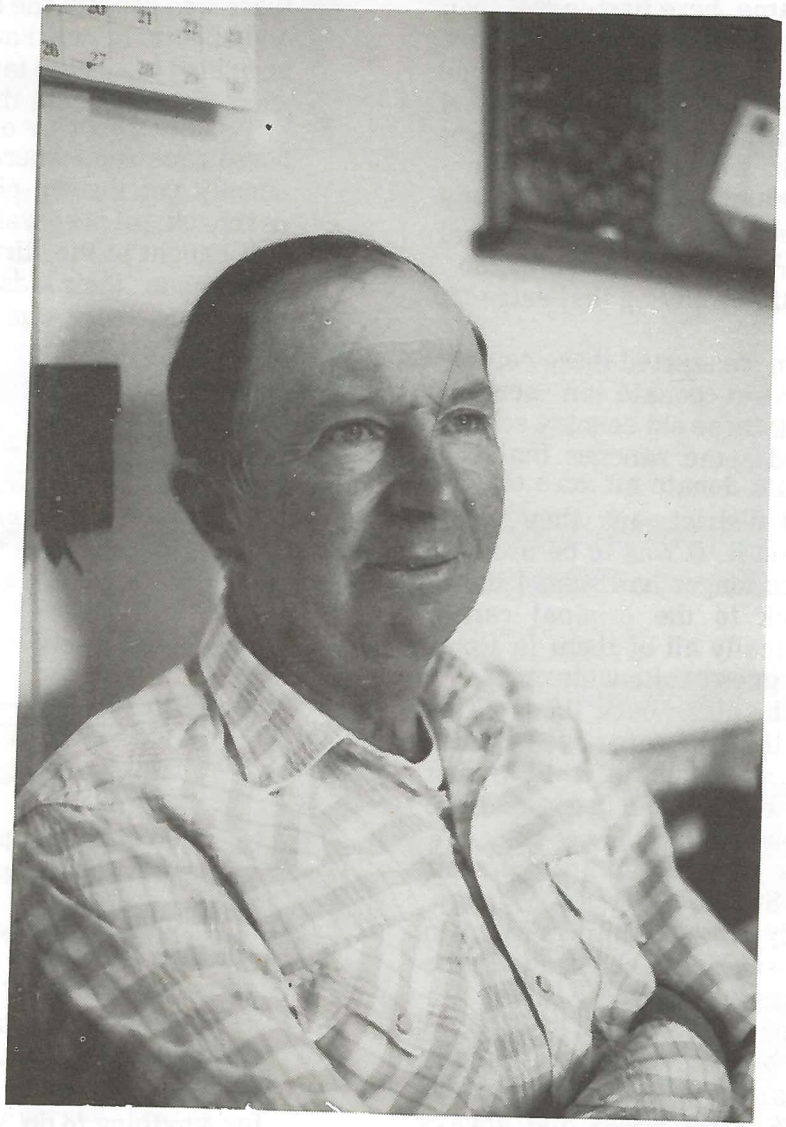
"IF I HAD ANOTHER 40 YEAR HITCH."



by Shane Jacobs and Jolene Stetson,

As we walked up to the ranch house on a sunny but windy day, Bob Gay, a lifetime rancher of Pleasant Valley, opened the door and asked us to come in before the wind blew us away. We met his wife, Elaine Gay, and then we sat down to a very interesting conversation, starting with his beginning.

"Oh, I was born on January 21, 1915, just a mile from here, right across the river. There were five children in my family. Amelia is the oldest, and then I had a brother and a sister that died in the influenza epidemic in 1918. You know, so many people died after World War I. I had one brother and one sister that died at that time, so that is why there is so much difference between Amelia and me.See, the two and Emma were in between us.

"The influenza epidemic was actually a kind of pneumonia I guess. Course, that was before the days of penicillin. They really didn't have much in the way of treating it.

"ROSINWEED - IT WAS PRETTY PUNGY"

"It started pretty much in Europe among the soldiers. When they got back home, it really spread. It was really terribly contagious. Really a lot of fatalities. You didn't have to go anywhere to get it. It was just a nation wide thing.

"My parents come from Switzerland. They settled here in 1898, came here first in '96, then they homesteaded here in 1898. They lived here the rest of their lives. Their homestead was one hundred and sixty acres. That's what a homestead was at that time. They also bought another 160 acres at the same time. Someone else had proved up another part. You could buy what's called a preemption. Each individual could only own a homestead of 160 acres, so they started out with 320 by buying that extra 160 acres.

"In most cases when we started these country schools, someone would donate an acre of ground. Practically all these old country schools were on one acre,and some rancher that was centrally located would donate an acre of ground to the school district, and they would build a school house on it. It was to be used for school. When we no longer had school there, then it reverted back to the original ranch. That's the way practically all of them in Routt County were, and I guess state-wide, too.

Bob told us about the kids back then, "Kids weren't any different than they are now. Kids are kids, I guess. We smoked a different kind of grass than some kids do now. We used to smoke rosinweed. You know what rosinweed is? We called it Indian tobacco. We hung it up in the loft in the barn to air dry. Smoking it's pretty pungy, but you ought to try it sometime. We also smoked cedar bark; we'd find a cedar post in the field and peel the bark off the post. Then we rolled it up in newspaper and smoked it.

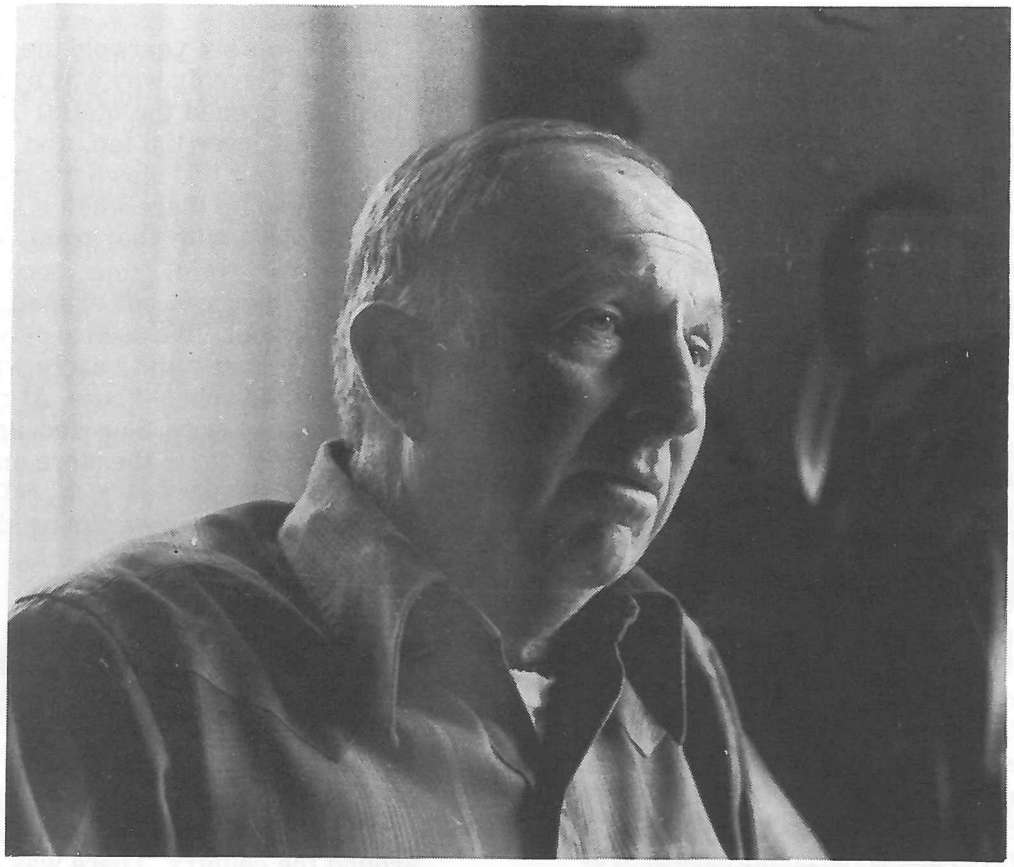
We asked Bob if there were ever any family feuds in Pleasant Valley, "The usual neighborhood bickers, always was and always will be. Sometimes the country schools used to and still do squabble a lot with the administration. They probably did a little more on a private basis when there were just four or five families involved.

"They had a school election over here one time; I knew there was going to be trouble. One family went and brought the county superintendent out. There was this little shed outside the main school room. Before the superintendent got there these two people got to battling in the school house there. One of their wives picked up a water bucket to throw water on them and make them stop. They were right in front of the door when she threw the water and they just happened to get out of the way. At that time the lady who was the superintendent opened the door, and she got the water.

"All the kids rode to school and always had horse races and what not, a real big deal. Pretty common to have a horse race after school, and there was usually one kid who had the best horse and of course, we had to test him. I've always been kind of a horse fanatic, usually had a pretty good horse too. On the way to school or on the way home about as often as not they'd have a horse race somewhere along the line. The kids usually got thrown off a lot, mostly they rode bareback, sot here was no danger of getting your foot caught in the stirrup. I know a lot of people who made their kids ride bareback most of the time. Boy, there was a lot of wrecks on horses.

"I WAS A VERY MEDIOCRE SKIER."

"I think kids used to make their own amusements. We didn't have any organized sports in the country school, but we never lacked for anything to do. We skied a lot in the winter and we built a little snow jump, that was the main pastime in the winter. I think that five dollars would get you a really good pair of skis maple, ash, hickory were probably the best. The pine skis were pretty cheap. You bought your own skis, but for your binder you took a harness strap with a buckle on it to buckle your foot in. It was hard to get them to stay on, I'll tell you. Snow would build up under your heel and your toe would come out, there wasn't near as much to it as with modern skis. I was a very mediocre skier. I'd go cross country skiing a lot, I loved to cross country, used to ski a lot of miles a day. I never was much of a jumper."



"IT'S LIKE GOING INTO AN ICEBURG."

Then he told us about some other of the winter activities, "We used to build snowforts and then choose up sides. That was when the snow was just right, damp and sticky. We would roll up some big snowballs and then pile them up and make a fort. You'd make two forts, and then divide up into teams and throw snowballs at each other. You'd get out of that fort, and whenever you got hit you would have to go to the other side. Course when you all ended up on the one side, that side won.

We asked Bob what kind of winter it was going to be, "I'm not much on predicting the weather. I don't know, all these signs. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. Probably have an average winter, I'd say, I don't think it'll be a real rough one, but it's 'pert near a sure bet it'll be more than we had last year because that was a once in a lifetime deal. Just about predict that and be safe."

When asked if the winters were rougher back then, he told us, "I don't know as the winters were so much tougher than they are now but you didn't have the means of getting along with it. Everything then was horses and sled, you know. The scoop shovel and the invention of a crawler tractor probably helped more than anything else on a ranch, because you can move that snow, break trails. It really took a lot of work. Practically everyone now has a little crawlerof some kind, you know. If you threw that and a few other things away we didn't have then, it would be tough now too.

For heat we used coal stoves on my parent's homestead. Had a cook stove that was pretty much standard. Everybody had a cook stove in the kitchen and a heating stove in the living room. Most of the bedrooms like ours were upstairs and the heat up there was pretty scant. Isn't much of it up there; it's like going into a iceberg. They hauled our coal to us. There were a lot of little wagon miners in the country at that time.Most people hauled coal in the fall for their own oven supply. A lot of people, ranchers, hauled coal to towns like Steamboat. Some guys would haul with four or six horses in the winter, it was part of their income, if they didn't have too many cattle to feed. A lot of people that were primarily grain farmers hauled coal in the winter, 'cause everybody in town had to have their coal hauled individually, also to the stores and courthouses, and that was a pretty good contract if you got that. It was a rugged job, I'll tell you.When they hauled that coal for twenty or thirty miles by teams and sled, especially when along toward spring the snow trails would get soft, and the horses would break off and couldn't easily stay on. Did a lot of hauling at night. They tried to be at the mine by daylight or before and get loaded up and part way back before the snow thawed, or you would be in trouble. A lot of

times the horses would get down and you would have to shovel them out. You understand that the roads weren't plowed out in any way, and all there was was a sled trail. It just got higher and higher through the winter and then in the spring it melted. The snow wasn't packed,and your sled trails would be up higher than the surrounding snow.

"It's unbelievable how if a horse was raised in this country and worked all the time how it could walk that sled trail. Course some of them were a lot better than others, but everybody bragged about his good snow teams. They were a must. A good wise team would walk like a cat going down a pole fence.

"We were awful late getting home sometimes. Sometimes you'd have to stay some place along the road That happened quite often to people hauling coal. Sometimes you would get to where couldn't go on because your horse would play out. It took two and one half to three hours ordinarily to get to town, depending on how the road was. It was thirteen miles but the last four miles were always slow after we left what is now Highway 131, because there wasn't much traffic on it. Until you got to there you could usually trot team pretty good. But during the winter a lot of times it was narrowing up, and it wasn't too good, so you had to walk them.

"To keep our feet warm we used to heat rocks and we sat in those sleds. We had spring seats. You sat on a board with a back on it with springs, I've got one out here yet. Then you covered it up with blankets and put a blanket on the seat and one or two to cover up with. Then Mother put some rocks in the oven the night before to get them warm. She then put them in a sack and threw them in there to keep your feet on. That really helped keeping your feet warm going down. Coming home, of course, they were cooled off."

Bob told us the story about the coldest time in his life, "I remember going to Denver one time in a model "A". The Gore was open.They kept it open a year or two before they kept Rabbit Ears open. They tried to keep Rabbit Ears open at that time, but it was closed that day anyway. I know we left here early in the morning and we got to Denver about midnight. The old model "A" had a rumble seat on it. This one was a roadster with a rumble seat. I know I rode in that rumble seat, and that was the coldest I've been in my life. When we got to Denver I got out, and I couldn't stand up my legs were so cold.

"When I was six years old the folks went to the stock show.The only way was by train. That was before they opened the Moffat Tunnel. We went over Corona, over the top, and got stranded up there. The wind had blown the track shut. That's really rugged up there when it storms. They got stuck up there with that train. We were three days on the train from here to Denver. I remember they ran out of food and water.

During school, "We used to play marbles in the spring. Boy, you could hardly wait for it to get bare along the school house. At recess and noon we would play with bow and arrows. In those days you didn't go to the store and buy 'em. you made 'em. Chockecherry or sarvisberry made the best bow, you know. String should be binder twine or bailin' wire."

"COUNTRY DANCES WAS THE MAIN ENTERTAINMENT"

At night the mood changed, "There was an awful lot of dances; country dances was the main entertainment, at various school houses around the country. There was almost always a dance on Saturday night. Maybe not in the wintertime so much, but when the roads weren't snowed up you could always go to 'em. "Bout everyone did. And then the country schools each had one at Christmas time, around Thanksgiving and at the end of school. 'Coursewe had plays and recited and sang songs and all that and danced afterward. We would put the little kids on the desks when they conked out, and cover 'em up with a coat. Almost every school had a piano and

BOB, ELAINE AND A FRIEND, "KIDS ARE KIDS"

usually there was somebody around who could play at the country dances, local people. Some of them were very good. Bill Thorne was an excellent saxophone player, he was very good. His wife played the piano; they played for a lot of dances around here. Then there was the Miles. They were good musicians, had a violin and a banjo. It was good dance music.I danced all night a lot of times, came home in time to feed the cattle. You just didn't miss a dance."

When asked if he ever idolized anybody he replied, "Cowboys, guys like that. My ambition was to be a good teamster and horseman.Of course, kids now would be more inclined to be race car drivers or something.

"I used to go to the movies occasionally. Of course, when I was a kid, they were the silent movies. I can remember going to them--that'd look a little ridiculous now, I guess."

Bob's wife, Elaine, told us that Bob would laugh so hard he would get the hiccups, and the only sound in the theatre was his hiccups!

"There were three in my grade school graduating class. There was usually anywhere from six to twelve kids over there. Brian Gorley, Hazel Werner (Hazel is Skeeter's and Buddy's mother.) and I graduated from eighth grade together. Mildred Bartholomew (Wingett) was our teacher. Then I graduated from high school in '31, so it was four years before that; 27, I guesss.

BOB GRADUATED IN 1931

"Along toward the last they had trouble keeping teachers in the country schools.There just weren't enough of them. You know, it was really kind of a rugged life. They just had their little teacherages to live in. The teacherages are still there. Those little, two-room houses, that's what most of them had. They had to pump their water, carry their wood, shovel their coal, no indoor plumbing, of course. They tried to teach in town, naturally, and it got to where you just couldn't hardly get a teacher to teach in these old country schools. Which I think is one of the reasons-probably one of the main reasons they consolidated

Then Bob told us about when he and Elaine were young, "I knew Elaine before school. She came here with her folks from Kansas in 1926. They lived around on the Mesa, so we never did go to the same country school. She always went to Sidney or Mesa, and I always went to Pleasant Valley.

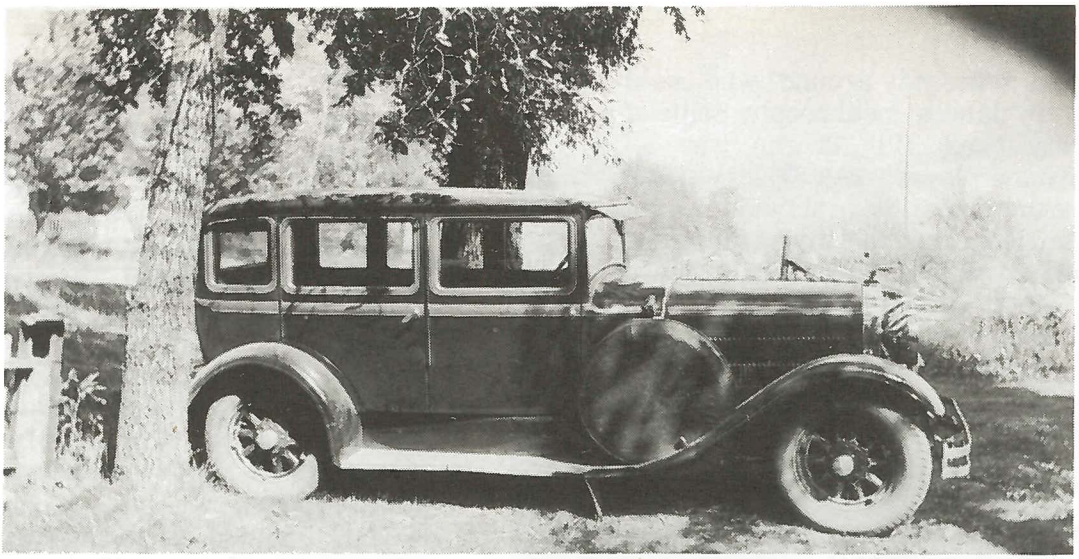
"We were married in July 1938. We went to Salt Lake City for a honeymoon and came back through Wyoming. We had a 1937 or '38 car."

"In fact, we had a new car," Elaine remembered

"Brand new Chevy, cost $735. I remember that!" Bob added. "My father didn't have a car when I was born. They had one later, though. Their first car was an old 1915 Reo. The model T came along in about 1912 or '14, but there weren't too many cars around here till then. Even when I was a kid, six years old, a lot of people didn't have a car.

"We had this old Rio, and it was a great big ol- monstorous thing.It didn't have much power, and it never had any brakes. Lotta times you'd get about to the top of a hill and it would conk out. It never had any brakes tohold it, so you'd have to turn the thing into the hill or out through the brush or somewhere to keep from rolling back down the hill. Or else back up pretty fast sometimes!

"The roads weren't as good as they are now, and I remember we started down below Craig one time--my folks, and my sister, Emma, and I. Emma was drivin', and we were three days gettin' down to Great Divide. Turned the thing over twice. One time, as I said, it conked out down below Steamboat goin' up a hill. She turned into the bank to stop it, and the bank was kind of slopin', and it just rolled up the bank and upset the girls. Next time, she got a little too close to the bank,and there was a creek down there--somewhere around Hayden, I don't remember just where--the bank caved out under the two outside wheels and the car turned over in the creek."



NEW CARS COST SEVERAL HUNDRED DOLLARS BACK THEN

"This was all the same trip, mind you," Elaine added.

"Didn't do much hotrodding 'till I was in high school," Bob continued. "You'd get yourself a Model T or Model A Ford (Model A's came out about '26 or '28). They'd strip them down to a 'bug', they called 'em, take the body off of'em, and you sat on the gas tank and drove 'em. They were hotrods, all right; they'd really slide on the corners. 'Bout all there was to 'em was the engine, the wheels and that gas tank. They'd take everything off. That was the 'in thing,' to see how much you could take off of 'em and still have 'em run.

"The cars today are a lot better, but they wouldn't have been any good back then. To begin with, the first thing ya did when you went to buy a car was see how much clearance it had, because the roads would get so rutty they couldn't have gotten anywhere with 'em. Most of the times the ruts were so deep you'd hang up, high center. And the roads were muddy--you wouldn't believe the roads. Everybody hollers about 'em now, but you can't believe how they've improved over the last thirty-fourty years. They just were really sorry.

"Gas mileage wasn't too much of a thing when we looked for a car then, 'cause none of 'em guzzled gas like they do now, ya know. There were all kinds of cars. Different makes and a lot of 'em were really 'jokers,' like the Essex, and the Star, and the Marmon and the Hupmobile. The second car my folks had was a 1924 Hupmobile, and most of it just fell to the wayside, due to mechanical failures. It wasn't anything unusual to pass two or three cars beside the road, broke down. Somethin' had just quit for some reason. The engines weren't what they are now, I'll tell ya. Different kind of experimental stages with somany of 'em, ya know. As I say, a lot of them just fell by the wayside.

"The Model Ts had a crank on 'em, they didn't have gears. You had what they called the low pedal--ya stepped on that to start, and after you got up to so much speed you'd let your foot off and you were in high. And then there was one for reverse, and then the brake, but you cranked

"They were rebuilding highway 131 down here one fall across the Mesa. A neighbor boy and I were goin' to school and he had a Model T. There were a lot of mud holes between here, and those low places that you couldn't get through if you got in the wrong set of ruts, because you'd get stuck or hung up. See, we were comin' home one night and takin' a big run at one of those mud holes. We got about to it and he said 'Oh-oh, this is the wrong rut,' so he just stepped on the reverse pedal and we were flyin' backwards up that rut. We never looked back, of course, and here was a guy in a big ol' Buick in the same set of ruts, and there's no way you can get out of those ruts. An' we banged into that Buick. I remember that really put a kink in my neck, I guess that's one of the first whiplashes. Anyhow, my buddy jumped out of the car, ran back to that guy and said, "Why in the devil don't you watch where you're goin'?" He didn't have a word to say

"When you had a wreck you just passed it up and went on. There were no patrolmen or anything. There were no driver's licenses, anybody could drive who thought they could. Why, you just got in and drove it. The cars had big, heavy bumpers,and, of course, they were so much more solid than they are now. I can remember that old '24' Hupmobile.Lord, the fenders on that thing must've been made from solid steel. They were sturdy,and you didn't go at such a high rate of speed.

"Our new honeymoon car got right around twenty miles a gallon,"

BOB AND HIS WIFE ELAINE

"I don't think gas was over sixteen cents a gallon," Elaine added.

After their honeymoon, the Gays came back to Pleasant Valley and ranching.

"We never left ranching. I was born over there, I ranched here, and I just lived on the two places all my life. We moved over here in 1948. This house was built in 1926. We have about 1,800 acres on our ranch. It's good-sized, but it takes that much just to make any kind of operation anymore. It's like everything else; it takes a little more cost, a little more money every year. About the only way a rancher has of keeping up is to produce more. We still don't set our own price,and I don't know if we ever will.

"During the Depression, living was harder. You didn't have all the conveniences. I don't know as it was a whole lot harder to make ends meet than it is now, only during the Depression no one had any credit. Now everyone is getting by on borrowed money, is about what it amounts to. Riding on this land inflation now, that's what is keeping a lot of people in business. Actually, as far as getting anything in plain dollars and cents or cold cash, the average rancher that doesn't have another income just isn't doing it.

Even if he loses money, well he's got enough equity in the land. In most cases he can just borrow a little bit more money and get in a little deeper and think next year will be better.

"It is hard to keep an outfit afloat, it really is. Because everything you buy, like your clothes, your food, your repairs, gasoline, goes up and up.

Your farm products are actually down where they were in '52, cattle and grain. To run a ranch at what it costs today, still trying to operate on the same income, it don't really work.

"During the Depression there just wasn't any money around. You could trade half a beef for groceries, though. They didn't have all these restrictions, you just took and butchered your cattle and sold them directly to the meat market. Eggs, cream and whatever else you had you sold to whoever needed it.

"The coal miners in Oak Creek and Mt. Harris were making a little money during the Depression. A lot of farmers would butcher beef or pigs and take it house to house. Those people had a paycheck yet, which I think made it a little easier here than in a lot of places.

"We raised some grain at one time but I haven't raised any grain for twenty-five years. I guess that's another thing that's really changed. Everyone used to be much more diversified. That's another reason it takes more money, too. You raise so much more. Everybody milked two or three cows, or most people milked several cows. They had that cream check that came in every week, and that's down the drain now because you can't even sell cream off the farm

GAY FAMILY ON AN OUTING

PLEASANT VALLEY

"NOTHING IS GOING TO STAY THE SAME."

now. Back then there was a local creamery and you could ship it to Denver. For many, many people their cream checks bought their groceries and made their livin'. Their cattle and whatever else they sold was their overhead and profit.

"Eggs, chickens, everybody kept a pig or two. You had your own pork, your own eggs, your own garden, your own milk and your grain that you fed, that stuff. Well, it seemed like you had to get more specialized to make things pay. You had to either go into farmin' business or else get into cattle more. I don't know where, but ya just run out of time to do all those chores. That's one reason that it's a little harder to go, 'cause you have to buy more things for one thing. We're not diversified like we were. Everybody's a specialist, or thinks he is.

"I think it's gonna be harder on an individual basis. We noticed this so much in Montana. It's true here to a certain extent, but especially up there in that real good big ranching country. I know an old fella up there, he's been there for years an' he knows the goins' on in the country. So many of the big ranches that we went by, he'd say, 'Well now, that's Arm & Hammer Baking Soda, and that one's Schlitz Beer, and one of the main stockholders in the Ringling Brothers Circus owns that one.' Big money like that, outside money. And they're doing a good job of ranching. They've put in sprinkler systems and they're wonderful ranches, but it doesn't make much difference to them whether the ranch makes money 'cause they have other income, and that makes it a little hard on the individual basis. I think that a guy who really wants to can still do it. He may have to get in a little different country than this, but it'll be hard 'cause it takes so much more money than it did. An' you're gonna have to have a line of credit that's pretty good to get through the rough spots, but there'll be some of 'em that are makin' some money like they always have."

We ended the interview with a discussion of the Lake Catamount dam, part of a large resort planned for Pleasant Valley.

"It's really a controversial thing. But it is there. I don't know how much development will go in with it, nobody does yet. Development in general is neither all good nor all bad. It's how much is progress and how much isn't. I don't

know what progress is for sure. I never had a good definition of it yet. Depends on your point of view. You might say that all change isn't necessarily progress, as I see it. There is bound to be change, that's the only thing for sure that'll happen. Nothing is going to stay the same. But just because it's bigger it's not necessarily better.

"IT'S HARD TO KEEP AN OUTFIT AFLOAT."

"The dam certainly will change things, pretty much put an end to ranching as it has been known. It already has in that end of the valley. Put a lake and development around it and it'll change that. Whether you can live next to it and ranch or not, I question. With the influx of people it's just not too compatible, you know.

"Progress is kind of a personal opinion. Probably the most progressive thing that ever happened in the Western United States was when they settled it and plowed it up. That's progress to most of us. But it wasn't progress to the Indians. They went and put up quite an argument with the U.S. Army. They didn't think it was progress to be put on a reservation. Most of them don't think so yet. So there, what is progress? One man's bread, another man's poison."

We asked Bob if there was anything he would like to change about his life.

"I'd like to do the same thing over," he replied. "I think it's been very rewarding. A very satisfactory life. As I say, I don't know if you could do it right here, but if I could find another place and if I had another 40-year hitch. If Mother was as tough as she was 40 years ago, and still willing to peel as many small potatoes as she did, we could do 'er!"

SHANE & JOLENE WITH BOB &ELAINE GAY AT THEIR RANCH IN PLEASANT VALLEY.