

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 307: OLGA (SCHAAF) LITTLE

BORN JULY 26, 1883 IN ESSEN, GERMANY, TO FREDERICK AND JOHANNA SCHAAF. OLGA WAS THE SECOND OF FOUR CHILDREN. THEY MOVED TO COLORADO WHEN SHE WAS ONLY TWO YEARS OLD.

A PIONEERING WOMAN OF DURANGO

Olga was destined to become one of Durango's most notable pioneers, as she was the first female mule-skinner, guide, and outfitter. She carried provisions to the miners, and would take travelers on horseback outings into the nearby La Plata Mountains. She learned how to handle horses when she was only ten years old, on a 400 mile journey from Holyoke to Chama, New Mexico. Her father was ill and stayed home, so she accompanied her mother and four other children on this trip. Olga had the responsibility of wrangling eight horses and herding the cattle; this was her formative learning experience. Olga and her little brother Alvin attended

school in Chama where the only language spoken was Spanish. This was all the formal education that they received. When Olga was about twelve, and Alvin about nine, the two of them rode two burros from Chama to Texas Creek, near Durango (about 150 miles from Chama) staying with ranchers along the way. They rode back to Chama that fall, and the next spring the family all moved to Durango. Frederick, their father, built a house in Animas City; a town adjacent to Durango at that time.

By the time she was a teenager she was as capable with horses as any cowboy. These skills gave her unusual social and economic

freedom for that time, and so she started her own guide business. Her nephew Ernie Schaaf shared the following story:

"One winter she was hauling supplies up to one of the mines. It was a very deep snow and Olga was on a steep cliff at the top of a ravine. One of her mules lost balance and slid down into a deep ravine. The snow was so deep that the mule couldn't get out. Olga took her supplies up to the mine and went back to dig a dry area out for the mule. Olga continued to take hay down to the mule multiple times a week until snow melted off, months later."

This was one of many stories that illustrate the great care she gave her animals.



Olga was famous for being a petite but tough woman who always carried a pistol in her pocket.



Olga's mules, above. Ernie Schaaf, below. All photos courtesy of Ernest Schaaf.

ERNIE SCHAAF CONTINUES THE FAMILY LEGACY

Though 34 years younger than his Aunt Olga, Ernie (photo right), made a name for himself in Durango. He started working hard young in life, earning 25 cents a day as a golf caddy at age 7. He attended Durango High School and was accepted to Fort Lewis College. He helped build the Lion's Den above Hillcrest Golf Course

as a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. In 1939 he married Peryl (pronounced Pearl) Kelly after a fast 6-week courtship. In 1943 he joined the Air Force where he received his pilot's license. Remarkably, he never shot at anyone nor was he fired at, surprising considering that WWII was going on at that time. Ernie

then returned home to Durango to manage two gas filling stations. They were called "Ernie's Triangle Service."

A lifetime member of the ELKS and Rotary, Ernie served on the Durango Planning Commission from 1959-1969. Today, Ernie is retired and living at home with his lovely wife, Peryl.



FALL OFF A HORSE, FALL IN LOVE WITH A MAN

Ernie Schaaf recalls this story of how his Aunt Olga met the love of her life: "Olga packed steadily for the Neglected and Durango Girl Mines for a few years. Then on one of her trips into the Neglected Mine her saddle horse fell with her on an icy trail, breaking her leg. She managed to get back on her horse—that's how strong she was—and she continued the trip into the mine. The miners sent for a doctor to come and set the leg, and she was

brought out on a home-made sled. On this trip, she met a young Miner, William Little, who had been a coal miner since age eleven, in Scotland. He had just recently immigrated to the U.S. and had gone to work at the Neglected as a hard rock miner. They were married the next year and moved to Mayday, CO. Their home was located just as you enter La Plata Canyon."

She and her husband Bill lived in a house they converted from an old saloon.

Olga learned that her height (only 5'4") made it hard to heave packs up onto horses, so she started using Burros as they were easier to load, more sure footed on high dangerous trails, and less excitable than horses. (See photo of Olga with her Burro, below.)



AT THE START OF HER CAREER, OLGA BROKE HORSES FOR LOCAL RANCHERS. HER PAY WAS FIVE DOLLARS A WEEK.



BRINGING HOME THE GOLD

After her marriage to Bill, there were many mines in the Canyon producing gold and silver ore, and Olga was busy providing the miners with their much needed supplies. The Rio Grande Southern narrow gauge railroad ran from Durango and west through Dolores, and up the Dolores River through Rico, Ophir, Telluride and terminated at Placerville.

Olga was so highly thought of by the community, that the railroad ran a line from the end of the rails at Hesperus to within a few hundred yards of

Olga's home. She would pack up the supplies from the box cars and pack them to the mines and then return with ore to be shipped to the smelters in Durango. Some of the mines were named "The Mayday," "Incas," "Jumbo," "Idaho," "Bessie G.," "Gold



King," "Kaibab," "Lucky Moon," and "Tomahawk." Olga experienced many dangerous incidents, but survived them all. Once she dropped three burros off Kennebec Pass. They fell several hundred feet, each burro was loaded with three cases of

dynamite. The burros were all killed but none of the dynamite exploded.

In the winter of 1912, Olga was snowed in at the Neglected Mine in a very deep snow. She and several miners set out trying to break trail to a place called Transfer, seven miles away. There were 18 miners in the group, Olga, and 8 head of Burros. It took them from 7 am. Until 11 pm. To make the seven miles, taking turns breaking trail. Some of the miners suffered frostbite. Some of the miners later said that they would probably have died if it had not been for Olga.

ANOTHER FAMILY LOVE STORY

After noting that Ernie Schaaf courted his wife, Peryl Kelley, for only 6 weeks before marrying her on Aug. 20, 1939, we had to ask if there was more to the story. Indeed, one of the most remarkable tales unfolded. Here it is, as told by Ernie himself:

“Where the Sonic fast food restaurant is now, there once used to be a filling station. In the summer the station hired pretty young girls to pump gas. Peryl was working there with three other girls. I came by to deliver a truck-load of gravel. We hit it off real good together, and I finally asked her to go out with me. We went to Animas Grange (above Trimble) and we had a good time. Weeks later, we were downtown together and we see Peryl’s cousin Frank Kelley having a beer. Frank says that he and Olsa, his girl, are gonna get married. They want to go to Aztec, and Frank asks me if we will give them a ride. So Peryl and I take them to Aztec to get married. After pronouncing them man and wife, the Justice of the Peace looks at Peryl and me, and says, “Why don’t we make this a double?” so we did.

I was 21 years old and scared about what her parents would do. I didn’t know how old she was. Her parents raised hell for a week or two, and asked us to get the marriage annulled. Turns out Peryl was not quite 16! I didn’t know-I thought she was already 16.

Meanwhile, we put a bed in the garage and lived in there. I thought hard about what to do. I needed to work someplace. Every morning I woke up at 6 am and walked around Durango to find work. I worked at Graden’s flour mill for a while.” Ernie later joined the Air Force, then returned home to a 38 year career managing two filling stations of his own. Peryl, after becoming a mother four times over, worked as the office manager for the Durango Natural Gas Co., She and Ernie lived in a Quonset hut and then built their own home on 8th Ave and 8th Street. She ended up the Vice President of Turner Industrial Bank, owned by the Turner family, who, incidentally, owned Turner Investments, which was located in the Strater Hotel, where the Diamond Belle Saloon is now.

Their four children were born over the span of twenty years, E. Wayne, Lavon, Thelma Beth (Tammy) Schreiner, and Sherri Gaugh, of Durango. Six grandchildren and two great grandchildren have brought Ernie and Peryl great joy. They have been married for a remarkable 73 years.

**THE STRATER
APPLAUDS THE
BRAVERY AND
HEROISM OF OLGA
LITTLE, AND THE
STRENGTH OF THE
PIONEERING SPIRIT
OF THE WOMEN OF
THE WEST.**



Ernie & Peryl’s first car by her grandfather’s grain mill, above.



Peryl Kelley and her brother Neal (right) playing Indians. This is Ernie’s future bride!

A LITTLE MORE ABOUT OLGA LITTLE:

- *There is a mountain named after Olga. Interested in climbing it? Visit www.mountainzone.com/mountains/detail.asp?fid=1063656*
- *Olga & Bill Little were the only people in Durango who owned an Edsel automobile. They were quite the talk of the town!*
- *Olga appeared with her family on the popular TV show “This is Your Life”, with Ralph Edwards, in 1958.*