

Frances (Dorr) Wheeler



“Common purposes are good for people”

by Lori Burch and J.D. Adams

Mrs. Frances (Dorr) Wheeler was born 61 years ago to Fred and Anna May in a small room above the Cameo Restaurant. She was delivered by Dr. Willett who practiced in that hospital until 1921. She recalled that Dr. Willett delivered many of her children, as she told us about her life. “My father bought his brother’s homestead claim and built a new house and brought his new bride from the state of Washington. I lived out there until I was ten years old.

“The home is on Salt Creek in an area known as George’s Gulch. An old horse died there in 1870 named George, thus the name George’s Gulch.

“When we lived at Salt Creek I hadn’t even been to school because there were no schools close. My mother taught me in what was called an ungraded system. I had more freedom than most children because of not having to go to school all day long. When I got my school work done, I could help my father, which I loved to do. I did help from the time I was less than school age, when I wasn’t playing with my sisters. I had two sisters and two brothers.

“I can remember or was told about mischief I did when I was little. The first thing my folks told me I did was to go off down the road to see a bird’s nest. My folks were always interested in



Young Frances at the Mystic Post Office.

those kinds of things and showed me. When Mother couldn't find me I had gone to see the bird nest. The first thing I can remember doing was going mud sliding. The adobe mud in this country gets real slick if you get enough on you. My sisters and I slid down a hill into the creek and kept climbing back up the bank and sliding back down again until we had enough mud on us to really get into it. I can remember running from my mother when she saw us, but I only did that once because she came after me with Daddy's four horse whip. She reached under the sled that I crawled under and popped me with it. So I never ran away from her again."

In 1928 Frances and her family moved to the present S-S May Ranch on Elk River. "When we moved down on the river there was school at the Mad Creek Village in a little log cabin. My folks took me over there and gave me a test to see what grade I should be in because I hadn't gone to school until then. The work that my mother had taught me was ungraded, and they decided that I was ready for the sixth grade. I went for about three months, then there was a serious epidemic of illness that fall and we didn't go back to school at all. The next year I started to Fly Gulch which is by the present Sherrod house. We had to ride four miles and open four gates. I went for a while and the next year they decided to have me in the eighth grade.

"In those days you had to take a test from the county superintendent to go to high school and I wanted to go. I was just 12 but I wanted to go anyway and I was trying to get up enough nerve to ask to take the test. There was this girl who was older and she was afraid that she could not pass the test so I said I'd take the exam for her. I did and I passed but she got to go to high school. So I asked if I could go take the test and the teacher told me that I wouldn't be able to pass. I couldn't very well tell her I had just taken the

test, so I went home very upset. My mother told me it served me right. I helped people after that, but not on tests. That cured me of cheating. It didn't particularly occur to me that I was doing something wrong.

"We never had big schools. There were probably seven or eight kids at Mad Creek and about 10 at Fly Gulch. I think the school system today has gone down since they don't require more subjects. They started to try to make it easier for the kids, but basically they have hurt the standards. For one thing, we were required to do harder subjects, not as far as taxing the mind like chemistry. I know things that have been advanced, but we were required to take a foreign language. It isn't that kids couldn't do the work; there were children who had a hard time but struggled along and finally did get it. In sports our league was confined, and we didn't travel over the state to compete with people. We had Oak Creek, Hayden and Craig, and if they could scrape up enough money, we did compete occasionally with Meeker. The country schools were supported in each district until we began



Senior picture of Frances

not to get teachers that would stay in the country and teach. Now we have a trend where all kinds of young people needing jobs would love to live out in the country and teach in country schools. There's a trend back to this but we no longer have the school facilities in the country.

"I was pretty good at sewing when I was young. I had five years of 4-H sewing. In fact, in those days, if you were the best, well, you got to go to the state fair, and I went for two years. I actually didn't get to go the first year, but my work did. Daddy said I was too young, but the next year I got to go even though I had the flu. We rode the train from here to Denver, then transferred to a train that took us to Pueblo. It was a marvelous experience.

"There are hundreds of people in Routt County who don't know anything about what it's like to ride a train from here to Denver. You see the country as no other way and it's a crime that there is no train service for the people who would like to have that adventure today. I've only left the state once and that was in 1931 when I went to Iowa. I rode what they call the stage. Instead of a bus, they had a private car that took us to Denver, and then we got on the train to Iowa."

Other forms of transportation were also different in Frances Dorr's traveling days. "One thing that people don't know much about is how you managed with a car. My dad bought our first car for \$25.00 and gave it to us but we didn't have a spare tire. We tried to keep tires patched. We had a spare rim, so if we had a blow-out, which we did frequently, we put the spare rim on. It was bent up anyway from the rocks. People nowadays have no idea what the road was like between here and Steamboat. It was gravel for many years and to tell you the truth, you couldn't tell a whole lot of difference between riding on rims and riding on a tire.



Frances and her family, rows, left to right; top: Helen, Jack, Dorthy, and Bill. Bottom: Frances, father Fred May, and mother Anna May.

The Model A's were rather simple. Once you got them started, they ran. Everybody thought they were a thing of the past, but now, of course, if we had them we could still drive them, if we could get the parts.

"My family also went to community happenings. I can remember the first dance I went to. My future father-in-law played the piano at the Cow Creek School House. It was quite an exciting thing for a new girl to come to a dance, so I was very popular that evening. For a number of years, as long as Dad Dorr lived, we tried to go to dances a lot because he played for community affairs. Times were really poor, so we passed the hat to pay the musicians, and quite a number of the community played together.

"When we lived over on the south side, near Saddle Mountain, nobody had any money then either. So we took turns going from house to house once a month and playing cards for community recreation. We took a team and once in a while we got Dad Dorr to play for a dance at the South Side School House. When we moved up here the social things revolved around going to the farmer's union meetings up at Moonhill. The business was dispensed of as quickly as possible. Then there was a dance.

"I thought my family and I were very lucky in those days. We had the only light plant in the community, up at the Mystic place. Daddy got on with the county when we moved down to the river. We also had the second radio in the community, and it was the first with a loud speaker. When they completed the Moffat tunnel in 1927, or maybe '28, Daddy had a thing that looked like a microphone, sort of. He held it in his hand up to the party line phone, so everybody could hear them drive the last spike into the Moffat Tunnel.

"The Depression didn't hit us too hard. I had a savings account when I was little. I got a penny for mice and a nickel for gophers, so I saved my money. My sisters had done the same, so eventually we bought three calves. They cost \$17.00 apiece and that took our savings. About a month after we bought the calves the banks closed, so we thought we were pretty smart negotiators. We had saved our money by putting it into calves. We kept them for three years and they brought just about what we paid for them.

"Back then we were more particular about how we used stuff, like things for fixing fence. I'll tell you, it was a little different. We were particular about saving the staples, and I can remember Daddy straightening staples in the winter time. We didn't have the entertainments you do now to fill winters. My mother read aloud and while she was reading, Daddy did things like straighten nails and staples because there wasn't many to buy. We took care of what we had. Daddy fixed fence in the spring, looking to



**Frances and her horse,
Pickaninny.**

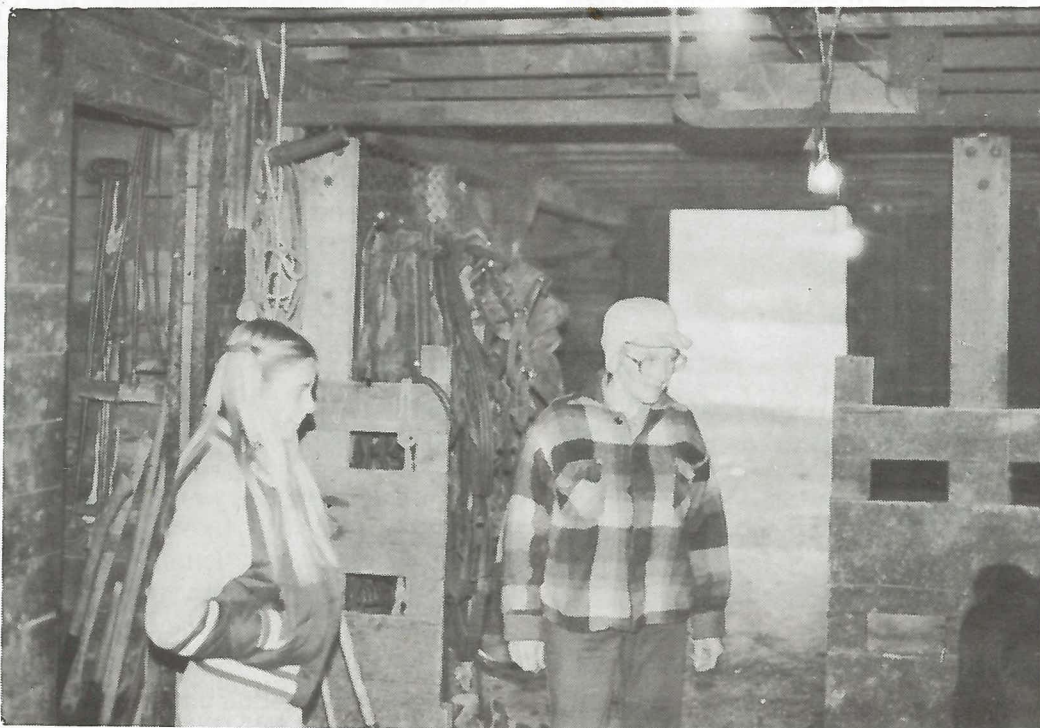
find staples that had been pulled out of the fence. People don't do that anymore. They just say, 'Oh, by the way, we need another keg of staples.'

"Steamboat in those days had gravel streets and things in the middle of the streets that were like fountains. I don't know what they were for sure, but there were these things at each intersection. Also there were hitch rails at the livery stables, so you could tie up your team. The favorite place was Soda Springs. That nobody uses anymore, but then we used to stop and get jugs of water and take them home to make lemonade. It was like having a lemon soda pop. I remember F.M. Light's store and am saddened by the fact that the sign is down. It was one of the earliest and the first moving light I ever

remember seeing. The drug store that is now Beckett's was Ballard's, and I remember it. I also remember the first bank. We didn't go to town much, maybe only two or three times a summer because it was an excursion. It seemed that it always rained and the road was slick, making it quite an adventure.

"The Mystic Post Office then was a box that hung on a building wall with a lock on it. The mailman came seven days a week, every day of the year. My mother had to stay there until the mailman came. He came with a team all the way from Steamboat Springs, on what is called Four Mile Road and up the back Mystic Road. It was 17 miles. He had to get out of the sled or buggy and open the gates to come onto the ranch. Now, of course, the mailman won't get out of his vehicle to put the package in the box, but in those days they had to open the gates. There were some neighbors who came to the house to get their mail, people who lived up the way from our place. Mother was the postmistress for six or seven years. I can't remember when she wasn't.

"My favorite thing to do as a child was ride horses. My first horse was Fliver, a palomino for which I traded a wart on my finger. Nelly Soash, Richard's grandmother, was the neighbor and she traded me her Indian pony for that wart. She said the next time I worried about my wart it would be gone. She said the secret was to not worry about warts but get your mind on something else, then the wart goes away. Then I had a horse named Hornet that the three of us girls rode to school. Then I had a horse named



Frances and Lori Burch, one of the authors, watch the calves feed.

Skeeter that Dad sold to the government for a hundred and twenty-five dollars. In those days it was like a thousand, so he felt he couldn't turn it down. And then I had a little black pickaninny, not black enough to be anything but a pickaninny, my Dad said. That was the first horse that was really just mine alone, and I had her when I was married. She died of old age after having eight colts.

"Raising horses for our family was always an expensive thing. I gave a mare to Dean Wheeler and sold him the colt when she was older, and he had her registered and raised colts. The last horse I had was named Cotton but I was never on him. I just never got around to riding him. The last time I rode a horse I rode the little Burr horse of Gary Yeager's, bringing cattle from the range. Most of the time I help with the cattle, but just as a tagalong.

"I married Elmer Dorr in 1936, when I wasn't quite 18. It only cost \$25.00 for my wedding and that included a wash tub. You had to have a wash tub in those days with a wash board, and the tub was full of groceries. I made my own dress. Members of the Dorr and May families were present for the ceremony which was at the May ranch. Mother served a supper to all of us, and Dad let us take the '25 Dodge to Cow Camp."

"That summer Mr. Dorr was hired by people who had cattle in the forest. He took care of the cattle. He was called a range rider. He had every other Sunday off. I helped take care of the cattle and I rode quite a bit after I was married up until 1944.

"Children have played a most important part in my life. I have nine of my own and two step-children; all together I have sixteen grand-



Wedding picture of Frances and Elmer.



Frances with all of her children

children born to me and ten step-grandchildren and one great grandchild. I am so fortunate to have nine perfectly healthy, intelligent children, and I hope they realize how lucky they are. I told them we would try and see them through as much schooling as possible. I thought that could be their inheritance. Their minds and their bodies are their heritage, but not money. They do pretty well. They didn't all go to school; and Hatti and Bob are the only ones who didn't go on to college, so that's pretty good.

"All of my boys have wrestled. Jim was the first, but he didn't have much of a chance because we didn't let him stay in town to practice. Of course, Ted was the first really good one. He was a state champion for two years in a row, along with Fred Guire and Truman Sandelin. Then Newton, I think, could have been real good if he would have applied himself, but he thought he wasn't as good as Ted, so he didn't try as hard. Even though Bob was never a state champion, I think he's the best wrestler of the bunch. He used more holds and was more gifted for it. He wasn't quite as big or as strong as Mike, though Mike won the most medals, because he started as a sophomore winning them. Fred wrestled more outstanding wrestlers than any of the others because he was the smallest. He had to wrestle people from all over the state who outgrew him. So each of them had experiences that way and I never saw one of my boys pinned, because none of them ever were!

"I had a hobby of following wrestling. For five years I kept records, which I still have, of all the matches. Even if I didn't get to go to the match, I got results from Coach Ramunno or from the newspapers. I started when Bob was in junior high and I went through Fred's graduation. There weren't so many divisions then because Montrose and Grand Junction weren't in the competition.

"My longest hobby as an adult has been daily record keeping. It's not a true diary. I wrote in

diaries when I was a girl, but I found out that people don't want to read what they think might be private. So I started keeping records on a calendar. I used to keep two calendars on the wall, one of last year's and one of this year's, so people could refer to what happened a year ago. I didn't write too carefully in '44 and '45 because I was pretty busy with my growing family and I kind of neglected it. Then people asked what happened at such and such a time, so I decided it was important to more than just myself. So I've been more faithful since then. I started in 1931 writing these, which is quite a while back. I like to write and would write more if I had the time. I like to write what I call jingles. I don't do it a lot, but once in a while I get a notion or an idea. I don't think I'm quite as good as my brother Bill.

JAKE
(Frances)

A fuzzy ball of fur was he — Newt said we'd call him Jake.

With puppy love he won us all, a stock dog he'd never make.

With big brown eyes and doggy grin Jake laughed when folks would shout.

He figured if we just got mad we could straighten matters out.

So Jake took care of all the kids, and had a special tone

For family, friend or stranger, or the cattle coming home.

When the yellow bus from school was coming up the road

I knew by old Jake's whimper if my boys were in the load.

When Newt went off to service Jake adopted Mike instead,

He learned to turn the doorknob and sleep beside Fred's bed.

He told me when the car would start on wrestling practice night.

I knew how soon the boys would come and if everything was right.

He guarded Hattie with his life. He loved to take a swim.

If Bob started for the river no one got ahead of him.

He knew when Jo was on her way, and when Newt was home on leave.

The things old Jake told me few people would believe.

He told me in the early dawn that someone took Dean's truck.

He loved to bark at puddles and at froggies in the muck.

Old Jake has gone where doggies go when earthly work is done,

I'll bet he'll tell the angels when it's time for us to come!

TELL US A STORY

Come, tell us a story, Grampa ---

'Bout times when you came out "west",
To homestead near the Elk River Valley

In Colorado, the state that's the best!

How you helped the settlers in winter

And taught in a one room school ---

With McGuffey readers and reference books,

But mostly the Old Golden Rule.

And when spring came back to the Rockies

You saw the huge tracks of a bear!!

Made by your barefooted neighbor ---

They gave you a most terrible scare.

Tell us again, Grampa, won't you?

'Bout the pony that just wouldn't go,

But bucked you off near a bobcat

And your rifle got jammed with snow.

We like to hear of your batchin'

And the tender dried peach pie!

The Oregon-grape wine on the very top log ---

And the biscuits the dog wouldn't try.

Then, when the days were too lonely,

You went off to Washington state ---

And brought back our dearest Grandmother

To share your Routt County fate.

The Lord has taken Grandmother

To the "pioneer" land up above ---

Where the "claims" on Heaven are final

And the taxes are brotherly love.

Tell us the stories again, Grampa!

With a chuckle, and shine in your eyes ---

Until you can rest with Grandmother dear

'Neath the sage and the blue mountain skies.

Dedicated to Dad,
with love,
Frances

You asked if the team will be waiting

When you cross the Great Divide.

Will there be sunshine and plenty of pasture

And a horse for you to ride?

Yes, Elmer, Old Bill will be there

And Lady, with Lad and Mate

Each one that you loved to care for

Will nicker for you at the Gate.

They'll be curried and fat and happy

With nothing to do but run.

'Cause Heaven's a place for the weary

To rest - when Life's chores are done.

My mother wrote, and I hope to publish a book of the works of her children someday. I have a collection of works which I think people will enjoy.

"Back when I was growing up I had the hobby

of playing the violin in the high school orchestra. That was my only recreation then. I didn't date much. I read from the time I was very little until I lost my reading sight and I miss it badly.

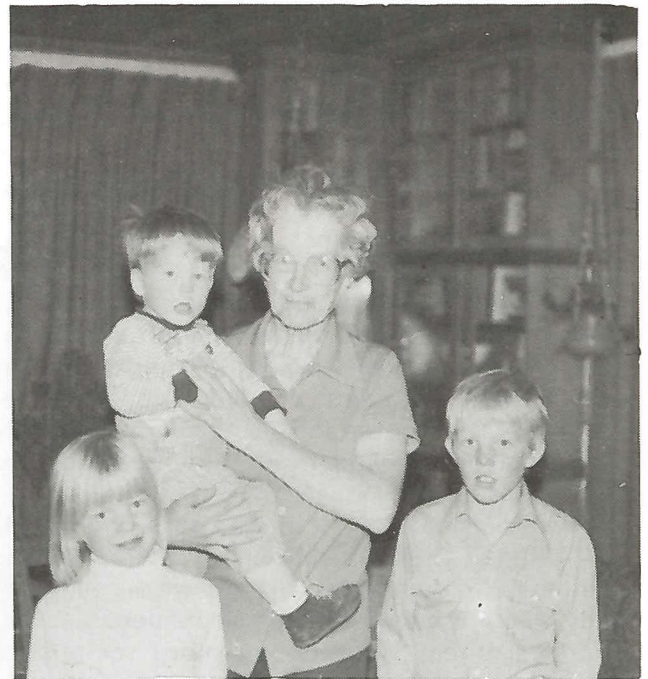
"Farming in those days wasn't any harder than nowadays. You didn't have to worry about buying gas or repairs. You just took care of your machinery. We used horses completely until we started haying with the tractor, and then in 1966 we bought a baler. I think that was our first mechanical thing. Then we bought a mower and a tractor. Before that, I liked working the horses. It's quieter and you have more time to think. Your head isn't being rattled off by the noise of the machinery. I didn't drive a tractor till fairly late. I thought I'd let the kids do that, but finally the children were all helping someone else, and there was work to be done. So I said, 'Well, teach me how to start it and how to stop it, I'll figure out the rest.' Tractors fool me because everyone of them is different. So if I go out to use one, I have difficulty remembering what I'm supposed to do on the thing.

"I've never harnessed a big team but I've driven more than four horses. We hooked up four on a farm machine called a disc. I've milked the cows. I've helped deliver calves. I've taken care of the chickens from babyhood to butchering them. I've cleaned the barn. I can't think of much of anything I haven't tried. I've never stacked hay and I've never cut it. I've never baled, but I guess I've done most everything else."

Francis Dorr Wheeler remarried in 1970 after her husband died. "Mr. Wheeler and I married the summer following Mr. Dorr's death. Mr. Dorr and I had been to Florida to visit some national parks to get an idea of what the United States was like. Since Mr. Wheeler and I have been married, we've made several trips to the West to see a bit of that part of the country."



**Frances and her husband
George Wheeler.**



**Frances with some of
her grandchildren.**

We ended the interview with Mrs. Wheeler talking about her philosophy of life. "My parents believed in and lived by the golden rule. They felt that you should do unto others as you wish them to do to you. Also my father felt that being dependable was important and so do I. I was fortunate that my parents were Christians. I never heard profanity until we moved down to the river and I heard the neighbors. I didn't know what it was because people didn't talk that way around me. We were pretty isolated. That's the way it was. My dad figured that you had to take care of what you had. If you couldn't buy something new, you fixed it the best you could. He said if it came too easily you might not keep it. He thought you needed to work for it.

"Routt County is the best place in the whole world to live. We don't have the prejudice here that others have in some places. We are getting more and more people and as you get more people you get more prejudice I think. When I was born I think that I was the luckiest girl. I was born in Routt County and I think north of Steamboat Springs in those days had an edge on other people. But when we went into town school, we were at a disadvantage 'cause we were the country kids. We didn't get to do some of the things the town kids did. Nowadays I think country children have the advantage from living out of town and having the town school privileges.

"I can't really say I was never on my own because I married so young. There wasn't any

money then and money has never been that important to me. I would like not to be concerned over whether I get a bill paid. I don't think it's important. The dollar is worthless now, so I think I'm proved right.

"The noise now is an outstanding difference. These days we have television, radios, automobiles and airplanes. I can remember the quietness of the country life and can imagine how the noise pounds at us 24 hours a day. I think about the communication that children used to have with their parents, when we could sit at the table and talk for hours. You didn't say, 'You're in my way. I can't see the TV,' and you weren't totally distracted all the time. It just seemed like we had more time.

"If we earned a dollar it was ours. We could buy things, make repairs, or spend it on whatever. We didn't have tax and we didn't have to divide our money with the government. I think our government is becoming more socialistic which is bad, and you can quote me on that. I would like to see a change. I don't know how it will happen unless we have another serious depression and that will be a sad thing but I think it will make a better country. I think people would start realizing the true value of life. I think there is a good possibility of a new war starting, a war that people believe in, not one that they can act unpatriotic about like they did in Vietnam. That was sad because of wars like World War II where everybody was working their hearts out. If you weren't fighting you were



**Frances and Mr. Dorr
in about 1941.**



**Frances and her sister
Dorothy at Cow Camp.**

working at home, and saving, and doing your part. We had a common purpose and common purposes are good for people.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm glad I don't have to live it over. I think the world doesn't have as good prospects as even during the depression years, because of the attitudes of the people. Everybody takes things so much for granted and are unappreciative, it seems these days."

**Education is when one has
learned to do What has to be
done, When it has to be done,
Whether you want to do it or
not.**



**Frances and Elmer with their
first seven children.**