

# Wallowa History Center

*Preserving Our Past for the Future*

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*The Wallowa History Center works to save the memories, stories,  
and photographs that define the history and culture of the places we call home.*

Newsletter Number 3: January 2005

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In 1974, Mitzi Wortman, the granddaughter of Charles and Virginia Wortman, wrote to her grandmother, wanting to learn more about her family. Virginia responded with a letter telling about the family and also about her life as a girl living in the Promise area of Wallowa County. The following letter tells about some of her experiences.

## SO YOU WANT TO KNOW

By Virginia Carper Wortman

(Adapted from the letter written by Virginia Carper Wortman  
to her granddaughter Mitzi Wortman, May 15, 1974)

I was born and raised in the Promise country, 23 miles north of Wallowa, in a little old log cabin. The house that was built later that I grew up in isn't even there anymore. Mother bought a place called the Groat place, which had wonderful spring water, and the folks donated one little corner of this place to the settlers for a cemetery. I went to school my first years in a log cabin built just outside of the graveyard.

Seats and desks were built of heavy lumber big enough for two kids to sit together. The back of one seat was the desk for the kids behind. I guess it was two miles to school. First day I went to school I guess I was the youngest one on the road. I tried real hard to keep up with the rest, but all I was able to do with my short legs was get a pain in my side and was left behind.

In those days you never went to school till you were eight years old. School lasted but six months, and after we were big enough to work we never got started until two months after school began, and then lost from one to two days a week because of work. It kind of fouled me up in arithmetic because teachers would pass you on with the kids who went steady. But I couldn't be fouled up on reading and spelling.

Dad had 30 acres in orchard and 15 acres in garden. He had the best peaches you ever ate, because they were dry land peaches. He had 60 different kinds of apples, two kinds of crab apples for eating and for jelly and sweet pickles. Some of the apples I remember are Yellow Transparent, Duchess, Striped Astrican, and two kinds of sweet apples that were never called anything but sweet apples. One kind made good preserves. The other was a big red sweet apple that I wouldn't trade for the Delicious. I took one to bed with me often. Great eating. Holly apples and little Rambos were also great to eat, as were two kinds of Winesaps, Ben Davis, Blue Pearmain, Gravenstines, Red Junes, Wealtys, Gueninos, and Twenty Ounce Pippins,



Virginia Carper Wortman

which were a very large apple. I liked to make baked apple dumplings out of the big Wolf River apples. We had prunes and plums of several kinds, though half the names I've forgotten. The prettiest apricots I ever saw were just as big as peaches with pretty rosy cheeks.

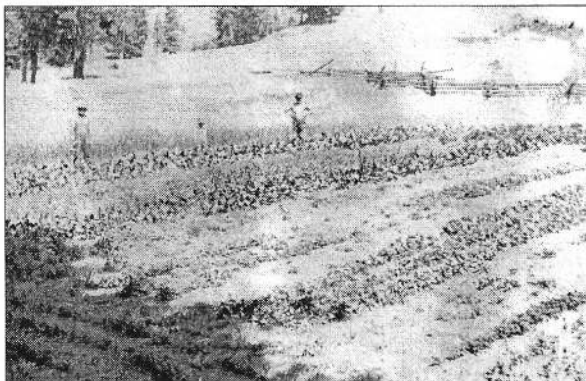
The fruit trees had to be plowed two ways each spring, leaving a square around each tree. You took an old heavy mattock to dig around them. I can remember that old mattock with the sharp point on the back. Those trees had to be pruned every spring, which meant that us kids had to pick up, drag, and pile the limbs where they could be burned without damaging the trees.

In the garden, the seven of us kids hoed and dug weeds. If there weren't enough hoes, I had to swing a footad, digging weeds all day. Perhaps you don't know what a footad is; it's heavy, just like the mattock, only it's shaped more like the hoe with only one side. I guess they thought I was the tough one, so it was my lot to swing the heaviest hoe.

A lot of grain and hay was also raised since we had a flock of hogs and milk cows to feed. Till Viola and I got big enough to milk, my mother got up at 4 o'clock in the morning to milk the cows before she cooked breakfast. I milked my first cow at about age 10 or 12. I baked my first batch of biscuits when I was 10, and they were flat as cookies. Everyone just went after them and bragged on them till I thought I had really done something, but I guess they were laughing at my back. I can see those old flat biscuits yet, but I don't mean I didn't ever get perfect in the bread line.

By the time I was 13 my bread really was great, and I could cook for 50 people with Viola as my kitchen helper. Every morning I had to bake a big pan of sour dough biscuits—which, if I do say so myself, no one could beat—to fit the big old fashioned cook stove oven. And for the noon meal, a big pan of light bread. This had to be done every day. That's what made my cooking better.

Mom put me in the house one week and out in the garden and field one week. Viola and I worked together when the hay and wheat were ready to harvest. We carried our hay fork over our shoulders two miles to the hay field, shocked hay all day, ate our lunches at noon, and carried our hay forks two miles back. When the hay was ready to haul, we didn't have slips to slide hay onto; we had to lift the hay and toss it into the hay rack that the horses pulled the same two miles home.



Garden in the Promise country



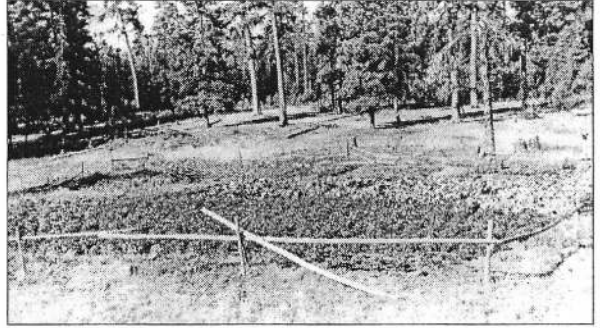
Working homestead land in the Promise country

Cucumbers did real well on the breaks of Sick Foot Creek or Sunnyside Canyon. I picked cukes every other day and got a big pail full. When the beans were in full swing we picked a gunny sack full and had a bean stringing. Young people from six to nine miles away would come to this. If anyone came in late they got peppered with bean strings.

After the beans were strung they were set aside. I think a midnight snack was served, and a party of games got in full swing. Games like Skipp-Tum a Loo, Little Brown Jug, Pig in the Parlor, Happy Was the Miller Boy, 10 Little

Indians Were Marching Down the River to Old Shylo, and perhaps some more I don't recall.

The beans were spread on the floor of the back room upstairs to dry. Seems like mother did make some pickled beans for home use. Also, the dried beans were sold around town and cooked occasionally for home use. I don't remember that they were ever canned. We raised tuff beans for home use, for when they got ripe and dry enough they were stuffed in gunny sacks and beat with clubs to thrash them. The big hulls were picked off to burn and, to clean them, a big tarp spread to pour beans onto when the wind was blowing.



Homestead garden typical of those found in Wallowa County's north end

The dried green beans were called "leather breeches" or "snap beans." These were boiled in soda water for a few minutes, then washed and cooked in clean water. The best seasoning for the finished cooking was either ham bones or a shoulder bone with some meat on it.

Wild strawberries were numerous. Kids would take a 10 pound lard pail and go pick it full of strawberries, then we had strawberry shortcake. Seems the wild strawberries were ready before the tame ones.

The place where we burned limbs made a good spot to broadcast onions, lettuce, and radishes. Big fields of field corn were planted for feed and corn bread. Pumpkins were planted all through this corn for cow feed and pumpkin pies. After pumpkin season was over, turnips and carrots were broadcast in damp places for family use and stock feed. Pumpkins, turnips, or carrots were chopped up to be fed to the cows when you milked them. Lots of weeds were pulled and fed to the pigs, and dish water or unwanted scraps were never wasted; hogs ate it all.

The most important of all was the big storage house, where every fall vegetables and fruits were stored, making it possible to sell apples all year. In the winter when it got cold enough to cut hunks of ice, it was stored in one corner of this building that was filled with sawdust. The ice was used to make ice cream in the summer.



Virginia Carper Wortman

The spring, which wasn't very far from the house, put out lots of ice water, which was real good for drinking. What we called the spring house was built just below it. It had a floor with water flowing over it all the time, and it was used to keep milk, cream, butter, or any other items needing cool temperatures. A deep hole was in one corner to sink cans of cream or huckleberries till they could be marketed. We picked so many huckleberries that Dad was called Huckleberry Joe.

One year we raised three cub bears in the wood shed, but one night the little devils figured a way to get out and ran away. But of course they remembered where they had been fed, so one morning when Mom got up to go milk she found one huddled up under the wash room sink. The wash room door was always open to the porch, and he had come in on the porch. Then when Mom went on to the barn she met another cub coming across the spring branch to the house. The other one was found up a tree. Dad finally sold them to a circus or carnival.

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*As a member you receive three free copies of  
historical photographs from our archives, and  
10% off your purchase of regional history books.*

Charlie and Virginia Carper Wortman raised eight children Fred, Stanley, twins Bernard and Bertha, Raymond, Wesley, Ersal, and Mervine. Virginia's parents were Joseph Carper and Leticia Lively Carper. Thanks to the Wortman family for giving us permission to use this material.



Virginia and Charles Wortman

Thanks to Ron and Celine Gay  
of Shell Mercantile for providing  
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