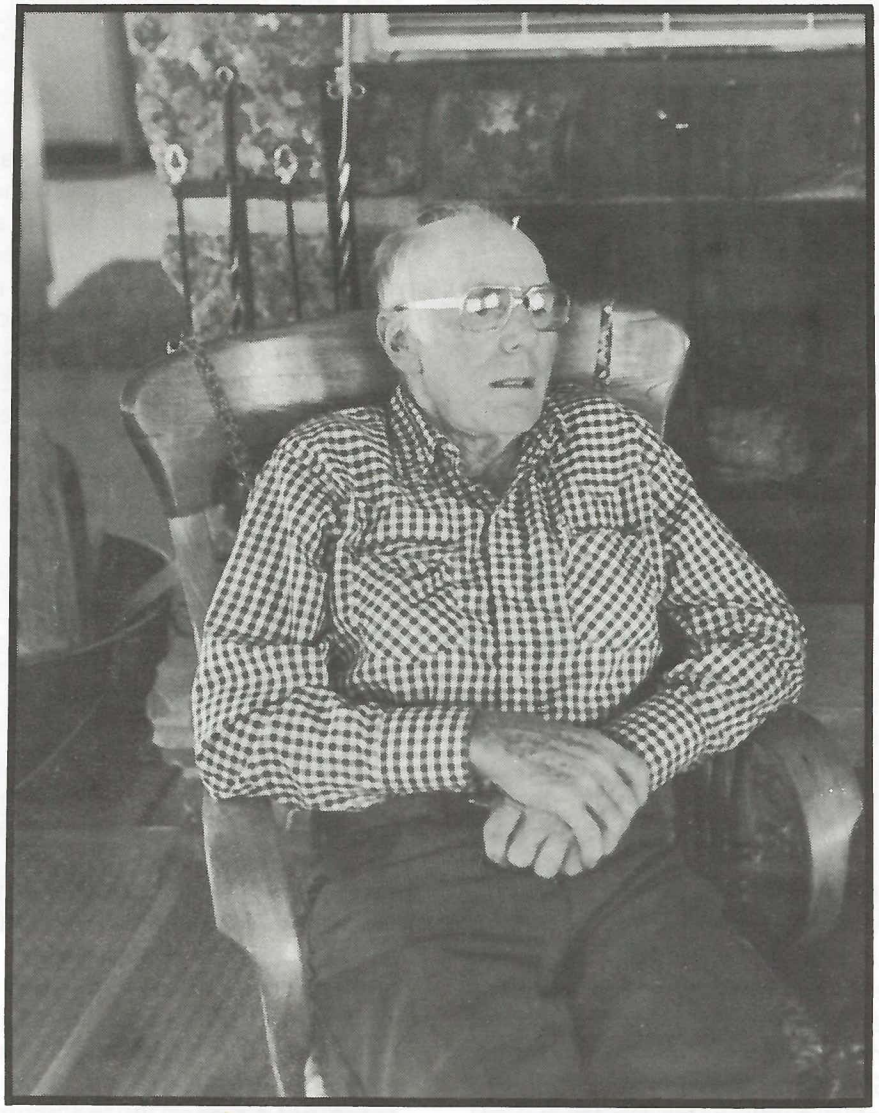
Wayne Whitecotton

"It was just life as it comes."



"...we all enjoyed all of it, so I suppose now to you it looked like hard times, but it wasn't..."

By Kristin Bostrom and Danny Horne

Wayne Whitecotton, a resident of this peaceful Yampa Valley since the age of three, is still alert and spry in his enthusiasm for life. His positive outlook and excellent memory make his lifetime of ranching, mining, and armed service duties come alive as we (Kris and Danny) reminisced one fine afternoon at his 'spread', 12 miles southeast of Steamboat. Mr. Whitecotton told us about army adventures, hours spent in the mines, and days and years spent on the ranch cultivating the land. He started at the beginning...

"I was born February 26, 1908, in Topeka, Kansas. I only remember a little bit of Kansas, and in 1911, we came out to Routt County. We came by train in an immigrant car, with our household goods, machinery, horses and all. There was a special rate, a freight rate. I am not sure but I think that we didn't have to pay any fare to ride the passenger train. That's the way I

WAYNE TELLING ABOUT HIS SCHOOL DAYS.

think it was, either that or the immigrant car came free of charge. The immigrant trains brought people to this part of the country. They wanted to build up this area. We got in at night and got off the train at Sidney. We came out here, to the ranch. Some time after that, the next thing I can remember was the summer that we built the old house. I remember at that time I was like all kids, mostly underfoot. My parents wanted me out of the house. So I searched from there on out and just learned my way around as a kid.

"My granddad was a homestead farmer. He homesteaded part of the land and bought part of it. My dad and uncle lived on farm parcels. When my grandparents died, my dad had been farming it all this time, so he got it.

"In my family there were four girls and three boys. We were like most all farm families, lots of kids, that was the way it was. During World War I my older sister and I worked around and picked potatoes and sorted them, and anything else there was to do. She didn't help in the fields with the thrashing, like I did. She helped in the house, with the cooking. I did haying and things like that.

"We went to school over at lower Oak Creek, three miles from home, straight up the hill from where the Wingets live now. My first year I rode a horse and after that my sisters and I drove a horse and buggy. There was 22 of us one year, all grades, of course, a typical country school. Everyone around here went to country schools, over at Sidney or Cow Creek, except for the kids in Steamboat. As far as discipline went there was no trouble with the kids then. If a kid went home and his parents found out that he had given the teacher trouble, they were in for a lot more at home. I guess it was quite a chore for the teacher to teach all the kids from the first grade straight to the eighth. Then when it came time for the eighth grade graduation it was another chore, but I never heard about any of them complaining.

"There was only one time that I got into trouble. We had a man teacher, the only one I ever had. We were in class, and I wasn't paying much attention when he asked me if I was interested and I said, 'No,' and he said, 'Okay, go take your book out to the barn to study.' About a half hour later he sent the other kids out to tell me that I could come in. He really never had any trouble with the kids, none of the country schools did really.

"Most of us kids had to do a lot of work when we got home at night. And in the morning I had to get up and get the horses in and get my horse ready to ride. My sisters helped in the house. We didn't have time to run wild, not that we didn't want to. Then we had a lot of school work to keep us busy.

"By the time we had grown to be teenagers we had parties around the neighborhood. One neighbor, Fred Barkley, had a phonograph or graphaphone, whichever you wanted to call it in those days, and some dancing records. The old folks would play cards, and the young kids would dance. We had parties at the Rayburn's, and we would go to parties with Florence Woods, Sidney Woods, all of the Sellers, the Fisher girls, plus my sisters and my cousins. Put all the families together, and there would be about a dozen of us teenagers. I guess we did that from about 1929, till I went into the service.

"We seldom went to Steamboat. It was quite a trip from here to Steamboat, and if we got there once a year we were lucky. Oak Creek always had a good Labor Day celebration, so we went to that instead of the Fourth of July in Steamboat, mainly because it was closer. I remember some of the rodeos I went to; they were awfully exciting, and they were always in Steamboat. Oak Creek had a rodeo that was fairly good, too, but most of the riders are gone now. There were some good riders, in the beginning of the rodeo days. I remember some like Tucker Wren, Ruben Squares, Ted Branch, Wilber Duncan, Tuffy Wren and Farrington Fairbanks. I didn't get to go to as many of them as I would have liked. One time I got to go to Craig for a fair, and that was a real highlight.

"We did ski in the wintertime and had summer school which kept us busy in the summer. When we were home we had to work in the hayfields or something. In the wintertime there was also the Literary club at the Sidney school house, and that was some entertainment. Of course that was after we got to be teenagers. Before that when we were kids, we really didn't do that much. We had skis, and we had a sled. When the snow got crusted we would ski or sled. We wouldn't have to worry too much about the fences because they were snowed over, like a Three Wire Winter.

When we skied down the hills, we would spook the cows, as long as our parents didn't catch us.

"My first pair of skis were made out of some old flooring boards with a piece of tin on the ends, turned up. In those days you skied in your shoes, you didn't have special boots. The skis were tied to your feet, and they were twice as wide as cross-country skis are, maybe four inches wide. Then I got some store-bought skis; I was really uptown then. One day someone told us about bindings. I took a piece of harness leather and made us some, with a strap over the top of your foot, and a strap around in back of your heel with a buckle in back. So that was our bindings that we skied with. I really don't know what skiing is like nowadays.

"I also used to do some trapping in the summer. I'd take anything that I could get in a trap. I could sell jackrabbits for about 35 cents apiece. I always managed to get one or two a week. I was able to get a lot of food. I got most of the food from about the time I was old enough to start trapping till the time I got to be 15 or 16-years old. Then I graduated to where I could get coyotes. I trapped coyotes till about 1930"

Wayne was like most ranch kids at that time. He graduated from school at the eighth grade level when he was 13-years old. After he graduated from school he started in on farming with his father. Mostly we were what they called dirt farmers, because we didn't have many cattle. Most of what we raised was small grain, hay and garden crops that we sold in Oak Creek. We could sell almost anything that we could produce to eat; meats like beef, pork, chickens, turkeys, and eggs and butter. That was what we lived on in those days; the things that we sold to people at the mines, in Oak Creek, Phippsburg, and Haybro. Haybro is not called that anymore, now it is called Edna. Haybro is short for Hayden Brothers Coal Company. It was right where Edna is now. The tipple was on all those old cement pillars there. I worked on the tipple for two or three years and then went underground. At the time they had a couple of special things like an electric tipple service and some electric drills. That was the only tipple that loaded the trains that way until about 1942.

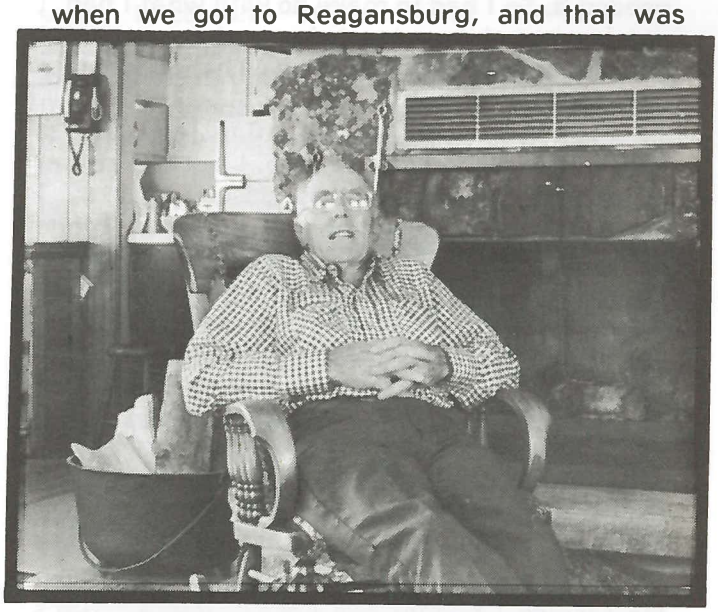
"We hauled from Chargo; that's where the Energy Fuels underground mine is now. We did haul some coal from Haybro and Oak Creek, but mostly we hauled from Chargo. You might wait all day to get a load of coal, because there was only one mine and that supplied all of Steamboat, Sidney Valley and all around here. In the winter time we used a sled to haul the coal. Most of the coal that was hauled came right through this valley from Chargo. Then they built a road over through Whitewood, and the coal was hauled over the hill. That made it shorter for the teams hauling from Shargo to Steamboat.

"The people from Steamboat almost always had four-horse teams, but Dad never did. He only took two, because it was shorter for him. I figure it was only twelve to fifteen miles to get there from the ranch. We went through what was called the Lodge, that was a short-cut; now you have to go around. We had to go to Shargo and wait our turn. It might take all afternoon, and a lot of people would wait all night, plus the day's trip over there and back. You could figure a mile and a half or two miles an hour with the team loaded. Of course, if you went to Oak Creek it was only eight miles up and the roads were better then, and the coal cost more there.

"I went into the service when I was 36. I didn't join till 1944, because I was on the ranch and mining coal. They both were essential industries, but they kept running me every six months for re-examination because my qualifications kept changing. I would say, 'Well, I'm gonna go see if I can pass my physical, then I'll know where I'm at. If I don't pass my physical, why I can farm but only six months at a time here!' All the rest of my friends had gone; everyone I knew was in, so I went too. I was in the service 27 months. The service didn't need anybody that was 36 and they didn't draft anybody that old, but I was already in so they took me.

"I didn't volunteer, but everybody I hung around and partied with had. My brother was in the service and my nephew and others that I ran around with.

"I was with Patton in a tank company. It is hard to explain what war is like. We saw a lot of torn up country and a lot of killing. Most of it was when we crossed the Rhine. We took care of a lot of prisoners. By that time Germany was starting to fold up. I think it was about the first of April when we got to Reagansburg, and that was



"I WAS WITH PATTON IN A TANK COMPANY"

WAYNE AND HIS WIFE SHOWING US THE OLD RANCH BOUNDARIES.

where we broke the back of southern Germany. They were leaving prisoners faster than we could take care of them. Also, everything you have probably heard about concentration camps is true. I've seen grown men with their thighs as big as your wrist after coming through the concentration camps.

"Germany surrendered in May and it took me until the next May to get home. I believe it was the second of May when I got home the next year. I guess you'd call it the army of occupation. We were guarding prisoners, and taking care of our equipment and vehicles. When I got back to the states things weren't really much different from when I left.

"The only hard thing was getting started back into farming. You couldn't buy any machinery, like a new tractor or a new combine, even if you needed it. So I had to make do with what I had. I also worked at the mine, to keep adding on until I got the machinery I needed. Then I went to farming.

"I worked nights at the mine, and then I worked in research for Texaco. I worked at that for several years, until it closed. In 1947, I decided I'd had enough of coal, so I quit. I then went to work and fixed cars at a filling station and worked nights at Texaco and Conoco. There was never a shortage of gas because of rationing. We could always get gas for the farm or to do what running around we had to do. We didn't take foolish trips, and there wasn't as much traveling then. I guess everybody was working.

"We got our first Ford car in 1923. Then in '35 I got my first tractor, an old Ferguson with iron wheels. In 1940 and '41 everyone around here had a Ford tractor. Sometime after I got back from the service I bought two Ford tractors. That's when the Model D was the predominant tractor. They are still around the country. I've got one out here that belongs to a friend, who didn't want to sell it, so he let me keep it. It still runs good.

"It took quite awhile to build up a herd. We didn't get it built until probably the mid '60s. We didn't buy up a bunch of stock cows to get our herd; we just raised our own. We never ran an open range operation. When we first came here, within a half-a-mile west (near Sidney), that was all open range. You could see range cattle up there anytime in the summer, and that went on through the summer time. There wasn't really any big trouble between the cattlemen and the sheepmen in my time. We never raised any great amount of sheep, maybe just one or two was all we ever had. We had eighty acres over the hill that we leased to Fuller, and he had sheep since 1928. We never had any trouble as long as they stayed out of the cow pastures. The only thing was that the sheepherders would tie the fence wires down to the ground to stop the sheep from going through, then the cows would get out by going over the wires. So we just had to get them educated. After I got done talking to the sheepherders they didn't do that again. That was the only trouble we ever had with the sheepmen. There weren't sheep and cattle wars, it was pretty quiet at that time.

"Cattle prices were a lot different than they are now. If you got 40 to 50 dollars a head you were doing good. If you got 45 or anything above 35 you were doing good. This was all after the war. 1934, '35 and '36 were dry years. We had to haul hay from the valley. This was during the depression. The man who ran the store in Sidney would stop me every time I went through there, wanting to sell me a horse or a cow. He had a real nice two-year-old horse that he wanted 16 dollars for, and he wanted 15 for his Jersey milk cow. He wanted to sell because he had to buy feed for them. The government had a program that bought up extra cattle that couldn't be fed. I think that you could get 15 or 16 dollars a head

WAYNE SHOWING RUSS SNOWDEN ONE OF HIS OLD GUNS.

that year.

"This is called Deer Park here where we live. When we came here in 1911 I didn't see a deer till I was 13. We didn't hardly see any deer here until the late 20s. There weren't any elk at that time either. We didn't live off the wild game because there wasn't any. We had pork, beef and chickens. We went out hunting blue and sage grouse, and I helped. By the time I was nine-years-old I trapped weasels and small game.

"The first gun I had was a .22 Stevenson single shot, then later I got an old .32 pistol. One day I traded Ed Sullivan 50 cents and a .22 rifle, and got another .22 special single shot Stevenson. When I was 13 my folks got me a .22 Remington. In 1927, I got hold of a 250 Savage. I did have a 303 Savage that I used for killing deer, but it was 1927 before I ever killed a deer. I killed my first deer with my 250 Savage. In fact, I hadn't seen one before then, to even shoot at.

"There really wasn't any elk until after W.W. II, and it was 1942 before I saw one. In 1936, the deer got to where they were moving into the gardens. Right now we can't raise anything in the garden. They started on the onions, then the lettuce and the peas, and last of all they've eaten the spinach. So there isn't anything left for them to eat now.

"If we had moisture and not frost we had a pretty good crop. Then we didn't have any market. That sizes up farming all through those years. If you had a good crop you didn't have a good price. That's just the way it went. If there is any land left for the ranchers it will be all right, but so much is getting divided. In the valley they got irrigation. I feel that a lot of these ranches like ours are going to be developed. Personally, I think that the people have to live somewhere, and better up here than in the high production land around Denver, where they can raise five times as much produce an acre than we can up here. You can't raise too much on the hillsides around here, I know! I've been at it quite awhile! You've got irrigation down by the river and usually you've got a good crop. We had 411 acres, and it was a lot of land to operate.

"It really wasn't hard for me to sell the ranch. My health got to where I couldn't wrestle the cows anymore. To sell wasn't a big decision really, we got the chance and took it. We sold out and were going to quit, but that didn't work. The subdivision didn't work out, so we had to take it and become the subdividers.

"I really don't have much of the original ranch anymore. You've got to have a pretty big outfit to make a go of it nowadays. Life was work, but we didn't think anything of it. It was just life as it came; we enjoyed all of it, so I suppose now, to you, looking at it, it would seem like hard times. It wasn't, we didn't mind."

We would like to thank Shane Jacobs and Russ Snowden for their help in putting this story together.