

# A COLORADO CENTENNIAL FARM

## THE ZINK FAMILY CELEBRATES 100 YEARS AT WATERFALL RANCH

by Indiana Reed

In the middle of the Animas Valley's prized lush green land sits a venerable landmark, the Waterfall Ranch. In early 2017, it will be named a Colorado Centennial Farm — a distinction granted to operating farms that have been in a single family for at least 100 years. The Colorado Centennial Farms program was created to recognize the importance of agriculture in the state's economy and to acknowledge the historical significance of a single family on the land for 100 years. As Ed Zink says, it all started with the land, which has sustained many generations. He and his wife, Patti, are just the current caretakers, he says.

Earlier than the Zink family, occupancy on the ranchland can be dated back to A.D. 500 to 900, with the arrival of early Native Americans. "They could have chosen anywhere to live," says Ed. "There was a reason they lived here. This valley is some of the most productive soil in La Plata County."

The ranch, which is named for the waterfall that cascades down the steep red rocks behind the site of the original cabin, was homesteaded by the Lambert family in 1877, then sold to Annie and Tom Wigglesworth. Upon Tom's passing, Annie sold the property to John James Zink, Ed's grandfather.

John James had been in Durango since 1910, acquiring parcels up in the valley before finally settling in at Waterfall Ranch. The date of purchase was recorded as May 31, 1917.

The land proved productive for John James and his wife, Ida May, right from the start. Although times were tough following World War I, the land sustained their eventual eight children and yielded abundant crops of potatoes. Family lore says it was those potato sales that generated enough money to build The Rock House, as it was called, back in 1921.

The stone for the grand three-story home, which would prove the literal bedrock for a successful family, came from a giant boulder that dislodged from the cliffs above and planted itself near the ranch in the middle of what is now County Road 203. Rocks were chiseled off and moved nearby to build the house that would shelter and nourish dozens of Zinks — siblings, cousins, anyone in need. It was characteristic of the time, Ed says; everyone shared in the responsibility of sustaining the family.

The Rock House still stands today — although it was rebuilt after a Christmas holiday fire in 1960. Fortunately, the home's first level and foundation, both made of that original cliff rock, didn't burn. It has been remodeled over the years more than once, with the latest reconstruction — just completed in 2016 — bringing it into contemporary times.



In John James' day, potatoes from the ranch supplied many in the local population, as Durango remained a much isolated community into the early 20th century. But Waterfall Ranch was also a fully operational farm. Its actual size varied over the years, with estimates that at its largest it spread across 350 acres.

John James dispersed his estate to his eight children prior to his death. Many had left the area by that point, but son John Wilson Zink wanted to continue the tradition of a successful farming and ranching operation. He bought out his siblings in the 1940s and with his wife, Ruby, was able to raise all five of his children at the ranch, just as his father had done. Anne, Ida, Nelson, Ed and Jerry all worked in the family operation from

their earliest years. Jerry remembers his first job at age 5 was collecting eggs to sell for two cents each. Ed recalls stitching potato sacks in the fields — bags that when full sometimes stood taller than he did.

Over the years, John Wilson sold off the least productive parcels of the ranch, financing college for his and Ruby's brood. And when potatoes became physically too challenging for the couple, and the price of potatoes fell, he evolved Waterfall into more hay production, as well as an outfitting guide operation — both of which Ed participated in and eventually took over from his dad.

Indeed, most of Ed's siblings returned to Durango and have made a difference in the community through additional enterprises and volunteer involvements. "But it all started with there being an economic engine that makes something work, and this ranch has been that," says Ed.

Ed and Patti Zink, who in 2008 enrolled 80 acres of the ranch into a permanent open-space conservation easement, are currently restoring acres that were formerly potato and hayfields back into their original wetland status. The Native Americans who first lived on the land would recognize the wetlands' open space, as well as the riparian birds and other species, from the earliest times. With the restoration project, Ed says, the land is coming full circle.

Today, a fifth generation of Zinks is growing up in Durango, appreciating the legacy of Waterfall Ranch, now in the family for 100 years. In June of 2017, the family will host a Centennial Celebration to welcome far-flung families, friends, and former workers who have a connection to the land to celebrate and commemorate the legacy of the historic Waterfall Ranch. ■





Photos, from the top: An unidentified woman is perched atop a slab of red sandstone that fell from the cliffs, providing stone for the Zink house, ca. 1920. • All five of Ruby and John W.'s children were raised at Waterfall Ranch. From left: Ida, Anne, Jerry, Nelson and Ed, ca. 1955. • The Rock House, built in 1921, was a three-story home with a large front porch. Eldest son Leonard Zink driving his dad's car, one of the few in the area at the time. • John James Zink and Ida May Dickerson were married in 1902 in Nebraska. • Ida May died in January of 1926, leaving eight children. Son John W. is shown at far left next to his father, John James. • The latest incarnation of the Zink home (back entrance) in August of 2016, with an extensive remodel just completed.

Opposite page: In a 1967 rendering, Viola Schaerer depicts the waterfall and the Zink home (two-story, back view) after the fire.

Photos: Zink Family Archives

