

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 211: KROEGER FAMILY

PIONEERS FRED W. KROEGER & SABRINA (VENARD) KROEGER, MARRIED 1906, IN HERMOSA.
FOUNDING FAMILY OF THE KROEGER HARDWARE STORE

SIX GENERATIONS OF KROEGERS

This story begins in the 1880's with a hard-working couple, named Frederick Wilhelm and Sophie (Rohlf's) Kroeger. They moved from St. Louis, Illinois to an area south of Denver, called Franktown, in search of better opportunities and free land.

Frederick felt that after ten or eleven years in one place, it was time to move on. Especially when he could walk to the top of a hill and see fences being built. So Frederick, Sophie and their nine children packed up and headed toward Cortez in September of 1885. While they owned a homestead in Franktown, Frederick had heard that you could have a second homestead if you planted trees on it. So they sold the first, and homesteaded anew in an area south of Cortez. It took them the whole month of September to travel to Cortez with nine children, 50 head of cattle, two wagons, and a surrey. Their oldest was named Henry, who was

twenty-one. The youngest was an infant named Minnie.

The Kroeger family only stayed in Cortez for three years (from 1886-1889). It was terribly dry and hard to farm. They kept waiting for water to come from the Dolores River, but it never came. In search of greener pastures, they came east to Durango, and settled in the Animas Valley. Twice they were flooded out (once was the great flood of 1911), and they ended up building a Victorian house that still stands, where Trimble Lane turns onto East Animas.

One of their teenage sons, Fred William Kroeger, met a pretty young woman from a farm north of Omaha, Iowa, when she was teaching in the Animas Valley. Shortly after graduating from high school in 1903, she found herself two thousand miles away from home in Silverton, Colorado. Sabrina "Sadie" Venard was her name. With a spirit full of adventure, she took a

teaching job in Silverton, and stayed just as long as she could. Having enough of the isolated winters, she decided to move south to Durango where she could make more friends. She found a teaching post in a school three miles north of the railroad tracks, in a place called Hermosa, a word that in Spanish means "beautiful". The end of her career was nigh, as Fred W. brought romance into her world. (Back then, female teachers were required to be single!)

In 1921, while father was managing the family farm, young Fred William and his brother, Jack, bought a Durango business called G.H. Clark Co., that was located at 148 West Ninth Street, now the parking lot of Toh-Atin Gallery. They renamed it Farmer's Supply Co. It was a bustling business offering livery, farm supplies, hardware, coal, animal feed as well as providing a locus for tall tales, advice, camaraderie and the incidentals of life on the burgeoning frontier.

In the meantime, Fred William and Sadie were wed, and had



SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST ABOUT FRED V. KROEGER:

- Fred turned 94 in 2012. In the above photo Fred is enjoying his cake in the Mahogany Grille at the Strater Hotel. A fine place to celebrate!
- Fred received the prestigious Wayne N. Aspinall Water Leader of the Year award from the Colorado Water Congress, the Bureau of Reclamation Citizen Award, and the Citizen of the Year Award (from the Durango Chamber Resort Assoc.) The Durango Herald ran a special piece on him when he turned 94. (Photo courtesy of the Durango Herald, above.)
- He was Mayor of Durango when FLC moved to its new location up on the mesa. This was quite an achievement, as many townspeople were initially opposed to the idea.
- He vividly recalls a day before Main Avenue was paved, when a trolley on a cable wire went up and down the street. The kids would try to detach the cable wire when the trolley reversed directions, and caused a lot of trouble!

HUNGRY FOR HISTORY? FIND MORE EXCITING STORIES OF LOCAL PIONEERS AND HIGH ADVENTURE WHEN YOU READ **THE STRATER HOTEL STORY BOOK**. AVAILABLE AT THE FRONT DESK.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

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four children, named Marjorie (Stagelman), Helen (Faris), Fred (a/k/a “Freddie”) Venard (one of the first babies to be born in Mercy Hospital’s new stone building in 1918,) and John “Jack”. Jack married a young lady named Barbara Mason in 1946, and they had two children, Russell and Mary.

The young Fred V. grew up working in his dad and uncle’s store. In 1940 when he returned home from college with his new wife Eleanor, he earned \$1,500 per year working in the store.

In 1943 Farmers Supply built a granary across from the store, where Toh-Atin now sits. Then, in 1956, they put in a grain elevator across the railroad tracks behind where the present Kroeger’s hardware is located. In 1965 Town Plaza was developing, so the elevator was moved to its present location on Sawmill Road. The Kroegers then developed the old elevator site for Montgomery Wards (now City Market) and built Kroeger’s Hardware in 1967. At the same time, they constructed a new grain mill in place of the old Graden’s Flour Mill on the present site of the Doubletree Hotel.

ROMANCE FOR FRED V. & ELEANOR

Fred V. met a young lady named Eleanor Towne, on a double date to see a ‘picture show’. When asked what movie they saw, Fred replied with a chuckle: “*I don’t remember. I wasn’t interested in the movie!*”

Eleanor was the daughter of a Forest Service officer, and she moved often during her childhood. Fred

and Eleanor both attended Fort Lewis College (FLC), where Eleanor studied Home Economics and Fred earned his degree in Agronomy. After getting married, they spent two years in Fort Collins at the school of Agricultural and Mechanical Arts.

Fred was drafted into WWII shortly thereafter. Eleanor and Fred moved to Biloxi, Mississippi, where he went through basic training and ultimately became an aircraft mechanic. They had a good time in Biloxi, he worked on B-24s and she was a housewife, and they spent a good amount of money getting by and enjoying themselves. Once his service was over, they found they were a little in debt and were glad to go home to Durango where Fred knew he had a good job waiting for him.

After their return home, they set up house and had four children, Jana (Newport), Marilyn Johnson, Stan (who sadly passed away at age 37 from multiple sclerosis,) and Leslie Koczan. The three girls helped out in the store while they were going to school. In the early years, Fred earned \$25 a month, working with his father, brother and sister. They sold everything from soup to nuts. In the mid fifties, brother Jack bought a new ranch on the East Animas, and farmed it very successfully. The family tradition was to jointly share in everything. When part of the family acquired a ranch, home, or business, they shared that asset as a group. This may be one of the factors that contributed to their success over and over again.

Fred was a director at the First National Bank for nearly 50 years. (*Please visit www.strater.com to read about the bank. Room 320 is dedicated to it!*) Fred served the bank even longer than its long-term

president, A.P. Camp, and helped facilitate the development of countless businesses, with both funding and expertise. His long-time friend Mickey Hogan, says, “*If anyone ever had any business questions, they usually went to see Fred. He gave great advice.*”

In 1980, Fred was the host for Durango’s centennial celebration, where he welcomed President Gerald Ford as the keynote speaker. According to the La Plata County Historical Society, “*His stature in the community allowed him to stand beside a former U.S. president as an equal.*”



Fred’s wife Eleanor (left) received the distinguished FLC Alumni Recognition Award in 1989. She passed away from a brave battle with Alzheimer’s disease in 1997. During her lifetime she and Fred enjoyed

the arrival of more than nine grandchildren, who make up the sixth generation of the Kroeger family.

When asked to reflect on his time in Durango, he claimed, “*This is a good place to be born, a good place to make a home and raise a family, and a good place to retire. We made a great choice.*”



Miss Jana Kroeger, 1943

The Kroeger Family was honored by the La Plata County Historical Society with a Community Heritage Award in 2008.

The Strater is proud to continue keeping the Kroeger family legacy alive, and wishes to thank Jana (Kroeger) Newport (above) now all grown up, for her help in providing much of the family information.

THE MAN WHO PARTED WATER & MOVED A COLLEGE TO THE MESA



Fred Venard Kroeger in his early nineties, above

State Representative Salazar once said in a speech honoring Fred Kroeger in retirement, that *“Fred’s commitment to the farmers and ranchers who were his neighbors continued throughout his life. That commitment was evidenced by Fred’s steadfast support for the Animas-La Plata Project, which was to deliver water to the “dry side” so that those farmers and ranchers could thrive with a more reliable and generous water supply.”*

Fred attended his first Southwestern Water Conservation District meeting in 1948. There he served as a board member for 55 years, that included 33 years as President. During his tenure on the board, three major water projects were approved: The Florida Project (Lemon Dam), the Dolores Project (McPhee Dam), and the ALP Project (Ridges Basin Dam).

Over the years, he served on the Animas-La Plata Water Conservancy District, the Colorado Water Congress and the Colorado Water Conservation Board.

He was locally involved with the City of Durango Water Commission, the La Plata County Water Advisory Board, Club 20 and the La Plata West Water Authority. He believed in the motto *“use it or lose it,”* and tried to

create a consistent water source for farm irrigation, especially during drought years.

Fred was also on Durango’s City Council for just over one term, then was appointed Mayor for a half term and elected for another full term. During that time, Fred helped establish the new location of Fort Lewis College. This was an especially controversial issue, as the FLC in Hesperus had buildings and plenty of land. Those opposed (and Fred’s dad was one of them!) said that abandoning that kind of property was wasteful, but many townspeople were anxious to have the college up on the mesa. According to Fred, there was lots of red tape. In the mid 1950’s the city sold the mesa property to Fort Lewis College for \$8000.

Fred served on the board for the 1st National Bank, and as president of the Fort Lewis Foundation. He was an active member of Kiwanis and the Chamber of Commerce.

Rep. Salazar also commented that *“He (Fred) always carries a little pocket calendar with him, and it is jammed with meeting commitments to boards, businesses, family and friends.”*



THE STRATER HOTEL WISHES TO SALUTE ALL THAT FRED HAS DONE TO SERVE THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE DURANGO, AND TO THANK THE KROEGERS FOR THEIR PIONEERING AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT.