

FIRST DRAFT

Hard work, adventure marked dairy near Palisade in the 1930s

One day in 1940, Gerald Clark accompanied his father to Rifle to purchase hay for the family dairy in Palisade. With the truck loaded, Gerald's father, Chester, told Gerald to drive the vehicle home. He did so, but at the railroad underpass in De Beque, the wide load of hay became stuck, and the truck died.

With traffic backed up in both directions on the state highway, Gerald grabbed a set of tools and did some emergency mechanical work to get the truck running.

Then he managed to back it out of the underpass and fork off enough of the loose hay so that the truck would fit through the underpass, and he continued home. He was 14 years old.

It was all part of the ongoing effort of operating a family dairy, said Gerald, who is now 94 and lives on a farm near Fruita, where he has resided for nearly 70 years.

Clark said his family — parents Chester and Pearl Clark, his three sisters and him — moved to the Grand Valley from Meeker in 1930.

They first operated a dairy near the Colorado River at 35 Road, below what was then the Bridges Switch store. His parents moved to the Vinelands, east of Palisade, two years later.

Soon after that, they bought what became the permanent home for their dairy, north of Ball Fruit and just east of Palisade.

"They built a barn and a milk house," Gerald said, eventually adding a bottling facility and a pasteurizing plant.

The dairy had 40 to 50 cows, making it one of the largest in the area, but it was by no means the only one.

A search of Palisade Tribune newspapers from the 1930s shows at least four other dairies operating from Clifton to Cameo during that decade.

The Clymer Dairy in Grand Junction was perhaps the largest in the Grand Valley, and it would remain one of the largest and best known throughout the 20th century.

Additionally, Palisades National Bank made it clear it was eager to help those participating in, or wanting to join, the dairy business.

In 1938, according to the Tribune, the bank helped a Collbran farmer purchase two Jersey bulls to improve his dairy herd.

But the Tribune also referred to the Clark Dairy as "one of our leading milk dispensaries in Palisade." The same article from 1940 said the Clark family had "worked hard to develop an up-to-date dairy, and it is one of the best-equipped on the Western Slope."

It did have some of the most modern dairy equipment, including mechanical milking machines, Gerald said.

But that didn't mean operating it was easy. "Everything was hard labor," he said. "We would get up at 3 a.m. to get the cows in and milk them. Then we'd do the bottling and pasteurizing."

After that, he'd head to school. But, as soon as he was done, "I'd come home, change my clothes



COURTESY OF GERALD CLARK

A load of loose hay on a truck destined for the Clark Dairy in the 1930s. The cab of the truck is nearly covered with hay. Gerald Clark is the young boy standing on the bumper of the truck, before he was old enough to drive it. Chester Clark is standing next to him. Others are not identified.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Gerald Clark shows a bottling funnel that was used to fill bottles of milk at the Clark Dairy.

and start cleaning out the corrals with a fork."

The cow manure was sold as fertilizer to local peach orchards and to others, he added.

Sometimes, Gerald would join his sisters, who delivered the bottled milk to residents around Palisade, using an early version of a Chevrolet Suburban.

Gerald said he attended grade school in Palisade, but rarely had time for friends, much less to join in social or athletic activities. He did not attend high school.

Clark Dairy had pasture for the cows near the barn and other buildings. Gerald recalled fondly that all of the Jersey cows knew their names.

He could call them by name if they hadn't come in for their milking. In the barn, they each went to their own stanchion.

But most of the crops the family raised were grown in Clifton, on the land where Central High School now sits.

Those crops included corn for silage to feed the cows, as well as vegetables such as tomatoes to sell. Gerald calculated he once hiked 22 miles in a day, walking behind a horse-drawn cultivator in the tomato patch.

However, hay for the dairy cows was purchased outside the valley.

"There wasn't a lot of hay in the valley back then," he recalled. "So, at first, Dad went up to Mesa with a team to get hay."

The loose hay had to be stacked onto the wagon

by hand.

Later, Chester Clark began using trucks to haul the loose hay, which was still loaded by hand. The Palisade Tribune took note of that development in January, 1933.

"Palisadeans were privileged to see the modern method of handling loose hay Friday," the paper said, "Chester Clark, proprietor of the Clark Dairy, had A.N. Tillman move thirteen tons [of] alfalfa hay in three loads from Mesa to Palisade on his big Chevrolet truck."

The newspaper added that "the first load hauled weighed 9,100 pounds and had the appearance of a whole stack of hay moving down Main Street."

Chester Clark soon purchased a truck of his own for hauling hay.

Seven-year-old Gerald was not yet ready to drive the hay truck in 1933, although he remembered sitting on his father's lap at about that age, steering a truck and learning to use the pedals.

In addition to his dairy duties, by the late 1930s, Gerald was working with another young man, leveling fields for farmers using horse-drawn Fresno scrapers, which could be notoriously dangerous if they hit a rock or the operator allowed it to dig too deeply.

By the time he was 14, and driving truckloads of hay from Rifle to Palisade on his own, Gerald Clark was skilled enough to remove one end of the fuel line from his truck, blow out the clogged line, and get the truck running



PALISADE TRIBUNE VIA COLORADO HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS

A 1939 advertisement in the Palisade Tribune touted the purity of milk from the Clark Dairy.

again.

Two years later, the Clarks were out of the dairy business. Low milk prices, established by the federal government under emergency war legislation, made it impossible to make money in the dairy business, Gerald said.

The Clarks weren't the only ones to quit. News stories from around the country showed that large numbers of dairy farmers began getting out of the business about that time.

A local story said 200 Mesa County dairy cows had been sold in the last two months of 1942, and the county extension service was warning of an impending milk shortage.

After the Palisade dairy farm was sold, Gerald Clark raised and sold crops for several years on the family's Clifton property and on some leased land nearby. He met his wife, Eloise, who lived in the area.

By 1953, he had purchased his 220-acre farm on 20 Road, between Grand Junction and Fruita. He and Eloise raised sugar beets, cattle and four daughters.

"Those girls were all good tractor drivers," he said.

Gerald also did custom farming and had the first three-row, self-propelled corn chopper in the valley.

Now his grandsons operate the farm. Eloise died in 2012, and Gerald married his second wife, Trela, four years later. He remains active and eager to talk about his life in agriculture.

Sources: Author interview with Gerald Clark. Old editions of The Palisade Tribune at www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org.

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Trucker convicted in fiery fatal pileup

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GOLDEN — A truck driver accused of causing a fiery pileup that killed four people and injured six others on a Colorado highway has been convicted of vehicular homicide and other charges.

Rogel Lazaro Aguilera Mederos, 25, was convicted by a Jefferson County jury on Friday in connection with the April 2019 crash on Interstate 70 west of Denver, The Denver Post reported.

Aguilera Mederos testified that the brakes on his semitrailer failed before he plowed into vehicles that had slowed because of another wreck in the Denver suburb of Lakewood.

Prosecutors argued he could have used one of several runaway ramps as his truck barreled down from the mountains. The chain-reaction wreck ruptured gas tanks, causing flames that consumed several vehicles and melted parts of the highway just after it descended from the mountains west of Denver.

Aguilera Mederos was found guilty of six counts of vehicular homicide, six counts of first-degree assault, 10 counts of attempted first-degree assault, six counts of careless driving and one count of reckless driving. Jurors acquitted him of 15 additional counts of attempted first-degree assault.

Sentencing was set for Dec. 13. Aguilera Mederos faces decades in prison.

The truck carrying lumber was going at least 85 mph on a part of Interstate 70 where commercial vehicles are limited to 45 mph because of a steep descent from the Rocky Mountain foothills. Just before the crash, police said the truck traveled past a ramp on the side of the interstate that is designed to safely stop trucks and other vehicles that have lost their brakes. Aguilera Mederos testified that he tried to hit part of a parked 18-wheeler's trailer to slow down and sought a space between traffic.

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