

What was billed as an informal gathering of the Roxborough Historical Society became a “welcome back home” get-together in honor of a neighbor who returned to Roxborough after a long absence.

Mary Lou Helmer Shields returned to her former home with her two daughters, son, granddaughter, great-grandson and nephew to tell the story of their family, the Helmers, who once owned thousands of acres in what is now Roxborough, Colorado. Mary Lou grew up on the Helmer ranch along with her siblings and nephew.

Her grandfather, Franz, and his sons, John and Anton, homesteaded near the foothills 13 miles southwest of Littleton in the 1870s. By the 1940s, Anton’s children--- brothers Toney and George and sister “Cel”-- - operated a 3800 acre cattle ranch, rock quarry and mining operation.

The Helmer holdings stretched from the nearby small community of Waterton to what is now known as the Sundance Ranch in Roxborough State Park. Their 400 head of registered Hereford cattle roamed freely except when shown at stock shows and competitions all over the West.

Toney was the businessman and protector of the property; George, the horse and cattle man. “They worked together real well,” Mary Lou said.

For the hundreds who go by the entry gate on their way home each day, or to play golf at Roxborough’s Arrowhead Golf Club, it’s hard to imagine that Mary Lou Helmer’s grandmother gathered apples for a pie and the Helmer kids played with Hereford calves at this very spot.

“Where’s the apple tree? Mary Lou said. “It’s still there.” Her nephew, Darrell Kaminski, happily replied. From the community center’s deck they pointed out where the house and historical barn, which was once a general store, dance house, and social hall once stood.

Now a landscaped entry, remembering the past was a special moment for them. “Everything was torn down as soon as we moved,” she said sadly. “They should have kept that building; it was historical.”

“They” was the Woodmor Corporation who-- in the early seventies--- purchased the Helmer property to develop a resort. The State of Colorado purchased some remaining Helmer property from Woodmor in the mid-seventies to form Roxborough State Park.

Dozens of audience members were transported back to the last century by Mary Lou’s relaxed, informal presentation. With a homey sense of humor she related one story after another about growing up in the country. Family members, Darrell, daughters Sherry Ann and Sheila, and son, Kenneth, added memories of their own to her narrative.

Mary Lou related how her children were told to remain on the front porch each morning until she ensured there were no rattlesnakes in the yard. She learned to ride her horse, Bimbo, from Uncle George, although not very well, she laughed. The family searched for Indian arrowheads and sea shells.

The family chimed in as they remembered when 13 families shared the telephone party line. Darrell spoke of the spring blizzard of ’49 and of his pet deer, Titan, which his family raised from a fawn.

When asked about her schooling, Mary Lou explained she traveled to Englewood for elementary school and graduated from St. Mary’s Academy high school in Denver in 1959. She attended one year of college before marrying Jimmy Shields who was introduced to her by her sister.

As the two patriarchs and sister Cel aged, they decided to sell. Mary Lou's father, Toney, was advised to find a place at lower altitude. He, his wife and family--- along with two hundred head of cattle---moved to Nebraska.

Mary Lou Helmer lived her first three decades at the family ranch so coming home again to share her story was a special time for her. "You can tell we have a huge passion for this place," Mary Lou said. "This place was well-loved."

-- *Flo Tonelli*