

## Gus Spitzmiller, Plumber for all Middle Park

By *Idelia B. Riggs*

Sky Hi News Vacation Edition, May 1961, Granby, CO

“A Daily Prayer: Lord, help me keep my dam nose out of other people’s business.”

This prayer hangs beside the piano loaded with pictures of their family in the home of Gus and Anna Spitzmiller of Grand Lake, Colorado: It’s a good prayer, but hard to keep; for Gus, as the only plumber in Grand County, had his nose in everybody’s business who lived and prospered in middle Park.



The story of this man, nicknamed “Pipes”, is the story of change from the Olden Days to the Newfangled Ways of water in the house and a bath instead of a path?

The reluctance of the pioneers to give in to change Gus could understand. Even he was caught between his love of his work and his love of the mighty mountains of Middle Park where he could fish and ride and prospect for gold and never miss the plumbing comforts by which he made a good living. Ten summers 1907-1917 he spent like a pale Indian in the high country around Grand Lake, returning to civilization and his pipes each fall to spend the winters following the advance of progress with his plumbing throughout the Midwest and Western states.

Then Progress puffed over the Continental Divide with Dave Moffat’s Denver and Salt Lake Railroad, and “Pipes” Spitzmiller finally cast his lot with Lady Luck in Middle Park for half a century and four years, this has been his home and he loves it.

Today Gus, 77 this April 23, is one of Grand Lake’s most colorful story tellers and beloved by summer folks who count that day well spent when they can “get Gus started spinning yarns” on the bench by the Village postoffice. And if they are somewhat embroidered, so what. They make mighty fine listening!

Born in 1884 of German parents who came to Cincinnati, Ohio in 1880, Gus grew up expecting to follow the family trade of stone-cutting. But progress in the form of cement ruined the stone-cutting business in Ohio (if not in German’s Black Forest whence they came) so young Gus apprenticed as a plumber at the age of 15.

“Plumbing was a dirty, little thought of trade in those days,” Gus recalled. “The shop was usually in an alley and there was a slate hanging on the door where people wrote down where they wanted us to come and work. And it was work, hard work! Everything was lead, lead, lead. And I got \$3 a week pay for 9 hours a day, 6 days a week. Young bucks didn’t start at the top then like they want to now.”

But how did you get from Cincinnati, Ohio to Middle Park, I queried.

“Well, you remember the Frisco fire in 1906? I was a full-fledged plumber by then and when they offered free transportation to San Francisco for carpenters and plumbers to help rebuild the city, I was one of the first to hop on a train and head west.” Here he paused and chuckled. “But it took me forty years to get there.” (He finally got there for his son-in law’s funeral)

It seems that Gus decided to stop over in Denver and visit his Aunt Victoria Richter for a few days before heading on to Frisco. But he fell in love with the mountains and the climate, so he got himself a job of plumbing in the old Sims Building on 15<sup>th</sup> and Champa.

“That summer there was a big to do about the Moffat Railroad reaching Kremmling up in Middle Park around July Fourth. It had got to Granby in 1904 and to Hot Sulphur Springs in 1905, and I decided to head for the hills the next summer as soon as I could get there.”

And that is just what he did. Giving up his plumbing job in Denver in the spring of 1907, “Pipes” boarded the train with Fred Mowbry and headed for the hills that were to become his home. Tom Johnson met them at Granby with team and wagon. They drove to Grand Lake and later from there to Squeaky Bob Wheeler’s Ranch up the North Fork of the Colorado, the present Phantom Valley Ranch now absorbed by the Park Service.

“I had two jobs that summer. I had signed up to do 20 feet of mine assessment work for the Baker Brooks Livestock Co. at \$10 a foot. That meant \$200 for a summer’s work, dam good pay. Then I got \$2 a month and board and room for wrangling horses for Squeaky Bob.

“That Bob was the cleanest and the cussinest bachelor in the world, I know, but the best storyteller, too. Shep Husted used to bring guests over from Estes Park, highfalutin’ folks with diamonds as big as my thumbnail. They rode over the Old Fall River Pass and Milner Pass at Poudre Lakes and on down to Squeaky Bob’s

“And between us we’d managed to put on a pretty good show for them. I wasn’t too smart about horse wranglin’ but I loved it; so I’d tie a ribbon on every nag and then a ribbon to match on his saddle, so I wouldn’t get mixed up. Squeaky got 50 cents a night for graining and wranglin’ the horses, and that was my job.

“I put bells on some of them, but those dam horses were smarter than I was, and they’d stand perfectly still in the willows and let me ride on by, I’d go back to Squeaky and tell him the horses had got out and then’s when the fun would begin.

“Squeaky would whip out his 6 shooter, a big 45, and fire straight in the air. That brought all the dudes up out of bed a running. He’d wave that 6 shooter at me and cuss, “You’re a goddam liar. You get those dam horses in here in ten minutes or I’ll fill you full of lead.” And I wasn’t too sure he wouldn’t do it! “Such was life at the first dude ranch in Grand County!

But tell me about your mine, I prodded. “Oh, it was a good mine, a dam good mine, only it didn’t have any gold in it. “Course, I wouldn’t have known gold if I saw it, and I was too lazy to dig much when the fishin’ was good, but it was a good mine.

“Eleanor Bryant Flanagan’s great grandfather Shipler was mining in here then, and he gave me a 50 pound sack full of gold. I buried it safely in the hills somewhere, and it’s still there – I never could find it again. Later, I found out it was iron pyrites, fool’s gold! Shipler Mountain was named for him.”

Gus was a joy to interview for so seldom did he need prompting. “Game? Oh sure. The country was full of it. You know when you’re diggin’ all week on beans and flapjacks you get pretty hungry for meat. And we used to go up on Specimen Mt. from the Poudre Lakes to find mountain sheep. They’d always be there, two or three hundred of them, down in the crater. There must have been some kind of salt or sulphur down there to attract them. Then when they brought in the tame sheep, lung worm attacked the wild ones and they died off pretty fast. They seem to be coming back now, tho.”

Two summers Gus spent thus, then in 1909 he and three buddies hired a horse and wagon and a driver for \$2 a day and they drove up over Berthoud Pass to Middle Park. Gus continued.

“When we got above the Stillwater Ranch there was an old log cabin with a dirt roof and floor, a door but no windows, and we decided to stop there overnight. Along came Jim Crandall on a saddle horse, leading a burro loaded with coffee and whiskey, typical prospector. He stopped and said, “I need some money. I’ll sell you this 160 acres for \$100 cash.” The other boys thought I was crazy but I bought the land and next day we drove to Hot Sulphur Springs where Jake Pettingell’s dad Judge Pettingell was county clerk and we had the relinquishment recorded. So I became a landowner in Grand County for the first time, not countin’ that good mine.”

That winter when Gus returned to civilization he persuaded his parents to buy up his relinquishment and move to Middle Park which they did in the summer of 1910. They raised a marvelous garden of root vegetables and head lettuce, when the porcupines would let them.

“I can remember getting up moonlight nights and going out to the garden with a big club and killing porkies. How they loved lettuce and how they could ruin a fieldful in one night. And the next morning, without fail, those porkies would be turned over on their backs with their bellies ripped neatly down the center. Every bit of meat would be cleaned out of them and not a quill disturbed – Mountain lions!”

Now this land, the North Shore development, is probably worth a hundred times \$100.

The next winter, 1911, Lady Luck led Gus to Des Moines, Iowa to pursue his plumbing exploits. And there, at his boarding house, he met a dainty but ambitious little Swedish gal by the name of Anna Victoria Sandstrom, recently arrived from the Old Country. Hospitalized from an appendectomy after serving in the household of the governor of Iowa for a year, Anna Sandstrom was staying with friends, the Levines, when “Pipes” Spitzmiller put in an appearance. Romance immediately raised its pretty head but flourished slowly, for it took a determined Dutchman 6 years to woo and win the prettily stubborn Swedish lass Anna.

In Denver on August 28, 1917, Gus and Anna were married and moved to Fort Lyon, old Bent’s Fort, where Gus was employed as a civilian charged with plumbing, and where they lived four years. There were born three of their four children, Irving, Gordon, and Barbara. Irving is

presently working for Squibb Co., in medical research in N. J. and Barbara is a Lt. Cmdr in the Navy Nursing Service at Great Lakes, IL.

Gustave Eugene, better known as Bud by the Grand Lake folks whom he serves as town engineer at the sewage disposal plant, and TV tower, was born in 1923 at Grand Lake in the new home which Gus built here for his Anna on the foundations of the pioneer Cohen and Williams store.

“Anna kept telling me to hurry, for she wanted her new baby to be born in her own home. Then one night she suddenly said, “Get the doctor (Doctor Meyer from Granby). “I knew he wouldn’t be back till the next day, so I said, “Can’t you wait until tomorrow?” Anna said very simply, “I can wait, but the baby won’t.”

And he didn’t. He was born while Gus was gone for Nurse Swanson, a superstitious spiritualist, who served as midwife for the community. “I took a team and sled over to bring her back across the lake,” Gus said, “but she preferred to fly across on her broom!”

Now with a home and a wife and family of four, Pipes Spitzmiller set out in earnest to be the proficient plumber he was trained to be – but this time he stayed and worked in all of Middle Park, Grand Lake Lodge, in Rocky Mt National Park, decided to put in plumbing and Gus was elected for the job. All over Grand County, progress spelled Plumbing was in demand and Pipes traveled the length and breadth of the 75 mile square county putting bathrooms in the new homes of ranchers Taussig, Noonan, DeBerard, Hinman, Ennis, McElroy, Smith, Stafford, among others.

In Grand Lake his first bathroom was put into the home of pioneer storekeeper, James Cairns. “Mrs. Cairns (noted author May Lyon s Cairns) insisted on the bathroom but that canny Scot Jamie didn’t give a hoot for it.”

Then in 1923 the biggest project of his life was undertaken and nursed for 35 years. He formed and installed the Grand Lake Water Co., System, only recently replaced by the new system which affords winter as well as summer water for the famous resort community.

Now Gus has retired but his plumbing business has been carried on by his second son Gordon who makes a thing of beauty as well as efficiency out of the maze of pipes unseen by the owners whom he serves. Gus putters about the cabins which his Anna and Bud maintain for summer vacationists, and takes wonderful care of the birds in winter when heavy snows blanket the ground.

But it’s summer Gus loves best. Then returning residents stop at his bench by the postoffice and say, “Gus, how was the winter?”

And Gus can tell them!