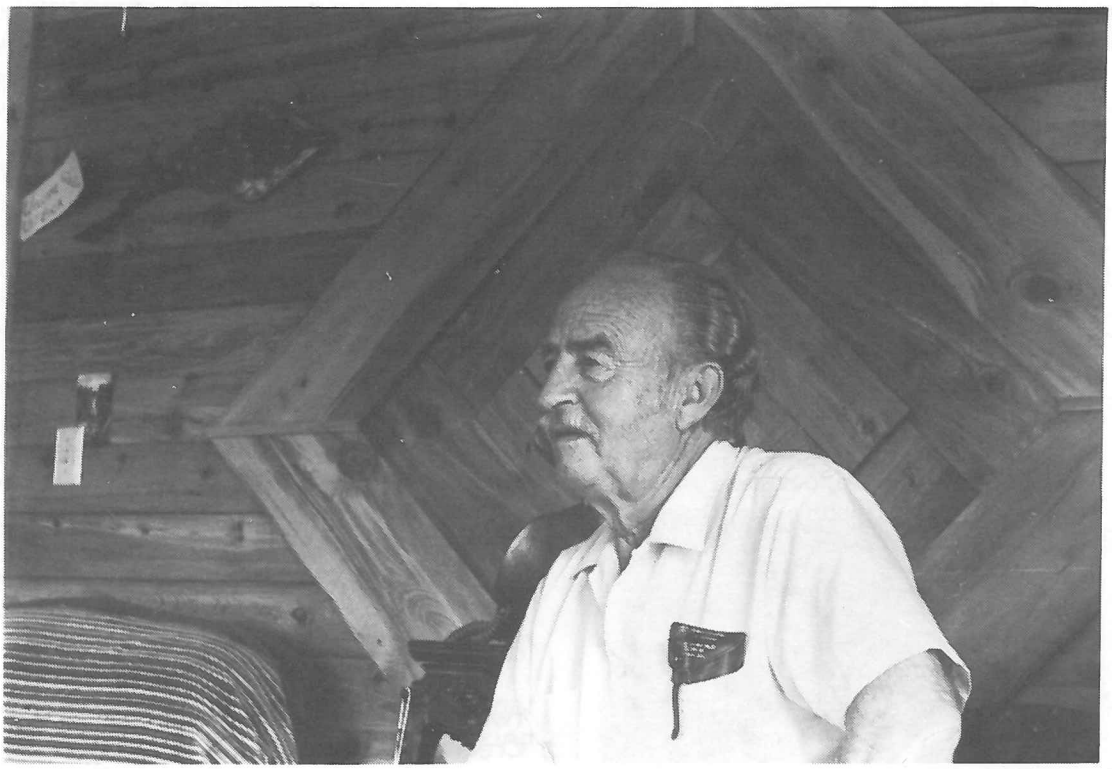
THE YOUNGEST OLD MAN IN THE COMPANY

ROGER BUTLER

BY TROY KELLER AND KENT FLETCHER



Roger and Lucille Butler are part of the fortunate Steamboat Springs population that head south for the winter. When Troy and I started this story, we knew we had to get all the information before the Butlers left for their winter retreat in Guaymas, Mexico. Roger started his story at the beginning.

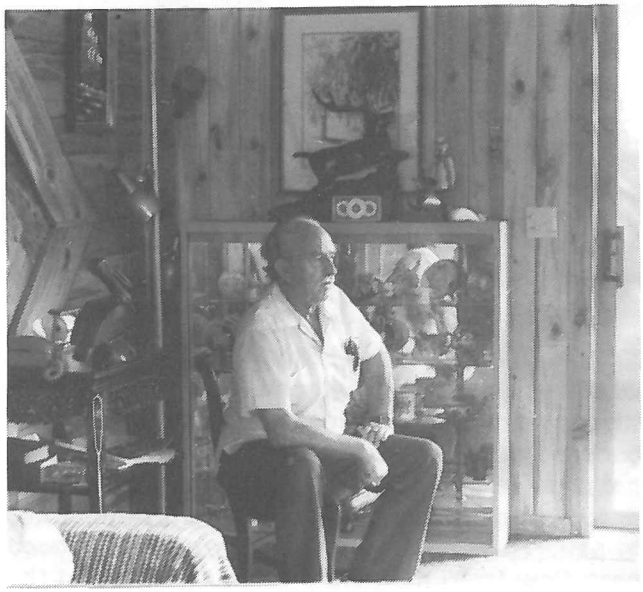
"I was born in Denver, February 29, 1908. That makes me a 'Leap Year' baby. My dad was a miner at the Leyden Mine. The mine was located near Rocky Flats, it's out in that area. It was on the Moffat Railroad Line, just between Denver and Boulder. There's something I have to mention about the Leyden Mine — it blew up a couple of times and they thought both times that it was due to the fact that the Leyden mine was never unionized, and they think that there was a little foul play there. They were thinking that it was possibly set when it blew up. My dad was the last live man out of the mine, the last time it blew up. He never went back.

"My sister was born the next year in October, 1909, and then we moved to McCoy, Colorado to what was my grandmother's homestead. From there, we moved to Steamboat Springs in 1920 because dad was not a farmer. We had planted potatoes in 1919. Dad got six dollars for a hundred pounds and he had several tons of potatoes to sell. Then he sold the farm and had a good cash flow from the potato crop. That was at the end of World War I, and I remember particularly that my dad was in Steamboat after the harvest and my mother and we children chopped down Quaker trees. It was one of those severe winters and my mother chopped down Quaker trees to give to the cattle. They ate the bark off the Quakers. Hay was ninety dollars a ton and our hay ran out.

"The homestead was 160 acres. Mother's folks all came in there and they set it up. When her folks passed away, it went directly to her because the rest of the family were brothers and

they (her folks) said that they could own their own land, so they set up a place for my mother. It was willed to her. When I was a child, every farmer watched out for the other farmer, as I recall. If, like in harvest with the potatoes, if we needed help, why there was somebody there. They helped each other more in those days than they do today.

"When my sister, Helen, and I were eight and nine my dad sent two bum lambs up from Steamboat as he was working there that summer. They were at the post office. It was two hours from our home. I still don't know how we managed to carry and get them home, but we did. Some two weeks later, when dad came home, he was down milking the cows about an 1/8 mile from the house. My sister went down, the lambs tagging along, and into the corral where my dad was doing the milking. The cows had never seen the lambs before and they took out after them. Dad nearly lost his life protecting the lambs. We didn't have the money in those days, but I think we had better times. I remember when we lived on the farm that we'd go to dances, country dances, which I very rarely hear about today. We'd get home in time, maybe, to pail the cows — that's a slogan that they used for milking the cows in those days. Sometimes they didn't get milked till noon, but we existed.



"MY MOTHER WAS QUITE A RUGGED INDIVIDUAL."

"When we lived in McCoy, there were lots of grouse, lots of deer, but no elk. There are a lot of elk on the place since we left there. The fellow that bought our place said that they were driven from a herd around Steamboat Springs because it isn't too many miles across there to our place on Gore Range. On the farm, we mostly lived off wild game. There were game wardens in those days, but the farmers sort of deserved the game because they protected them and fed them through the winter. I remember one time when the game warden came up and we served him deer meat, and he said, 'This is sheep or something isn't it?' He was a Dutchman. We said 'yes.' It was wild meat.

"They were enjoyable times, as a young man. The hunting, fishing and getting together with the neighbors and the dances particularly. We enjoyed those, because they were an outlet for social activity and you saw more of your long-time friends. They were mostly square dances, circular dances, and waltzes. One thing I remember about going to the dances, mother and dad would give us milk with a little coffee in it, and we both threw up on the way home. Evidently the coffee didn't digest or something and so they quit giving us the coffee with the milk, and that solved the problem. I never did get over the coffee, I still can't drink coffee. My sister got over it. We had mostly local musicians for the square dances particularly. It was a thrill to hear the fellows call the square dances and you practiced those before you really went into the action. Even the kids joined in. One town over there was Copper Spur, which is on the Moffat Railroad and we had most of our Christmas dances there because it had a large hallway. The Copper Company had a huge hall over there, so they had room enough for several squares of square dancing. Practically all the locals showed up at these dances. Like I say, there was a mining camp at Copper Spur, so there were quite a few folk around there from the camp.

"And then right below our farm up at McCoy, (we were the last farm on the road) was Rock Creek and there was a wooden tressle across Rock Creek that the railroad crossed. It was the highest wooden structure in the world at that time and it was among the 'wonders of the world' at that time. My dad would take me down, it was quite steep, into this canyon fishing and carry me on his fishing basket, I remember that particularly. One time, my sister and I were at a place in McCoy buying groceries and my sister and I snuck some tobacco into the basket. When we got home, they said, 'Where did this tobacco come from? We didn't buy any tobacco.' We told them we put it in there, so they made us go back to the store and tell the owner that we had put some tobacco in there for daddy. So, that taught us not to take things that weren't ours."

Roger then told us about the many changes they experienced when they moved from McCoy to Steamboat in October of 1920.

"My mother was quite a rugged individual. We had about 23 head of cattle and 3 horses. She drove them from our farm to Steamboat, to get rid of them. We kept one horse, and sold the livestock for money to live on. She spent days

driving the cattle from McCoy to here, which is about 60 miles. Dad and us kids came down on the train, the good old Moffat Railroad. There was an interesting thing — we made some serviceberry and chokecherry wine, and eventually the motion on the train made the wine blow its caps. But it was good wine. My dad got a job as the jailer at the courthouse, and then later became a postal clerk for the city. School was one of the biggest changes. In McCoy, we only had school in the summertime. You couldn't get teachers to come up there in the winter. We rode horses or walked 2½ miles to school in McCoy. In Steamboat, it was quite a change. It was a little different, because right at the start you had to show that you were strong, because they tested you out. You had to fight somebody. The first day of school, I had three fights. They egged you on. I had three in a row and won those, then the fourth one I lost. But they were one right after the other. I went to school here, from fifth grade on through high school. I was behind in school from being in the country, from McCoy, I was and, there were two or three others that were probably as old as some of the teachers. I was 21 when I graduated from high school. So, I even became a Mason my last year in high school which is very unusual for any student, particularly in those times. In fact, I got my 50 years' jewel in Masonry five years ago and our class of '29 has a reunion every five years. We had our 55th reunion this last year. Also, I got my 50 year pin in Eastern Star in February.

"We built our house in 1921 up on Crawford Hill. We lived on Boulevard Street in back of the Crawfords. The Crawford family and our family were very close. It was through my mother that we became real good friends with them; she went to work for the Crawfords. We would come down to visit them quite often.

"The Crawfords were a well thought of family, especially James. No one was ever turned away from their house, or a meal, or a place to stay.

"Logan Crawford developed this country by taking fish into the higher lakes. He usually was responsible for the good fishing we have today because he got Rainbow trout and there were only Natives here when the Crawfords came. He introduced Brook trout and Rainbows into all this area himself. There used to be a fish hatchery in Strawberry Park area and he ran it for a few years.

"Fishing is a part of my life like hunting. When it comes to hunting I have to be out there. I hunted every day but two this year, and every year I hunt every day. We don't particularly care for deer. I give most of my meat away, you know, we have lots of friends that don't have a chance to get any. I would say that I would give three-fourths of my meat away. Same way when I fish, we've gotten to where we don't relish fish like we used to. We get tired of it.

"FISHING IS PART OF MY LIFE LIKE HUNTING."

"Mary Crawford, the youngest daughter, said to my mother, 'Katie I want you to, if you have children, I want you to have them call me Aunt Mary,' and the rest of the folks chimed in and said that goes for us too. So we did, and a lot of people think we're related to the Crawfords. In fact, I got a letter from Lulita the other day and she addressed it as 'Dear Kinfolk.' And every time I go out there I take her fish or wild meat. Jim Crawford was the son of John Crawford, county clerk. He was the county clerk for many years, probably longer than any other person. Jim and I would get together with the family, and have dinners together, and we had a club called "The Arbuckle Club."

"We had one party a winter and each of us was allowed to invite a guest and we rented the Odd Fellows Hall for about ten dollars and an orchestra for, well they played themself, their band was called The Scissor Bills. John Crawford, my dad, KC See (who was janitor of the schools at that time), Margeurite Crawford, the Butlers and the Sees were the Scissor Bills. And there would be about thirty or so of us. We were all allowed to bring one guest. One of the things my dad pulled was somebody saying, 'We're running out of coffee, Ben.' He says, 'Well, I'll wire for some.' He had the Arbuckle brand of coffee and he had some slid down on a wire for the club's party. There were at least a hundred or so people there, and those were the days that this was similar to a country dance that they don't do any more, and I miss that.

"In 1922, my father dressed in an Indian headdress. A lot of people thought my dad was part Indian, but he wasn't. Maybe it was due to this parade, but we've had a lot of people ask if he was part Indian. He led that parade on an old pony and it was actually an Indian headdress that belonged to the Hawks family.

"It was in the summertime when they finished the Moffat Tunnel. They were so elated over here, that all the towns had a little parade. My dad led this parade with this costume.

"This particular area wasn't hit that hard by the depression, as much as other areas. True, we didn't have what we have today, but the good ol' days, them hard times everybody helped everyone. In those days, if their neighbor was having trouble, why somebody would go out and help him. If the wheat or alfalfa hay needed to be harvested somebody would always help. They went from place to place with the crew if someone needed help. They went from place to place thrashing the grain. First of all, in those days, it was shocked and put in little shocks, then they stacked it. Then the thrasher came along and separated the wheat from the straw. The gals always talked about cooking for the thrashers. That's one thing they did; they really fed at those get-togethers.

"We camped a lot during the depression. We know this high country almost like a book. Every summer we made a trip into the high country. My wife and I did the same when we were married. One particular trip I remember, we went out on an 11 day trip. We just took two horses and a pack horse. I was telling one of my friends about it, and he said, 'You can't take enough food for 11 days on one pack horse, can you?' I said, 'Why sure, I'll just eat fish.' We ate so many fish that I actually gagged. I couldn't get it down. This was way up on Red Pass in the Bear Lakes area. They were good fish; they were all Natives over there. We got Brookies out of the stream; out of the lake we got Natives. The Natives are a little on the dry side anyway."

After high school Roger went to Denver to work for a Safeway store. "I worked a little bit during school. I worked for two bits an hour for different friends around the city, spading gardens and any available little jobs. After high school I worked for Safeway Stores, and I was transferred from this one down to one on East Colfax. I was there about a year and I had a couple of interesting experiences there. I was robbed twice there, on the second day of January and the second day of February. The second day of February was really quite exciting. Some well-dressed fellows came in and said, 'I want to see you in the back room.' As soon as I got in the back room, I turned around and here was this six-shooter bouncing on my hip. 'Where's the money you keep in the back room?' I said, 'We don't keep any money in the back room.' He said, 'Well I know better than that and I'm just going to give you to three to tell me where it is.' So he started counting, 'One.....Two.....,' I got excited, then I said, 'Honest to God mister, I don't know where it is!' The people in the store were nervous too because they thought surely I was going to get shot. As the guy was going out the door, I picked up a can of soup, Campbell's Soup, it was one of those long ones. I threw it like a football and I just missed the guy as he was going out the door. The soup almost collapsed, but it didn't fall apart. I told my boss that I'd like to have it for a souvenir and I had to pay for the can of soup! I chased the guy down the alley a little ways but he got away. They had robbed a store at the end of that alley that same night. The next day they caught them all. There were five of them and they were making better wages than we were. They were working for the Ford assembly plant down in Denver.

"I moved back to Steamboat soon after that and went to work for Furlongs Hardware. That's where I met my wife. She came in and we got to chatting, I asked for a date, and got it. I married that gal; she was teaching school up at Long Gulch in 1937." Lucille then told us a little about herself. "I was born in Gregory, South Dakota and lived there for about 16 years. My father raised hogs. We weren't very big farmers; he would have a field of corn and something else. But what he did was raise purebred hogs. And that was his first mistake. He died when I was nine and Mom went back to teaching.

"Mom went to Boulder to teach. Then I finished college and went out there. She was applying for a new school. She didn't want to teach here because they had to ride horseback to the school, so she asked me if I wanted to do it. I did and I came up here. It was one of those one-room school houses up Long Gulch which has been taken away.

"I liked teaching the country school very much. I just loved the children; then I taught a year in Hayden, the 4th grade. I ended my teaching career teaching Spanish and English in the high school here in Steamboat. In those country schools you taught everything. I taught 28 students and nine grades. They didn't want girls to go to town for school, so they gave me ninth grade which I had to teach 15 minutes

before school and at recess and at noon."

Roger and Lucille settled in Steamboat after their wedding. Roger was busy with his business of recapping tires and everything was moving along smoothly until World War II got started.

"I didn't really volunteer, quite a few volunteered, but I got drafted. I could've stayed home. I wouldn't take a millon dollars for my experience, but I wouldn't want to do it again. My wife was rather disgusted with me on that. They had a board that decided who was eligible and

"YOU CALLED MY NUMBER AND I'M GOING."

who couldn't go. I was an essential business here and the board came to me and said, 'Roger, you're an essential business. You don't have to go.' I said, 'You called my number and I'm going. My number's ready, why I'm ready to go.'

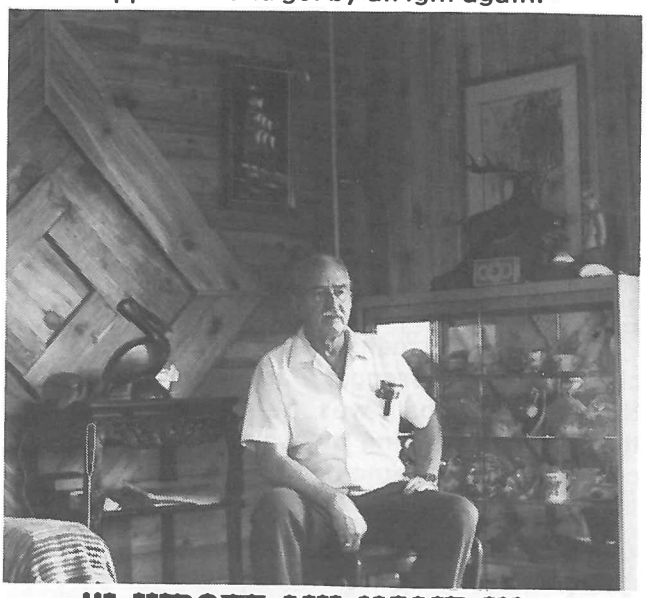
"I had to get somebody to take care of my business; I was in the recapping tire business which was the OK Rubber Welding System out of Denver. I think it still exists.

"I spent two and one-half years in the ski troops. We trained up here at Camp Hale. I could make a long story out of that 'cuz I was known as the AWOL kid that never got caught. In fact, I was the oldest one in my company, and they called me the 'youngest old man in the company'. All these AWOLs, I was covered some way or another. Do you want some of those stories?

"Let's see — the first one was when we had 'D' series which was to test the men for their ability to follow orders. We were sent on this bivouc deal which was six weeks in sub-zero weather, clear down to 30 and 40 below. We were on what is now Vail Pass. That's where we were shuttled to and we manuevered from there. When we got there some of the lads wanted some liquor, so I came down into camp. We were quarantined, we weren't to go into camp or to get out of camp. My wife was working in the hospital as a file clerk and I had a Little Champion Studebaker, so I went into camp and my wife took me up to Leadville and I crawled into the trunk of the car to get out of camp. I got the liquor and took it up to our bivouc area and one of the lads drank too much of it and threw up all over his buddy. We just had two-man pup tents and it was kind of a mess.

"Another time, we went up to Leadville and all the time I was in the Army, I was never issued the Eisenhower Jacket. I was sitting in the cafe and the MPs came in and said, 'Where's your blouse, soldier?' I said, 'I guess it must be at the motel.' He said, 'Well let me see your pass.' And I said, 'I guess (I fumbled around) I must have left in my blouse.' He said, 'Go get it.' And that's the last the two MPs ever saw of me. We were staying in a friend's home, so I went right out there and called Lucille to come here to where I was. So I got out of that one.

"Then, when we were about to be shipped to go overseas, we left from Camp Hale to go down to Swift, Texas. My wife lived in Austin, Texas which is the capital. The engineers, 126 engineers, were attached to our outfit, but they weren't quarantined like we were, so I borrowed his cap. Caps are designated by colors. The blue was infantry and the yellow was something else and I borrowed his. I always wrote my own passes, so I got out alright. I had his cap and went down to see my wife and when I got back they were all lined up, ready to ship. George Orrell was in my outfit (he was a veterinarian here) and he covered up for me there. The captain said, 'Where the hell's Butler?, He should be in this line up here?' And Orrell said, 'I just saw him a little while ago.' And he hadn't. Then I appeared and got by alright again.



"I WROTE MY NAME IN THE REGISTER THERE."

Then, when we went over to Italy, we were bivouaced in an area which was about three miles from the Leaning Tower of Pisa. I wrote my name in the register there. About two or three days later, a lad from Steamboat who was in the 188th saw my name in there, but we never did get together. And then I got back to the area, went from there on up into a stalemate which was up at Catigliono. At Catigliono I was bivouaced in the house where Luchimy composed Madam Butterfly. We did a cloverleaf patrol there. This was our first sort of stalemate, but not on the cloverleaf. A right flank cloverleaf patrol contacted the enemy and they were pretty well shot up. There were three of them killed and one of my buddies was among them. He was from Golden, Colorado. On the way in, we didn't contact the enemy, but we know we were shot at

with silencers on their rifles because we could hear the bullets go by, but they didn't happen to hit any of us.

"I think the goodly share of us were glad the war was over. The whole thing about war in our nation here is the general public doesn't know what war is about. Our first casualty was killed by our own men.

"I don't like to talk about it. We were on the cloverleaf patrol and we.....you have a sign and a countersign to let your side know that you're challenged. You had to give the countersign. Well, I was on the cloverleaf patrol and the left flank came in before we did. They were challenged and countersigned and the new one hadn't been given out yet, so they were challenged and they didn't know and couldn't answer the countersign. They started shooting at them and one of my best buddies was killed in this incident. I went to pieces for a while; I lost a lot of real good friends in the war.

"When I was in Italy I did see a lot of fighting. Quite a bit. I got to the front twice. I wasn't exactly wounded, but I was pushed over a ledge by an artillery burst. It threw my leg out, so I was in the hospital until I was discharged. We all wanted to get out as soon as we could. I had some injuries from the service and I didn't put them all in, only my knee. I got a ten percent disability on it, but it really should have been more. Everyone was anxious to get out.

"When the Germans finally surrendered I was clear up in the Brenner Pass area. It was well fortified. Perhaps it was the Air Force that was the factor of winning the war, because it was a continual bombardment of the Air Force helping the infantry that won the war. Of course, the infantry was the one who had to hold the ground. They got more casualties than the Air Force, but it was all rugged. Our first push, the night raid on Belvedere, just before we started there, there was a continuous wave of bombers over it. That was a thrill. I don't like to talk about the war too much because I'm emotional. About a thousand of my buddies were killed in the war."

Roger then talked about where he was when the war ended. During the war I was just a PFC (Private First Class). Being the oldest man in my company, we had a young buck who was a Lieutenant. We called him an action lover. One time he said, 'Hey Pop, how about doing some certain job?' I said, 'Okay sonny, if that's what you want.' That was the last time he ever called me Pop. Over there I could get by with that sort of thing, but in the states I couldn't have talked back to him like that. When we got back home, we were going by the Statue of Liberty as we got word that we had bombed Hiroshima. Of course, everyone was excited and our destination was to do a little more training and come back. From there they spread us all out and we went to our

"WHEN I WAS IN ITALY I DID SEE A LOT OF FIGHTING."

home areas. Fort Logan was my area. We got to Fort Logan the same night that the Japs surrendered. This is one of the times I went AWOL. I had called up my wife and told her where we were in Denver. She said she would be at the Shirley Savoy Hotel, which is non-existent anymore. A buddy and I went AWOL. We met our wives at the hotel. When I got there I gave the clerk the excuse that my wife ran off with the key, and I couldn't get in. He could have gotten reprimanded for that, because he didn't know me from Adam. I had to climb the fence to get back in the outpost, but I got by with it. The men who had the most points were discharged. I was confined to the area again until I got my discharge. I went over the fence and told my wife where I'd be. As I jumped the fence, I saw the MPs down at the corner coming up. They had seen me jump the fence. There were rolling hills there so I ran down into a ravine and rolled like they taught me in the Army to get out of sight. They came by, slowly, looking for me, but they kept going. When they got out of sight, I got up and headed down for the corner. I got in the car with my wife, and we got by again. I really had some thrill; it was sort of like in the story, 'No time for Sergeants.'

"A section of U.S. 24 in the central Colorado Rockies was dedicated to the ski troops of World War II who trained in the area. The 29 mile section of the highway from the Interstate 70 interchange near Minturn to the Colorado 91

junction near Leadville will be named the 10th Mountain Division Memorial Highway. Signs with the unit's shoulder patch are posted at either end of the 29 mile section and near the site of Camp Hale, the unit's training base. A monument dedicated to the 994 members of the division killed in action is atop Tennessee Pass on the highway."

Roger got through with World War II and told us what he was thinking when he got back to Steamboat. "I thought we had done a real good job of cleaning up the situation, but apparently we haven't. Even my own business, I was disgusted with it when I came back. It didn't go to my plans, so I sold it out and got into other things. I worked for the Forest Service and took a job as a fire guard up on Hahn's Peak. I was up there two or three days, and my wife said, 'There's no work to this; you go out and get yourself a real job, and I'll take care of it,' which she did. She worked up there from the 10th of July until mid-October, then I closed the thing up. She was the last fire guard up there. For a while they patrolled with airplanes, but it became rather expensive. People became more aware of the situation and reported these fires in different areas. It seems that they don't have fire stations like this anymore.

"She lived in a cabin up there on top. Probably ten by ten feet, maybe a little smaller. The bed was on insulators, 'cuz when a storm came up you really knew there was a storm up there. She didn't see any forest fires while she was up there. She had to walk three miles to Columbine to get supplies, even if she just needed a loaf of bread."

After the war Roger went back to work for the post office and worked there for fifteen years. Then he went to the forest service for about six years. "We only worked in the summertime for the forest service. In the winter, I helped with the lifts at Howelsen Hill. Ski tickets were about one-third of what they are today. I don't remember the exact price, but I didn't take care of that part. I just ran the tows. It was a chairlift and there were always....I had to maintain them too. It was sort of a headache because one was always breaking down. In fact, one time I happened to look out and it was wrapped around a kid! It would have pulled him apart if I hadn't been right there where I could punch the button to stop it. That is when I decided I didn't want to do that type of work anymore.

"Boy, has the equipment and clothing ever changed since those days. The ski troopers had the best possible equipment in those days. Today it is more glamorized, in fact, skis then you could buy for $30 and $40. Now it's $100 or more for even boots or three or four times the price, maybe even five times than what it used to be. Skiing has changed a lot and it really got started here in the west with the ski troops that learned to ski at Camp Hale.

"When working for the forest service we mostly built trains for the forest and similar things — maintenance. I built campgrounds mostly at that time. I didn't build many campgrounds; I built trails, drift fences, and cleaned out trails going to lakes in the high country.

"The forest service mostly took lads, I think they had to be eighteen at that time before they could get a job with the forest service. We'd have a crew that I would help manage, but I would work too. In doing this, I cooked because I didn't like the way some of the kids cooked. I cooked and they did the dishes, that was our little deal. I was down in Black Mountain by Craig when there was a big forest fire and I was the chief cook for that. I fed about 500 men on that fire. It lasted 10 to 15 days. It wiped out several hundred acres in there and they salvaged good part of it. It was some of the best spruce in this country. We were just building a campground up there, so we were called upon to help fight the fire. Like I said, I was a cook; from then on, other people mopped that up, and we went up to Stillwater Dam to build it. I also built Ferndale and Summit Lake campgrounds. We built the campground and the city built the lake for water storage.

"I APPRAISED THE WHOLE ROUTT COUNTY."

"After I got out of the forest service I was an appraiser of the county for the property tax. I appraised the whole Routt County for that. Then, shortly after that I retired. We've both been retired for about 12 years now. When we go down to Mexico this winter, it will be 13 years.

"I was an appraiser for about four years, I believe. About three years after I retired, the state didn't think the assessors were doing their job, so they hired some of us appraisers to spot check. I think I did 10 farms and homes in Routt County, Moffat County, Rio Blanco County, Montrose County and Mesa County. They found that the assessors weren't doing too bad a job. All the money I made, I gave back to the government. I could only make so much. It was rather discouraging. That was the last job I ever did.

"I'm very proud of the fact that Senator "Bob" Dole was a Lieutenant in my company. The big event today, March 17, 1985, is being present at my step-dad's 100th birthday party. We flew up from Mexico to be with him for this occasion.

"I have several hobbies, I like to fish and hunt, along with traveling. The bear rug I have, I shot that when I was hunting during elk and bear season, up on Copper Ridge. I'm very proud of that bear rug."