

GROWING UP ON A PALISADE PEACH ORCHARD

By Jeff Johnson

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In the Spring of 1954 Dad and Mom (Jerry and Mary Johnson) had just purchased a home and peach orchard located on East Orchard Mesa – 20 acres with about 2,000 peach trees, 1 cherry tree and 1 apricot tree. My first recollection as a 7-year-old is riding in Uncle Ed's truck with a load of our belongings to our new residence 3 ½ miles from our current home in Palisade. The ride through nothing but peach orchards seemed to never end. Not only that, our new address of 587 36 5/8 road made no sense to me whatever. In addition, there were no stores of any type! I was not a happy camper. Our previous home on 4th street in Palisade was just a block from Bennet's Phillips 66 garage and filling station which had a small store attached with lots of pop and candy – a forerunner of today's convenience stores. You could get a great candy bar for a nickel. Brother Steve was 11 and sister Judy 5.

Mom and Dad were both teachers in Palisade and had decided this would be a wonderful place to raise a family. With peach harvest in August, they could finish harvest in time to start school. Dad was a teacher, counselor and finally principal at Palisade High School. Mom taught 7th grade a few years then settled into 5th grade, teaching many years with her idol, Helen Maurer, at Taylor Elementary. Dad's family arrived in Palisade in 1917 when Dad was 5. While living in Iowa, Grandpa Johnson had evidently read an ad in their local paper from Lee Toothaker extolling the virtues of peach ranching in Palisade. So, Grandpa had this in mind when he relocated his family in Palisade. Grandpa worked in the coal mine in Cameo and Grandma ran a boarding house. Later, they bought a peach orchard in Vineland, just east of Palisade, and later purchased a larger orchard, the "home place," on East Orchard Mesa in the mid 1920's. Dad was familiar with the peach orchard business. Uncle Ed ultimately bought out the family orchard, which was just a quarter mile west of our new place. That helped the folks immensely as Dad and Uncle Ed shared equipment and labor to help each other out.

Mom and Dad met while enrolled at the University of Colorado. Mom grew up in Illinois, the daughter of a Presbyterian Minister. She had had asthma since childhood but found almost total relief in Colorado. Mom and Dad were married

in 1939. Setting up the family household on a peach orchard with heavy equipment, irrigation ditches, etc. was a challenge to keep everyone safe. Mom got the job of dealing with the fairly large irrigation canal that ran by our house. She recalled that that first summer she practically lived in her bathing suit teaching us to swim in the canal and to not drink the canal water. It didn't take too long before Steve, Judy and I were having a wonderful time in the canal often joined by pals from surrounding orchards. Turns out it is easier to learn to swim when you are going downstream in the canal. The trick was learning how to get out! The folks attached a small ladder to our nearby bridge which helped immensely. Dad was out in the orchard doing tractor work all summer and it was hot! He was known to stop the tractor at the end of a row near the canal, strip off his clothes (almost all) and take a quick dip in the canal – then get back on the tractor and take off in the other direction.

Sometime in our first year on the orchard we discovered that I was asthmatic and allergic to certain weeds and peach fuzz! The folks weren't too surprised as Mom had it and Grandpa Johnson had it. In hindsight, the folks made a good decision in letting me try various jobs in the orchard to see if I could tolerate them. While I did not know it at the time, this was a great approach as opposed to limiting my activities.

Over the years as a family, we all experienced trials and tribulations. By getting us involved in all types of farming experiences, we didn't know it, but we were getting groomed for life's challenges. Here are a few examples of peach orchard chores, beginning with winter. Pruning was a significant task and one of the few we normally hired others to do. ~~farmed out~~. Dad talked about a time around 1930 on their home place when they had frozen out and couldn't afford for him to attend his first year at Mesa College. The Great Depression probably impacted this decision as well. Everyone in the family pitched in to make ends meet. Dad's job was to prune the home place by himself. He started in the Fall, worked 5-6 days / week through the Winter and finished in the Spring. His only company during the day was their dog. Steve and I remember finding pruning stilts in the shed and assume Dad used them on the home place. We used to think that if we made it to the end of the first week in May, there was a strong chance we'd have a full crop. Thinning was normally done in early Summer. The small peaches about the size of your thumb would often form clusters which needed to be thinned out. Dad used 8-foot bamboo poles with a hard ball attached to the end.

This negated the need for ladders. Steve and I were part of the crew (normally friends from school) and found fun ways to use the poles to bang each other with peaches flying from an adjacent tree! (This was always done after Dad had left the area.)

This was also the time that the trees started to need to be sprayed for various pests. One of the first sprays was applied to delay the opening of the buds to reduce the freezing risk. This spray also included a “peach thinner” to kill some of the peaches (which never made sense to me). The orchard was sprayed for various pests 6-8 times a season. Irrigation, weed control and planting replacement trees were also done each Spring.

Orchardists in our area were all owners of irrigation water rights and shared controlled access to gates in the two canals (Upper and Lower) on East Orchard Mesa. Usage was monitored by a ditch rider. I recall the orchardists in our rotation worked together to keep the system in good working order. All were very supportive of each other and were willing to take their turn as required and adjust their schedule as needed. Dad and eventually Steve would put a disc creaser on the back of the tractor and make five furrows in each row for the water. Steve and I worked with Dad to change the water twice a day (6:00 AM and PM) for 6 days and to make sure every tree was watered within our allotted time. Then after two weeks off, we repeated this until harvest started sometime in August. Later, the Soil Conservation Service installed underground delivery pipes that reduced leakage. Above ground gated pipe was then attached to the underground system to direct the water to the individual rows.

Things started getting really busy sometime in July when we started to prepare for harvest. Peaches have a relatively small window of time for being picked, packed, and shipped. This made the labor source critical. From a kid’s perspective your whole world is turned upside down before and during harvest. Imagine 20+ men and a cook and helpers all living on your property. By this time the ladders, picking sacks, roadways, trucks, tractors, Speedy (below), and picking boxes have been prepped. Amazingly, things would normally go pretty well. The picking sacks were adjustable and well designed and could carry up to 40 pounds of peaches. The wooden ladders were 7 feet tall and heavy. Imagine climbing the ladders with a full sack and then carrying the ladders to the next tree all day! When I was eight years old, I got my first job as “waterboy” and hauled two

canvas waterbags on my bike out to the pickers in the orchard who were very appreciative! At the conclusion of harvest, I think I got paid \$6 which I used to open a savings account at Palisades National Bank! Early on, Steve helped pick up the wooden field boxes of peaches in the orchard, called swamping, and loaded them onto Speedy. Once I was 10 or so, I was able to join Steve as a “swamper”. The real fun was getting to drive Speedy, our orchard truck, out of the orchard to the truck. Steve and I used to estimate how many times we manually lifted each full field box (40 lbs.) and came up with an estimate of a minimum of three times for each box. Then Dad would drive the International Truck to the “United Fruit Growers Association” in Palisade. As I recall, we would load about 220 boxes for a full load. Dad would often let me and Steve ride with him to town. He used this as an opportunity to impress upon us how dangerous the trip was, especially going down the steep hill from East Orchard Mesa to Palisade. We were amazed how at the top of the hill he could downshift the manual transmission into “granny” gear without grinding the gears. After spending several days in the orchard, it was refreshing to go to town and fun to see the peaches being packed and see the “fruits of our labor! ”

Speedy came with the purchase of the property and was made up of the front end of a 1920 Ford Model A (cut off just behind the dash) with a Model T chassis attached. Then 1'X 6' wood planks were attached to the rear ~~end~~ to make a flatbed to haul boxes of peaches, pickers, and other items to and from the orchard. I recall such things as the classic Model A radiator cap and the wooden spoked tires. I remember Steve driving Speedy with me to Palisade to get some work done on it at Hoffman's Garage. I'll swear on a straight stretch he had Speedy doing 60 MPH! Seats or seat belts? Haha.

Our house had a full basement that had originally been designed to accommodate feeding our crew of men “3 square meals” during peach harvest. It had a complete kitchen with a pantry, two commercial stoves, two bedrooms, and a large room for the meals. Some 20-25 men who resided on our property were fed daily for approximately two weeks during harvest in August. At lunch, Dad would take orders from the men for tobacco, clothing, outgoing mail, etc. and Mom would then go to town each day to pick up the orders at Bancroft's – later Bill's Market. The men were very appreciative of the hospitality and almost always remarked that they had gained weight during the harvest and felt much healthier. We raised July Elbertas, Giant Elbertas, Standard Elbertas and JH Hale

peaches. Each variety matured at various times, July Elbertas first and JH Hales last, which made scheduling picking much easier vs all ripening at the same time.

In hindsight, it was a remarkable time and a wonderful feeling when the last of the peaches were picked and trucked to town. During the first few years, we packed the peaches in bushels at our own packing shed and then trucked them to town. Dad decided that the ongoing hassles of sorting and packing your own fruit was not worth it and switched over to using the much larger United Fruit Growers Association packing house in Palisade.

It was great fun to help unload the truck at the UFGA packing shed and then watch a large conveyor system take the peaches, sort them, and have them individually packed in 16-pound wooden boxes. We would recognize many Palisade friends and acquaintances working there during harvest just before school began (the school starting date was occasionally adjusted to coincide with the end of harvest). The best part was to observe the final step of taking the packed boxes and loading them into the refrigerated railroad box cars to be shipped to markets in the Midwest. In earlier days, the railroad box cars were cooled with blocks of ice put into the bunkers of each one. You definitely felt part of the community but were sure glad when harvest was over.

I didn't realize until later how hard Dad and Mom worked during the summer through peach harvest. I do recall one year when on Sunday we had finished the harvest, Dad had trucked the last of the peaches to town and paid our crew. He came into the house for a late dinner and had just enough time to read the paper, go to bed and then go to his teaching job the next morning! I'm sure this was common to most family-owned orchards.

Steve and I grew up pretty quickly after moving to the orchard. While we didn't always like to work, we developed a strong work ethic. One particular learning experience came the day before we were to start harvest one year. Steve and I were out irrigating the last of the trees in the afternoon when some dark clouds came over and dropped a ton of hail that ruined our entire peach crop. We had run to the house for help, but Dad said there was nothing we could do. That evening at the dinner table he told us that there was no need to worry, we could make do. He then said "Guess what? We have a full crop for next year!" That

calmed Steve and me down. I think most people that choose a life in agriculture have that optimism. It also helps to have a 2nd job!

Early in his teaching career, Dad decided to take advantage of some educational grants and get his Master's degree. This would necessitate him spending about nine months at the University of Denver. So, Mom, Steve, Judy and I had to take care of the orchard with Mom also teaching 5th grade at Taylor Elementary. Dad came home most weekends and luckily finished by the start of peach harvest. Steve took on most of the tractor work with Uncle Ed helping with the spraying and me helping with the irrigation. That Spring, Mom took her 5th grade class to a skating rink and managed to break her wrist! Judy was a godsend in terms of helping Mom. I remember Mom and her cast (right-handed with broken right wrist, of course) driving us to school and having to wrestle with a manual transmission in our car! In hindsight, I've wondered about how Mom and Dad must have thought long and hard about the Denver decision but knew Uncle Ed was always there. Uncle Ed probably got a few calls from Dad while in Denver. What fortitude Mom displayed during this time!

As mentioned, Uncle Ed and Aunt Jane lived close by. Starting right after we moved to East Orchard Mesa, our family and Ed and Jane began a family tradition of meeting Sunday evenings for dinner and cards. As long as Steve, Judy, and I were living at home we would participate. Math test Monday? No problem, we would study wherever we were having dinner. They carried on this tradition for 53 years, well after we left home.

Like most families in the peach business, the sons and daughters often acquire their own orchards. That was the case with dad's family. In addition to Ed, Dad's two other siblings, Ruth Echternach (Marion) and Harold (Doris) Johnson had peach orchards in the Palisade area. Many of the children of our peach orchard families, including ours, grow up and move away. However, many of these children and their families return to help with peach harvest! I think one of the reasons is the strong family ties and respect for hard work that develop growing up in an agricultural setting.

A FEW STORIES!

The Spring cold snap was/is something that all fruit growers dread. Dad put in two large, elevated fans to keep the cold air from settling on the peach buds early

in the morning. The challenge was to wake up in time to get the fans started before the buds were killed when the temperature dropped below 28 degrees. Dad decided he knew just the trick and put their vacuum cleaner in their bedroom and wired it to an outside thermometer so when the temperature registered about 30 degrees a connection would be made and the vacuum cleaner would start up and wake him up! Can you imagine how funny that would look and sound with the vacuum running with its light turned on at say 4:00 AM! Glad he didn't put it in our bedroom!

Safety is always an issue in farming operations. One of our winter jobs involved using the tractor with a buck rake on the front equipped with a pneumatic system to take out dead limbs and those which were pruned. Once the canal was dry Dad would start a fire in the canal and then carefully drive the tractor and buck rake to the edge of the canal and then tip the load down of limbs into the previous load's hot ashes. After training, Steve and I continued the job while Dad was at work at school. Well, Steve was dumping a load when the canal bank gave way under the front tires pulling the load and the tractor down toward the pile. Yikes! Well Steve knew what to do and quickly dumped the load and was able to back away from the fire. I think we quit early that day!

Mom's family back east loved to come visit us. I recall her brother Fritz came out for a week during thinning season. Dad loved to get relatives out in the orchard doing various tasks to give them a good feel about peach farming. Fritz wanted to help so he put on a pair of Bermudas, a short-sleeved shirt, knee length business socks, a Panamá hat, a pair of dad's old irrigation boots, his own bamboo thinning pole and was smoking his pipe. As we are all walking out into the orchard he suddenly stops, levels out his pole, and yells out "en garde"! That made thinning that day almost fun! What I would give for that picture!

Another story has to do with our cat, Pyewacket (Bell, Book and Candle movie), who had just had five kittens and kept them on our outdoor porch. Uncle Ed, who came by all the time, had an older Army Jeep with no top that he could take out in his orchards and always took his cow dog, Corky, along for the ride. Well, not thinking about the Pyewacket, Ed pulled into our driveway and got out with Corky who spied the cat who took exception to his arrival. She took after Corky who headed for the Jeep but with the cat clawing his back end to the extent he couldn't slow down enough to jump into the Jeep. He starts circling the Jeep but

every time he slows down to get in, Pyewacket claws him again and Corky yelps! It was a sight to behold with all the barking, yelping, and hissing. Eventually, Ed was able to save Corky and Pyewacket went back to her litter.

Mom called our truck (1943 International) the “Tom Cat”. Before Ute Water municipal water system extended to East Orchard Mesa, we utilized a cistern. Dad put a large metal water tank (1,000 gal.) on the truck and three Saturdays out of four, he drove to Palisade and bought drinking water from the town. He had a large black hose attached to the tank in order to drain the water into the cistern. Mom thought the hose looked like a cat’s tail thus the name Tom Cat. For good reason, we were very careful how much water we used. One Friday we got up to go to school and you guessed it – no water! Kind of a panic but we learned to be really careful about water consumption.

Dad learned to whistle growing up and was it ever loud. As youngsters we basically were able to roam the area with our pals. We would ride our bikes everywhere and when the going got too rough, we would get off and hike on foot. The one thing we kept in mind in the late afternoon was to listen for Dad’s whistle which meant get home pronto! One day I was having so much fun I pushed the limit and didn’t come right away. Then I thought, “oh boy, I’m in trouble” and took off for home knowing I was in for a spanking. Preparing for that, I picked up some gravel on our lane and put it in my hind pockets... Bad idea! I heard Dad yell “Ow” as he first swatted me, then give me one of the worst spankings I ever had.

Just as Dad hired local kids to do various jobs in our orchard, we did the same. Our neighbor, Elmer “Snag” Rice, let us pick Bing cherries at his place using something like 16’ ladders. These ladders took a little getting used to, but we eventually got the hang of them. Snag later confided to the folks that he wasn’t sure but thought we may have eaten as many cherries as we picked. Elmer got his nickname from playing baseball in the infield at PHS where he excelled at “snagging” ground balls.

After the three of us kids moved away with families of our own, the folks continued to live at home. Due primarily to reduced production due to tree health, Dad took out the peaches and planted Double Red and Delicious apple trees. He eventually sold the apple orchard (it is now a vineyard) but kept the

house. Mom and Dad enjoyed a wonderful retirement including their 50th anniversary together. The kids and grandkids were frequent visitors. For a number of years, Mom and Dad volunteered at a local hospital. They loved taking trips in their camper and would try to find a fishing spot by late afternoon and enjoy a trout dinner. They also loved attending their local church. After Dad passed, Mom continued to live on the place and enjoyed her twice daily social walks along the ditch bank with her dog, Cricket. Her neighbors often visited for chats, particularly in the kitchen or outside porch with wonderful views of orchards and Grand Mesa to enjoy. In addition, miraculously, many chores were completed around the house by Mom's wonderful neighbors. She could not have been happier or safer than spending her time at 587 36 5/8 Rd., Palisade, Colorado.

There were many families the folks knew and cherished on Orchard Mesa, through the Palisade school system and through the Palisade United Methodist Church.

Our Neighbors – by last name (all with nearby peach and apricot orchards):

Elmer "Snag" Rice*

Ronnie Canfield

Layne Brown (previously owned by Floyd Swanson)

Weber Family (later owned by the Ehmsen family)

Delbert Brown

Virgil Hickman

John Cox

Max Noland

Bracken Family

Story Family

Morton Family

Martin Family

Kimminau Family

Wallace Family