

Ernie Adamson -EA
Peggy Ford -PF

PF: My name is Peggy Ford. I'm Coordinator of Research and Education for the City of Greeley Museums. Today is Monday, September 21, 1987. I'm at the City of Greeley Museums at 919 7th Street. I will be talking with Ernie Adamson of California. Mr. Adamson is the adopted son of Kate Slaughterback, otherwise known as Rattlesnake Kate. He will be giving me some information about his mother and growing up in this area.

Mr. Adamson, tell me when you were born.

EA: 1921

PF: 1921. You were chatting with me a little bit earlier. You said that your mother died and your father could no longer keep you or your brother and raise you. You were very young, so at about the age of about one year you went to live with Kate. At that time she was married to...

EA: Jack Slaughterback.

PF: You were about a year old at the time. You told me that your brother Fred also was taken in by Kate and Jack, but it didn't work out well with them having to raise two children.

EA: Yes, that's what they said.

PF: So Fred went to live with...

EA: Our Uncle Tony. They lived in the mountains. What's that little town? Kremmling, Colorado. Long years ago, I guess he was the Town Marshall. They lived in the mountains. Then I have two sisters and another brother that stayed with my pop in Denver.

PF: They were older. I see. You told me a little bit earlier that Kate never officially adopted you, although all the stories that I have heard, she very much considered you to be her son.

EA: Yes, everybody knowed me as Kate's son.

PF: What would be one of your earliest memories as a child growing up in the Hudson area?

EA: I don't know. I've heard that snake story so many times I feel like I remember it, but I don't suppose I do. I was only two years old when she killed all those snakes. I can remember people talking about it. Of course, they had all those pictures; all those people came out. It was a pretty exciting thing when it was going on. Then I remember Jack pretty well. Kate and he used to fight quite a bit.

PF: In terms of the way your mother raised you, did she have kind of a heavy hand would you say? Fairly strict?

EA: I thought so. [Laughs]

PF: As a young boy you thought so. You obviously had to help a lot around the farm and do a lot of chores.

EA: Oh, yes. Jack and her divorced. I don't know for sure, but I probably was six or so. We lived out in the country, out in the Hudson area. Jack give Mom that 80 [acres] that she called her homestead all these years. The house that was on there burnt down, so we moved up on the old Gorange [?] place. It was north and east. She just rented that. I can remember that. We milked cows up there and put up wild hay, things like that. Then she bought that place down on Box Elder [creek]. We lived there for quite a few years and I went to school at Keenesburg. I had to walk about three-quarters of a mile to get to the bus and then ride the bus from there to Keenesburg.

PF: You said that Jack and your mother fought a lot. Your mother sounds like she could be a fairly strong-willed individual.

EA: It seemed to me as though they fought quite a bit. I don't know. Jack was a gambler; a real good farmer, too, but he gambled an awful lot. He'd come home with a pocket full of money and the next night he'd wouldn't have enough money to buy a donut [?]. That's a gambler's life. So they would get into a big battle over that. Finally, they just give it up. She took that 80 acres for her share. Of course, I didn't know what else went on. That's how she got her homestead. I think Jack owned 400 acres, or something like that. He gave her that 80.

PF: She seems, from what I have read and have heard, that she liked to do everything by herself. It seems she didn't want to take a lot of help from people, or charity. If she was going to farm, then she was going to farm. Is that pretty much true?

EA: Very true. She could cook real good, but she very seldom did. All the time in the fields or with the animals.

PF: Some of the things I have read, too, she was a nurse for a while. She trained as a nurse. Can you tell me about that?

EA: Yes. I don't know a whole lot. She done that when I was real young. But she was a graduate nurse because she had the cap and pins and stuff that showed that she was a graduate nurse.

PF: It said that she nursed during the war. I'm not sure if that's World War I or World War II. It talked about Fitzsimmons.

EA: It had to be World War I.

PF: In a letter that she wrote to this Colonel Randolph, it said that she ended up doing a lot of nursing and helping neighbors in the Hudson area. If a baby was to be born, oftentimes she would be called. Do you remember that?

EA: Not much. I can remember her going to some of the Dowdys. [?] There was a lot of the Dowdys out in that area. I can remember going, maybe twice. Probably delivering a baby or something like that. But that's about all.

PF: It said that she got into it by chance. It wasn't her lifelong dream to be a nurse, but there she was. She had nurse's training. I'm assuming she really loved the land; she loved to be outside. Is that true?

EA: Yes, that's true. And animals. She didn't raise that much stock, but I can remember even in later years, after I married and went to California, I would come back out and she'd have ducks and geese and chickens. She'd go out in the yard and cluck to them and they'd all come running, just like she was the old mother hen. She had a lot of goats and she raised a calf or two. And she always had horses.

PF: I take it that she really liked to ride an awful lot and was a good horsewoman.

EA: Yes, she was.

PF: Obviously, she had a lot of friends. What about her education? She wrote a lot of letters to this Colonel Randolph, otherwise know at Buckskin Bill [?] Did she have a formal education that you know of?

EA: I don't really know how much, but she must have had a pretty good education.

PF: Did she read a lot? Or read to you?

EA: Not a whole lot, really. She did write some poetry, too. I don't know what ever happened to it. And letters. I can remember, not too long after she killed all those snakes. She used to get crackers in those big cracker boxes. She had two of those cracker boxes filled with letters that people had written her after she killed those snakes. She was pretty famous. She answered about every one of those letters.

PF: The letters that she wrote to Randolph. I guess she had a very interesting style of writing; she didn't use paragraphs and had interesting punctuation. Is that pretty much true in all the letters that she wrote to you, as well?

EA: I think that's pretty much true.

PF: She liked to get mail.

EA: Yes, she did like to get mail.

PF: In some of the letters to Randolph, during the 1930s she mentions the hard winters. She had to walk 3 ½ miles to the mailbox. Is that true? Was it a long ways to get the mail?

EA: When we moved down on the Box Elder, it was at least 3 ½ miles.

PF: That time, during the [19]30s when you lived there.

EA: I think she might have put on a little there, because I can remember we always rode horseback. We didn't walk. I can remember one Christmas that we went, because we was expecting presents from people in California. We almost didn't get back; it was a terrible blizzard came up. We just let the horses loose and hoped that they would find their way, and they did. It was pretty bad.

PF: Sounds scary. Did Kate correspond, then, with members of her family? Was she close to her family that you know of? Her parents? Her brothers and sisters?

EA: Not too much. Her brother, Roy McHale [?] and her was the closest. He lived over by Longmont, which wasn't too far away. They'd come and visit us, come visit her. They had an old Model T, and I remember going over to see Roy. They were about the closest. She wasn't very close to any of her relatives, I don't think.

PF: She was pretty much a loner.

EA: She was very much a loner.

PF: I think what is interesting, too, is the fact that she was married five times.

EA: That's right. None of her marriages lasted too long, it didn't seem like. I don't know what the problem was. Her and Jack, they were married quite a while.

PF: You were telling me that he just up and left one day.

EA: Yes, I don't know what happened to him. Don't seem like nobody knew. He went off. Mom went to California and left him there. I was pretty small, really, and she left him there to watch after me. Well, I wasn't all that small; at least I didn't think so. I didn't need all that help, so Jack and I sort of got into an argument. I had an old Model T, so I drove him, I think it was to Gilcrest, and I never, ever heard from him again.

PF: And no one else did either. And your mother never said anything about it?

EA: No, she never did. She seemed to think it was great that he left. [Chuckles]

PF: She continued on with her life. She had supposedly gone to Omaha for a time in her life and taken training as a taxidermist at a school there. Did she talk much about that?

EA: No, not really.

PF: But she had done that?

EA: She did do that. She done quite a bit of taxidermy. She had pheasants and ducks and squirrels and snakes. Quite a bit of stuff that she did.

PF: You recall that, as a youth, watching her work on that?

EA: Yes, she'd get her little knives out and go to work on them. Skin them, and whatever that is, I don't know. She did quite a bit of taxidermy.

PF: She did it as a recreation, a hobby? Or she did it for people?

EA: I think it was more something to occupy her. She'd do it when there wasn't too much going on, like farm work in the winter time. Just to entertain herself more than anything. I don't know of her ever selling anything. She did give some of the stuff away. Of course, when she passed on, people come in there and stole stuff like crazy. It took me about two days to get here from California. There wasn't a whole lot of stuff left. People just took it.

PF: That's a shame. What did Kate believe in? What were some of the things, as you were growing up, that she felt very strongly about? Obviously, she didn't like the fact that Mr. Slaughterback gambled. How did she feel about drinking alcohol? Was she very anti...

EA: No, she believed that that was all right. I don't know if I should even be saying this, but her and Ed Brewer [?] were old pioneers out there together and they made moonshine and sold moonshine. I can remember that pretty well.

PF: They had a still down on her place?

EA: In the area. I don't know if it was on her place. She had an old Model T pickup. I remember the revenue men came out there one time and I guess located it and they were going to come back later, or something. That night they hauled out those barrels of mash in that old Model T. I think they tipped it over or something in the old dry ditch and spilled a barrel of mash or something. I wasn't along then so I can't remember exactly what it was. The old revenue men would come out and they even tried to bribe me with candy and bananas one time; I remember it pretty well. Of course, I didn't know nothing. [Laughs]

PF: Ignorance is bliss in that case. What were some of the other things? Was she a religious person? Did you attend church on a regular basis?

EA: She was a Catholic, but we didn't attend church very often. Kind of funny, the way things worked out that way. She always raised a fair crop of corn and wheat. I can remember many times when a bad cloud would come up and look like hail, and Kate going in and praying. She was religious and she was a Catholic. When we went to California, I think I was four years old. I was baptized as a Catholic. We didn't go to church very much.

PF: Who were her heroes or heroines? Did she talk much about characters in Western life in literature, such a Buffalo Bill or anything that you recall?

EA: Very little. Famous horses, like Midnight that was a bucking horse. Racehorses, if she would hear about them that was great.

PF: Anything pertaining to animals she was very interested in talking about.

EA: Very interested. I can remember talking some about Amelia Earhart, when she flew around the world. Little things like that. Didn't have many people that she thought were great.

PF: What about her opinion of herself?

EA: I really don't know. It's hard to say really. She always stood up for herself. Nobody kicked her around or gave her a bad time. She was a pretty rugged gal. I don't think there was anything that she couldn't do. She done all kinds of farming. She was a graduate in taxidermy. Everything she did by herself.

PF: She had a lot of pride in her own capabilities, probably. Maybe she was born a bit out of her age. She probably would have done much better, maybe, in this age, a little more liberated time. She was obviously a very liberated person for her time. That must have caused her to feel maybe somewhat like a loner.

EA: I suppose. Yes, maybe. I know she never did take anything; she always had to do everything on her own. Very seldom asked even anybody to [stops]. I can remember a couple or three different times going for coal with a team and wagon into Hudson, rather than have somebody get it for her. From where we lived out there, we had a little strip mine thing going; it was almost up here to Greeley. She'd take off really early in the morning and she'd get back really late at night with a load of coal on the wagon. That was a long trip with horses, but she would do it.

PF: What did you do for fun? Did you go to socials? Was she involved at all with the school?

EA: No, I don't think so. They had a little church out there, that little Four-Way. Of course, I don't know if that was even going back too many years. We never did go to church. We went to neighbors over there where she killed the snakes. That was later. I know we went a time or two to watch Joe Lewis fight. I think his very first fight, that's where we went. We didn't have radio or electricity, so we cranked up the old Model T, it was cold in the winter, and we barely got there. We drained the water so it wouldn't freeze the radiator. She come in and sat down and they said, "Well, the fight's over." It was a real fast knock-out. [Laughs]

PF: Where did the fight take place?

EA: It must have been in Denver; I think so.

PF: This would have been during the 1930s? That's interesting.

EA: Once in a great while we would go to Denver or to Greeley. That was really a trip in a Model T. But we didn't do anything for fun. Later on, when I got a little older and in school, I

had friends with cars. We'd go to shows in Fort Lupton. Saturday night, maybe play a game of pool, go to a show and have a malt. Boy that was really living it up! [Laughs]

PF: Off of the farm. You went into the service, then, right out of high school? Or did you work for a while?

EA: Yes, pretty much right out of high school.

PF: What year did you graduate?

EA: I don't remember for sure. I went into the service in about [19]44.

PF: Did you go overseas?

EA: No, I never did leave the States. I went to Salt Lake City and spent about a year and a half. Then to beautiful California. I was there about a year and a half. Then I went to Phoenix, Arizona. We stayed around there. We had a few German prisoners. I was attached to the Air Corps, but I was actually in the military police. I guarded the German prisoners out there in Arizona.

PF: Then you met your wife in Arizona?

EA: No, I was married just before I went in the service. Went into the service and got married about the same time.

PF: And you have two children. A boy and a girl?

EA: Two boys. One of them was born while I was in the service in Salt Lake City, and the other one shortly after I got out. Out on the farm. I came back from the service and spent about 10 years out on the farm.

PF: The homestead here? That would have been in the late 1940s to mid-1950s?

EA: About [19]52 we went to California. That was about 10 years out there. It was pretty rough right in then, drought, and we was on dry-land. Not raising no crops, or nothing. I had a brother in California. He came out to visit and he said, "Come to California. Money growing on trees out there." So I went out there and, of course, a farmer, they do everything. I tried my hand at carpenter work. I worked about two years in carpentry. Done real good, but there were so many people in that business that it was kind of rough. I put in applications around at schools, cities, and things like that. I got on in the City of Garden Grove and worked for the city for 25 years. That was the nearest I could find to farm work in town. I was mainly their main truck driver, but when you work for the city, you do a little bit of everything.

PF: That was a good choice then, the Garden Grove area?

EA: Yes, I thought so. We bought a home there.

PF: Are there any other things that you remember specifically about growing up, having a mother who was famous, at least in this area? Regionally?

EA: Everybody knew her, that's for sure. Even yet, when I come out in this country. I had a lot of friends when I left here. But we were only here 10 years. People that don't know me, I say, "Well, I'm Rattlesnake Kate's kid." "Oh!" Everybody knew her, that's for sure.

PF: Who gave her the name Rattlesnake Kate? Is it something she just picked up from the newspaper article?

EA: Probably Buckskin Bill; I don't know for sure. He was always writing; quite a poet.

PF: So she just kind of assumed that name, from that experience. And her mailbox did say Rattlesnake Kate; she received a lot of her mail addressed to "Rattlesnake Kate."

EA: All of her mail came to Rattlesnake Kate, Route 2, Fort Lupton.

PF: Did she ever try to capitalize on her experience?

EA: No, I don't think so. People was always trying to get her to reenact the whole thing; go through it all; but, no way, she wouldn't do it.

PF: All of the dress that she made out of the snakes that she killed when she happened to stumble across the den of rattlers in October 1925, I think it was. Legend has it that she wore that dress to parties and to dances in the area. Is that true? Do you know? That's written in the literature, the newspaper articles.

EA: The only thing that I remember, and it's just from the story more or less, is she was supposed to danced on a bar in Old Mexico. That's when I was only four years old. I do remember going down there, and we stayed too late. When we came back over the gate, it was closed. They all crawled over and I was small enough I could crawl under it. People have been shot off the gate from crawling over it; it was supposed to have been closed.

PF: This was in Juarez, Mexico?

EA: T.J. Tijuana.

PF: Did she go down to Mexico quite a bit? I know from some of the photos from the 1930s are marked Juarez?

EA: I suppose so. I don't really know. But that's the only time I know her wearing the dress to a party. She might have done it later.

PF: But when you were growing up and while you were young out in Hudson, you don't recall an active social life of her putting on the dress and wearing it?

EA: No. I know she used to get it out a lot and show it to people. Everybody wanted to see it. She kept it right at the house there.

PF: I've also heard that she didn't like people to photograph it. She was very particular about who she showed the dress to, and who actually took a photo of it. There are not that many photos of her taken in the dress, and the ones that we have are taken of her wearing the dress when she was an older woman. There are just a couple like when the experience happened.

EA: I'm sure she didn't want anybody photographing it. Maybe she mellowed out a little bit. She was a pretty rough woman when she was younger. She stood up to any man that give her any trouble.

PF: I also heard that she was a very good marksman. She was good with a rifle and she liked to shoot. Is that true?

EA: Yes. She never had a lot of guns. She had that little 22 that she shot the first two or three snakes with. She could really shoot it. She had a shot gun and maybe a revolver. I'm pretty sure. I never seen it; somebody got that before I got back. She was into Indian lore quite a bit. She had a lot of arrowheads that she had found right out in that area. Rub rocks. It was my fault that I didn't get a lot of them because she had tubs of rub rocks that she had picked up. The Indians that they used to grind their corn.