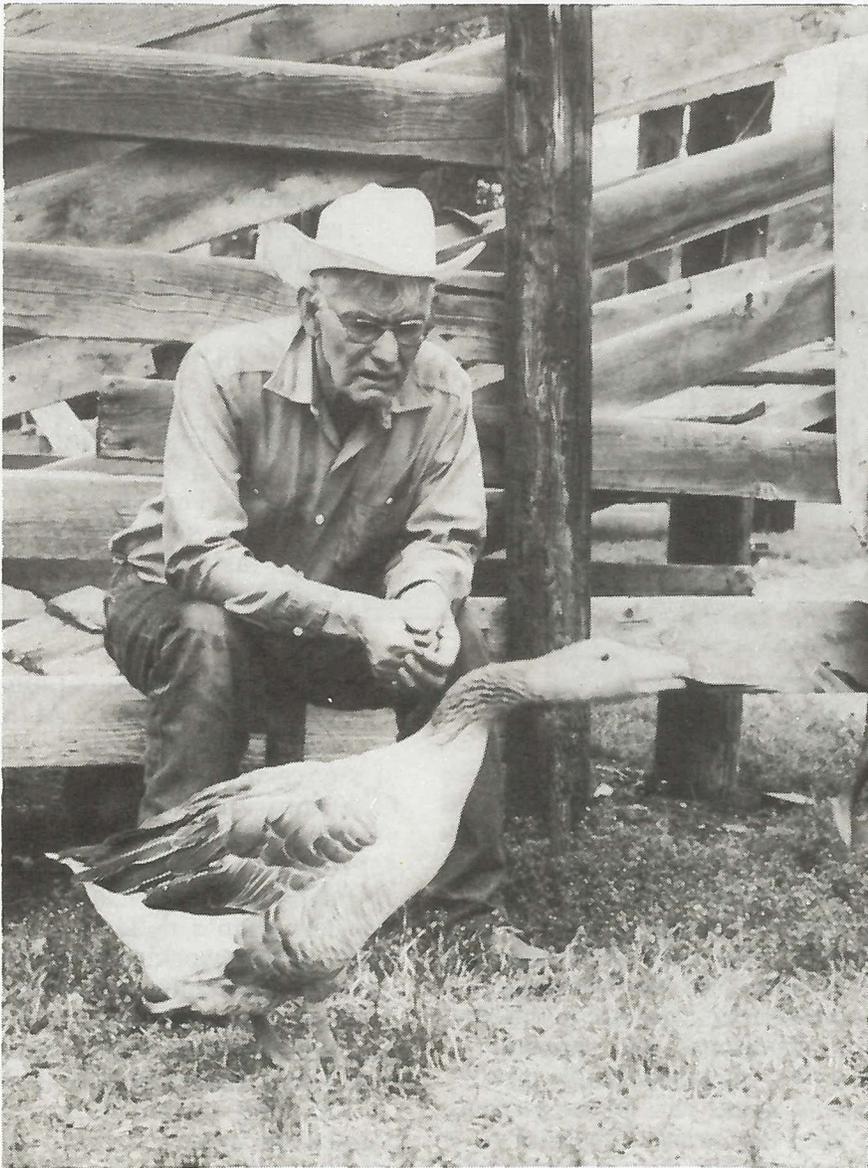


# **"SOMETIMES YOU'D DO ANYTHING FOR A LITTLE MONEY."**

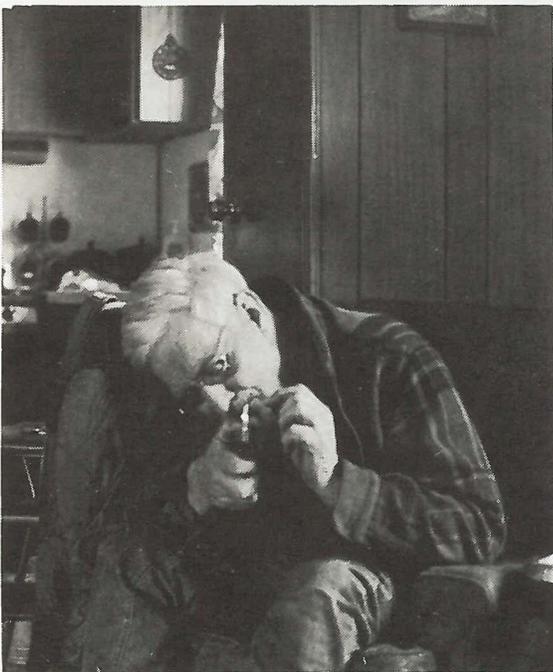
**RALPH BELTON STORY BY CATHY LANDON  
AND DEBBIE GREEN  
PHOTOS AND LAYOUT BY LOUIS OLSEN**



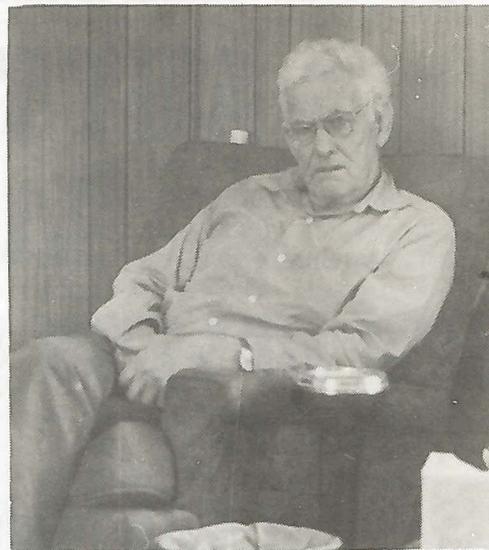
"Sometime's you'd do anything for a little money." Ralph Belton did everything from hauling coal from the ol' Block Mine, to trapping muskrat and bear on the Elk River. He also drove a school bus and hauled milk, just to make a few bucks. Ralph is a retired rancher, now residing along Elk River approximately 7 miles north of Steamboat Springs.

Our first impression of Ralph was one of great dismay. We didn't know how to take his comments that he threw at us left and right. Is he serious or just cantankerous? To answer that question upon meeting Ralph Belton would prove difficult! But after visiting with Ralph we drew the conclusion that he's a man who believes in voicing his opinion. Although his voice is gruff and demanding we knew that behind it was a man of compassion and warmth. His prophecies of Steamboat and what it's coming to are quite blunt, but we know that he is a man concerned about the world.

The days of Ralph's life were spent in many different ways. Ralph can tell you of bootlegging, coal mining, ranching, and the perils of trapping along Elk River and "probably" a hundred other subjects. Ralph, sitting in his rocking chair rolling a cigarette, told us about trapping.



"Trapping was one method of making money." Muskrat, weasel, mink and an occasional bear were the animals Ralph trapped on the rivers and creeks running throughout Routt County. He told us about how plentiful muskrats and mink were on Salt Creek. "I caught 50-60 nearly every year." When Ralph went to trapping bear in the mountains surrounding Steamboat, he trapped mostly up on Big Creek. "Very seldom would you see a bear, the bear would smell ya', or see ya' too quick." He used a trap that was a foot wide and teeth on it about an inch long. Sometimes a trapped bear would "tear down a few trees and things, but not too bad." Bears often robbed sheep of their bags or lambs.



We talked with Ralph about horse stealing around Steamboat in his day. "There wasn't near the crime then that there is now. At the time, the old judges wouldn't allow it. There was no messing around. They'd send 'em to the pen. A fellow stole a horse several years ago. He was supposed to have stolen it up on Gore Pass. He claimed that he had been riding across the range when he came upon a rope laying there on the ground, and when he got home he looked around and there was a horse on the other end of it. And that's the story he told in court...but, I guess, they didn't believe him."

Ralph found his way to Routt County in March 1910, when he moved onto his grandparents homestead on Elk River. He attended "ole 33" a one room school house along Elk River. Then each district had its own number, the first district in Routt County was at Brown's Park. Routt County and Moffat County were then one district.

Soon after he found himself in a world of hard work and little pay. "At times they never did pay me a damn cent." Ralph worked for the government in the Civilian Conservation Corps Camp and made "pretty good money, a dollar a day." They also paid for Ralph's clothes, and doctoring. "Used to be that you could get a good shirt for a dollar, an expensive pair of gloves for less than a dollar."

While working for the C.C.C. Ralph saved enough money to buy eight heifers for six dollars each, which was enough to start his own ranch, so he made out all right. "Now it just costs an awful lot to live here in Steamboat. I remember making ten dollars a month at one time here for ranch work."

He speaks of the days of the depression when life was hard and times were rough, yet comes back with, "Things ain't much different now than they were then, just costs more."

Ralph's wife, Katherine, says Ralph courted her, taking her to dances and such activities by team drawn sleds or horse back. The dances were held in the school houses throughout Routt County. When we asked them about when they got married, Ralph was quick to reply, "Well, right after she proposed to me!"



**RALPH AND KATHRINE  
AT THEIR WEDDING.**



**RALPH AND KATHRINE NOW**

Winter transportation proved difficult, but residents could usually make it with a team of horses and a sled or wagon, which at that time was a necessity. Winter coal hauling was quite a task then. "Yep, it was quite a job, especially coming down off the block, a coal mine. I know several guys who killed their horses thinking they could come down from a mine without a rough block." A rough block is, "a big chain you put around the runners of your sled, and it digs in the snow and keeps the sled from running the horses over."

Ralph's skiing abilities are very limited and were even as a boy. As a matter of fact, Ralph's only comment on the subject was, "I'll bet if you were to go up on that hill (just a small hill across from his place) you can find my skis yet!"

Coal was never hauled in the summer time, because the ranch work had to be tended to, so they hauled it in the winter. "Pert' near every rancher up and down the river hauled coal! They would haul coal one day and get to town the next, providin' they didn't run across a bootlegger, they'd come home." Bootleggers took up their residency "just up the draw from Oak Creek," some twenty miles south of Steamboat. There they did good business because, "at one time Oak Creek had more people than Steamboat, on account it was once a booming coal town."

Ralph himself didn't believe in buying liquor from a bootlegger; his philosophy went more like this, "We used to steal from a bootlegger. We'd watch him and see where he'd hide it then take it. Boy, they'd be mad! But there weren't much they could do."

Ralph also related a story about how he once helped a man up on Big Creek make some whiskey. "I never did get a taste of it, because someone came along and stole it." Ralph also told us how to make whiskey. "To start out with take sugar, water, yeast and rye (the rye can be substituted) and put them in a barrel or crock and let ferment. After fermenting put into the still ( a large metal container with a funnel top which is connected to several feet of small coiled copper tube) which is used for condensation. Boil the contents so that just alcohol evaporates and not the water. Maintain this just until all the alcohol evaporates. The evaporating alcohol goes up the funnel, the tubes being kept cold with water or snow.

Then head the tube downhill for the boiling still and hold a jug over the end of the tube to catch all of the alcohol that comes out. This alcohol is refined by adding water, so it goes from 100 proof to 80 proof. In this case we used brown sugar, but there are lots of different substitutions."

After Prohibition Ralph said, "I quit drinking after they made it legal 'cuz it wasn't fun anymore — couldn't steal from the bootlegger, so I just quit."

Ralph also remembers his grandfather telling him about a four horse team stagecoach that came down the mountain into town. He told us how it used to take a day to get from Hahn's Peak to Steamboat, because they had to change horses at several different places. Ralph's grandfather's place was one of the stage stops.

Breaking horses brought out a chuckle from Ralph and this recollection. "You got paid by the horse, about five dollars for every horse, that was quite a bit of money around Steamboat during the depression." Ralph also seemed to think getting paid five dollars a horse was all right because, "you got paid whether you rode or got thrown."

A casual mentioning of California brought out Ralph's opinionated personality. "I think that the settlers in San Francisco built where they did because it's too damn steep for pasture; the cows would just roll off."

Nowadays Ralph refrains from rodeoing and is settled down to ranch life. He doesn't hunt anymore. "Somebody built the hills higher and steeper than they used to be. He now has children and grandchildren residing in Steamboat Springs; however, they don't go to "ole '33", but they are very much a replica of Ralph's past.

Ralph drove a school bus for ten years, until he retired in the early '70's. "Had good kids on my bus," he says. Some of his former riders are now THREE WIRE WINTER staff members. One said, "You had to be good 'cause any messing around resulted with a thump on the head."

While talking with his kids about him (many smiled remembering), we knew that he had touched their hearts as he had ours, with his specialized sense of humor and his outspoken ways. Ralph Belton will always be a memorable part of the ranching community of Steamboat Springs.

