

# Harold edd provonsha

Interview by Detta Dahl

**Q: Would you state your full name?**

A: Harold E. Provonsha.

**Q: What does the E stand for?**

A: Edd, E double D.

**Q: That was your father's name?**

A: Yes.

**Q: Harold, where were you born?**

A: In Montrose, Colorado.

**Q: What were your folks doing in Montrose when you were there?**

A: My Dad was selling Dodge cars for Hartmann Brothers.

**Q: Was he a good salesman?**

A: He was. He did it different than most people, but he got them sold.

**Q: How did he do different?**

A: He just did his way of doing it. He had to be sold on them (the cars) himself and if he was sold, he could sell it to anybody else. (An honest sale.)

**Q: How long did you live in Montrose?**

A: I was born there, and we moved back to Moab when I was four, going on five. We moved back in 1929. I was born in 1924. When we moved back, we had to rent a place in Moab for a few months until the people that had the farm in LaSal, which had been leased and the lease was up that fall. We had to wait until the lease was up until we could go up to LaSal. We stayed in Moab for a few months.

**Q: Did you start school in Moab?**

A: No, I started school in LaSal. I started first grade when I was 5 years old. I rode a horse 2 miles to school.

**Q: How long did you live in LaSal?**

A: I lived there until I went into the Navy in January of 1944.

**Q: What did you raise on the ranch?**

A: We raised cows and we had some sheep, alfalfa, and corn. We had a silo where we put silage down for the cows. It was a deep silo, a hole in the ground.

**Q: What all did you do to help with the ranch?**

A: Well, when I was that age, I helped in the house doing dishes and stuff like that. And pull weeds, we had lots of weeds to hoe. We raised a big garden all the time.

**Q: When you were in school, how many grades were in the school and how many other children?**

A: The schoolhouse had two rooms; First through the fourth in one room and fifth through the eighth in the other. After the eighth grade we came to Moab to the High School.

**Q: Anything you recall about going to school?**

A: We used to have a lot of fights.

**Q: Would you like to talk about living on the ranch?**

A: Things were hard in those days, back during the Depression time. Dad made a wood sawmill where he sawed a lot of wood and hauled it to Moab. He sold wood for people to burn in their stoves. He got the wood out south of the ranch out on the BLM property. It wasn't really BLM property at that time. It was when the Taylor Grazing Act finally came in. Anybody could go out and cut wood then.

**Q: Did you have any interaction with the CCC?**

A: They were there. My older brother and kids his age would play ball with the CCC boys. I was too young for that.

**Q: How did your folks get into sheep raising?**

A: Well, they bought some sheep in 1935, before I turned 11 years old. Dad bought the sheep from a Frenchman in Price and we trailed them in from Thompson to LaSal. I helped with my brother, Dan, and my brother-in-law, Don. When we had trailed them down and got to Blue Hill, I came down with the measles. They set me on old Ginger, one of our horses, and sent me home to ride all the way to LaSal with the measles all

broke out. I was still ten and hadn't turned 11 yet. The horse and I knew the way home, but I was really sick. When I got home, my mother had a fit. I got stuck herding the sheep. That summer we didn't have a good range yet so I had to herd the sheep down south of the ranch. When I started school I had to take my bookwork out there because they kept me out of school for a little while. Then I had to go to school and make it up.

**Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have?**

A: I had one brother and two sisters. My brother and one sister were older and one sister was younger.

**Q: Were they all at the ranch?**

A: Yes, at that time.

**Q: You lived on the ranch most of your growing up years?**

A: Yes, I did.

**Q: Tell me about your mother.**

A: My mother's name was Isabella Beggs McCollum Provonsha. She was born in Moab on December 25, 1897 in a log cabin located where the Wells Fargo Bank is today. Her father was Daniel McCollum who came to Paradox, Colorado about 1878. The exact date he started to operate the first sawmill on the LaSal mountain is not known but his last ledger showed it was in operation in 1889. He sawed lumber in LaSal Pass, Old LaSal, Buckeye and Pine Flats areas. He furnished lumber for the old water flume on the San Miguel River below Uravan, Colorado, hauling it (lumber) down through Roc Creek with oxen to the San Miguel River. The lumber he delivered to his Moab customers was hauled through LaSal Pass and down Pack Creek. He married Helen Grimes on December 13, 1893. He said the sawmill was no place for a woman, so he sold it to a man who had worked for him, Tom Branson. He started working for Pittsburgh Cattle

Company at LaSal as the ranch foreman. Helen Grimes family included some of the first settlers in Paradox, Colorado.

**Q: This sawmill is the one described in the attached article by Billie Provonsha?**

Yes. (Billie: the ledger has interesting details, could be copied, also)

**Q: Did you sell cattle from the ranch?**

A: At LaSal we didn't have many cattle. We had more sheep. We had more cattle when we got the Pack Creek Ranches. While I was in the Navy, the folks sold the ranch at LaSal and got the Pack Creek Ranches with a different range. The ranch where we had the sheep was near New LaSal.

**Q: Did you ever go to the location they called Coyote?**

A: They didn't call it Coyote at that time I was there, they had changed it to New LaSal. Old LaSal was always called Old LaSal. New LaSal is where the post office is now.

**Q: Was there a post office at Old LaSal?**

A: I don't think so, (Billie: I think so, but I'm not for sure on that)

**Q: Let's go back to you herding sheep on the LaSal Ranch?**

A: When I went into the Navy, the folks had to sell the ranch. They couldn't find herders because of the war effort. I went into the Navy January 21, 1944.

**Q: Did you enlist?**

A: Well, in a way. I enlisted through the draft board. My Dad got me deferred once, so I sent word to the draft board "For Heaven's sake, draft me!" But I wanted the Navy. It might be easier than herding sheep. Anything to get out of that!

**Q: What did you do in the Navy?**

A: First thing I did was to get Rheumatic Fever and I was in the Naval Hospital for 8 \_ months. That was in Farragut, Idaho. After I got over that, they sent me back to duty. Having Rheumatic Fever knocked me out of all the schooling. They put me on a submarine rescue ship. I went to Pearl Harbor and worked with the submarine. The submarine would come into the port for overhaul. They would fire the torpedoes to see if they were going to work. We'd pick up the torpedoes and bring them back in; they had dummy heads on them. They had a diving bell on it (the rescue ship) in case the submarine got down and couldn't get up; they would send the diving bell down to the submarine. That's about all my service amounted to was in the hospital and on that submarine rescue ship. I was discharged in the spring of 1946. When I came back, the folks had sold the ranch at LaSal and had both ranches at Pack Creek. They had a better cattle grazing permit and had sold all the sheep and had cattle. They could run about 300 head of cattle on the allotment. The summer range was in the mountains and winter range bordered Arches Park. Dad got Fred Prewer's old brand that Prewer no longer used. Fred Prewer's brand was registered in Dad's name in order to keep it in the family, F (Cross F).

**Q: Did you live at the Pack Creek Ranch then?**

A: Yes, it was a lot better herding cattle instead of sheep.

**Q: Do you remember noticing any changes in downtown Moab while you were away in the service – the war years?**

A: If you mean just in that length of time, it wasn't that many years. Moab didn't change much.

**Q: But it was shortly after that that the boom hit.**

A: After I came back, I met Billie and we were married in 1947, on my birthday.

**Q: Were you married here in Moab?**

A: Yes, we were married in Dale and Ruth Parriott's house. We have three children, 5 grandchildren, 5 great grandchildren. We lived on the ranch until we sold it in 1949. I ran the ranch while Dad had a business in town. Dad and I didn't agree on how to run the ranch. I tried to buy his interest out, but he wouldn't sell to me, so we decided to just sell it. Then I did a lot of things; worked on the first movie.

**Q: What was the name of the first movie?**

A: "Wagon Master." I wrangled horses. Just regular old day to day stuff.

**Q: Did you meet the stars?**

A: Yes, I think Ben Johnson was on that.

**Q: Did any of the rest of your family work on this movie?**

A: No, just me.

**Q: Any other movies?**

A: I worked on "Rio Bravo" and "Battle at Apache Pass" three or four of them.

**Q: Were you wrangling horses on these, too?**

A: Yes. The last one I worked on was “Blue” and I drove the director on that one, chauffeured him.

(Billie: Ann worked on “Blue”. She was stand-in for JoAnn Pettit, the star. All the scenes of her riding away in the buckboard, just looking at her back – that was Ann.)

Then I got to prospecting. We had some claims staked on the mountain. In 1950, another guy, Newton Duram, and I bought a bulldozer and built us a road from the Pack Creek Ranch up Hell Canyon to the Red Devil claims.

**Q: What were you prospecting for?**

A: Uranium. My brother and I had staked the claims before; then we got Newton to do the assessment work for us for a year or two and cut him in on it. We decided to mine the claims, and after we got the road up there, we hauled two pickup loads of high-grade uranium out to Thompson. I can’t remember who we sold it to.

**Q: Did it go on the railroad then?**

A: I guess it must have. Whoever bought it would stockpile it there at Thompson. They took it to someplace in Colorado. Then I bought the bull dozer and an ore truck and started hauling ore for other people. I hauled ore from Temple Mountain to Monticello. (Temple Mountain is down close to Hanksville) I did some bull dozer work around. Then I decided to go prospecting so I hired a guy to drive the truck and haul ore and another one to run the bull dozer and I took off prospecting.

**Q: Did you have luck this time?**

A: I got together with Fred Frazier and I’d stake the claims and he’d peddle them. We’d get a down payment on them, but that’s all we’d ever get. We did make some little money on them.

**Q: During this time, you were living in Moab?**

A: Yes, I bought the ground that I built the houses and apartments on later.

**Q: What was the address of those apartments?**

A: The apartments were 450 and 460 East and 200 South. The house we lived in was 440 E 200 S. The first house, that little old house we moved into from the ranch didn't have a number on it. Right now they are building all that stuff ahead of that. (Billie: it's right over there behind the Mason Lodge but it never did have a number.) Later, when I made a little money in uranium, we had that log house down on the corner and we built the houses at 420 and 430 East and ours was 440. We contracted those to be built.

**Q: Who was your contractor?**

A: The guy's name was Charlie Smith that built those. Then I bought Fred Frazier's house that was across the street that he had bought from Ace Turner. So I wound up with 5 houses and then we built the apartments.

**Q: This was during the boom?**

A: Yes, then I borrowed some money from Dan O'Laurie and built the apartments. We were able to keep them full for awhile, until the boom kind of busted. So I went to work for the Uranium Reduction Company when they first started the mill up. Before they got the thing started, they sent me to Grand Junction to school to learn how to operate what they called the R.I.P. section. Resin In Pulp is what it meant, to take the uranium out of the ore. Then later they sold out to Atlas, I worked for them for ten years and nine months.

**Q: What were you doing?**

A: I was just an operator in the mill. Then I took training in instrumentation and they sent me back to Foxborough, Massachusetts, to school. Then I learned to be an instrument repairman.

**Q: When you were working there did they furnish protective gear and safety training for you?**

A: Before I left they started getting a little of that. We were supposed to wear hard-toed shoes and stuff. At the very last I had one of those badges that I wore for awhile that was supposed to tell how much radiation exposure I had. When I quit there, I went to work for a movie that summer; that was "Blue". After that I went to work down at the Potash Mill. I worked there for a couple of years and then saw an ad in the paper about a job down in Arizona in a paper mill for an instrument technician job which I was trained to do.

**Who owned the Potash Mill when you were there?**

A: Texas Gulf Sulfur owned it then. I worked on Instrument repair. Then when I went down to Arizona to check on that job I found it paid twice as much as the job here. So we moved to Arizona. I was an instrument repairman in the paper mill for eighteen years until I retired in 1987. I retired when I was 63, didn't wait until I was 65. We lived in Taylor, Az. while I was working at the paper mill in Snowflake. While down there, we lived in Snowflake, Show Low, Taylor and eventually, Vernon; kind of moved around all close to Show Low. Every place we moved we bought a house and then sold it. We moved back to Moab in October, 2004.

**Q: Did you sell the apartments in Moab?**

A: I sold the apartments and the houses. (Billie: I think Steele did have them, I don't know if he still has them) We sold the apartments to Reed Lance, an old timer in town.

**Q: You were here in Moab during the Boom and the Bust. Before you had the houses and apartments, where did people stay?**

A: They were sleeping on our front lawns. The rentals were all filled for awhile then when the bust came we had a lot of vacancies.

**Q: Did you have families?**

A: Yes, all the apartments had 2 bedrooms. (Billie: a lot of people would move to town and into the apartments when they first moved to town, until they found a house or built a house. They would live there 6 months to a year.) There are several business people here now that rented from us: Pete Peterson, the barber, for one; Don and JoAnn Knowles, Tony and Carolyn Lema, a lot of people started there.

**Q: What else did you do?**

A: I always liked to hunt. We hunted deer and in Arizona we hunted elk. We took up archery down there when I was old enough to know better, but I got 3 elk with my bow, several deer, javelina, turkeys. Billie took up archery and she got several javelina. They look like a pig.

**Q: When you were living on the ranches, did you go hunting?**

A: We hunted deer; there weren't any elk in those days. I think I saw about the first elk there. In 1950 they came on the LaSal Mountains and I saw them in LaSal Pass. I told people that I'd seen elk up there and Chet Smith laughed at me, and said all I'd seen were deer, those were just Provonsha Elk. He wouldn't believe it. I just saw them that once, but we had seen their tracks up above Pack Creek Ranch when we didn't have any cattle up there at that time of year. They had to be elk tracks. You'd see bear tracks once in a while.

**Q: Mountain lions?**

A: I've never seen a mountain lion, but I have seen their tracks. (Billie: I saw one out in the desert, in the Valley City area in those hills back in there. It surprised me, kind of scary.) I've hunted rocks all my life. We had seven crystal claims that we staked in Arizona. We mined crystals and took them over to the museum in Springerville. They would sell them on consignment. We sold quite a few clear quartz, few amethyst crystals.

**Q: Did you rock hound around Moab?**

A: We hunted agate and stuff. We saw a few arrowheads.

**Q: How did you prospect for uranium?**

A: I hooked up with Fred Frazier and Bill Tibbetts to prospect in the Millard Canyon area on the Green River. Bill Tibbetts and I went in and prospected and staked some claims. We had a camp on Anderson Bottom. In fact we found a little seep there and set up a tent. We made an airstrip there on Anderson Bottom by dragging the weeds down with a couple of saddle horses. After we sold the ranch, we kept some of the horses and took them down on Anderson Bottom. We dragged a log back and forth and wore it out so Fred Frazier could land his plane in there. He would fly us in and fly groceries in to us. Bill Tibbetts and I would go down and stay two weeks at a time staking claims in Millard Canyon. It was rough country down there. It was rough country to get those horses down there the first time, too. We had to go down a trail at the head of Millard Canyon that was really a rough trail that the old outlaws used. One day when Fred was flying, I told him I had dreamed that he broke his leg down there and I had to fly him out. He was superstitious and said "Well, I'm going to teach you to fly." He did. Then he sold me that J3 Cub that he had. He got another plane and I got a private flying license. I souped up the Cub. I had a chance to buy an Air Coup that had been wrecked and had a 85 hp engine in it, which was quite a bit more power than the Cub had in it. Put that engine in it and a special prop on it and then we could fly the rim. Then we could prospect with a

scintillator flying around the rims. That plane would just about go straight up souped up like that. I sold that plane and bought another one over in Dove Creek. I flew it back from Dove Creek, then sold it and bought a Super Cub, kept getting bigger all the time. Prospecting all the time with these. Fred and I were still in partnership, but we bought Bill out. By the time I got the Super Cub, the uranium boom was going busted, but I flew that thing all over the country, just playing around. One day a windstorm came up and blew it loose from the tie-downs and tore it all to pieces. That put me out of the plane business.

**Q: When you were flying and locating with the scintillator, how did you get the claims?**

A: You would have to get on the ground somehow. The trouble of it was, that a lot of time you'd pick up a big low-grade bed from the air and you'd get on the ground and couldn't find anything. It wasn't all it was cracked up to be. (Billie: that's when the horses and pack outfit came in handy, getting on the ground).

**Q: When you would get in, you would locate and sell the claims?**

A: Yes, when you could. That bunch in Millard Canyon, we got an outfit (A K Wilson in Oregon) interested. He flew Fred and Bill Tibbetts and I to Oregon to talk to him about the claims. He bought us an airplane ticket to fly up to Oregon. He made a deal and went down there to try to work them, and see if they amounted to anything or not. He set up camp down there and we had to make a little strip there to land on. It didn't have room enough to make a good strip just by dragging with the horses and rolling a few rocks out of the way. You could fly in with a load, but you couldn't take off with a load. One day when Fred came in, a guy named Wally Windfield decided to follow him in. He came in and lit down there. We had a kid working down there that wanted to quit and get out of there so Wally said he would fly him out. Fred told him he couldn't get off; there's a big rock at the end of the run-way and you can't get off with the extra weight. "Oh, yeah, I can." He says. So he put that kid in there and he had a little dog, too. He took off and

tried it; hooked his landing gear on that rock; and tipped him bottom-side-up and went right down in the wash. It wrecked the plane, but didn't hurt the people. The kid decided to go back to work. We had to take them down to Anderson Bottom with horses where we had a better airstrip to fly them all out of there. It was quite a ways from the camp up in Millard Canyon. One day I went out there and a big windstorm had come up and blown down a big tent we had there for everybody. There they were all about to freeze to death with the tent down. They all wanted to get out then. It was just before Christmas so we got them all out. Now that country is in the Canyonlands National Park. We had a road; we did get a dozer in down there over what they called the Flint Trail down in Elaterite Basin. We had to come way around the rim there. You can probably still see the tracks there. We had another airstrip out on what we called Flint Point. When you took off there, you had to goose the plane to get it over some trees, and then dive off into the canyon to pick up airspeed.

One time I was prospecting out here in East Dry Valley. That morning I could see the flashes in the west where they were setting off the bombs in Nevada. There came a big rainstorm and I got soaked. It made me sick, vomiting. When I got home that night, I put my Geiger Counter on me and I was hotter than a firecracker. My clothes pegged the Geiger Counter on the least sensitive scale. That rain had picked up radiation from the Nevada bombs and soaked my clothes.

(From the notes) Billie and I were going to Monticello, just past Hole 'n the Rock. I started passing slow moving trucks and discovered it was a military convoy escorting a very slow moving large truck. The two vehicles we passed crowded in close behind us and we could see the soldiers watching us in our rear view mirrors. The soldiers had rifles pointed at us. We breathed a sigh of relief when finally there was a break in the traffic and we could pass the rest of the convoy and get out ahead of them. We have always wondered what they had in that big truck.



