



The History of Woody Creek

Water was, and is, critical for any agricultural enterprise in the semi-arid West. The original homesteaders, Henry Collins and his family were fortunate in getting land with two creeks, one of which now bears their name. Life was not easy for these settlers; the small cemetery alongside the drive displays a poignant witness to this. One marble military stone reads:

Henry Collins
Co. H
5th Wis. Inf.

And a cast-iron marker has names on three sides:

Viola May Collins
May 7 1887 - April 24 1889

Martin Loran Collins
Oct 7 1871 - May 24 1879

Clide Andrew Collins
Nov 6 1884 - April 22 1889

Edwin Roscoe Collins
July 27 1878 - April 24 1889

The first two names share one side of the marker. 1889 was a terrible year for the Collins family: Viola died at almost 2, Martin at age 7, Clide at age 4, and Edwin at age 10. We can only speculate about why there is no separate marker for Martin, who had died ten years earlier. These simple memorials tell much about life on the ranch in those early days.

When Aspen's silver boom began in the mid-to-late 19th century, hard-rock miners from Eastern Europe immigrated to work the mines. Burros were the entire transport system. It makes sense that some entrepreneurs saw better opportunity in clearing fields of oak to supply mine timbers, and in planting hay to feed the burros. The family names of many of these European homesteaders, Vagneur, Natal, Bionaz, Cerise, Arlien, Clavel, Veve, etc., are attached to the water rights of Flying Dog Ranch. We can't help wondering how the Collins family got along with these neighbors, and where they went after their children died that savage April week.

Neighbor Stan Natal tells how he and his sister rode two-to-the-horse to elementary school on McLain Flats; they were taught in Italian! His grandfather told him that the homesteader cabin was the first building in Woody Creek.

After the silver crash, Woody Creek became primarily an agricultural community. During WWI, there was a brief revival of mining silver ore for its lead component to make bullets, but then back to agriculture. The book, *Aspen the Quiet Years*, documents the period from the end of the silver mining era until the post-WWII rebirth of Aspen as a recreational and cultural resort. Between the silver mining era and the today's resort community, agriculture was the predominant economy: cow/calf operations using summer range on public lands, crop rotation of alfalfa, oats and potatoes. Valley exports were beef and potatoes. Older cowboys tell of cattle drives down to Glenwood, riding with the cattle to Chicago, and going to auction. Chicago menus featured Carbondale Baked Potatoes (although the potatoes came from the entire valley). Red Roland told that in his youth, he would set out from Aspen on foot with his rifle and walk up Woody Creek towards Lenado to find and shoot a buck which he would trade to any of the ranchers for potatoes, which he would then carry back to town – all in all, a two-day hike.

Collins Creek remained an important part of this agricultural history. August Bionaz employed four irrigators who were housed in the cabin, receiving room and board plus fifty cents a week. Each irrigator was responsible for 40 acres, moving the water all day long. The depression years were especially difficult; it is said that in the middle of these awful times, August Bionaz stood on the bank on the Salvation Ditch with a short-fused stick of dynamite in his mouth, and perished.

The flower show at the Armory was the main competition event during these “quiet years” and the red soils of Woody Creek were coveted for potting material. Earliest and best sweet peas were other competitions. Virginia Vagneur Jones of the Woody Creek Store was one of the strongest contenders.

In 1960, I was “summer folk” at Casady Creek, two miles upstream from the ranch. Thus I drove by the ranch at least twenty times a week. Hank and Trudi (Peet) Pedersen owned it then. Trudi was an artist and horse person while Hank was a gentle cement contractor of Scandinavian descent.

Trudi drove a big white Lincoln Continental, drank jug wine, and painted in the fauvist style. She and Hank hunted with the hounds and played broom polo. Neighbor and third-generation rancher Stan Natal irrigated and hayed the place for them. Trudi was a free spirit, as we used to say in those hippie days.

When Trudi decided to sell the place, she placed a full page ad in the *Aspen Times*, “Come out to the ranch, bring a picnic, and pick out your homesite.” Zoning then was not what it is now! Her friends talked her out of this. A month later, she called me and said, “I’m going to sell the ranch to a Catholic summer camp unless you buy it first.” She set a price that I thought was about 20% above market, and I made a counter offer. She said no to that and set the deadline for noon the next day, “Take it or leave it.” All next morning I pestered the agent with clever counteroffers, all refused. At twelve, I folded, she won. But, you know, I won too! That was 1970.

In 1972 I left the university and moved year-round into a new house on the current foundation. Stan Natal said he could not take care of the place anymore and gave me much guidance about farming, and eventually the cattle business. I learned to love the farming and the cattle business and got pretty good at it. We showed the grand champion bull at the 1990 National Western show.

The house that was built in 1970 burned down in 1978, and many nieces, nephews, and children spent a most pleasant summer building the current house. In 1989, back surgery removed me from active participation on the ranch. I watched (and paid for) the hired hand to have all the fun I used to have. In about 2002, we reduced the payroll, got rid of the cattle and put the ranch into maintenance mode – maintain roads, ditches, hayfields, the irrigation system, spray weeds, and little more. I think the place deserves better.

~George Stranahan