

Story Of A Pioneer boy

E. E. Ohmert

Jessie W. Ohmert and his wife, Elizabeth, were Virginians of Holland and Dutch descent; they were religious God-fearing people of substantial means. In '59 Jessie Ohmert joined the gold rush to Colorado, coming to the present site of Denver. He located a 160 acre ranch where 38th St. now crosses the Platte River, building a cabin close to the banks of the river. He then went on a prospecting trip which took him to Cherry Creek, the Pikes Peak Country, Clear Creek, Tarryall,--then called Graball, for obvious reasons--and Fairplay. He returned to the "Gregory Diggings" on Clear Creek and began placer mining. On a hill, above the present site of Black Hawk, he discovered a rich pocket of gold. Afraid to acquaint any one of his discovery, he carried the dirt from the pocket to his tent in a small sack and panned it out at night. In this manner he cleaned up \$30,000. He then went to his ranch on the Platte, where he traded his relinquishment of the ranch for a yoke of oxen. He then returned home.

Soon after his arrival cannons boomed at Fort Sumter so he joined the Union forces, serving through most of the war. Meanwhile the family had moved to Dixon Illinois, where Ezra was born on Washington's birthday, 1865. During the year of the great Chicago fire--Ezra remembered of seeing its red glow in the sky--they moved to Elm Springs, where Mr. Ohmert engaged extensively in farming, and also served as Postmaster

There young Ezra contracted a disease which made of him a helpless cripple, every treatment being futile. Sparing no expense in an effort to cure his son, Mr. Ohmert called in a group of Doctors, two of them specialists from Chicago; but they gave up the case as hopeless, one of them carelessly remarking, as they departed, that a change of climate might help.

Determined to take advantage of this slender chance to save the boy's life, for it was just that, Mr. Ohmert, who had always been desirous of returning to Colorado, decided to locate there as soon as possible. So that spring of '74 found Mr. Ohmert and his eldest son, ^{Windsfield} Jay, placer mining on the Arkansas about one and a half miles below the present site of Buena Vista.

That fall Mrs Ohmert and three sons--Mildred, her daughter, remained--set out for Colorado to join her husband. They traveled by train to Cheyenne, and, although they had purchased first class tickets, they were forced to ride on an emigrant train--a sickening experience. Ezra's remembrance of it was vivid, as it was also of the persistent, annoying news butcher; and the huge piles of buffalo bones, between Omaha and Cheyenne, awaiting shipment to the east where they were to be converted into fertilizer.

It seemed as though everyone wished to take advantage of the inexperienced travelers. Prices were extremely high, and at Cheyenne, where they found it necessary to layover six hours awaiting a train to Denver, they were forced from the waiting room of the station and taken to a hotel where they were charged an outrageous price for accommodations.

At Denver they spent the night, stopping at the Williams Hotel, near 12th and Larimer Streets. The next morning about seven they boarded a stage for Fairplay. Going up Turkey Creek the Omerts were all greatly interested in the many placer miners, who were very busily engaged along the creek.

Near the head of the creek the stage tarried for a short while, and the miners proudly exhibited gold nuggets, some of them as large as hickory nuts, to the passengers. The road was lined with travelers, most of them being pedestrians with a pack on their backs. Many of them stopped to carve their names on the trees; and the young Omert boys were delighted to spy the initials of their brother who had preceded them. They reached Fairplay that night at 7, twelve hours after departing from Denver. The stage fare was \$16 per person.

The Omerts left Fairplay the next morning with some freighters, who were bound for the Gunnison country, reaching Chubb's (Robert B. Newitt) Ranch that night. Almost one hundred people were camped there, and many camp fires dotting the black night made the scene bright and cheerful. The boys, greatly interested, visited each circle and listened with wide-eyed amazement to the tales told there. Mrs Omert listened to tales, too--dark and ominous tales concerning the wild and lawlessness of Lake County; and suddenly experienced the pangs of homesickness.

They departed early the next morning on the last leg of their journey, arriving at their destination on the Arkansas in the afternoon where there was a joyfull reunion of the family.

Their new home was a one room--partitioned with curtains--cabin about 30X25 feet, with a dirt floor and a clay roof. Mrs Ohmert cooked over a stone fireplace located in one corner of the big room. They were about five miles from Browns Creek Post Office, where they went twice a week for their mail. A store was located there, also, where the Ohmerts purchased some of their supplies, paying fifteen cents per pound for coffee, sugar three lbs. for \$1, lead--for bullets--about twenty five cents per lb., powder about one dollar per lb, hard candy sixty cents a lb.; and here young Ezra bought his first cigarettes, paying thirty five cents for a package of ten.

In a short time Ezra began to recover from the dreadful disease that possessed him, and he was soon riding a pony; not long afterwards he became almost completely cured.

This was during the "Lake County War", and when ever the young boy ventured out, especially to Browns Creek, he was usually waylaid by a "rider", who treated him roughly, and wanted to know who had stopped at the Ohmert cabin, and what the conversation had been.

Winfield, Ezra's brother, secured work as a rider for a rancher on Chalk Creek--a rendezvous for one of the gangs. After working some time, and not receiving any pay, Winfield broached the subject to his employer. A drunken gang was lolling about the premises, as usual, and its members promptly beat and mistreated the boy shamefully for his temerity. Winfield returned home, and, being unable to control his desire for revenge and the death of his former employer, he soon departed from that vicinity. Later he joined ^{Miles or Terry} Custer's command as a scout, serving thru the Black Hills campaign until '77.

Dissatisfied with the results of his placer mining, which was only netting him about \$6 per day, Mr. Ohmert departed for California Gulch. There he leased ^{on} the Tom Starr property, his clean up there averaging

about \$1 50 per week. Later, Ezra and his mother joined Mr. Ohmert at California Gulch, and while enroute there, saw a rather strange spectacle. A few miles above Granite they suddenly met approximately one hundred men in single file--to Ezra it seemed ^{that} the file was a mile in length. They wore no hats, and at first, he thought that they were Indians, but on closer inspection he discovered that they were Chinamen; and they were carrying, on poles, resting on their shoulders, large baskets, bundles, and bed rolls. Upon the Ohmert's arrival in California Gulch they learned that the Chinese had been imported by Tom Starr for the purpose of digging a ditch and ^{doing} other labor--at a cheap price; but the local miners thought differently about the matter--hence the sudden exodus.

Meanwhile, Jay Ohmert had secured work with C. M. Harding on the latter's ranch located several miles above the present site of Salida on the Arkansas. Harding was a packer who usually purchased, and then packed his supplies in from Canon City; his pack string numbering about 30 head of burros and mules. He made ~~the~~ ^{his} ranch his headquarters, and from there peddled ^{his} wares--including vegetables grown on the ranch--over Lake County. He was an upright man of about 55, and tended strictly to his own affairs.)

Late one evening, Hank Day came to the Harding ranch from the Nathrop vicinity, seeking some horses which had gone astray--or had been stolen. Harding invited him to spend the night there, and the three men, Harding in the middle, slept on a "shakedown" bed on the floor. During the night Cameron's barn, on the other side of the river, burnt down; the trio witnessing the conflagration.

Early the next morning Jay went to the barn, which was a good distance from the house, to feed the stock. There he found one of Harding's mules saddled and dripping wet; unmistakably it had swum the river--but

who had taken the animal that night? It was planted evidence. Jay, instantly alive to the situation, took the saddle off the mule, dried it, and then rubbed down the animal.

Shortly after breakfast a half-dozen or more men rode up to the cabin, called the three out and accused Harding of burning Cameron's barn. They visited the barn, but, of course, discovered nothing. Becoming infuriated, they attempted to force Jay and Hank Day to state that Harding had committed the deed; but they both stoutly refused to do so. Two of the men then struck Day over the head with their guns, and advised him to leave the country then and there. Hank Day, being a meek man, took their advice. The riders then departed without any further action, but--

Harding did not live long after that. One day he was found dead, not far from the present site of Salida's railroad station--with his dog's paw clasped in his hand; he had been dead a long time. Jay, discovered, too, that the young man who had preceded him as Harding's helper had been found dead in a field, a bullet hole in the body.

But meanwhile, Jay left Harding's employ, went to California Gulch where he got Ezra; the two then locating near Chalk Creek, or, to be more exact, on Round Bar on the Arkansas, where they engaged in placer mining. The ground did not prove to be rich but the two boys averaged about \$5 per day. Here they were again visited by the "Regulators", "Committee Of Safety", or whatever they were.

One day about twelve of them rode up to the boys, and their leader again attempted to make Jay say that Harding had burnt Cameron's barn. Upon the boy's refusal, the gang hung the boy in an attempt to choke a confession from him. This, too, secured no results. The riders departed then, taking Jay with them. Alone, badly frightened, Ezra made his way to the road where he was finally picked up by a passing freighter, who took him to his mother in California Gulch. He told his story to his folks and Jay was given up for dead.

The Ohmerts moved to Colorado City to spend the winter. They lived in a cabin which, the "old timers" there informed them, was the original "Capitol Building", and it is not the one on display at Denver. The one now at Denver being much smaller, and it was located across the "street" from the one occupied by the Ohmerts. Mrs Ohmert became acquainted with one of Governor Hunt's sister, and they became great friends. Ezra attended school. Then, one day, a tattered and exhausted Jay walked into their cabin. He had been incarcerated in the "Committee's" jail at Dale's ranch on the South Arkansas. He finally succeeded, in some manner, to break out, and knowing that the family intended to spend the winter in Colorado City, made his way there. The Ohmert's joy can easily be imagined.

The spring of '76 found them back in the mining country, ^{located} ~~located~~ in Mosquito Gulch, where Mr. Ohmert and a partner erected a "Dry Amalgamator" Mill to treat free-gold ore; it proved to be a failure, however. They spent the summer in that vicinity, and that fall the daughter, Mildred, came out to visit them; intending to return to Iowa with the family that winter.

So that fall the family returned to Iowa, Mr. Ohmert remaining to continue with his mining activities. Mildred became so greatly enamored with Colorado that she decided to make it her future home. She spent the winter in Colorado City, and here, largely thru her mother's friends, she met and became well acquainted with many influential people, including General Palmer and Gov. Hunt.

During this time Mr. Ohmert, still interested in farming, and to establish a home for his family, traded a mine for the Briscoe ranch of 160 acres,--it included the present Frantz Fish Farm--located just above the present site of Solida. Mrs Ohmert and Ezra, visiting in Iowa became homesick for Colorado so they returned. Mr. Ohmert met them at Morrison, they moving traveled that far by rail; and then continued their journey as far as Alma with a freighter. Here Mr. Ohmert remained to carry on with his mining work, while the others went on to the ranch on the Arkansas.

This was in the fall of 1877.

Their new home was a two room log cabin, located but a short distance from the Arkansas River. The land was partly fenced, and forty acres had been cultivated; the Ohmerts, at that time, grew nothing but a garden. Mr. Ohmert joined his family there, and spent the winter placer mining close by on the Arkansas, cleaning up about \$5 per day. The following spring he returned to Mosquito and California Gulches, leaving Ezra as the "man of the ranch"; and the only one at that. Quite a position for a thirteen-year-old boy!

Young Ezra supplied most of the meat for the table--a task appealing to any boy,--and not a difficult one, as the streams teemed with trout, and the valley was over run with deer; bear, too, were numerous, as were the mountain lions.

This was Pre-Leadville time; the upper Arkansas Valley being little disturbed by the outside world. Mail, carried in a buckboard wagon, came twice a week. Ezra overheard one rancher remark: "We can always make a good living here on our ranches; but we'll never see a railroad in this country. Why it would be impossible to build in here!" The country was wild; times were wild.

Mr. Ohmert had been gone but a short time when the cattle rustlers began their attempts to run the Ohmerts off. The rustlers had a cabin about 300 yards distant, and beyond the hill from Ohmert's cabin; and the new owners of the ranch interfered with their actions. One day two men rode up to the cabin and called Ezra out, and at their insistence, stood close by the men, who remained mounted. Suddenly one of them reached down, jerked the boy's gun from his belt,--Ezra always went armed--and struck him over the head with it. With blood streaming down over his face, Ezra rushed into the cabin, grabbed a rifle, and started out. One of his enemies, however, was standing in the doorway, gun in hand. After disarming the boy again, they rode away; young Ezra, darted out to the chicken house where

kept a small rifle for the purpose of killing chicken hawks. Using the fence as a rest, he aimed at the back of one of the departing riders, and pulled the trigger. At the same time the rifle was jerked to one side and the ~~trigger~~^{HAMMER} fell upon the hand of his mother; that resourceful and brave woman thus averting serious trouble.

Later, while Ezra was repairing the fence, which the rustlers continually tore down, one of them dashed up on his horse and savagely struck at him with his gun. Several times they shot at him on the range, and one day on the ranch they shot at both him and his dog. In the pitched battle that followed Ezra wounded one of his enemies in the foot. Two of these rustlers were later hung in Leadville for murder, though they were not known by their true names. This was the first "legal hanging" in that town and Ezra traveled to the scene for the purpose of seeing his enemies die; the crowd was so huge, however, that he was unable to get close enough to recognize them. It was a rough scene and the boy's desire for revenge soon turned to pity for the two wretches.

In '78 Mrs Augusta Tabor came to the ranch to visit her friend, Mrs Ohmert. (They had become very well acquainted in California Gulch and Buckskin) During her visit Ezra brought in a large catch of trout, and she, being fond of fish, enjoyed them immensely. When she boarded the stage the morning of her departure she told Ezra, "If I ever get rich I'll remember that mess of fish."

Stage service was started thru the valley, Dale's ranch, was the post office, and became, also, the new stage station. Bales operated a tavern, too, and young Ezra made an occasional dollar there by waiting on table. He also acted, on two round trips, as gun messenger; one being required whenever large amounts of money was aboard. About this time there was a rumor circulating that the James gang was in that vicinity; but they were never seen. Ezra received \$21 for the two round trips--four days; and a

more proud, happy boy than he never existed when he crawled up, gun in hand, to his seat beside the driver.

Later Ezra experienced much trouble with the stage drivers as they insisted upon tearing down the Ohmert fence and cutting across their field. This in itself was not so terrible but "wherever the stage went the freighters were bound to follow". Ezra was determined to put a stop to this trespassing, so one day when he saw the stages coming across the field,-- business must have been good that day because there were four stages--he secured his rifle, went to the upper fence, trained his rifle down the fence, and awaited results. The stages rolled up to the fence, stopped, and the first gun messenger dropped off to make an opening in the fence. Ezra said nothing but ^{the} ominous click as he drew back the hammer of his rifle was warning enough. The other three gun messengers came up, and the passengers urged them to tear down the fence, at the same time chiding them for being afraid of a mere boy; still the fence was not touched. Finally, becoming impatient from the excessive delay, the drivers wheeled their teams and thundered away in the direction from which they came, Ezra never having uttered a word. Thus ended his trouble with the stages.

In the fall of '79, shortly after the Meeker Massacre, a Company of Sheridan's men were camped just below the Ohmert ranch. An excited man rushed into their camp and announced that the Indians were attacking Maysville. A detail of soldiers was ordered there at once, and, as the soldiers were advised not to march there by the road for fear of ambush, their commander engaged Ezra as a guide. He led them up thru the parks and along the slopes of Mt. Shavano until they reached the vicinity of the town. The commander then sent some scouts ahead to reconnoiter. A great forest fire was then burning on Methodist mountain and various other places, so a dense fog of smoke covered the entire valley. It was impossible to distinguish an object at even a close distance, the scouts finding it necessary to creep into the town before they could discover anything.

Maysville was quiet and peaceful, and not an indian in sight! The soldiers were the victims of a practical joker.

Later the soldiers set out for Meeker and Ezra guided them over Monarch Pass to the western slope. The soldiers did not continue on to their destination, however, as they learned that they were not needed at the agency.

That same year about 200 Utes camped on the river just below the Ohmerts. This was their favorite camping place in that vicinity, and they usually stopped there when traveling to and from South Park. They were always playing pranks on someone but were not troublesome. They were fond of bread, and begged Mrs Ohmert constantly for it. One day a particularly mischievous brave sneaked up behind Mrs Ohmert and fired his rifle close to her ear. She retained her composure, however, and thus won the admiration of them all. They forced Ezra to mount a pony and ride behind a squaw, clasping her about the waist, which brought forth howls of laughter from the Utes.

The morning came for them to move on, and Ezra watched them break camp. The braves were soon ready to depart; they merely caught their horses, mounted, and were off, leaving the squaws to take down the teepees and pack their belongings. As Ezra watched from a distance, a squaw left her packing, and hurried to a clump of willows near the river's edge. In less than fifteen minutes she appeared with a new-born papoose, which she proceeded to wash in the cold waters of the river. Having done this, she placed it in a sack on her back, hurried to the camp, finished her packing, and took her place in the departing caravan; the head of which was already out of site on Ute Trail.

✓ In '77 Ezra erected a small cabin made of slabs, about 12x16, near the present site of the railroad bridge across the Arkansas. He called it a "claim cabin" and intended to file upon the land when he became old enough--but the advent of the railroad ruined his plans. This cabin was the

was the first place of residence on the present site of Salida. ✓

Rumors circulated thru the valley that the D&RG was going to build thru the Grand Canyon Of The Arkansas; but the ranchers scoffed at the idea. Then came the Leadville excitement; and in '79 the coming of the railroad was an established fact. In the spring of '80 the pioneers saw the railroad completed to South Arkansas, to the tune of:

Pay them good wages,
 Pay them good wages,
 Times are better, you see;
 Five dollars a day,
 And that was the pay;
 Paid by the D&RG.

A townsite was laid out and surveyed. Gov. Hunt and Mildred Ohmert were partners and owners of the land. They realized handsomely in the land deal, but later the two disagreed, and became involved in a law suit which cost them both much money. Mildred won the suit.

The depot then was a box car and a bridge was built, about one quarter of a mile above the present one, to connect it with the building town. Webb & Corbin, of Cleora, erected a tent on F Street, in the middle of the second block, and therein started a general store. Cleora moved up enmasse and bodily; Gov. Hunt and Mildred moved the Germania Hotel and located it on Front and E Sts.

A town well was dug in the square near First and W Streets, and was the only supply of water for domestic use. The first school was held in a rented, rough clapboard store room, located on First Street, about one block from the narrow gauge main line tracks. The school teacher was a drunkard, and was a very profane talker in the school room. There were about forty pupils ranging from young men and women to six year old child-

ren; this arrangement lasted for a term of two months. Later that same year (1880) a building, located on the second block of G Street, was rented, another teacher engaged, and school continued. Prior to this there was no school in Cleora, but twenty young people of the valley engaged the services of Miss Orton, paying her \$2 per month each, to teach them; classes being held there in a large cook, or eating shack.

The first marshal of South Arkansas (Salida) was Jim Meadows who was soon after badly wounded in the performance of his duty. The largest dance hall in the new town, or that region, was moved down, piece by piece, from Arboresville by the owner, Arbor, and re-erected in Salida, on First Street next to the railroad tracks. It was in this dancehall that Frank Reed shot and killed Marshall Stingely.

Gov. Hunt and Mildred Ohmert erected the Hunt block on E Street, and the upper floor was used as their headquarters; the lower floor was rented for a school room. This was the first two story building in town. (Now occupied, or known, as the Salida Hotel) Winfield Ohmert located a ranch on the Arkansas just above town, and there erected an ice house and engaged in selling ice. He was the pioneer there in that field and found a ready market in the growing town, receiving \$1.50 per hundred lbs.

Mr Ohmert then commenced the operation of a brick yard on his ranch near town; probably the first in that vicinity, though another started about the same time. The product was a sand rolled brick for which he received \$10 per thousand delivered, or "in the wall". When they were contracted for laid "in the wall", every aperture was estimated as part of the wall, thus giving Mr. Ohmert a margin, over and above \$10 per M, with which to pay the brick layers. The brick yard's capacity, with a full crew of 9, was 10,000 bricks per day. Ezra was one of the crew, soon learning to be a proficient brick roller. Later Mr. Ohmert furnished the

brick for the D Street school house and the D&RG Hospital.

Mr. Ohmert then engaged in various occupations, during which time he installed the piers for the new bridge across the Arkansas at the foot of F Street; and engaged in charcoal burning at Maysville. Later he went to Denver and was engaged by Richardson, contractor, as granite cutter on the new capitol building at \$8 per day. Richardson had contracted to erect the building for \$1,000,000; but failed to complete the basement with that sum.

Ezra's mother passed away in 1897 in Denver; his father in 1899 at Boulder. Winfield located and died in Arizona. Jay went to California, and perished while seeking gold in Death Valley. Al became a representative of the London Mining Company of England, and traveled over the world investigating its properties. Mildred married Ed Johnson, and operated the Traveler's Hotel and Mildred Hotel in Salida. Later they traveled extensively, then located on a cattle ranch near Meeker. After this they located in Meeker where Mr. Johnson served as mayor. Mildred passed away there in 1927.

In '82 Ezra went to Denver and was engaged as a bricklayer on the Tabor Grand Opera House, earning \$7 per day of ten hours. Tabor was criticised by the people of Denver for building the opera house on Curtis street which was so far away from the main business district. Three years later Ezra visited his father who was still employed in the construction of the capitol building, which ^{he} found "in the country" and adjacent to many stock corrals

In the years that followed, and including the present, Ezra Ohmert has been traveling and living in various sections of the state--always a loyal Coloradoan. He now resides at Salida.

E. E. Ohmert