

# Cold Hay Ride

By Steve Roberts

Based on a David Wood's Reminiscence at 92

At the time I was the quietly confident type but make no mistake about it at 24 I knew almost everything there was to know. With a youthful sense of urgency I was a subscriber to the "ready, fire, aim" club. Listening to other voices was not my strength. The day I stopped by to visit a ranch in Wyoming was a chilling remind of the mountain of stuff I still didn't know.

The X Bar C Ranch was 40 miles northeast of Dubois, Wyoming and 9,000 feet into the eastern Rockies. The family owners of the ranch had raised hay and cattle for decades along the banks of the Wind River. For the previous five years the ranch supplemented income by offering a five-day ranching adventures to city folks. On a bright and cold Saturday morning in early December 1940 my wife Dorothy and I coaxed my old Ford up the snow covered winding dirt road to the ranch for a one-night stay. New snow had fallen the day before and the giant pines on either side of the road formed a tunnel over the road with their snow-loaded branches. Around the 3,000 foot mark we were treated to some spectacular views of the mountains, rivers and valleys as the road wound its way along the cliffs hugging the sides of the mountains. About this time the guardrails disappeared and we had a few deeply religious "Jesus" moments as we slid around the bends in the one lane road.

The ranch owner's sister, Mary, had invited us to stay at the X Bar C for a day as both a friendly gesture and a way to promote a longer stay at a later date. She ran the motel where we were staying that summer while I worked on the public works project building a road through the Togwatee Pass into Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. As a recent engineering graduate I was glad to have a job and the project also helped pass the time while I waited on the draft board to call me into the Navy.

Fritz, the ranch owner, waved from the corral attached to the right side of a white barn as we pulled under the archway at the main gate. We came to a stop as my old reliable Ford gasped for one last breath of thin air and spit a plum colored cloud into the mountain air. I had two spare quarts of oil in the trunk for the trip back to Togwatee.

"Hi Folks," Fritz said, wiping his leather hands on a rag from his back pocket before shaking hands with Dorothy and me. "Hope Mary's map to the place wasn't too confusing. I know there are several cut backs and splits in the road coming up here."

Wavy salt and pepper tresses ran from under the rancher's sweat stained floppy hat. The rancher's barrel chest preceded his fleece vest, open despite the temperature. Fritz had a square jaw with smiling eyes and a stocky built with a trace of middle-age spread.

"We did OK," I said, shaking hands and introducing Dorothy.

"Welcome, little lady," Fritz said, helping get Dorothy's bags out of the car.

"Never saw a print or a map I couldn't figure out." I said, more boastfully than intended. "Actually we got lost twice," I said, trying to recover, "and my wife looked a little car-sick toward the end but we made it."

“Good,” Fritz said, turning toward the farmhouse, “bring your bags and let’s go in and meet Lillie. Our 5-day adventure guests stay in the bunkhouse but my wife’s got you two set up for spending tonight in the house.”

Earlier, at the hotel, Mary had mentioned that about ten years earlier she and Fritz inherited 60 acres along the south side of the Wind River plus a 40 acre meadow about 4 miles up and across the river. Fritz managed the farm. Our first look at the house told us that Fritz spent his maintenance money on the two barns. The porch sagged a bit on the left side and the house appeared to have survived in a gradual graying state without paint for somewhere around 10 years. One of the brown shutters had fallen off and was lying sideways on the floor, leaning against the wall of the porch. By comparison the two barns were sparkling white. I wondered if we should offer to stay in the barn during our one-nighter.

“David and Dorothy, it’s so nice to meet you two,” Lillie said, smiling while she wiped her hands in her apron. “Fritz’s sister has told me about you and how much she has been enjoying the summer and fall with you at the hotel.” Lillie was more cultured than expected for her part in the isolated western movie she was living. She had the calloused hands of the farming life but she possessed genuine warmth that made you think you’d known her for years. She and Fritz had met 20 years earlier when Fritz and his father sold beef to Lillie’s family’s restaurant over in Idaho Falls.

“Fritz, why don’t you get a drink for David and I’ll show Dorothy their room?” Lillie said, picking up one of Dorothy’s bags and heading for the stairs.

“Beer OK?” Fritz asked, grabbing two from the fridge without bothering to wait for a reply. He twisted off the caps, handing one to me before stepping out on the porch. “I hear you’re an engineer?” Fritz said, leaning back in his chair and looking up toward the mountains. “We get lots of those up here for a week. Mostly we get civilized wanna-be cowboys and five days later we send back men,” Fritz said, with a slight grin as he studied the bottle in his hand. I didn’t think it was worth interrupting since it sounded like Fritz was giving a speech he’d given many times. I decided it wasn’t intended to degrade me or city folks, just to set the record straight as to where Fritz stood on the world outside the X Bar C Ranch.

“That engineering and drawing lines on paper wouldn’t be no good for me,” Fritz continued. “You know, with that kind of work you should sign up next year to come for one of our weeks at the ranch. We take folks through the work of a ranch, and they stay in the bunk house at the smaller of the two barns.”

“I might give it a try,” I said, “but I haven’t been anyplace long enough to get vacation time. For now let’s see how I do for just one day. How much is it for the 5 days?” I asked, just to appear politely interested. After all, Dorothy and I were staying free for the night and eating their food as guests. There was no need getting on the wrong side of the rancher up here in the wilderness.

“It’s \$200 and you get three squares a day. Miss Lillie sees to that,” Fritz said over his shoulder as he stepped back inside for two more beers. “Ever ride a horse?” he said from the kitchen.

“No, never had time,” I said, “but I think I could learn if I had to.”

He came through the door and handed me a second beer. “There won’t be any ridin tomorrow but the week’s stay involves plenty of ridin through the wooded trails and every afternoon helping to round up the herd.”

I was in pretty good shape so I wasn’t concerned about the next day’s adventure. I had been an all-state basketball player in high school and played intramurals in college, besides, for crying out loud, I was 24-years old. I wasn’t sure how it related to the day but I had the grit it takes to survive growing up on Detroit’s lower east side. In my young adolescent days I had run the street with the kids of the Purple Gang members for a while. Some of my classmates’ fathers had been arrested over the years and convicted of murder and other lesser crimes. We lived close to the Detroit River and there were several occasions when we would hide and watch a group of men known as the Little Jewish Navy smuggle booze across the Detroit River for the Purple Gang. At a prescribed time the gang would wait in hiding while the smugglers pulled their boats near shore and tossed small crates wrapped in hay into a grassy field. One night the federal agents were waiting for the drop and a gunfight broke out with bullets flying everywhere including through the bushes where three of us were suddenly hugging the dirt. One of the kids, a left-hander we called Bud, peed his pants and we had to run around for an hour to help him dry out before going home. Two days later my mother found out I was at the scene of the gunfight and that was the last night I ran with the guys.

Lillie’s tour ended at their guest room, which was clean and well decorated. Dorothy said later it was their good luck that Lillie was in charge of the interior of the house and Fritz the outside. Dorothy and Lillie got along well from the start and they were going to stay at the house and visit the next day. Dorothy was particularly interested in seeing Lillie’s collection of western scarves and hats she had made as well as a set of Indian woodcarvings. Fritz and I were going to travel to the upper 40 acres to bring down a load of hay. Based on the little of the mountains I could see driving up to the ranch, I was looking forward to seeing the wonders of this part of the Rockies in winter.

I awoke the next morning to the sounds of Lillie and Dorothy in the kitchen. Arriving down stairs at 6:00am, Fritz had already finished breakfast and was in the barn getting the horses and wagon ready for our adventure. I was allowed to wolf down two scrambled eggs and toast in about four minutes before being shooed out the door with a thermos of coffee and a soft muffin for the trail plus a sack lunch. A new layer of snow had fallen during the night and it crunched under my feet as I walked with some urgency toward the barn.

“Morning, David,” Fritz said, more cheerily than was necessary as I approached the wagon. “I was worried the horses were going to take off without you.”

“Good Morning,” I managed.

“Is that the warmest jacket you brought, son?” Fritz asked, as one asks a child of 7 or 8 if they remembered to bring their books to school.

“I’m fine,” I claimed. “I’ve got three layers under this coat and I’m warm blooded.” My coat was not as thick as I would have preferred but I wasn’t about to give Fritz a victory for the day that hadn’t even started. Besides, it was a quiet snow-covered day of 20 degrees and the sun was shining. I squinted toward the sun and could see the tall pole-pines back of the house were giving only a hint of a breeze at their tips.

With a barely disguised look of disgust, Fritz jumped down from the wagon and walked toward the house, returning a minute later with an extra coat for me. I climbed up on the wagon bench beside Fritz and held the coat in my lap.

“Ok, I guess everybody’s ready.” Fritz said, giving a flip to the reins and commanding, “Ted, Rusty, hay-yaa, let’s go.” The horses took a step and the wagon jerked forward nearly throwing me off the bench.

We drove through the crunching snow down to the edge of the Wind River, which was frozen and snow covered. The only sound was that of the horses’ hoofs and the gentle clinking of the harnesses as we turned right and traveled along the bank of the river. The horses slowed into a steady pace as the road was up hill. Once on the road Fritz seemed to mellow to the day and he turned quite pleasant, sometimes pausing to take in a sight when the road left the riverbank and climbed a ridge, and on another occasion stopping to point out the traces of a former Indian village.

“My dad knew many of the Indians around these woods and traded crops for pelts and trinkets with them. I still sell some of the stuff in our little gift shop. Dad moved here from Germany in 1906 with nothing but a dream of owning a ranch and living with his animals. He always said the animals were much easier to love and they never talked about you behind your back.”

“How thick is the ice on the river?” I interrupted.

“Oh, it’s plenty thick this time of year.” Fritz said. “There’s a point up here a ways where I cross to the meadow.

“Anyway,” Fritz continued, “Dad bought the farm and a year later he wrote to his brother about the beauty of the mountains and the peacefulness of the country. Dad’s brother read between the lines, sensing from the letter that Dad was lonely despite his love of America and the mountain life. Germany was not peaceful at the time and many were looking to escape to a better place. Dad’s brother wrote back mentioning his wife’s younger sister Anne who Dad had known in school. Dad replied quickly to the unmarried sister. An exchange of letters for less than six months culminated in the sister moving to America and becoming dad’s wife, and eventually my mom.”

“I can see why you like living up here,” I said, as the horses found a slower stride pulling the wagon through the snow. I’m afraid I’d get lonely, however, for someone smarter than me to talk to, as well as a restaurant, a grocery, even a movie”. I guessed Fritz had never lived anywhere else so these things probably weren’t an issue for him.

“Seems like you found a lifestyle up here that’s made for you,” I said, just stirring the pot a bit, “but have you ever wondered what it would be like to live and work down below this mountain, say in Dubois, or Casper or maybe over in Cheyenne?” I was sure of his answer but I was wrong.

“Yea, I attended University of Iowa in Iowa City for three years majoring in Animal Husbandry,” Fritz said to my surprise. “My grades were just so-so, partly because of working two jobs but after my junior year it seemed I was on my way to Vet School for two more years. That would have been the river of my life except I took an internship with a vet in Dubois and hated it. I found many people are too stupid to own a pet or a working animal. They brought animals to the clinic for things like ‘sad eyes’ or refusing to eat or running away from home. I’d run away too if they were my owner.”

Three deer broke out of the woods leaping through the snowdrifts along the road and crossed just ahead of us. A few minutes later Fritz said he could hear a bear crashing

through the snowy woods just up the hill from the road but frankly I couldn't hear it over the sound of Ted and Rusty breathing hard and rattling their harnesses.

In an hour and a half we reached a gradual slope toward the river and Fritz announced it was the crossing point. He eased the horses and the wagon down the bank and onto the frozen river. I could feel the horses adjust to shorter steps on the snow-covered ice as they started pulling us across. We traveled about a hundred yards across the Wind River where we pulled up the bank and into Fritz's hay meadow. Stacked in small circles under the snow the field of hay bales reminded me of rows of three-layer cakes covered in white icing. I didn't mention the visual to my host.

Fritz removed the bits from the bridles so the horses could feed through the snow while we loaded the hay. We started disassembling the cakes and loading the bales onto the wagon. Both of us loaded from the ground until we had a solid platform for the load. Then Fritz stood on the ground and heaved the bales to me standing in the wagon. We alternated positions until we couldn't throw the bales high enough to reach the top of the load. Fritz was surprised that I knew how to load a wagon full of hay. I'd spent many summers haying near my family's cabin in northern Michigan. Non-the-less, it was heavy work as the bales were wet and, of course, being a slide-rule pusher I wasn't used to such all-out exercise. Conversation was limited at 9,300 feet to conserve our energy and we were down to our shirtsleeves within an hour. When we finished loading the wagon we took a break for lunch of sandwiches and hot coffee. Snow as far as you could see and the Grand Tetons in the distance towering over us gave me a better understanding of why a person living here would find a way to stay. The sky was deep blue and the snow was so clean you could eat it to quench your thirst. The migratory birds had flown south but the Jays wolfed down our bread crusts. We gradually added layers of clothing as we cooled off. I think Fritz and I were equally glad for the lunch break.

After lunch we hitched the horses to the wagon and started the return trip. Ted and Rusty, feeling the new weight, struggled to get started but moved steadily once the wheels broke loose from their position.

"The other thing that kept me from being a vet," Fritz said, as we started across the river, as if there had been only a few second between conversations rather than two and a half hours, "was that Dad got sick and I had to run the ranch. Mother had died the year before I started school and when dad died Lillie and I were left to manage the ranch." He looked up and turned his head slowly from side to side taking in the scene. "Can't say as I miss the city too much."

So there it was, I thought, as the horses struggled to high-step through the snow drifted on the ice. Fritz claimed to be a man with a plan and a place where he was meant to be. It sounded a little too smooth to me but quite appealing. I had graduated from college only two years before and had been working in construction waiting on the draft board to give me a call. A year down the road I could be dropping bombs over Germany, patrolling the Pacific, or in my place below the earth. While the ranch was an interesting place to visit, I didn't envy his life only the fact that he had found it. I certainly hadn't found my place in life or even the road leading toward it.

"Fritz, you've got a good thing going here," I said, surprising both of us with my candor. We were about a 100 feet from the shore. "It's interesting to see a life so different from the one Dorothy and I have started. We are still trying to find out what we want to be when we grow up."

Suddenly, there was a loud crack from below the snow when the ice shattered and the two horses and the front wheels of the wagon plunged through into the river. Fritz and I were only saved from going in by grabbing the seat rail. I was too stunned to move but Fritz jumped up and stood on the back of the bench, immediately taking off his boots and ripping off his clothes, yelling for me to do the same. The sun was close to hiding behind the mountains and I was cold even with my clothes on so I wondered what he was thinking. Fritz jumped into the river between the horses and held their heads together talking to keep them calm.

Fritz looked back and shouted for me to spread bales of hay around the hole. The wagon was creating a bigger hole as it moved up and down in the river. Sheer terror injected me with limitless energy as I tore off my clothes, jumped off the rear of the wagon and spread the bales. He yelled for me to throw our clothes on the upriver bales along with my shoes and socks which were the only things I hadn't removed as I ran around on the ice.

Fritz carefully removed the harnesses from the horses. I helped him tie Rusty, the upriver horse, to the wagon so he wouldn't float down into Ted. This caused Ted to float a foot higher in the water allowing Fritz to pull and twist Ted's head over on the ice as I stood as far from the break as I could get and pulled on Ted's tail. The horse was thrashing in the water and his eyes were wide as we tried to pull him up out of the river. It took three tries and I was soaked and exhausted but finally the horse slid up on the ice. Fritz climbed out of the water and laid on the horse for warmth.

There was no time to rest or try to dry off as Rusty was struggling against the ropes. Fritz untied Rusty from the wagon and we bounced him in the water to have a better chance of pulling him onto the ice as he floated upward. We got Rusty's head and neck laying on the ice then we got him out on the ice. I stayed with the horses as Fritz jumped back in the river and dove beneath the water to release the wagon tongue. It turns out that western wagons are made to hitch the tongue at either end.

"Damn!" Fritz said as he emerged from the water with the wagon tongue, "that river is cold." Looking toward me he said, "There are natural springs that crop up under the river from time to time and weaken the ice. I guess we found one." We were both in the process of freezing to death as we put our dry clothes on and lit a fire with matches I had in my shirt pocket.

"Up here, my friend," he said, as we stood close enough to the fire to set our clothes on fire, "you learn to save the horses so they can save you, and above all, else keep your clothes dry."

Ted and Rusty somehow got to their feet once the fire got going. Fritz put ropes around their necks and asked me to walk them until they looked dry. I walked them back to the meadow and rubbed them with dry hay.

In the meantime, Fritz untangled the harnesses and attached the wagon tongue to the back of the wagon. He signaled and I walked the horses back to the wagon and unloaded the rest of the hay. Fritz found a downed pole-pine to be used as a lever to lift what was now the rear of the wagon. I sat on one end of the pole and placed it over a bale of hay with the other end in the water under the front of the wagon. Fritz yelled for me to take my clothes off again as I was going to be getting soaked when the wagon moved up and down at the end of the pole.

Fritz put the harnesses on the horses and hitched them to the tongue of the wagon. He put the whip to them and they pulled and slipped to their knees on the ice repeatedly but they rose up again until their knees were bloody. Fritz eased up on them and the wagon slipped further into the hole. We rested a minute before I got back on the pole as Fritz shouted and whipped the horses. I was beside the wagon with the pole under the axle when the rear of the wagon jumped up on the edge of the break and crashed through the ice throwing me into the water under the wagon. Thrashing under the water I banged my head on one of the wheels and dove to find the hole in the ice. In my panic I dove toward the front of the wagon instead of toward the hole. I was out of breath and trying to find a pocket of air under the ice. I could hear the horses stomping and pulling on the ice above me and I turned toward the back end of the wagon. I burst through the surface completely out of breath and scared. Fritz jumped in and pulled me to the edge of the break and pushed me onto the ice.

Suddenly there was a huge explosion of water and ice and the wagon jumped over the edge of the hole and rested on the surface. The horses had continued jumping and pulling even after Fritz left to save me.

We put on our dry clothes again and put a half load of hay back on the wagon and walked to the shore where we unloaded the hay and repeated the process. Finally, as the sun's warmth left us on our own, we loaded the wagon with what amounted to about three-quarters of a load. We climbed up to the bench and Fritz signaled the horses to take us home. On our way down the mountain Fritz and I suddenly became too tired and too cold to sit up on the bench and hold the reins. Fritz dug a hole in the hay and crawled in where he seemed to collapse. I couldn't feel my feet so I put them down in the hole accidentally hitting Fritz on the head with the heels of my boots. Fritz looked up then opened his coat and hugged my feet and boots as he fell asleep.

The pace of the horses was easy as the road was mostly downhill. I saw three young men walking in front of us on the road but when I called to them they disappeared. I was aware of the sound of birds' wings in flight but couldn't see any birds. These images stayed with me all the way down the mountain and they are with me even today.

I heard cattle bawling and realized I'd been sleeping. We were home and Lillie and Dorothy were pulling us down from the wagon and helping us into the house. Fritz attempted to protest, insisting he needed to tend to the horses but Lillie put his arm over her shoulder and marched him into the house, sitting him in front of the fire. The hot fire stung my feet and hands and I couldn't stop crying. The ladies unbridled the horses, put them in their stables and fed them.

Shaking and hurting in front of the fire I looked over at our host who was doing the same. Ted and Rusty had taken us home. Fritz was right, save the horses and they will get you home. I couldn't believe he made us take our clothes off in the middle of freezing Wind River. I'm convinced that Fritz's advice to keep our clothes dry saved our lives. I had learned a great deal in one day at the ranch. It was interesting to think what I might learn from a whole week.

Sixty-eight years later I still remember very clearly those frightening moments that day on and under the ice. I'm thankful to God and to Fritz, Ted and Rusty for getting me through the day alive.