

Voices of Dixon: Carl Berghofer

From the book
Voices of Dixon:
Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley
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Interviewed February 21, 2003

Origins

My great-grandfather came to New Mexico in 1846 with Sterling Price's troops in the 2nd Mounted Missouri Volunteers. Then he went back to Missouri. My mother's family, the Harbaughs, an old family in the United States dating back to 1731, settled in Colorado Springs before the coal mining started. They were in the cattle business. After World War I, when the Taos Junction-Tres Piedras area was opened for homesteading, my mother and dad moved to New Mexico and settled close to where Taos Junction is now, and that's where I was born. My aunt and my cousins and the folks on my mother's side came to New Mexico in 1921 and they also settled around Taos Junction. Then they bought land here in Embudo about 1923. My aunt built the rock house that you're living in now. My

cousin built a café and motel where the bar is in Embudo. That was when the main highway went right past the house and the café. It was US 64 at that time, a dirt road, not even gravel, from Taos to Santa Fe. It wound through Velarde, then up past the present Embudo post office, then down into the bosque, and back up. Remnants of the old road are still there.

My father went to work for the Highway Department and was caught in a rockslide in 1930 down by Embudo Station. It broke his back and he died six months later in Santa Fe. I was four years old and my brother was just a newborn baby. With the insurance money, though it wasn't much, Mother bought the place which was known as the Watts place (in Rinconada) and she later married Gordon Watts. That's where I was raised, though I was born in Taos Junction and so was my brother. We've lived here ever since except for a year just before World War II when we lived in Taos and my step-dad worked on building the Taos public school on a WPA project.

We've seen a lot of changes. In about 1940 the road was paved from here to Taos, and bypassed the old road that went up the canyon. A lot of people moved in after World War II. When I was a child the Schafranka family owned most of the land around here. The Schafrankas came here around the turn of the century. They had four pieces of property altogether. Bob Schafranka, Sr. had built a bridge across the Rio Grande right where Sopyn farm is now. The road to Peñasco went through Rinconada and over the hill where the Dixon dump used to be. There was a ford over the river at the head of Rinconada and the road crossed the river, and went right up the side of the hill opposite my house to Barranca Station (on the old "Chile Line" narrow gauge railroad) and on to Ojo Caliente. It was just a wagon road. The road that is here now was built during the 1890s. It extended up our irrigation ditch right-of-way almost to Glen Woodie bridge, named after Glen Woodie who had the mining operation up there. Then it went up to Pilar—just a little two-track road that later became Highway 64. At the upper end of the valley Jim Craig owned the property that now belongs to the Frosts and Carol Jones. He was

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a prominent orchard man.

Schooling

I went to elementary school here in Rinconada. There was a one-room schoolhouse with eight grades. Then one year we walked over the hill to Dixon, all year. Then I put one year in grade school in Taos. I went to high school in Taos and the rest of high school I was self-taught.

There weren't any school buses in those days. The high schools were in Taos or Española. That meant you had to rent a place and had to live there to go to school. It was rather difficult. That was during the Depression.

Away From Home and Home Again

My first job away from home—I was sixteen—was in Colorado, mucking out a sewer line for a ski area at Leadville. It was in October and it was cold. We had to break ice in the trench to get down to lay the pipe. I worked there till about Christmas. Then after New Years I went to Arizona to work in mine construction for about three months at Globe, building homes for the miners. Then I came back and got a job with the Game and Fish Department in beaver and predatory animal control. I was a trapper, basically. I was seventeen.

I worked with Game and Fish until the following spring when I enlisted in the Marine Corps, before I was eighteen. That was in 1943. I shipped overseas and saw service in the invasion of Guam and Iwo Jima. I was wounded on Iwo Jima. After I was discharged I came home and bought this place with a GI loan. It actually came up for sale while I was still in service. My folks bought it and then I came home and got the GI loan and reimbursed them. And I've kept it since then as a retirement property.

When I got out of the Marine Corps I went right back to work for the Game and Fish Department and I was with them for thirty-two years total. I retired as a division chief. Information and Education

was my last job, public relations. Now I do farming and public service.

Search and Rescue

My wife was a nurse and she worked in various hospitals, but mainly here in Embudo Presbyterian Hospital. I retired from Game and Fish in July and we set up an EMT training program the same month. Then we set up the first emergency ambulance service manned by volunteer EMTs. Before that all the people in accidents were picked up with the hearse, without any first aid equipment. They just loaded them in and took them to the hospital. Here's how we got our first ambulance service. My wife was working in Embudo Hospital and they got a call that there had been an accident on the highway. My wife took one of the rolling gurneys and loaded it in our station wagon. She grabbed a first aid kit and got one of the nurses to go with her. They got the injured woman out of her car and brought her down to Embudo Hospital. They bandaged her up and then they had to haul her down to Albuquerque to take care of her broken bones and other injuries. The hospital janitor drove and my wife went as attending nurse. Our personal car was the first ambulance.

About six months afterwards a gentleman came by who was real prominent in the Presbyterian Church. He came by and thanked us for what we'd done for his daughter and he wanted to see our ambulance. My wife said, "That old stationwagon out in the parking lot is our ambulance. So about six months after that a guy drove up with a new Dodge van equipped with a radio and a built-in gurney and the whole works. He said, "Here's your new ambulance." That's how come we had to get EMTs, to man the ambulance. We had the first class right after that. I think the rescue occurred in 1974 and we got the ambulance in '75. And we operated that as an ambulance service until, I think, 1979. That's when Embudo Hospital closed and became a clinic. At that time there were some unpaid taxes on some of the employees and the tax people got after us and said if we didn't

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pay up they were going to take our ambulance. So I went down to the bank and pulled money out of our savings and bought the ambulance. I think we owed twelve hundred dollars in taxes from the old hospital. Up to that point we'd been operating on contributions to pay for the gas and oil. We didn't charge for transporting patients. So I bought the ambulance and turned it over to the (Dixon Volunteer) Fire Department as a rescue unit, fully equipped. Since then we've upgraded the rescue system, but that was our first Fire Department rescue unit.

The Dixon Volunteer Fire Department got started in 1963. They had some really dilapidated equipment in the early days. It wasn't until '78 that we got our first good truck. That was the old green truck that we still have. We're planning to retire it this year. It's still a good truck, but it's getting awfully old. I joined the Fire Department in 1978, after we had the ambulance service going. I figured up a while back that I've been to more than fifteen hundred automobile wrecks, rescue calls. That's not counting house calls and other emergencies. That's over fifteen hundred trauma cases. (Editor: And one of them was my daughter.)

Embudo Plaza

Dixon originally was called Embudo Plaza, because it's the place where the Rio Embudo comes out of the funnel, the box canyon. Where Embudo Post Office is now was called La Cienega, because of the springs down there. Just north of that is La Bolsa (the pocket) and then La Rinconada, which means the corner to nowhere, the corner of nothing. When it was named there was nothing but horse trails in La Bolsa and La Rinconada.

Dixon got its present name from a postmaster who established himself there. So it was called Dixon post office, and the name hung. The Farm

When I got this place it was nothing but a hillside covered with chico brush. I brought in a bulldozer and we leveled it. We planted fruit trees in 1946 and '47 and those trees are still alive today. I've

been cutting them back, forcing out new growth. We raise all kinds of fruit, but originally I was heavy in berries, raspberries. We planted the raspberries between the rows of apple and peach trees. I pretty nearly planted every bit of the property. We grew around fifteen hundred pints of raspberries a year on this place. We had no trouble selling them at the stand and to stores in Taos; they took everything we could raise. But then I got too old to pull the weeds and bend down to pick. My wife also got to the point where she didn't want to pick in the sun all day, so we got out of the berry business. It was hard work, labor-intensive, but it was also good money and it's a fast crop to start with.

People say you can't make a living on a small farm. What do you think?

You can make a living, but you can't pay for the land. If you get the land outright, you can make a living farming three or four acres. You are not going to live high on the hog, but you can afford all the necessities of life. During the Depression my folks had about two acres on their place and we grew all of our vegetables and fruit. We usually raised a couple of pigs every year, and rabbits and chickens. And then we'd trade fruit and vegetables for grain and beans. We lived pretty good during the Depression; we heard of people starving, but we never missed a meal. We didn't have any money, of course. We did just about everything in trade. The only thing we bought was coffee and sugar. We even traded for wheat up in Tres Piedras.

There was a flourmill in Dixon where the Rutledge place is (on the Rio Embudo). In fact, Rutledge put the millstones in his fence. It was a waterwheel and they ground corn and wheat and barley. You'd take over the grain and they'd grind it for a percentage of the flour.

We'd trade fruit and vegetables up in Tres Piedras and Carson and Taos Junction. At that time people were growing a lot of grain up there. We'd take up a load of fruit and then come back with maybe enough money to buy a tank of gas. Then in the fall we'd hear the old trucks rolling down the dirt road and one guy would unload a half of beef, another a half of pork. Somebody else a hundred pounds

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of beans. Somebody else four or five hundred pounds of wheat. And we'd get the grain ground at the mill. We did pretty good during the Depression as far as food is concerned. And our heat didn't cost us anything, using all wood heat.

Small Farming In the Future

Now, in a good year, I pick about a thousand boxes of apples; and, usually, two to three hundred boxes of peaches; and a couple of hundred boxes of cherries. I sell most of my pit fruit through the fruit stand. Last year we didn't have enough for our regular customers. And I have regular customers for the apples. I don't depend on the property for a living; I draw a retirement check. But let's put it this way: if it came down to an emergency, we could live on this place.

Looking ahead, I see the young people all leaving and the people staying in are the retirees. People are coming out here to get a little closer to nature and have a little more freedom than what they've had in the big cities. But I think over the next twenty-five to thirty years the family farm is going to come back. The big agribusinesses are just not cutting it, with the cost of petroleum products and the cost of their equipment. Farming is done with big tractors and harvesting is done with big harvesters and weed-control is done with chemicals. While that stuff mass-produces food, the quality is gone. And there is the rapid use of water that we've seen over the past few years; these great sprinkler systems have depleted the water courses. Those are the reasons you're going to see the big agribusiness fade away and the small family farms come back. I'd say in thirty to fifty years. Somebody has got to feed the nation. We can't buy it all from Chile and Argentina. I don't think we'll ever go back to an agricultural economy, but we may become a raw-materials supplier to the world. In ore and coal, things like that. That's because industries in Japan and Germany can out-produce us. They turn out a good a quality at a lot less cost.

Here the problem is our water supply. The big cities (in New Mexico and Texas) want our water. They want it for frivolous

purposes—swimming pools and golf courses and bluegrass lawns. A bluegrass golf course in Albuquerque will take about eleven acre-feet of water. You can grow fruit with a lot less water. A crisis in water is coming.

Working In the Game and Fish Department

It was a good life and I enjoyed it. My biggest mistake was moving out of the field and into an office job. Then we got into the computer age and some people figured the computers could raise more fawns than the deer could. It kind of got a little complicated toward the last. (Laughs) That's a fact.

When I first went to work there were almost no roads in the forests. Then the logging operations picked up in the early fifties and that began to open up the forests so people could get in. When I started most of the hunters would go in on horseback or put a pickup at the end of the road and hunt on foot. There was a lot more game then. What's happened to our wildlife is not the hunting pressure, it's the pressure of people. There's almost no place a doe can lay a fawn without being harassed by a skier or a snowmobile or a jeep or an RV or something. We're getting more wildlife run over by cars than being killed by hunters. There's too much traffic and too fast, and right in the river bottoms where the animals come down to water.

Almost all of our patrol work was done on horseback. I had a pickup and a horse trailer. I'd take my pickup as far as I could, then unload and ride. I'd work the elk hunts in the Pecos Wilderness area. They'd usually start about the 15th of November and run through to December. I bucked snowdrifts up there that were four feet deep. Did the same in Tres Piedras and Taos areas. We had to patrol all the mountain streams and lakes on horseback. One year in Tres Piedras we had twenty-one rescues in one hunting season. It snowed thirty inches on a level the first day of hunting season. That was the advent of the four-wheel drives, the International Scouts and the Jeeps. They'd go as far back in the woods as they could. "I've got a four-wheel drive and I can go anywhere," they said. There were some of

those camps where we didn't get the vehicles out till the following June. We went in with snowshoes and skis and toboggans and got the hunters out and their real valuable gear, but the rest of the stuff we left there till June. We had a lot of rescues. Not only hunters, but cross-country skiers, picnickers. They'd go out and get lost. Quite a lot of cross-country skiers, and snow-shoers. I was working in the Taos district and I spent twenty percent of my time looking for people who were lost, or stranded somewhere. The biggest part of them didn't have any idea on how to get along in the woods. A lot were from Albuquerque and Santa Fe and some non-residents. But there were a lot of locals just pulling something stupid. They'd say, "I'm going to climb that mountain," and take off without realizing the top might be twenty miles away and five thousand feet up. Then they'd get up and get lost in the wrong drainage. Usually we'd find them in two or three days. And we had a lot of little kids wander off from their campsites. That was always a scary one.

One young fellow got caught in a snowstorm over by Tierra Amarilla. We found him within a quarter-mile of his home. He was holed up in an arroyo. He had frozen. He got out there in the snowstorm and absolutely lost all sense of direction. We've had others we had to trail. We trailed them through the snow mile after mile. They had panicked when they realized they were lost. They'd run till they'd get overheated and then take off their coat, hang it on a limb and go on. And then they'd be soaked with sweat from running. We had a couple of them that way. We found them dead. They just got absolutely exhausted and lay down and quit.

My last job with the Game and Fish Department was to organize the New Mexico Hunter Safety Program. Firearms safety, survival, wilderness first aid—I taught all that to teenage groups. We have a law now that requires that anyone who hunts or shoots a firearm in the State of New Mexico must complete a hunter safety course. I wrote the law, in fact, which was passed by the Legislature. In the course we teach all aspects of firearm safety and archery safety. There's always quite a bit on survival, what to do and what not to do

in the woods. Knowing that really helps. The last class I taught was about three years ago in Peñasco.

Changes In the Dixon Community

Let me tell you a little story about the rabbit running through the bush. The rabbit came around a bush and there was a coyote standing there. The rabbit ran up the hillside. The coyote said, "Oh, come back, little rabbit. I'm a good coyote. Let's run around and see the country together. Well, they ran around looking at the country and then rabbit ran around another bush and there was another coyote. The rabbit ran up and hid behind a tree. The first coyote said, "Come back, little rabbit. That's a good coyote. He's a friend of mine. He won't hurt you."

So they ran around together and then they came to another bush and there was a third coyote. The rabbit ran up the hill and hid under a rock. The first two coyotes said, "Come back, little rabbit. He won't hurt you. He's a good friend of ours."

The rabbit said, "No, nothing doing. Every time you get three people together, there's bound to be a bastard in the crowd." Well, that's the way it's been. We've had fights to clear back when. I remember we had to call the sheriff in to walk the ditch because people were stealing the water. Two of my neighbors over here got into it about water rights and one killed the other fella, and he lost his property over it. That was across the river from us, at the place that Rigsby has now. Back in the late '40s we had a school meeting and had a big fight over the schools. One guy came by and wanted to carry a gun to the school meeting. He said he needed it for protection. I wouldn't let him have it.

So it's always been here. Any time you get three people together, you're going to have three different opinions. It depends upon how strong they feel about them as to whether it will become a war or not. That's the nature of the human being. I don't think the inter-racial problems, if you want to call them that, or the problems between the newcomers and the old-timers are any different than they've always

been. There's just more people. And when you have somebody come into a country, they've got their way that they did things at home and that, by God, is the way it's going to be here. Then the people who have lived here all their lives say that the way they've done things have worked just fine. "We don't want to change." So you have the conflict of the two opinions. And both of them are wrong. And both of them are partially right.

I realize that New Mexico has always been a backwards state. And I hope it always will be. Because I don't really go for all this high-tech business that we're up to. It's like computers. Computers are a rich man's toy. They're all right to keep track of things in business. But for everyone to have a personal computer and be on the Internet all the time—I don't think we need that. It costs us a third of our income going into computer systems. Like I was saying about the deer. The computer won't help me a bit on my farming operation. It might help to keep track of my reports, but I can do that with my diary. I'm not anti-computer or anti-technology. What I'm saying is that when you go into something, there should be some reason for it. It should be a reasonable sort of thing.

As far as people go, it's going take some give and take on both sides for people to get along.

Farming and Water

The original farming in this area was done by the Picuris, before the white man ever came here. I can show you where Picuris had a diversion here in Rinconada just a quarter-mile above our ditch pump. The area along the Rio Grande under irrigation was a fairly narrow strip in those days. When the Spaniards came in they put in another ditch. The headgate is about two miles up the canyon from here. I can show the remains of the old banks below where the ditch was. About two-thirds of the land we now have under irrigation was under the old ditch. The visual remains go back to the sixteen hundreds. And you can still see the old dam site up the canyon. I believe it was in the seventeen hundreds that they put in the new

ditch that we still have. Of course it was gravity-fed and in the spring of the year the floods would wash out the banks and we'd have to go in and rebuild the banks and resod them and wash out all the dirt. Finally it got to where it was impossible to service the ditch, so we went to pumping water out of the river in 1970. We still maintain the right-of-way so we could reestablish the ditch if we wanted to. There was another ditch at the head of Rinconada across the river that went down where Rigsby's place is. And there was another ditch that came out behind this place, which serviced La Bolsa. And then below Rigsby's there was another ditch on that side of the river that went down to where Eremita Campos farms. So there were several ditches coming off the Rio Grande in this area.

Now people have gone to pumping systems. Maintaining those ditches was labor-intensive; we just couldn't do it any longer. Besides paying a crew to clean the ditches, we had to pay a man to walk the ditch during the season to fill in gopher holes, repair breaks, and take out beaver dams. We put in underground pipe systems connected to pumps. Now the water is costing us about half of what it was costing before. Bob Jones found a document in Santa Fe showing that the acequia at Rosino—that's what they called La Bolsa at that time—was re-established in 1690, which means there was a ditch there before that. That was after the Spanish came back from Mexico, after they were kicked out by the Indians (in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680). The document was in the old Spanish records stored in the basement of the State Archives in Santa Fe.

So the Picuris came all the way down here to do their farming?

Actually, Picuris Pueblo isn't very far if you go cross-country. On the old road that went from here to Picuris over the mountains it's only about six miles. If you go through Rinconada to the top of the hill, you see a road that turns to the right. There's a little spring at the top of the hill. Right there at the spring the road turns to the left. You can't drive it any more. But that's the road that goes to Picuris, past Copper Hill mine and then down to the Pueblo. When the Copper Hill mine was operating, a lot of the miners were living here in

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Rinconada and they walked back and forth to work every day. That was when I was just a kid. The mine had pretty well folded up by 1940. There was mining at the Harding Mine during World War II for lepidolite, which was used for making bombsights. It was also used in the manufacture of isinglass, a high-heat opaque glass that was used on heaters and on gas stoves. I don't know if it's still being used.

The old Spanish horse trail came from Velarde behind the black mountain where all the springs are and down the canyon into Dixon. Then over the hill from Dixon it hit the old Picuris trail, which went west of the Harding Mine and crossed over where the horseshoe bend is in Hondo Canyon and came where the Stakeout Restaurant is (off the present Taos highway). The Camino Real later came through Truchas and up to Peñasco, then over U.S. Hill to Taos. Down here there was nothing there but horse trails. In fact there were no horse trails in here until late in the Spanish period. There was a horse trail down from the Camino Real that forded the river and then went to Ojo Caliente. Then that was widened so they could take wagons on it. The road is pretty well washed out now, but I've been all over it on horseback. At one time Walt Schafranka had a bridge across the river down behind Sopyns. You can still see the abutments by the river. He charged a toll. It was the only way to cross when the water was high. That was after Barranca Station was operating on the railroad and a lot of people went up there. The bridge didn't last too long because the people couldn't afford to pay the toll. Then they brought a lot of sheep through Rinconada. I remember as a kid seeing sheep being driven through the river on the way up to Carson Mesa to spend the winter. That ford is right behind Patty Nielson's place. In fact there's still a little triangle of BLM land next to Patty's place where the ford used to be, in the right-of-way.

Living in Rinconada

I've been all over the United States and I haven't found any other place where I'd rather live. The winters aren't too bad and the

summers aren't too hot. The only thing that bugs me is this high-speed traffic. When I first built this house, there wouldn't be a car going by here but once an hour. More wagons went by than cars. That was in the Forties. From ten o'clock at night there wouldn't be a car come by till daylight.

I donated the land across the road for the fire station. Then when they were going to build the new clinic they wanted to buy my land. I told them I wanted to hold on to it. But they finally convinced me to sell. And it's not a bad place to have the clinic. (The new Embudo Clinic is directly across the highway from Carl's house.)

Historic Battles

You can still see the abutments from the old battleground on the hill above Dixon. That was from the battle of Embudo mountain, in 1848. The Taos Indians and the Spanish settlers in Taos at the time (of the Mexican-American War) were very anti-American. They started a revolt. They killed the American governor, Governor Bent. Kit Carson's wife and others had to hide. Then this militia of Taos Indians and Spanish settlers moved south as far as Tesuque. Then the American forces stopped them. The first battle was at Santa Cruz. Then there was the battle of Embudo Mountain, on the hill between Dixon and Velarde. My mother found a bullet mold up there, a brass bullet mold that someone had dropped at that time.

The next battle, the following afternoon, was fought on the hills overlooking Dixon. That was called the battle of Embudo, because Dixon at that time was called Embudo. You can see the old dugouts they had in the hills. They're all caved in, they're just slight depressions, but you can still see them on the hillside on this side of Dixon. The old Dixon trail came out in the little arroyo right across from Zeller's store. Right down the trail there used to be a big log across the Rio Embudo. That's where we used to cross the river when we went to school. The trail wound up to the mesa. Local people put up a racetrack there for racing horses, back in the Thirties. We'd go up and watch the races about once a month. Local people

were betting on their horses. And that's where the battle of Embudo took place in 1848, on the Dixon side of the mountain.

A short time after that troops from Fort Bergwyn had an encounter with Jicarilla Apaches on Green Mountain at the head of Agua Caliente. That was on the old Spanish horse trail that ran from Velarde to Taos. You can get there by taking the Copper Hill mine road up to the fork. Take the fork to the right. It goes over a little ridge and drops down into a little valley and that is the Agua Caliente creek, a little stream coming out of a spring. And then on the ridge before the next canyon—the Tierra Amarilla creek, yellow water, right on top of that saddle between the Tierra Amarilla and the Agua Caliente is where that battle was fought.

Soldiers were coming down that trail and they spotted an old Indian woman building a fire. They sneaked up on her and, of course, the Jicarilla Apaches sneaked up on the soldiers. That's where they had the big fight. The Jicarillas were on a raiding party. They raided the pueblos quite a lot. I can show you the grave markers up there. There were seven soldiers killed and one or two Indians. The soldiers were buried under a pile of rocks. Then troops came back later and took the bodies to Fort Bergwyn. The Indians packed out their bodies.

A Fisherman's Story

Where did you meet your wife?

She was working at the Presbyterian Hospital in Dixon. She came out here as a missionary nurse, to try to convert the heathens. I met her about five days after she got here. I had gotten out of the service and was already working at the Game Department. I had a weekend and was here at the house. I went down to the river fishing. That was in January. Along in January there would be a little hatch of these gray flies. In the evening they would start mating. They would bunch up, five or six of them, and the brown trout would come up and grab a mouthful of flies. I had been fishing there for many years. This day I'd gone down behind Sopyn's place and got a whole mess of

browns. I think the limit that time was twelve, and I had eight or nine. Some of them were fifteen, sixteen inches, real nice, big trout. Of course it was cold. Every time you cast your line you had to break the ice out of your guides or the fly rod. I got my feet wet, my pants legs were frozen. I came in the house and had my shoes off. Rolled up my pants, drying my feet. Faith and some of the staff came by to visit. They were good friends of my mother. They would come to play canasta. So Faith was with them and we got acquainted. They all loved fresh fish. I ended up giving them all those fish. It was enough to feed the whole staff a breakfast of fried trout. And that's how we met.

The original hospital was in Dixon. The first time I went there I was about four or five years old. We were coming down the old road from Pilar. That was the main road to Taos at the time. (The road washed out several years ago and was never reopened.) We were in a Model A and a rock came off the hill and hit the passenger side of the car where I was sitting. Glass broke and flew into my cheek and my temple. I still have the scar. So they took me over to the hospital. They ended up not doing any stitching, but they bandaged me up. That was the old Brooklyn Cottage Hospital. It's where the manse is now. They had four beds. And they had a little operating room. They did everything there. Later they built the hospital in Embudo. A lot of people around here were born in that hospital, and my wife delivered half of them.