

Herb Ringer...continued.

"But he gave it all up, the thing he loved most--his music--for me, and we moved to the country to the family farm. They thought the country life, a quieter atmosphere would help my heart condition. And it did. It worked wonders. Soon I was able to run... run across the fields. Plus I was working daily on the farm.

"But my father had no way of making a living. No orchestras. No bands. Nothing. So we tried to make a living off the poultry we raised. But the price of poultry feed kept rising and we could not keep up.

"By the late 1930s, they were just barely getting by. And so, considering all they had done for me, they came to live in Nevada in 1942. My father hoped that perhaps he'd find an orchestra to play with in Reno, but it never happened. And sadly, my father never really played professionally again."

I turned another page of the journal and read a passage or two to myself. Herb's hearing is not much better than his eyesight these days and he had leaned his ear close to me as I recited from his father's words. Now he wasn't hearing anything at all.

"Let's stop for awhile," he suggested. "I'm hungry. How about some dinner?"

I nodded. Herb went to the refrigerator, pulled out a pan of pound cake, a quart of strawberries, and a can of whipped cream. "If you don't mind," he said, "let's just go straight to the dessert tonight."

"We're kindred spirits in more ways than I ever dreamed possible," I answered. "We're two divorced guys trying to prove we can live a healthy and active life eating nothing but junk food. But you have about a 40 year lead on me, Herb."

"I didn't get all of that...miserable hearing aid," Herb grumbled, "but I got most of it...don't you want some more whipped cream on that?"

GOING TO NEVADA AND 'THE WESTERN LIFE'

In many ways Herb began life all over again when he made the move to Nevada. And for Herb's mother and father it was a whole new world. Except for the summer trips to Colorado Springs when Herb was a small boy, the Ringers had not ventured farther west than Cincinnati. Now suddenly Joseph and Sadie Ringer were making a new home in one of the wildest and most remote parts of the American West.

Until 1942, neither of Herb's parents had ever camped out a day of their lives. Herb changed all that. The parents scarcely had time to unpack before Herb bundled them into his Ford and took them for a day trip to Virginia City. It would be the first of thousands of journeys, both short and long, to the remote and hidden corners of the West. In order to make ends meet, Mr. Ringer went to work at the Washoe Market with Herb who was by now the store manager. Even Sadie helped out during busy times. They worked six days a week, month after month. But they never seemed to squander a



moment of their free time.

On Saturdays, after locking up the market for the weekend, the Ringers hit the road. Herb had specially equipped the Ford so that his parents could sleep across the back seat. He pitched a canvas tent for himself and with a cook box and stove that he permanently kept in the trunk, the Ringers camped out almost every Saturday night (weather and season permitting) for years. They explored ghost towns in the Nevada desert and searched for the remains of the long abandoned Virginia & Truckee Railroad. In the summer they sought the cool relief of the High Sierras and, according to Herb's own count, made 120 trips to their favorite mountain getaway, Hope Valley. But their first overnight sojourn to Hope Valley, in June 1945, gave them more escape from the heat than they had in mind. Herb's father faithfully recorded the day...

"June 5, 1945: Herb took us up to Hope Valley, Calif. to camp out there overnight for the first time. It was cold so we built a big fire and stood around it until it was time to go to bed. We all slept in the car & when we got up in the morning there was ice in our pots. It was 22 degrees. Where we slept it was over 7000 feet. It turned out to be a fine day and it got up to 82 degrees."

And that is how Herb and his parents lived for much of the next 20 years. In addition to their weekend wanderings, they traveled to the Rocky Mountains, to the Pacific Northwest, to California, to Alberta, Canada, and sometimes back east to New Jersey to re-establish contact with the family. But they always seemed ready to travel whenever the opportunity presented itself. Even his mother, who by the time they made the move to Reno was in her 60s, adapted remarkably well to the outdoor life. To this day, Herb marvels at the way Sadie embraced camping and endured the lack of amenities. "I never heard her complain."

The Ringers owned a succession of vehicles. They sold the '36 Ford in 1945 and bought a '41 Lincoln Zephyr. And then a '46 Ford. And a '49 'Woodie.' And a '54 Ford pickup with one of the first camper shells ever made. They crisscrossed the West, again and again and traveled hundreds of thousands of miles in a part of America that was still

asleep and undiscovered.

And Herb kept taking pictures. From the beginning, he used 35mm cameras with excellent optics and later purchased a large-frame (2 1/4 inch) camera. When Kodak introduced its Kodachrome color film in 1946, Herb was one of its first customers and used it exclusively (Most of the black & white reproductions in the Zephyr are from those extremely clear Kodachrome slides).

Herb photographed the mountains and the deserts and the canyons. But he also photographed the small towns, the gas stations, the cafes, the road houses, and the people he met along the way. He created a portfolio of life in the West in the last years before Industrial Tourism grabbed it by the throat. His work is testimony and tribute to another time.

In 1963, Herb's father was diagnosed with cancer and Herb spent most of his life savings, trying to save his father's life. But Joseph Ringer died later in the year. In 1964, Medicare was enacted but it came too late for the Ringers. Herb and his mother continued to travel, to places as far away as the Canadian Rockies, even though Sadie was now in her late 80s. In July 1974, while at Banff National Park in Alberta, Herb suffered a massive heart attack. As he was being rushed by ambulance to a nearby hospital, the shock of seeing Herb unconscious and in critical condition was too much for his mother. Sadie was struck down by a cerebral hemorrhage; while Herb's heart slowly healed,



Sadie died a few weeks later. She was 92 years old. Herb had just turned 61.

Herb was devastated by the loss and discouraged by his own health problems. But one morning he arose from bed, looked out the window at the beautiful fall day that awaited him and decided he would not let his heart attack or the grief that still gripped him ruin the remainder of his life. "It was simply a case of mind over matter," Herb recalled.

He retired from his grocery job, re-located the trailer to Fallon, sixty miles southwest of Reno, and determined to make the most of every remaining day of his life. Now he would spend every possible moment exploring the West that he loved so much.

A routine, if you can call it that, began to emerge. He started packing up his 1970 Ford Econoline Camper late in January of each year. By the first week of February, Herb was ready to travel. He always headed south for warmer weather and stayed at that latitude until spring. Sometimes he journeyed all the way to the east coast; sometimes he'd only go as far as the midwest. But he was almost always back in his beloved Colorado by June.

And every autumn, I could expect Herb Ringer to arrive at the Devils Garden Campground along with his Burmese cat, Nami. He became a part of my routine as well. I could not imagine an October without Herb. Once nine years ago, I got a hastily written note from Herb; he feared he would most likely miss our annual rendezvous. Early in the summer, he had experienced some worrisome health symptoms and immediately drove himself back to Fallon. Herb was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent major surgery the next day. A couple of weeks later, Herb wrote again to let me know he had survived the operation, but remained skeptical about his prospects.

But October arrived and here came Herb. "Well," he complained gently, "I already wasted part of my summer. I wasn't about to let it ruin the entire year." Mind over matter.

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1994

And so the years passed and each visit from Herb brought more stories and pictures and memories. Herb became my Time Machine. I could say to Herb, "OK, it's the summer of 1941 and you're getting ready to head west again from New Jersey." And Herb will pause briefly, gather his thoughts and say, "Yes. I remember I left about eight in the morning. It was a clear cool day. Not too hot. I traveled north on Route 22 and stopped for breakfast at a little diner." It was like that.

In the summer of 1994, I met Herb in Crested Butte, Colorado and we camped by a lake near Kebler Pass. But something wasn't right and Herb was worried. Without any warning, his eyesight had begun to deteriorate. He had recently been to an ophthalmologist.

gist who saw no problem so it seemed unlikely that his vision could go so rapidly. But Herb was concerned enough to cut his summer trip short. He insisted he could still see well enough to drive and so we reluctantly watched him take to the road again in his camper.

By the time he reached Fallon, he could barely make out the road. And an eye examination brought bad news. Irreversible macular degeneration had robbed Herb of most of his sight and the condition would grow even worse. After more than a million miles, Herb's driving days came abruptly to a halt. He parked his beloved Econoline Camper and never drove it again.

I could not imagine how Herb would survive this sudden loss of mobility. Traveling was his passion and his life. All his friends lived along thousands of miles of highway, in large cities and small towns across America. He had not spent more than three months at a time in Fallon since he moved there in 1974.

I should have known better. Herb Ringer---the Unflappable Man. He had a phone installed for the first time in 20 years and we had an amplifier attached to it to aid his hearing problem. He made new friends. Adjusted to a new chapter. Mind over matter.

**After more than a million miles,
Herb's driving days came abruptly to a halt.
He parked his beloved Econoline Camper
and never drove it again.**

Now, instead of Herb showing up on my doorstep, I started making the long 700 mile drive to Fallon. On my first visit, I found Herb worried about finances. He was trying to live on a monthly \$500 social security check and was barely getting by. "I don't know how I will get by with all these new medical expenses and maintaining the trailer."

At 81, Herb had never applied for any of the benefits that are available to lower income seniors. We made a trip to the local social services office and discovered all kinds of programs that could help---from energy assistance to food stamps and especially medicare---he had never applied for MediCare! His near blindness allowed for a boost in his social security payment and the state even provided a housekeeper to make him a hot meal and keep his trailer tidy.

Herb was ecstatic. "I feel rich!" he exclaimed, now that his income and benefits had been boosted by a couple hundred bucks a month. When he made his weekly visit to the social services office, he always brought them flowers.

Over the next four years, I traveled to Fallon again and again; we spent countless hours pouring over his photographs and journals. His eyesight was now so bad, he could not see the images he had so lovingly taken and preserved. Many of them were unlabeled, but Herb remembered---we'd sit at his table and I would describe the scene. "Ah yes. That's Beatty. 1941....That's Wes Moreland. He ran the casino at Rhyolite." We identified scores of old black and white photos in that fashion. He told me about the artifact he kept in a plastic jar that came from King Tut's tomb. And about Shorty



Yarberry. He remembered everything. Over the years, he began to give me his most treasured possessions, including his father's journal. "My life is in here," he said quietly. "Please take care of it."

On a visit in the fall of 1997, I found Herb in a bad way. He was having difficulty breathing and his ankles were badly swollen. From my ranger days, it looked like a case of pulmonary edema---congestive heart failure--- and urged him to go to the hospital. Inexplicably, he had been and they had sent him home. "Let's try this again, Herb," and we made the short drive to the emergency room. This time he was admitted.

He was in the hospital for a few days and with treatment, he began to feel better. Herb was a hit with the nurses, who loved his stories and tall tales. Herb loved it as well and when he was finally discharged, I could tell he wanted to stay. In most ways Herb had a remarkable ability to occupy his own mind. Once during the hospital stay, I sat next to his bed as Herb seemingly stared morosely into space, a sort of blank stare that worried me.

"Herb?" I asked. "What are you thinking about right now?"

Herb looked at me a moment, and smiled. "Do you remember Ariel Sharon?"

I nodded uncertainly. What does Ariel Sharon have to do with this moment in time?

"Well," Herb explained, "I was thinking back to 1973. I think it was summer. Sharon had come to Camp David to visit President Nixon and I still remember that when Sharon got out of his car to shake hands with Nixon, he didn't have a tie on. His shirt was open at the top...Nixon had a tie on. So did everybody else. So why didn't Sharon wear a tie? I thought it was very disrespectful."

I sat there a moment, utterly bewildered. Finally I said, "Herb? THAT is what you've been thinking about? Ariel Sharon's tie-less meeting with Nixon?"

Herb nodded.

"What made you think of that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Just bothered me."
I squeezed his shoulder and said, "Herb, you're one of a kind."

But the following winter was hard on Herb, both physically and emotionally. As his health declined and his eyesight deteriorated, he began to feel more isolated from the life and the world he loved so much. In the summer of 1998, he made a momentous decision---he would give up the 'Smoker' trailer he had called home for almost 45 years and move into a retirement home, just a couple miles away.

I drove out in late July to help him sell the 'Smoker' and deal with his belongings. He filled my pickup with the artifacts and treasures of his life---even his kitchen utensils had a special place in his heart. He handed me a well-worn wooden spoon. "That was my great-grandmother's," he said sadly. "Please be good to it." Herb sat in his emptied trailer and sobbed. It was one of the saddest moments of my life.

In the next four months, Herb's health declined rapidly. We were still able to speak on the phone until late October, then we lost that connection. In a way, he almost willed himself to go. He couldn't be himself anymore, so what was the point?

On December 11, 1998, Herb Ringer left us. He died on my birthday...It was a death in the family.






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