to Buena Vista. It would be this streak going down the hill in the night.

Ray: There is a place, north of Salida, called Heckla Junction. It is thought of today as a camp ground and a “take out” place for rafters, in Brown’s Canyon. Now, back when I was a kid, The Junction is where the Turret branch led off to the west, on this 7% grade.

Ray: Well, I have a lot of memories about my mountain beginnings in Colorado but you also wanted to talk about Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, during my teenage years.

Ray: We moved from the mountains, which was snow, to a place where I never wore a heavy coat, until I came to Boulder, Colorado, to go to school. Southern New Mexico dipped to the 30s once and I saw snow once in 6 years. So for a kid that typical saw snow once every 3 weeks, this was a change.

Marv: Yes, I would like to take this up in segment two of our discussion.

Please return for session two, “Life in New Mexico.”