"The best thing about the good old days is that they are gone!"

Margaret Rossi

Margaret and her husband Guido outside their home.

BY Mark McCoy

Margaret Rossi came to Steamboat Springs High School one fall morning to speak and demonstrate to Karen Schumann's American History class about the life and times of pioneer women. During the day I met and spoke with her about her own personal pioneer experiences. As we visited, the interview expanded to cover not only her pioneering, but also much of her personal life.

Margaret moved to Colorado 58 years ago from North Platte, Nebraska. Thus she began her story. "I was born in North Platte, Nebraska, in 1921. I moved to Colorado when I was two years old, so I feel like I'm a native, although I really am not. When I first came to Colorado I moved around quite a bit. I got my twelve years of education at twelve different schools. For example, my father did some work at the Moffat Tunnel and picked fruit in Palisade, and we spent some time in the lower end of Moffat County during the Depression. We also lived in Denver for several years when I was a child.

"I basically came to Routt County from Moffat County in a wagon with my father, behind a team of horses pulling a mowing machine. My father had contracted to mow hay in Oak Creek on a big place that Louis Rossi now owns. I came up to help the lady of the house with the cooking. Hay

"I cooked for 18 men for three weeks when I was 15 years old!"

crews then were very much larger than they are today because they used horses, and it took more men. When we got to Oak Creek the lady of the house was mad at her husband, so she went home to Mama. I cooked for 18 men for three weeks when I was fifteen years old."

Margaret has some vivid memories of the depression years. She spoke of this as she recalled coming to the Yampa Valley. "The Depression made such a large impression on me because I was just going into my teens, a very impressionable age. Providing well balanced meals was a major concern of my father. One time when we had very little money, I remember my father hit a sale on pigs' tails. I can't remember if they were eight cents a pound for ten pounds or vice versa, but my mother learned to fix them every way imaginable before we finished those pigs' tails. In those days the liver, heart, and kidneys, the worst parts of the meat, were given away by the butchers or sold cheaply. We lived a lot on these parts because we couldn't afford any other cuts.

"During the Depression my father had a business of peddling door-to-door. He and the children took cottage cheese, buttermilk, eggs, cookies, honey and other goods to different parts of Denver each day of the week to sell. We had an established route, and the kids always had the job of soliciting new customers. I really hated selling door-to-door; I just didn't like to ask people things. It probably wouldn't bother me as much today, but it did then. However, that might have helped me with my outgoing personality, because I learned to meet people.

"My dad bought an old panel truck to use in the business. The first week he had the truck a fellow ran a stop sign and demolished it. We called the wreck the 'Land of Milk and Honey,' because there was buttermilk and honey running down the gutter. In those days there was no insurance and no alternative. So my dad took the last of the money and bought ingredients to make cookies. My mother had a good oatmeal cookie recipe. We went to the dump for old metal signs. We burned off the paint and cleaned them up to fit into my mother's oven. Why, she'd bake cookies nearly all night! Then we would get out with a basket on each arm and peddle cookies door to door. My mother couldn't get the next batch ready until my dad had brought home money from the last batch. He would buy the ingredients on the way home for the next batch. It was during this time that he bought home the pigs' tails."

I asked Margaret about her wedding and marriage to Guido. She responded by telling me about him and their early years together. "My husband was born in Oak Creek, and he was 69 years old last week, and he has never lived anywhere else. We call him a native. We actually met twice. I met him at Prom and danced with him several times. He was with a girlfriend of mine. Then we met again and began to court three days after graduation. My father had borrowed some tools from Guido's brother-in-law. He sent my sister and me down on foot to return them, two miles to town. Guido was there. We started dating in May and married in September. We've been married 42 years."

As Margaret and I talked further, she spoke of her knowledge of early pioneer techniques. "I've had a lot of experience from my grandmother and just being around older people. Four years ago I was asked by people in South Routt County if I would be interested in demonstrating some old pioneer techniques. I had access to some antique things to use, so I just worked basically from that and the request."

"It took a couple of hours to make a batch of soap."

I asked Margaret to be specific and tell me about soap making and canning and all those old time devices for survival. "Well, soap making is quite a lengthy process. I can remember when people used lye made from wood ashes in their soap. Lye can also be bought in cans at the store today. The lye was added to fat and water in a big caldron. Many people made soap in the back yard because the fire had to be really hot, and often it was smoky. Most women used old round bottomed kettles that hung over a camp fire. Then a long paddle was used to stir the bubbling stuff. You wouldn't want to get any of that lye on yourself because it would burn and eat your skin. There is some sort of secret in getting lye and lard to mix together well because it must be

Margaret explaining how heavy irons used to be.

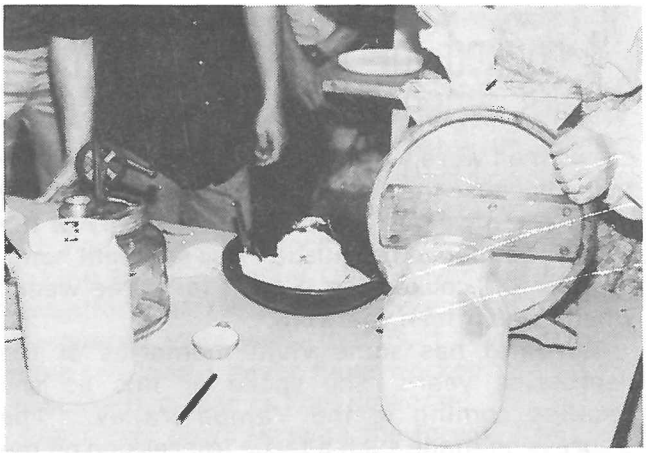
stirred and stirred. The fat would have to render to turn to liquid and mingle with the water, and then the lye had to work into it before it congealed and made soap. It took a couple of hours to make a batch of soap."

Since soap making was such a process, then I wanted to know about the mundane chores that occupied the early homemaker's time. "Well, laundry would take most all day Monday. The week before I was married my parents bought a washing machine. I guess they thought they were losing their laundress. I was laundry lady, and I had six brothers and sisters. Those were horrendous times. We washed the bedding and quilts in the spring, after being shut in all winter. We would usually soak them in a tub and melt the soap on the stove. Sometimes we would get the younger kids to climb in the tub and stomp the quilts with their feet. Actually, that was a better method that trying to lift them so filled with water. We often would drag them out of the tub to a grassy spot and let them dry, rather than trying to hang them on the line. The weight would pull them crooked, plus getting them over the line was a big chore. It would take all day to do an ordinary laundry for one family, and that was if you had one tub washing, one tub soaking and one or two tubs to rinse in. Then going back and forth to the clothes line was very time consuming. We were pretty tired after washing, and our backs had just about all they could stand.

"Ironing was done the next day. If Monday was wash day, Tuesday would be for ironing. Those irons were heavy and it was not easy. Everything had to be ironed, and the irons had to be really hot. A cool iron won't take the wrinkles out. We lined our irons up on the stove and took one from one side while the other was heating. We constantly used the hotter irons. Since they were heavy, that was a big chore."

The next thing I asked was making butter. "First we had to milk the cow and skim the cream after the milk had set. We had cream separators where the cream went in one spout and milk came out another. We let the cream sit until it soured lightly, not too much or the butter would taste strong. Then we warmed the cream to room temperature. If we churned it too cold or too hot, it could take too long to make butter. There was no need to add coloring. The butter fat in the cream holds its' own coloring."

Today Margaret still raises a large garden and preserves a lot of food. "We still have a root cellar where we keep potatoes, carrots, fruits and vegetables. Up until the last couple of years I've always baked bread, especially when we have company. I imagine it is still cheaper than buying bread. I just don't bake as much as I used to, but I do make things from scratch, no boxed mixes."



Margaret making butter.

Next our conversation went to winter survival and the feeling of isolation that often comes with wintertime. "My husband had to feed cattle everyday as any rancher in Routt County has to do. That was really a daily chore that couldn't be avoided. While he was doing that I usually would do my housework and maybe even do some sewing. We would only socialize in the winter by driving to a neighbor's house in a sled with a team. We might have supper and maybe stay all night and return in the morning. Maybe we'd have breakfast, then drive home and sleep.

"Entertainment was a little hard, but we always had something to do."

"Entertainment was a little hard, but we always had lots to do. I still like to refinish furniture, and I have some really treasured pieces in my home. I own a solid oak table and some chairs of my grandparents, which I know are 69 years old. My husband and I also entertain ourselves by playing a lot of cribbage, especially at night when we can't sleep. It's relaxing."

Margaret then told me about when her kids were growing up. "Of course, when we had the children our son had to ride on horseback to the first grade to a country school two miles below our place. The next year they consolidated the schools, so he went to town school on the bus. I remember the winter of 1951 was so bad that they had trouble keeping the roads open. The bulldozers had pushed snow as far back as they could, but the road got narrower and narrower. Finally there was no place to push it, and that's when the county bought a rotary plow. It took a long time to get the plow, so toward spring our son stayed in town with relatives and went to school. That's been the worst session with the weather since they consolidated the school. Since we have the plows our isolation may be only a day or two before we get plowed, but it's nothing like it used to be.

"The winter of 1951 was a very bad winter."

"As I said, the winter of 1951 was a very bad winter. That was the winter when everything was snowed in or blown over. I was asked to make a Farmer's Union bus trip to Saint Paul and to Washington. This is one way people can stay in touch with their representatives in Congress. They said, 'Oh, you can go on the trip because we know you son is staying in town.' Anyway, it got very comical because the snow was so deep that the neighbors each built trails from their feed trails to the next place so that we could get my luggage and myself out. It took several days for them to make the trails. My husband took me the five miles from home where my sister-in-law picked us up in the car and took us on to Phippsburg where I caught the train. I had not been able to get out to go shopping because of the snow, so all I had were big four buckle Arctic overshoes. When I got to Denver I was going to do this shopping, and there was not a particle of moisture on the Eastern slope. So I

One of the many steps in making butter.

went clopping up 17th Street in Denver with those high four buckle boots with all my luggage. I couldn't carry them so I wore them. And not a mud puddle anywhere. My mother said it's a good thing they knew I was a country hick, or I would have been locked up. That happens here a lot; there's a lot of difference between the weather on the Eastern and Western slopes. It was an interesting trip and an broadening experience. To travel is to learn how other people live and to see the other things people do. This trip was to visit the big grain exchanges in St. Paul and then to Washington to visit with the senators and representatives."

As a change of pace I asked Margaret about her opinions of the changes which have occurred in the Oak Creek and Yampa area. "When I moved to Oak Creek in 1936, it was the largest town in the county. There were several large pit mines, shaft mines, and they all had three shifts a day, so they hired a lot of men. During the 1950's they closed all those mines and Oak Creek nearly became a ghost town. There were very few people living there, mostly men who had been near or close to retirement age when they shut down the mines. These men were not allowed to go to the new coal fields. They were retired immediately. They had lived there all their lives, so they stayed. That's what the population of Oak Creek was for a long time. A lot of people from the big cities, Denver and Colorado Springs, bought up a lot of the homes in Oak Creek at that time. They bought them for taxes or recreation homes, summer or second homes.

"When we got married there were a lot more people living on ranches. As time goes by, it gets harder and harder to make a living on what is called a family type farm, so ranches had to get bigger or be very special. A rancher had to raise registered cattle or some other special thing in order to make a living. The ranchers became fewer and fewer and the ranches have become larger and larger. I have seen some changes in this area...

"When we got married we raised a lot of lettuce and spinach. At that time there were big packing sheds in Yampa and Toponas. These were very hard crops to raise because it was a job we called stoop labor. Everything we did we had to stoop over. It was a good money crop, though. Actually, head lettuce and spinach paid our ranch off more than the cattle and the hay ever did.

"We would transport the lettuce by packing it into crates in the field, field pack, we called it. Then we would transport it to the packing sheds and they would trim it. They would trim some of the outer leaves off and pack it with ice in crates with oiled paper inside them. They were shipped by a refrigerated railroad car. That's another change, too. The railroad had gone from hauling produce and livestock and coal to now all they haul is coal. Up until this year they have been able to haul livestock on special stock trains on the Rio Grande Railroad. This year they

wouldn't even accept stock. All the stock has to be trucked out of here now. That's quite a change.

"There was a lot of rivalry in this area. I went to school one half of the year in Oak Creek and the other half in Yampa. The rivalry between the cowboys and the miners was terrific. They just didn't want to mix together, and there were lots of battles back and forth."

Margaret still makes a lot of her own clothes. "I made my husband's flannel tuxedo for our 40th wedding anniversary two years ago. We had a big party. We were remarried in a church service and had a big reception which we did not have the first time we got married. They even decorated our car. It said, "Just Married, 40 Years." I made my dress for it and his suit. I enjoy sewing. It's relaxing and much cheaper."

As we brought the interview to a close I wanted to know about Margaret's philosophies and attitudes about life today. "First, I would like to say the best thing about the good old days is that they are gone. I would hate to go back and live those days again. I think the old days built a lot of strength and character, but you should be happy you're living now. Times have changed gradually, not all at once. Sometimes country people complain about all the neighbors knowing what they're doing, but when there's a tragedy or need of any kind they all rally around and help. A small town feeling is totally different than anything you will find in the city. People are more friendly, more open with each other, more prone to help each other."

Trying out the freshly baked rolls.

BISCUITS

2 cups flour, 4 teaspoons baking powder, 1-2 teaspoon salt, sift twice. 3 tablespoons shortening mixed into flour, 1 cup sour milk, 1-2 teaspoon soda. Mix soft dough, knead lightly, roll 3-4 inch thick, cut into small biscuits and bake in hot oven. Be sure to have all ingredients cold. Use fork for mixing. To make jelly biscuits, insert a cube of suger dipped in orange juice in the center of biscuit. Bake. This leaves a hole in biscuit. Fill with jelly and serve while hot.

Mrs. Alva Jones

Taken from, "How We Cook In Colorado"