

**A History of Red Feather Greens
and Bonnie and Hugh Drake
From the 1940s to 1980**

**By Jean Drake Emond
Daughter of Bonnie and Hugh Drake**



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by Jean Drake Emond, daughter of Bonnie and Hugh Drake

Introduction: This is a story about a small business whose owners did not make a lot of money, but whose efforts and dedication, as well as the involvement by others, enriched the lives of many people in a mountain community and other nearby communities.

“She once employed the whole town” was the headline above an article in the *Fort Collins Review* by Mary Hagen, published July 27, 1983. The article described “Bonnie Drake Day” in Red Feather July 22, 1983, and told some of the history of the greens project.

Many years earlier, Wallace Biggs, a journalism professor at the University of Wyoming who had a cabin in Red Feather, wrote an article that covered two pages in the Sunday Empire section of the *Denver Post* on Nov. 30, 1952. It was headlined “Christmas Village, a Colorado mountain community does a thriving business selling Yule cheer to the whole nation.”

Most of the wreaths were sold wholesale to church groups as fundraisers for their annual holiday bazaars, and a number were sold to florists and other businesses.

The headline from the *Fort Collins Review* was correct: The business really did employ almost everyone in Red Feather at one time, as well as people from other areas, shipping as many as 6,000 wreaths during one or more seasons, but for historical purposes, let’s go back to the beginning of the Drake family in Red Feather:

In 1924 Hugh and Oscar Drake came to Red Feather with their father, R.P. Drake, from Kearney, Nebr., where they had their own law firm. Hugh and Oscar bought property east of the Ramona dike at 176 Minnehaha Rd. and began building a one-room cabin in 1925.

Hugh married Bonnie Hess of Wayne, Nebr., in 1925. They lived in Kearney and then moved to Lincoln in 1928 where Hugh worked for the state government. In 1930, he was elected to a 6-year term on what was in those days the equivalent of a Public Utilities Commission. Hugh and Bonnie moved to Greeley, Colo., in 1938. Oscar married Miriam Eckhardt of Viroqua, Wis., in 1927. He remained in the family law firm in Kearney. Hugh and Bonnie had two children, Hugh (nicknamed “Bud”) and Jean.

The cabin was expanded several times, and the two families traded off using it during the summers. In the late 1930s Oscar bought a smaller cabin next door at 132 Minnehaha Rd. In exchange for Hugh’s expanding the small cabin, Oscar and Miriam turned over title of the larger cabin to Hugh and Bonnie. Hugh also built or expanded several other cabins in Red Feather.

The beginning of the wreath project

Bonnie was active in Trinity Episcopal Church in Greeley, including making Christmas wreaths for the church’s annual holiday bazaar in the 1940s. The wreaths became so popular that the minister, the Rev. Charles V. Young, suggested she and Hugh turn it into a business for themselves—so in the late 1940s, Hugh and Bonnie spent much of their time summers and each fall working on the wreath business.

After Jean graduated from Greeley High School in 1950 and headed for CU Boulder, they extended their stay at the cabin to full-time from Memorial Day into the first week of December. This enabled them to increase the wreath business significantly and hire many helpers who were paid on a piecework basis.

The most popular wreath was a 12” door wreath, woven on a wire coat hanger that had been bent into a round shape. The hook on the hanger served as the hook for hanging the wreath on a front door. There were also small “table” wreaths, often used with a candle inside them, as well as extra-large “double” wreaths with a second frame around the outside of the coat hanger. Those were bought by many businesses such as the First National Bank in Fort Collins to display outside their offices each December.

The greens were Alpine fir, a balsam that grows best above 9,000-foot elevation. It stands up much longer than other evergreens and is fuller in texture. The U.S. Forest Service sold permits to Red Feather Greens each year allowing them to cut the greens.

In order to find good greens, Bonnie came to know the forest above Red Feather in detail. She always knew where the sweet spots were. Many people helped her cut the greens or they went out in the woods by themselves in areas suggested by her and covered by the permit.

They made wreaths at their homes and brought them to the Drake cabin. Bonnie would inspect and weigh them to make sure they met her standards. The wreaths were hung on racks in a shed north of the cabin located in a damp area so they stayed fresh. Some weavers also built their own storage sheds.

Each wreath included several types of pinecones. The Drakes paid many people, including children, to bring cones to the cabin. Hugh would “wire” and store them in boxes in a shed on the property. He wound a few inches of stovepipe wire around each cone with the other end of wire sticking out so it could be inserted in the wreaths. A variety of pinecones were used including Douglas Fir, Limber Pine, Lodgepole, and Ponderosa.

Early each fall, several people gathered cedar, with blue and silver berries, and kinnikinnik, a mountain ground cover with red berries, and made small bouquets, tying them with fine wire and storing them in large cans to keep them fresh. Others cut red plastic ribbon and tied it into large bows. The bows were wired in advance for quick assembly during “trimming” at the Drake cabin.

Before electricity came to Red Feather people used kerosene lamps for light. It was a big day at the Drake cabin in the fall of 1952 when they turned on the lights for the first time. The cabin had been wired by Bud Drake who graduated in 1950 from CU Boulder in electrical engineering. No more need for kerosene lanterns or blocks of ice in old-style iceboxes. The Drakes got their first well (and inside bathroom) in 1954.

In the early 1950s, two rangers and their families lived year-round in homes at the U.S. Forest Service offices on West Lake, and a game warden for the Division of Wildlife and family lived year-round at Parvin Lake. They were typical of many families who worked on the greens project. Their regular jobs paid minimal salaries in those days. Many others who worked on the greens project were retired and living on Social Security or World War I benefits or had small businesses or other work that did not bring in much income, especially from fall to spring. Several ranchers and other Forest Service workers were also active in the project.

The extra money from the project helped a lot of people pay for refrigerators, freezers, inside bathrooms, and other modern conveniences. The extra income for one family with young children helped them pay for a well and cold running water.

One Girl Scout troop in Texas sold wreaths for several years. The money they made covered some of their costs for a trip to Europe.

Making the wreaths

There were some years in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Pat Barker made more wreaths than anyone else. She taught at the Red Feather Elementary School during the day and spent much of her time nights and weekends each fall on wreaths.

From 1965 to 1980, Carol Vannorsdel probably made more wreaths than anyone else, sometimes 1,000 to 1,200 door wreaths and 500 doubles. She and her husband Dick lived in Glendevey for 38 years before moving to Stove Prairie 5 years ago. She described how their goal at first was to make enough money on wreaths to pay for their children's Christmas gifts and their car registrations in January. Dick worked for the highway department and made frames for the wreaths and rolled wire. They would fill their vehicle with wreaths and drive over Deadman to Red Feather, if the road was still open. If Deadman was closed, they drove north to Wyoming and then to Red Feather.

Before each season, Bonnie would call Carol and remind her how many wreaths she made the year before, asking whether she could make X more than last year. "I never intended to make that many but Bonnie needed them," she said. She added that Bonnie insisted on the use of balsam, rejecting wreaths made of Douglas Fir or Spruce because those needles would not last long.

Others who worked on the project from the Glendevey area were Helen Elliott, Buck Elliott's wife, who made 200-300 for a few years, and Diane Rivas Elliott, married to Helen and Buck Elliott's son John at that time, made some wreaths.

Louann Aughinbaugh who lived at Spencer Heights in the Poudre Canyon made about 800 wreaths each year in the early 1960s, and Bonnie Rogers, who lived at the Boy Scout Camp, also made many wreaths. Among others who lived outside Red Feather and made wreaths, collected cones or helped in other ways were Dee and Red Ashby and their children from Cherokee Park and Jessie and Wes Swan from Livermore.

Carol Arent, who moved to Red Feather in 1971, made as many as 1,000 wreaths during the years she worked on the project, and Shirley Boyd Koenig made up to 500 plus decorative "rope." Rose Worth often made 350 doubles. Among other weavers were Sugarbabe Carnival, Bernice Gilmore, June Krakel, Erica Maxwell, Margaret McPherson, Kathy Morissette, Dolly Nelson, Kathy Rose, and Vi Stevens.

Again, Bonnie needed to make sure that she could fill all of the orders, as many as 6,000 wreaths some years.

Trimming the wreaths

From November into the first week in December, workers gathered at the Drake cabin to trim the wreaths, inserting the pre-wired cones, cedar and kinnikinnik bouquets, and red bows. The cabin was a well-organized factory with most trimming done in designated areas of the living room and boxing, labeling, and shipping activities in the east "sun" room below the kitchen. Each person had assigned duties. Bonnie provided a hot lunch, the highlight each day. The cabin was the social center of Red Feather each fall.

Among those who worked during the trimming, some of them for many years, were Ruth Anderson, Carol Arent, Betty Benson, Maxine Benson, Marge Bickhaus, Pauline Casey, Jerry Dalton, Mildred Denning, Karen Edstrom, Jane Fender, Bernice Gilmore, Emma Grauberger, Barb Hartman, Georgee Hurd, Dee Maxwell, Margaret McPherson, Carolyn Morgan, Kathy Morissette, Dolly Nelson, Nita Rainey, Audrey Robinson, Marge Scott, and Muriel Taylor. Marguerite Snyder cooked the hot lunches for as many as 20 people.

For many years Joe Bickhaus would unload wreaths brought by weavers to the Drake cabin. Also helping were Charley Arent, Carl and Bee McCarthy and children Bunny and Butch, and the Glenn Scott family. In the early years, Ted Dunning, Hans Schmalzreid, and Lou Young were involved.

Bernice George worked on the project with Hugh and Bonnie at first. She was active in the same church and had a home in Greeley and a cabin in Red Feather. She was the fire lookout on the Deadman Lookout Tower in 1943 and 1944 and returned there in 1951 and 1952.

There are undoubtedly many others not listed here, but it is obvious that it was a community effort, benefiting many residents.

Most of the church groups that bought the wreaths were located in Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, Arizona, and other nearby states. Bonnie also sold gift boxes that included a door wreath plus extra greens. The gift boxes and wreaths went to as many as 47 states some years.

Some customers came to Red Feather with trucks to pick up the wreaths. Many were mailed from the Red Feather Post Office. Hugh Drake did the bookkeeping, supervised the boxing, and scheduled the shipments. He knew just how many boxes would fit on the back of the pickup driven by Ernie Rowe, the long-time mail carrier who brought the mail to Red Feather.

In the early years, the Post Office provided mail delivery only 3 days a week in the winter. The additional business from the greens project helped the Post Office expand to 6 days a week. In later years UPS was used for much of the shipping.

After Hugh died in 1967, Jerry Dalton, who owned the Red Feather Trading Post with her husband Jack, took over the bookkeeping duties.

In 1980 Bonnie sold the business to Linda Gorton and Jody Dahlstrom who had bought the Red Feather Trading Post from the Daltons. Linda and Jody rented the Drake cabin each fall for several more years for trimming sessions.

They and others wanted to give special thanks to Bonnie so on July 22, 1983, many people came from near and far to the High Country Inn to celebrate "Bonnie Drake Day" in honor of what her business had done for residents of the greater Red Feather area over so many years.

Bonnie died on March 1, 1994.

Linda Gorton and Jody Dahlstrom sold the business in 2003 to Joan and Dick Rosecrans and Joan's son Ed Niebur and wife Tina. Dick Rosecrans died in 2008. Joan Rosecrans and Ed Niebur continue to make and sell wreaths as Red Feather Greens.

Additional information:

Hugh Drake was a leader in organizing the Red Feather Lakes Fire District, spending much of the summer of 1958 knocking on doors all over Red Feather, encouraging residents to approve a mill levy to establish a district. He pointed out that their fire insurance premiums would probably decrease more than their property taxes would increase.

Oscar Drake died in 1981 and Miriam Drake died in 2001.

Bud Drake married Florence (Flo) Steele in 1953, earned a law degree in 1957, and worked as a patent lawyer in the Chicago area until 1967. He and Flo moved to Fort Collins where he opened a patent law practice. In the early 1970s Bud and Flo bought 204 acres in Livermore between Haystack Butte and Green Mountain Meadows on the north side of 74E, across from the Glacier View Meadows fire station. They built a home there in 1973 and called it "Monadnock Ranch." Bud commuted to his Fort Collins law office until retiring in 1994. He died in 1999 and Flo died in 2002. Their land has been subdivided and is now called "Drake Ranch."

Jean, who came to Red Feather the first time in 1934, and Mark Emond were married in 1953 and graduated from CU Boulder in 1954. They lived in Cheyenne and the New York City area before moving to Anaheim, Calif., where they lived 33 years. Both worked in the journalism field. They came to the Red Feather cabin with their children for vacations almost every summer and some hunting seasons in the fall. In 1972 they bought 130 acres not far east of Bud's. They left Anaheim in 1994 and moved to Red Feather, living in the main cabin until 1996 when their new home was completed just north of Green Mountain Meadows. Mark Emond died in 2015.

The two Red Feather cabins were sold in 2000. The east “sun” room on the main cabin at 176 Minnehaha where much of the work took place each fall, is now only a memory, having been torn down by a subsequent owner.

(Submitted by Jean Drake Emond Sept. 28, 2009. Updated 4/24/2016.)