

“I can still see everything.”

HERB RINGER'S remarkable life.

Jim Stiles

“Let me show you something.”

Herb Ringer paused a moment, then pushed his chair slowly away from the table and stood up. He turned and walked down the darkened hallway to the bedroom of his trailer, the same travel trailer he has lived in since 1954.

On November 21st of that year, the local Reno, Nevada newspaper reported:

Giant Trailer Home Sold Here.

Sale of what is believed to be the largest trailer home ever sold in Reno was announced today by Mr. Hall of the Old Orchard Trailer Court on South Virginia St.

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Ringer and son Herbert will make their home in the new giant 45 foot “Smoker” trailer at the Old Orchard... The giant trailer will be on display to the public starting Friday.

It was quite an event. Herb saved the clipping, now faded and yellow, and tucked it away with a few thousand other tokens and artifacts of memories that document his life, an adventure now almost 85 years long. Each of those tokens is a story and all one has to do is wave the memento beneath Herb's nose and everything comes back, in extraordinary detail. He looks at a photo and he remembers the date it was taken, the place and the people who were there. But he also remembers the smell of it, the angle of the light, the warmth of the breeze...the feeling of that moment. He wraps himself in the memory and the glow of it warms us both.

THE CRYSTAL-CLEAR VISION OF A CENTURY

His mind is as clear and crisp as the Rocky Mountain streams he spent summers by in years past. But his body is failing him. As I watched Herb disappear into his darkened bed room, I knew he was making his way there by memory as well. His eyesight has deteriorated to the point where he can't even see the vast collection of photographs he took of his favorite places over the last half a century. But he can still enjoy them. He pointed a finger to his head and said, “In here, I can still see everything.”

“Herb,” I'll ask, “Here's a picture of you on horseback and in the next picture there's a girl on her hands and knees under her horse. What's that all about?”

His worn out eyes sparkle. “Yes!” he smiles, “That's Skippy. That was in the High Sierras in about 1942. She loved her horse and the horse would do anything for her. She bet me she could sit right under it and I didn't believe her. So she climbed down and crawled right under the horse's front legs. So, I took a picture.”

I could hear Herb moving things about in his closet and a few moments later he emerged from the bed room, a manila-covered album held tenderly in his hands. He returned to his chair, a bit winded from the short trip, and then placed the large book in my lap. It was the size and shape of a photo album but was covered with brown wrapping paper and held together with yellowed Scotch tape. I opened the binding to the first page. In block letters it read:

1944 RENO, NEVADA STARTED ON XMAS EVE
GIVEN TO ME AS A GIFT THIS BOOK BY MY SON HERBERT.

“This was my father's journal,” Herb explained. “I gave the blank book to him a couple of years after I moved my mother and him out here to Nevada from New Jersey. He kept it going until just a few months before his death in 1963. Now my eyes are so bad I can't even read from it any more...Would you read a few of the entries for me?”

I carefully thumbed through the hundreds of handwritten pages; Herb's father painstakingly recorded the events of their lives with a fountain pen and supplemented the text from time to time with old black and white photographs, newspaper clippings and telegrams.

“Well Herb,” I said, “Why don't I start at the beginning?” Here's your father's first entry...

Christmas Day Dec. 25th 1944

We are in Reno, Nevada and it is our second Xmas here. We lived at 988 Watts Street and I have been working at the Washoe Market with Herb. Herb took us on a trip this day. We left Xmas Eve and got home tonight as we had two days off from the store. We left at 7 a.m. for Winnemucca and got there at 3 p.m. We took a hotel overnight so we walked around town and after supper went to the movies. We had a swell time.

“Yes,” Herb nodded. “I remember that day so well. That was such a long time ago.” He looked at me and strained to see the outline of my face and he smiled again. “It's

even been a long time since we met, hasn't it?”

I nodded. “Where have the years gone, Herb?”

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH A REMARKABLE MAN

I met Herb Ringer in the early autumn of 1981 when I was a seasonal ranger at Arches National Park. In the evenings we used to walk the Devils Garden Campground to collect fees and to say hello. I found fee collection to be a tedious task most of the time, but the opportunity to occasionally meet someone special while making the rounds kept me hopeful. It was like that with Herb.

From the first evening, I found myself fascinated by his stories of the West and the passion with which he told them. After a several days we traded a few details of our personal lives. I was enduring the aftermath of a divorce that summer and when he asked me if I were married, I gave Herb the two minute version of the ordeal.

Herb placed his hand on my shoulder and nodded empathetically. “Yes,” he said. “I know...I know what you're going through. I was married once...”

His eyes drifted away from me as he remembered and talked and it appeared as though his gaze had settled on the distant La Sal Mountains. But I had the feeling his stare was cutting through the haze of time, not miles.

“...1938. I was married for a short time to a local girl. I traveled all the way to Reno, Nevada from New Jersey and got a divorce.”

His eyes welled with tears. “Oh I loved her...I still love her, I guess.”

I looked at this man, still staggered by a sense of loss, more than 40 years after his marriage failed, and I selfishly thought to myself, am I going to still feel this bad in another 40 years? The prospect of it made me shudder. But from that moment, Herb and I became kindred spirits.

HEARTBREAK AND A NEW LIFE

Herb told me about his marriage. They had met several years earlier and were married on October 25, 1938. “She was beautiful...a beautiful girl. But we just couldn't hit it off right, and rather than destroy each other, I decided I would have to make the move to end it.” The details are still too painful for him to discuss but eventually Herb traveled all the way from his home in Ringoes, New Jersey to Nevada and seek a divorce. In those days, Nevada was the only state in the country that had fairly liberal divorce requirements and Herb simply

didn't want to go through the painful process of a divorce in his own home town.

After the divorce was finalized in Carson City, Herb returned to New Jersey. He had borrowed \$1000 to make the trip and so he went right to work to re-pay the loan. In six months he was debt-free but something unexpected had happened to him during the five months he spent in Reno; now he found himself dreaming and day-dreaming of the West he had left behind. He had never seen such magnificent open country and now he realized he could not bear to live without it.

“I had the great urge to return to the Western Way of Life. And so I did.”

**But he also remembers the smell of it,
the angle of the light, the warmth of the breeze...
the feeling of that moment. He wraps himself
in the memory and the glow of it warms us both.**

For the third time in two years, Herb loaded up the '36 Ford sedan and headed West in the winter of 1941, just before Pearl Harbor. He would never return East to live again. “From then on,” he remembered, “I was a tourist when I visited New Jersey.” Herb set out to find work and make a home in this strange new land. He had learned the grocery business at a small store near Ringoes; it was Herb's first job and he loved it. Always the gentle gentleman, even then, Herb remembers that “I enjoyed being able to help people. My parents always taught me to be courteous and polite but this allowed me to do something for others.” So he applied for a job at the Washoe Market in Reno. He would stay there for the next 18 years.

And Herb set out at once to document his new life, although he failed to see the significance of it at the time. He loved to take pictures and he loved to write down his impressions and memories. He never considered himself proficient at either, but his efforts prove otherwise. Over the next 40 years, Herb took almost 10,000 photographs of an American West that simply doesn't exist anymore. And his journals fill dozens of spiral notebooks. For him, it was a simple but enjoyable exercise; even Herb could not dream or predict the changes that lay ahead.

But while Herb basked in the excitement and adventure of this new home in Nevada and scribbled notes and took pictures, he could not forget his parents, who still lived in New Jersey. His mother and father had seen hard times during the Depression



and now, practically penniless, they barely survived on the Ringer family's farm in a small house they had built several years earlier.

I don't know that I have ever met anyone whose devotion and loyalty and sense of responsibility to family was as strong as Herb Ringer's. And so, two years after his own migration to Nevada, he returned east yet again and brought his mother and father back to Reno with him. "They did so much for me," he once said. "Letting them stay with me for the remainder of their lives was the least I could do." His memories of childhood are still vivid and sweet, but sometimes touched by a hint of sadness. Herb remembers the early days...

"I was born on July 15, 1913 in Brooklyn, New York at 80 Cornelius Street. We were living in my grandparents' apartment while they traveled to Europe for a last visit. We moved to Cincinnati, Ohio not long after that. My father had a contract with the symphony starting in October. My father played French horn and my mother took care of me. I really don't remember much until I was four, but that is where my life really began.



"When I was about four my father had an engagement to play the summer season out in Colorado Springs with a local band, the Colorado Midland Band, owned by the Colorado Midland Railroad. So we journeyed by train across the country to Colorado and my father rented a small cabin there. That cabin, by the way, stood until the 1980s when it was torn down for a new apartment complex. We spent a very enjoyable summer there. We loved the outdoors and we hiked every day. I remember they bought me a small red tin wagon which could be hauled quite easily to places like North and South Cheyenne Canyons.

"My father only had to play with the band in the evenings at the park so we had a lot of time to see many things. My mother and I sat on the grassy lawn and listened to the concerts each evening. We were there for most of the summer; then we'd return to Cincinnati and he'd play with the orchestra. I went to my first concert when I was five and I remember that with a shaking finger my father told me to be very quiet and not talk or rattle a paper or in any way disturb the other people who had come to enjoy the concert.

"We lived at 123 Mason Street in Mt. Auburn, a part of Cincinnati, but later the landlord bought a large three story building with a cupola on Auburn Avenue, and we moved into an apartment there. It had a huge living room about forty feet long and a bathroom and kitchen, and so we were safely ensconced there and enjoyed several years at that location. It had a large yard in back and it had a playground atmosphere where I could play. My father always brought me toys when he was on trips with the symphony. One particular set of toys was a set of little colorful Swiss buildings and I placed them around my train set. They lasted me for forty years.

"So I had many enjoyable days in that yard and I had the company of lots of squirrels who served as constant companions. But I didn't have a lot of friends. I was a loner, even then. I learned to entertain myself quite well.

"That is partly due to my father, I suppose. He devoted his life to his French horn and practicing it to perfection and he didn't want to be interrupted by screaming children. I could play in the house and I had toys to play with beyond measure but I had to handle them gently. That's why they lasted me countless years. But I was pretty much alone. I didn't have the knack of making friends.

"When I was 12 I contracted rheumatic fever and it was treated much differently in those days. I had aspirations to follow in my father's footsteps and be a musician but when I got sick the first thing they did was take me out of school and my musical aspirations ended entirely. It was thought that I should be kept as quiet as possible; sometimes they kept me in bed for six months at a time. And yet, I didn't feel that badly...just tired I guess.

"And then, when I was 13 years old, we left Cincinnati forever, thanks to the murderous intent of the symphony conductor Fritz Reiner, who disliked all American musicians. He employed European musicians thinking they were better equipped to perform the great symphonic selections than their American counterparts. My father had already played 16 years with the symphony and it was a terrible defeat when he lost his position there. Up until the last three years, when Reiner arrived, he had loved his work, associating with all the great classical musicians of the world. So we moved back to New York.

"For a couple years, my father played with some of the large theater organizations. He played for the Lexington Opera House and for some movies. He played with many pit orchestras...he once played with Major Bowes of the Amateur Hour. He saw many good and many really poor performers on the stage. He often saw many of those poor performers 'get the hook.'

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NEW Backbone members for OCT/NOV

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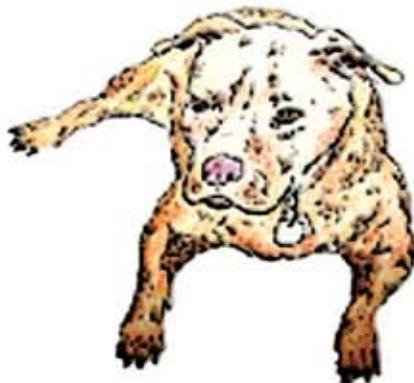
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