

A Ranch Begins: The Chambers Period 1874-1900

An account based on the "Chambers History" and other memories.

by Grace DeLong

Robert Chambers was from an early pioneering American family, the first four Chambers brothers, Ben, Jim, Robert, and Joseph, having come from Ireland in 1727. They settled in the frontier country of Pennsylvania, setting up mill sites and starting towns. (Hervey Allen's *Towards the Morning* tells of Chambersburg, PA)

Later, several Chambers families went by covered wagon to take up land in Illinois and Wisconsin.

Following this family tradition, Robert M. Chambers and his wife, Elsie Woolsey Chambers, came "west" in 1874. It was the famous Colorado climate that brought them from Pennsylvania in search of better health for her.

Robert Chambers had been a successful wheat farmer in Pennsylvania, but in the new land he looked for a good place for a fruit ranch with ample water.

Here on this site, now called the White House Ranch, he found the water rights and a beautiful setting. He bought the 160-acre homestead from Daniel F. Kinsman for \$1,700 including the rights to the waters of Camp Creek. This was in 1874.

Prior to this, according to Mrs. Chambers, the homestead had been, from 1867 to 1874, occupied by Walter C. Galloway. She tells about him and his cabin in her story, "What Happened While the Cabin Lived".

Mrs. Chambers named their new home "Rock Ledge Ranch" and here they worked, raised a family, and made a good life for twenty-six years, until retiring in 1900.

THE CHAMBERS HOUSE

The building of the Chambers House, the one to the west among the trees now, was begun immediately with a long, wooden portion. The family, consisting of father, mother, and two children, was to live here until the larger home could be finished.

Soon after they were in these temporary quarters, a band of Indians on their way through the valley stopped to beg of the new settlers. Needless to say, the young Mrs. Chambers was plenty frightened, with the warnings of her eastern friends about the "wild west" still ringing in her ears. But there was no scalping, just friendly begging.

In a short time, work started on a large stone house, with the field stone being cut from the quarry on the land. (I don't know where the quarry was. Do you suppose it later became part of the reservoir?)

Mrs. Chambers kept urging the workers to hurry as she wanted the expected baby to be born in the new house. By August of the next year, 1875, the new home was finished enough for the last baby to be born in the main bedroom.

The wooden portion served as a kitchen as long as the Chambers family lived there, but has since disappeared.

A vegetable and fruit cellar is still in the side of the hill at the back of the house.

The Vroornans very regretfully stuccoed over the stone of the house to keep the mice, squirrels, etc., from getting in.

WORKING THE RANCH

Making a success of the ranch production took much ingenuity and determination.

The apple trees were soon planted (some are still standing), but tough problems followed.

First, there was the terrible scourge of grasshoppers which lasted for three years all over the Middle West. On account of this, Mr. Chambers bought milk cows and ran a dairy. The grasshoppers came in clouds, darkening the sky, and devouring every spear of green so that he had to buy feed for the cows.

Then the water proved to be insufficient, so Mr. Chambers built the dam for the reservoir to hold flood waters. He and two neighbors, Hardwick and Neff, had first rights to the water of Camp Creek which ran through the ranch and down the valley. However, to get the water into the higher reservoir, a surveyed ditch had to be brought from way up in Glen Aerie.

He and his son, Ben Chambers, built the dam themselves using a horse, or maybe a team, and a grader. The irrigation outlet gate can still be found.

This son, Ben, became an expert plumber right there on the ranch, and continued in this trade as the city plumber for the town of Fruita even after he was totally blind.

At one time, in still another effort to get more water, father and son tried a big, expensive windmill north of the reservoir, but this was ruined by the first strong wind.

MORE INGENUITY AND DETERMINATION

The ranch prospered, however, as Mrs. Chambers wrote in 1885:

As the years have gone by since 1874, the homestead claim has grown more fruit and vegetables than any other ranch in El Paso County. With its six acres of asparagus, hundreds of apple trees and hundreds of cherry trees besides other fruit, its value has increased many fold and shown what even the apparent barren land, so near to the foothills, may become by patient, persistent effort.

In addition to the fruit orchard, asparagus field (the asparagus still keeps coming up!), and other crops, Robert Chambers raised winter vegetables. For these he had two very fine, heated green houses just behind the big house.

The son, Ben, who was very inventive, created the steam heating system for these green houses. On cold winter nights, Mr. Chambers would go periodically to stoke the furnace and see that the proper heat was maintained for his vegetables.

He got good prices for this out-of-season produce which he sold to the Antlers Hotel, along with jams and jellies made by Mrs. Chambers. They were quite proud of this business as the hotel, of course, was considered the "classiest" place in the Rockies.

Ben made other inventions, such as a sauerkraut mill for shredding cabbage.

The little girls were also kept busy cutting asparagus, turning the "smelly" sauerkraut mill, and, worst of all, putting the hundreds of glass panes in the green houses -- every summer. You couldn't let in any cold winter air.

The family also took in many summer boarders, often T.B.ers from the East.

As for Mrs. Chambers, by now it is needless to say that she had no small part in the ranch's success. Yet she found time to do quite a bit of writing for the W.C.T.U., and for her own pleasure. This was an activity which gave her life-long satisfaction.

THE FIRST SCHOOL

As might be expected, it was this Mrs. Elsie Chambers who started the first school in this part of the valley—upstairs, in her own home. She had taught in Pennsylvania before her marriage, and so it was natural that when her little ones were ready for school, she would gather the children from the surrounding farms and teach them all in an upstairs bedroom. There may have been eight to ten students.

Soon, however, the country built a little school house across the fields from the Chambers home. This was probably the lovely little building that was moved to the Glen Aerie grounds and stands there so beautifully preserved today.

Later, each of the Chambers daughters, Eleanor and then Mary, took a turn at teaching in the little school, but only for a year or two each.

A GOOD LIFE ON ROCK LEDGE RANCH

Besides all the work and worry, the Chambers family found great enjoyment in this beautiful spot.

Relatives and friends from the East visited regularly in the summers and the young men from town came courting the two daughters, Eleanor and Mary. In winter, there was ice skating on the reservoir and in summer, picnics in Queen's Canyon of Glen Aerie and excursions into the mountains.

Ben Chambers married Madge Kinney and his son, another Robert Chambers, was born on the ranch.

LIVING IN TOWN

Later, when the girls were ready for high school and the ranch had become a prosperous operation, the family would spend the winters in town. The ranch must have been left to hired help during the school months, but when summer came, they all returned to the place they loved best.

It is because of the happy memories of my mother, Mary Chambers DeLong, that I can provide you with this account of the ranch in its beginning.

RETIREMENT

General Palmer had always been a friendly neighbor. In the later years, when it became his habit to ride horseback into town, he often stopped for a little chat.

When Mr. and Mrs. Chambers were ready to retire in 1900, General Palmer was very glad to buy the ranch for \$17,000 and also the Hardwick and Neff farms in order to secure the water for his Glen Aerie. After that, for a long time, there was very little water for this ranch. (This was the impression given by later tenants).

Mr. and Mrs. Chambers, with the daughter, Mary, traveled around the United States for a couple of years and then settled in Pasadena, California in 1903, after observing that raising oranges in California was more than "just lying under a tree and picking fruit". So it was a real retirement, no more farming, as far "west" as they could go.

This account is based on the "Chambers History" and other memories of my mother, Mary Chambers DeLong, the child born in the new house.

-Grace DeLong