

Book concerning hoarding of money in Palisade about more than gold in the floorboards

Written by Wauneta Breeze

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By Carolyn Lee The Imperial Republican

A memoir written by former Palisade resident Alison (Krotter) Johnson of Maine about her parents is “way more than about gold and silver. There were so many strange family things going on.”

In “The Eleventh Hour Can’t Last Forever,” Johnson wrote about her father Dean’s obsession with hoarding gold and silver in the family home just off Main Street in Palisade.

Dean Krotter believed that the collapse of the American economy was just around the corner, all of the time, and in order to save his family, he needed to collect “as much gold and silver as he could lay his hands on.”

Johnson said, “This fear of a future calamity that might leave his family penniless so dominated Dad’s thoughts that he failed to see how his blind absorption in amassing wealth created family problems that would lead to his oldest son, Kent’s, hopeless alcoholism and his wife’s mental collapse.”

Johnson added that her sister Diane, of Denver, is very insecure and has resorted to astrology to answer the frustrations of her life.

Kent died in 2002 and another brother, Mark, died in 2005.

Johnson said she wrote the story not only for her three daughters, but for everyone. “I thought it was such an interesting story that needed to be told.”

She also wanted to explain her mother’s life. Many people in Palisade knew about Audrey Musick Krotter’s mental problems toward the end of her life, and her daughter felt that the book would be a tribute to her.

“I also wanted to have a true account (of the family’s life) because once people read the book they’ll see it wasn’t as great under the surface as they thought.” The Krotters had money, through a string of lumber yards, and people might have been jealous of their wealth, Johnson noted.

Not many families are perfect, but people don’t talk about the problems, Johnson pointed out, so she wanted to bring to the surface the fact that money doesn’t make a family happy.

Dean Krotter owned eight lumber yards, beginning with one in Palisade started by his father, F.C. Krotter, about 1890.

Those lumber yards included those in Wauneta, Imperial, Benkelman and Hamlet, among others. The one in Imperial, the current site of Adams Lumber, had the name “Krotter” painted against the north side of the building, visible for many years.

That lumberyard was sold about 1980 to John Fitzgerald, a partner in the Palisade lumberyard, and became Chaco Lumber.

Johnson and her siblings didn’t know about her father’s hoarding when they were growing up. As a matter of fact, Krotter didn’t reveal the location of most of the coins to his wife until he had a heart attack in 1958.

Johnson said recently that her father, who was known in Palisade as an “eccentric,” purchased most of his gold from a coin shop in New York City. When she talked to the owner while researching her book, he told her Krotter was a “hoarder,” rather than a collector.

“He got most of his silver from vending machine operators,” Johnson said. Other silver was shipped to the post office in Palisade.

Looking back, Johnson said the postal employees were discreet, as they had to know “huge amounts of silver were coming in.”

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Krotter also obtained canvas bags of quarters via the Railway Express when a train still traveled through Palisade.

Johnson and her husband, Wells, didn't know how much the people in Palisade knew about her father's hoarding when they decided to look for the coins the summer of 1978.

They were motivated by the theft of some coins from a cedar chest in Krotter's bedroom. Evidently a "young man" was spying on Krotter, and knew where he kept at least that much loot.

Krotter was incapacitated by a stroke and heart attack, and wasn't living in the home.

"Maybe he thought it was a coin collection," Johnson said. Whatever the youth thought, he ended up in the state penitentiary, and could have told anyone about the hoarding.

So, Johnson and her husband and sister Diane were very careful about not appearing as if they were looking for anything when they stayed at the house in 1978.

They first discovered an opening beneath the storeroom floor that contained several bags of gold coins.

They also found coins in amongst old toys in a fruit room, in a clothes chute, and in the attic.

Exploring the garage while making sure that no one would see them carry in shovels, the Johnsons and Diane dug up a large wooden box filled with bags of coins.

Johnson said the search was exciting but frightening. "Maybe there were people waiting for us to come back and to watch when we started looking," she explained.

At midnight on a hot night, while the family was sleeping in the house, Johnson woke to a noise in the yard, and saw a person standing under a window.

All in all, over \$1.5 million in coins was discovered, or over two tons of gold and silver.

The next question was, how to transport such a bulky fortune to Denver and safely?

Johnson employed an FBI agent with a car and van to transport the money. To keep from prying eyes, the loading was done at 6 a.m., a time the Johnsons had determined was the least busy time in town.

Good friends Clark and Helen Brown told neighbors who asked about the activity at the old house that the girls had found someone to buy all those old musty books left behind when the Krotters deserted the once-beautiful house.

Johnson said the family later found out that "really hardly anyone in town knew it" about Krotter's obsession with hoarding money.

The money, including 200,000 silver nickels, could have been sold at the peak of the silver trade in the 80s for \$1.5 million. However, Johnson said it wasn't, so lessened in value as the years went by.

The money was split between the siblings.

Johnson, who is the author of several other books, including the just-published "Amputated Lives: Coping with Chemical Sensitivity," said "The Eleventh Hour" is in its second printing, with about 750 books sold.

It is on sale at The Wauneta Breeze office for \$15 plus tax.

A minister at Dean Krotter's funeral, a newcomer to the area and not in the know about the hoarding, recited Psalm 19: The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold.

Johnson found the selection ironic.