"I've probably had over one-hundred jobs in my life..." Aldis Klumker

By David Sherrod and Laura Werner

Aldis Klumker was born and raised in Toponas, Colorado. While he grew up in difficult times, he was employed at many different occupations. Today he is working for the city of Steamboat Springs. As a hunter and a fisherman, he enjoys life, and he enhances his free time with western dancing and softball supporting. More than once Aldis has been a business owner, and at one time he was the owner of the Skee Inn Cafe. He is one of the more colorful persons in Steamboat Springs.

Here is his story: "I was born in Toponas in 1920, and I didn't leave there until I went into the army. I lived there for 20 years, and all we did was work. I was nine years old when the Great Depression started; it was really rough. I tell a lot of people today and they don't believe all of that, but I can remember as a child being very poor, and I had to work. I started working when I was twelve, and I've been on my own ever since. I just barely got through the eighth grade because I was working and going to school. It wasn't on account of my parents, we just didn't have any money; that's all there was to it in them days.

"The times then were pretty hard and rough. When I was going through school, we worked pretty hard, but we didn't make much, mostly room and board. I stacked hay for a ranch when I was twelve years old and all I got was fifty cents a day and my room and board.

"My parents treated me very well. I have three brothers and one sister, Lewis, Raymond, Billy and Peggy. Raymond was the oldest, then me, then Lewis, then Billy and Peggy. There is two years difference in our ages, and I will be sixty-three on my next birthday. All of us, worked really hard, including my parents, who were really strict with us which was good. When we sat down to a meal we took all we could eat, but we didn't put anything on the plate we didn't eat. If we did we would have it for the next meal. Now don't get me wrong, we just had to stretch everything. My parents didn't care how much we ate, and the folks treated us the best they could.

"On our ranch in Toponas we raised spinach and lettuce. Some years crops would be pretty good and other years we would be hailed out and work for nothing. They had lettuce sheds in Toponas and Yampa, and the farmers used that to help live. The ranchers that raised cattle and stuff, that was a different story. The farm we were on only had lettuce and spinach, and we made a little bit of money on that. If it didn't pan out then we just didn't have anything. We had approximately fifty acres, but we farmed mostly lettuce and spinach. Some seasons there was a big market, and then others there wasn't. There was always a good chance to get hailed out when the crop was real good.

"It hailed a lot in those days. One year we were counting on this one field, and it was real good spinach and we were going to cut the next day. But, that night it hailed, so we never got a dime out of it. We had a lot of neighbors who helped with the lettuce and spinach. All of the farmers would get together and cut the crop while others would harvest grain. Nobody had enough money to hire help back then, so we would pitch-in and help one another. Nowadays you don't see that too often. Many people would travel from field to field, working.

"The lettuce business went out because the market went down, and they started packing lettuce in bigger crates and boxes. Then the market just quit. It actually was still going when I went into the service, but when I came out it was over. That was in 1945, and from 1945 on there was some but not much lettuce. The best times were from 1933 to 1938.

"We used mostly horses back then, but we had a car that we traveled in. We did our work, gathering the hay and grain, with horses. They had tractors back then, but we couldn't afford one. I can remember the first car that we had; it was a Model 'T', and the second car that we had was a 'Star' car. It looked like a little box. We got the Model 'T' when I was sixteen years old, and we had it for a long time. I remember one time we had a fire in Coberly, and we had to move that Model 'T' through six feet of snow that night. The next morning, we couldn't move it back, not even with the team of horses. That really scared us.

"My father was a tanner and a taxidermist, and he mounted heads and tanned hides. All of us kids would have inherited the ranch in Toponas and the business, but we went broke when my dad drowned in the Colorado River.

"I went to school in a school with fifty to sixty kids in grades first through eighth. We were busy, and there wasn't any recreation. We had a few foot races, but that was about it. We didn't play practical jokes on people because we didn't have time, and the teachers wouldn't allow it. We didn't have a lot of homework, because in those days we didn't have time for school work. We had other things to do at home like chores.

"We went to school by horseback most of the time, but sometimes we walked four miles. There was five of us, so generally we rode two or three on a horse. We had four work horses and two were saddle horses. That's all we had on our ranch, so that's how we got to school. The eighth grade was as far as I went, and I got no education only common sense."

"THE EIGHTH GRADE WAS AS FAR AS I WENT, AND I GOT NO EDUCATION, ONLY COMMON SENSE."

As a teenager, Aldis told us of some teenage pranks. "On Halloween, we would turn over outhouses, and we would break a board or two off. Another time we jerked the bars off the jail to let out the kids. That's the time I could have really gotten in trouble. That's when I found out it doesn't pay to be silly, even when you are having fun. That could have been a federal offense. I was sixteen years old, and they took us to Oak Creek and threw us in jail. The other guys got out early the next morning, but they just kept me in there, and I really wondered what they could do. They just scared me, which was very good.

"The next morning at 10:00 the cops asked, 'Do you know where you are going?' I had been thinking it over, and I thought I was going to Canon City. Well, they had a wheel barrel and some cement, and they said as soon as the bars were cemented back together I could leave. That took me about 20 minutes, and it really scared me. Actually the cops trapped me. I left and went to unload coal, and when I got back my buddies were all back in jail. I said, 'What are you guys doing back in here, after I pulled the bars and let you out?' And about that time two cops grabbed me and said, 'Oh, you're the one who did that!' They didn't know who it was until I told them and they were standing right there listening.

"I WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN THE GREAT DEPRESSION STARTED, IT WAS REALLY ROUGH."

"We were a bunch of kids getting into trouble. Some kids today are liable to tear anything up; some even shoot at signs, we never used to do that. Some even shoot at buildings. We were in Spring Creek changing chlorine powder, and bullets went right over our heads.

"In June 1939, my father drowned in the Colorado River down by Burns, Colorado. All of a sudden this undercurrent came up, and three people drowned. A little girl, Arleen Shellness, was saved. We were just wading and fishing in not-too-high water when all of a sudden this undercurrent came up. There were three families with us, the Klumkers, the Shellnesses and another family, and the Shellness girl was saved, but three were drowned saving her. We had our pant legs rolled up, and there wasn't much water, but a current came and took this little girl under. Someone saw her go under and dad dove after her. He had hip boots on, and as they were coming up he went under with her into a whirlpool. My dad came back up, and the little girl didn't.

"Mrs. Grill dove in after the little girl, and she was a real good swimmer. She didn't have on hip boots, but she never came up. Then Virgil saw his mother go under, so he went in to help. He was only about seven or eight years old. Then he never came up, so that was three of them. Then

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"All I got was fifty cents a day and my room and board."

Ramond Howe dove in and saved the little girl. It happened so fast, and they gave her artificial respiration. Two hours later some divers looked for my dad. They had ropes, but they couldn't do a thing.

"I was about nineteen at the time and if I would have taken one more step I would have dropped off in the same damn whirlpool. Something just stopped me, and that's all there was to it. I can't explain what it was, but Dad said something to me that I didn't hear, and he went under. A pair of hip boots can absorb a lot of water, so that was that."

Aldis continued his tale by telling us about some of his army experiences. "I went into the army in 1940. I was in World War II in the infantry and then I wound up in the 421st Quartermaster. I left Toponas and caught the passenger train to Fort Worth. I took my basic training there, but it was only about two weeks. From there, I went to California. We were there about a week, then we went overseas and never had a chance to come home. After that I was discharged.

"I was in the Wake Islands during Christmas, then I went to Honolulu, Hawaii, Guadalcanal and several others. I also had a hernia and was operated on in the army. I was redlined (my company was shipped out), so they transfered me to another outfit. I got out of the hospital, but because I was redlined I didn't get any pay until I got back into another outfit. That was pretty rough, and at that time I smoked, and I couldn't get any money for cigarettes.

"I was in the Army four years, eight months and 28 days. I didn't mind it too much, and I wanted out, but I wish I would have stayed in. I had a full term and a pretty good pension coming from that. At that time though I wanted to get the heck out of there, and went through some pretty rough deals. I wouldn't take nothing for what I learned, and I sure wouldn't want to go through it again. That was what a person had to go through and that's one of those things.

"I was at Pearl Harbor when it was attacked. We were out on the ocean aways, but we came right in after it happened. If we had been four hours quicker we would have been in the harbor and maybe at the Schofield barracks where the bomb hit. We were there for a year after that. It's hard to express how we felt; we knew it was real bad and we were scared. They say if you're not scared, you're kidding yourself. Some people don't show it as much as others. When you're where you can get bombed really quick you're scared. We were just lucky we weren't in it. We would have been bombed or killed.

"The fighting on Guadalcanal was really tough, the same with Christmas, Wake and Kwajalein. Kwajalein was only ½ mile by a mile long; Guadalcanal is a little bigger and is mostly an air base. The outfit I was with was a clean-up squad, right behind the action.

"While on Kwajalein Island I had a close call. I was looking for souvenirs, in huts buried undergound (the Japanese did that), and I crawled in one looking for sabres. When I got down there I realized that there were two Japs still there and there was nothing I could do. They had rifles, and I didn't; I was really scared. I acted quickly enough and grabbed a bar and went to work and killed them both. When I went out, I was white, and some guy asked, 'What's the matter? You look like you saw a ghost!' I told him what happened, and he said, 'No way!' I wasn't too scared to go back in there, so we crawled back in, and he said, 'Well, they are still warm!' It was either my life or theirs.

"Most of the people on Kwajalein Island were only supposed to be there for 6 to 8 weeks. Instead, we were there a year and four months. A lot of soldiers just snapped, because they wanted out of there. It was stupid to be in a foxhole, because it would bury you if a bomb hit. The island was so small that a person would be better off just standing on top of the ground. You might get blown up, but it's better than getting buried. I never used a foxhole. I just got to where I thought I was never coming back again. I asked the captain one time, 'Sir, why do you tell all these people what you're going to do when you know it's a lie, why tell them?' He said, 'You could be in a lot of trouble for saying that.' I said, 'I'm in a lot of trouble anyway, so don't worry about it.' It's rough when they tell you you're going to get out, and they keep you another six months. We would set our minds, yet they just popped and you just went crazy. After the captain stopped saying that, it wasn't all that bad. But, of course, a lot of us got to where we didn't listen to him.

"At the time we were in a mobile unit where we washed clothes and cleaned up. There was nothing to do, but we would go to the ocean and swim and go back to our dug-out. That's why it was a rough duty. We never saw anybody; all we had was K-Rations, no fresh food or nothing for a whole year.

"Finally, it took us seven days to get back from Hawaii and sixty days from Hawaii to California. We got out on a point system, and I got out a month and a half after the war ended. I had eighty-six points; that was pretty high. I was overseas almost all of the time, and if I knew what I know now, I would have stayed in there for another twenty years. I could be drawing a pension, and at the time I didn't want anything to do with it.

"I do remember some of my old army buddies. There was John A. from Memphis, and John Walkins from Yuma, Colorado, and we were together when we went in, and we got discharged at the same time. One night after the war in Denver, he said, 'Let's go out on the town tonight!' Then about 8:00 that Saturday night they called and said that he stepped off a curb and was hit and killed by a car. That hurt me worse than anything. It's rare to have a buddy that long, because they're always shipping everybody here and there.

"I was at the 421st; after that I got hurt, and I was in the 111th infantry. In the 421st quartermaster we were a laundry mobile unit. We would move in after our troops would take a island and clean up. From time to time that unit stayed in one place a year or six months.

"I got paid $25.00 a month, and it went up to $50.00 before I got out. I saved a little, and I gambled a little, but we did not have anything to spend money on. Some people would blow it from time to time or gamble it away. I gambled a little and lost some but I sent some money home the last year I was in. I made pretty good money; I tood steady K.P. and got 25 cents from each person who did not want to take K.P. I was making more than the first sergeant, and I liked the kitchen. I did not mind K.P., I was used to it. After two hours I would be out to go to town.

"I JUST BARELY GOT THROUGH THE EIGHTH GRADE."

"Hawaii was pretty good through the war, but I never did like Waikiki Beach like I liked soldier beach, the one we went to. I thought it was a better beach than Waikiki. Waikiki is very pretty, but I would not want to live there, even though they have the prettiest theatre I've ever seen. It is hot there, and in the winter time you would get a lot of rain. I did not like Hawaii that much, but when you are there with Uncle Sam you do not have much of a choice. He tells you when you can come and when you can leave, and you can't get fired or quit.

"We went broke in 1939 when my father died, and then I went into the service. My mother sold our place and married. When I came out of the service I went to live with my mother and stepfather in Baggs, Wyoming where my stepfather bagged livestock, and I had many jobs.

"Then I worked in Denver for two years. I worked for Dick Klumker as a tanner and taxidermist. Then I came to Steamboat in 1948. I moved to Steamboat to get into the mountains. I worked for the city for two years, then I started different jobs here and there. I worked for Larson Transportation for about ten years; that wasn't a steady job, just part-time.

"Back then you could get a hamburger for 50 cents."

"Then I got married. I worked in beetle camps, for the forest service, spraying beetle trees. There were sixty or eighty men in camp. Virginia and I cooked for the camp, outside of Kremmling and Telluride. We did that for four or five years and worked here and there. That's how I wound up the way I am now, having lots of jobs.

"I remember the first job that I ever had on the Perry ranch, and I plowed ground for Barney Houge when I was twelve years old. I remember I would tie up the horses and take off over the hills six miles home. Barney would come and take care of the team. In a few days I would come back and he would pick me up. I would be good for a couple of months and then he would see the team tied up to the fence and he knew I had headed for home. I worked for a lot of other places, and the forest service. I built fences and stacked hay and did all kinds of jobs. I worked for water and sewer department, that's fresh water. I like my job now, I've been with the city for eleven years. I have had 100 jobs or maybe even more, I would say."

Aldis then told us about owning the Skee Inn Cafe. "I owned the Skee Inn Cafe from 1951 to 1954, then I bought the Town House Cafe, but I only had it a couple of years. It was where the Storm Hut is now. I wish that I still had it, but at that time there was nothing going on, and there weren't many people then. I ran the Skee Inn till 1953, then I sold out. At that time all you had to look forward to for business was the fishing and hunting season. You really banked on that for a couple of weeks. The rest of the time I had to cater to local people, and that's the only way I made it. I had to work hard and I couldn't hire a bunch of help, so I did it all myself. I was working eighteen hours a day. A stack of pancakes used to cost 35 cents and one was only 15 cents. Now it's about $1.90 for one pancake. Stuff is higher now but not much. Sometimes I would have three waitresses. I owned the Skee Inn first, then the Town House Cafe second, then Buddy Werner started the Storm Hut. The Skee Inn is where Panache is now. The old cooler is still in there."

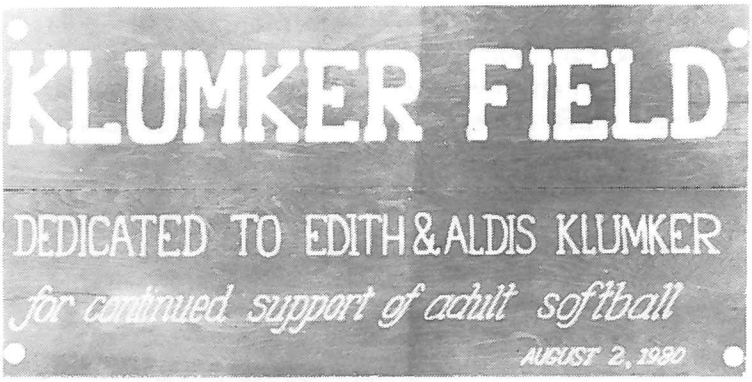
We asked Aldis what his most valuable possession was, and he said, "My fishing poles, I guess. I've had those all my life. I also guess my home and stuff like that, but my favorite hobby is hunting and fishing.

Next we asked him if he could live life over what would he do? His reply was, "I would do the same as I have done all through my life, even though it has been hard. There's some kids nowadays look forward to trouble and destruction, but back then we just had fun, like Halloween pranks. The kids' parents in those days were a lot stricter, and parents nowadays just don't take care of the kids. They just let them go, and they really don't keep them in hand. I think it would be better if there were more things for the kids to do, but I think they could find things for themselves to do, if they would just put their minds to it. Some just don't want to try".

Aldis thinks times are better now than they were back then. "Of course, it takes more money now than it did back then. Everything is higher now, but back then I could get a hamburger for 15 cents. We didn't make much money, but I think things are harder and better now than they were. Machinery and stuff back then were built a lot better, but there wasn't much of it. We didn't have any gasoline bailers and we stacked the hay by hand or with a stacker and hand-chopped all the grain. We didn't have combines but we did have an old thrashing machine that we used after we had tied it into bundles. Then we shocked it and took the team around to pick it up. We would drive right alongside the grain and thrash it out that way. It was a lot of work."

We then asked Aldis about his hobbies. He said, "Hunting and fishing are my best hobbies because I'm away from everybody else. I like to be alone because I don't worry about anything. I would like to go salmon fishing up in Alaska, and then up to the Calgary Stampede. I still want to do that."

In the summer of 1982, Aldis Klumker was honored by the city by naming a softball field after him. "I used to go over to the softball field every night. We hardly ever missed a game. Then the city decided that I would be a good name for a field. They called me out for it, but I was going fishing. They said, 'What time are you coming out?' and I said, 'About noon.' When I got back some employees came and got me and said



there was sewer trouble at Howelsen Hill, trouble with a manhole. I said, 'There isn't a manhole,' and they said that it was plugged up. That wasn't right because there isn't any manhole, but I said, 'O.K.' We got in the truck and went there and that's when they presented the field in my name. I didn't figure anything like that, but I knew something was up because there isn't any man hole.

Aldis then continued telling us about his fishing and hunting experiences, "I was up at Bill Sherrod's ranch, and I knew that there were cattle in that area. There was this deer coming down this hill, and I shot under him. He turned and went into the bursh but turned and came back out. I couldn't figure out why, but I knew something spooked him. I started down the hill and shot at him again, but it went straight through him. I knew the country really well, and the oak brush was thick, but I knew if I went through enough it would open up. I wasn't seventy-five to eighty feet before I saw the calf. I knew Bill Sherrod was in Kansas, so I went to tell Helen. I dressed it out and when Bill came back I told him what had happened. I said, 'Bill, what do I owe you?' and he didn't say anything. I said again to Bill, 'Bill, what do I owe you?' I knew that he was getting pretty fair money for a four hundred pound calf. So Bill said to me that I should give him $75.00 and keep the meat and that he was getting at least $200 to $300 for those calves. I don't like accidents like that, because a person could have been shot.

"Another time on Buffalo Pass I got a seven point elk. We went up on the 17th of October, and it had snowed sixteen inches that day. I had a jeep, and my three friends had a pick-up. Jim Camilletti and I were walking when we came across this bull track and it was pretty fresh. We tracked the bull four miles, and I knew that we were close. It was then snowing so hard, I could not see very far in front of me, and I did not have a scope at the time. I looked up just as he turned his neck, and his rack was sticking up. I shot twice and hit him both times in the neck. He went down and it took three of us to get him out. We had to drag him to the jeep, then we loaded him. A fellow from California wanted that head but all I wanted was the meat, so I said,'Take it.'

"I hunted some this year but never got anything. You know, I like the city pretty good, but I liked it better a few years ago without all those people. I don't mind living in the city, but I really like the country better."

"I SPENT ALMOST EVERY NIGHT AT THE SOFTBALL FIELD DURING THE SUMMER."