

BOB GILBERT



"YOU WANT TO BE SATISFIED WITH YOUR OWN WORK." WRITTEN BY HENRY ROOT

EDITED BY CARL SANDEFUR

When I, Henry Root, enrolled in Three Wire Winter, I did so out of a need for a credit in history. I knew I had to write a story, yet I wanted it to be about something or someone of my interest. My family and I had known Bob Gilbert for many years, and since he's in the body work business, and since I am interested in this work as a career, I decided to find out more about him and his business.

Mr. Gilbert moved to this area in 1928, when he and his family settled in Mt. Harris. Since that time he has ranched and worked in the automotive and body work business. His unique sense of humor, his professional work, and his inexpensive prices make him admired. He began his story:

"I was born on June 25, 1920, in Spokane, Washington. I moved to the Mt. Harris area in 1928, with my mother. When I first came to Routt County I went to school in Mt. Harris, and as far as Mt. Harris being tough, or anything like that, we didn't have much of anything to do during the

Depression. We didn't have a lot of things, but we did have the essentials. We made our own fun and our own recreation by ourselves.

"The depression wasn't as hard felt here as it was in the rest of the nation. If a man was working in a mine, he could make \$20.00 a day, and that was practically unheard of in this country. If he was on contract labor he could make \$10.00 to \$20.00 a day, it depended on how hard a man wanted to work. Mining was the only industry during the Depression where a man could make good money, but people didn't stay at that too long; they would only work one or two months and move on. I still run into people who say, 'Oh, I lived there in '31 or '32 or '29, or they knew someone who was here in the Depression years.

"As a child I didn't have to support myself, but I had chores to do around the house. I tended the garden, brought in the coal, helped with the

horses, and washed the dishes. I went fishing and did other ordinary things like kids do. We used to fish and hunt a lot. Also, I used to boat on the Bear River. We made our own boats and floated down the river from Mt. Harris to the Dawson Ranch. In the winter we went skiing and on sleigh rides. We played 'kick the can,' and we even had a softball team in Mt. Harris. We would follow the team around to the different coal-mine camps, as all the mines had their own teams. Usually, on a Saturday or Sunday, the team would have a big game and a picnic afterwards. We had all kinds of activities.

"In the winter, we had sleigh and tobogganing parties. We were interested in skiing, and we were busy all the time, especially on the ranch. We had plenty to do. I was more or less treated as an adult, and I entered into conversations. When we would go anywhere, we would participate as a family. Of course, we didn't have a lot of places to go, but wherever we went, we had fun as a family.

"When I lived in Mt. Harris, it was a company town. All the houses were company houses, and the rent was deducted from the paycheck. It was the first understanding I had of the 'company store.' We lived right in Mt. Harris. My uncle, George Newby, was the town blacksmith. He didn't retire until the age of 72. I lived with my aunt and uncle in a company house and went to school there.

"I went to a typical school, but we didn't have all the things you have now. It was basically the three 'R's', and the discipline was really strict. We had good times, but it seemed like most of our fun was at recess. The rest of the time it was strictly business. I remember when I first moved there, I wore knickerbockers. Well, I went to school with those knickerbockers on, and I did nothing for three days at recess except fight. Finally, my mother wised up and bought me a pair of Levis, and after that I was all right. Until then I had a rough time.

"When my mother was ready to graduate from chiropractic college in Denver, we moved to Denver, and I went to school there, at the Evans school at 9th and Gilpen. I was about nine or ten years old. I had to cross Broadway twice and run back and forth about 27 blocks. I used to pass a place called the 'Blue Parrot Inn.' They had a parrot they said was 27 years old. Everytime I would go by that parrot, I would stop and say, 'Polly, want a cracker?' and the parrot, of course, never said anything. I would say, 'You dumb, S.O.B.' One day, I came by there and there was quite a crowd. I rushed right up in front and stuck my ears up and said, 'Polly, want a cracker?' As far as I know, that parrot had never said a word. The parrot just turned that beak real slow and said, 'You dumb, S.O.B.' Boy, I took out of there flying.

"The second floor of the Evans School was The Leif Williams School for the Deaf. I didn't realize this for a couple of days. Then this boy came up and was talking to me in sign language. I thought he thumbed his nose at me, so I thumbed mine back at him. He promptly broke my nose. It was the first of about three that I have had in my life. He fixed me up real good.

"After my mother graduated we moved to Hayden. I learned about hunting and fishing from my stepfather, Bill Rogers. He was part Indian, and he taught me about wildlife and conservation. Ferry Carpenter was the head of the Boy Scouts, only it was called the Boy Rangers in those days. Hayden at that time had an indoor swimming pool. We Boy Rangers thought it was pretty neat when Ferry Carpenter would take us there in the winter time. He had an old 1932 Chevy then, and it had a big spare tire on the back. One time I was going to get off in a hurry and I didn't want to go clear to the bumper, so I stepped off. Every time my first foot hit the ground it got higher and higher, and pretty soon it went over my head and broke my collar bone.



"IT REALLY ISN'T FAIR BUT AUTOMOBILES JUST AREN'T BUILT LIKE THEY USED TO BE."

"When I went to school with my arm in a sling the teacher said, 'Well, what happened to you?' I said, 'I fell off a car last night and broke my collar bone.' She said, 'Well, you better go to a doctor,' and I said, 'No, they just put it in a sling for two weeks anyway.' I sure popped it. I could hear it crunch when I raised my arm. Of course, I told my mother that I slipped on the ice.

"Ferry Carpenter was a fine man; he had a way with children. He was a natural hunter and quite a guy. At that time he worked for the Dawson Cattle Company. There were two big cattle companies in the area at that time, the Dawson Cattle Company and the Cary Ranch. Ferry also worked on the Cary Ranch, and he was active in everything. He was good for

Hayden, and he was good for Routt County. Later in his life he boosted grazing for agriculture in Colorado.

"I went to the Oak Creek School in the seventh grade. The first fellow I met there came on horseback. He stopped in front of the house and said, 'Hello, kid!' and I said, 'Hi!' Then he said, 'You want to fight?' I thought I might as well get it over with, so I said, 'Yeah, get off, and we'll get at it!' He wheeled that horse and took off. Later on we became real good friends. I learned when a person starts in a strange school he has to stand and fight, 'cause if he doesn't then he's in trouble. Seemed like every time I changed school I spent time getting acclimated the first three or four days."

Bob Gilbert graduated from Oak Creek High School in 1939. He continued by telling us about his early job and military experience.

"The first job I had I worked for a man by the name of Brown. He needed a hired hand down by Toponas. I worked for him for one summer, then I picked up car body work by working for George Hageman. I went from one job to another, using gas pumps, then sales and then body work for George."



"ROUTT COUNTY IS AS GOOD A PLACE AS ANY."

Bob then told me a funny story about his military induction. "One day I went across the street to lunch, and a friend caught up with me on his way to enlist. I went with him and never went back to work. In one hour we had to be packed and on the bus. That was in September of 1942. I didn't go back to work until years later.

"I wasn't in actual combat. My stuff was more or less technical. It was hard work and not very romantic. We had to install parts on repair

planes that would come in on their way to Japan. I started out as an aviation mechanic in the Air Force. I wound up in electronics and radar. I was a radar technician with the 502 bomber group.

"I was only out of the country once, and that was when I was in Puerto Rico. I went to the electronics school at the University of Nebraska, and then attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I then went to Florida for radar and back to Grand Island, Nebraska. I was in the 502nd bomber group. They dropped the atomic bomb, and the war was over. I was slated to go to Brazil to work as a technician and trainer, but I came home on furlough and decided not to reenlist and to forget the army. I took about three weeks to be separated out of the army.

"Routt County hadn't changed much; it was about the same as always. I decided that Routt County was as good a place as any, it all depended on what I wanted out of life. I think I had about a week's vacation, and I went straight to George Hageman and asked him for work again.

"George started out with a bicycle shop in Oak Creek and then he went into the car business. He had the oldest Chevrolet agency business in Colorado, and I worked for him for 30 years. We were always busy. We built a new shop and garage in 1967, and George put in a big body shop. We had three men working; we had his used cars to take care of, and we had the customers' cars to take care of. At the time, we were associated with General Motors and Motors Insurance Corporation, so we also had an insurance business. There wasn't any time when we weren't busy.

"Body work is very exacting. We used to do a huge body work business. We used to do the whole thing, framing and upholstery; now there are gas men, upholstery men and painters. They break it down, when we had to do the whole thing. We got out of the painting business because the parts were hard to find, and we had money tied up in a job. We would be tied up for two or three days on a job, and we couldn't find a part or piece and then couldn't finish a job. There are many people to satisfy in the body work business.

"Generally there would be just the employer, but in body work there is the employer who wants to make money, the insurance company who wants to save money, and the customer who doesn't want to spend any money and then there's yourself. You know what I mean, you want to be satisfied with your own work. So, it makes it kind of tough to decide just where you are going to fit in. The customer is the last guy to satisfy, and he should be the first. Anymore, he gets little consideration. Many times the insurance company says how the job should be

done. I think that is a bad deal, and about 70 percent of our work was insurance work.

"Insurance companies used to have their own adjusters, and we used to work with Motors Insurance Corporation. We had discounts on parts because of being a Chevrolet dealer. Everything was down to a flat rate operation, and the insurance company was pretty fair and tough and exact. Now there is a lot of redo and replace. Some fenders just can't be straightened because they are too paper thin, so a lot of fellows remove and replace, and there is very little straightening. There's more profit in parts and labor, and it's too much work to straighten. Years ago we used to heat, stretch and shrink metal, and we used to use lead. Now lead is a thing of the past.

"Now it's all plastic, and some of these fellows are pretty good. I mean, they sculpture, and they know their business. We used to have a process where we could heat lead, like in a door panel. We would get it as good as we could and then use a heat gun and sticks of lead. We melted the lead with air and built it up to 1/8 or 1/4 inch and then filed it off. That way it was all hand-filled. I will never forget once we had a door that looked beautiful, and we slammed the door, and it fell off onto the floor.

"The hardest part is painting. In this part of the country we have little humidity and dry air which changes in the cold. My facilities are limited, because I don't have a bake oven and monitoring equipment, so the painting is the hardest thing. Another handicap in this part of the country is parts. We have to get more of the parts out of Salt Lake and Denver, and it all has to be shipped in. We have also lost our Rio Grande freight and the train is gone now too. That puts a handicap on us and the competition. We have freight bills, and we are lucky if we get parts in a week.

"When I first started in the business we used to have what they called rollers. A roller looked like a U clamp, and it had rollers on both sides. We greased both sides of those fingers and pulled them back and forth to straighten the dents. We used to have pneumatic air hammers then, so we did away with the rollers. This was easier on the hands but harder on the head because of the noise. Most body men today seem to have trouble with their hearing.

"The fenders and things like that were heavy. We could weld them and not get heat distortion. Now if we put a torch to the middle of one of those doors we couldn't get the shape back for love nor money. Doors used to be so thick we could work on them with a sledge hammer. The metal is so thin now that it is light gauge and the edges are sharp. If we put a sledge hammer to one of these fenders today we would twist it out of shape, so it wouldn't be able to be fixed.

"Things have changed. We used to have metal grills, and those were expensive. Now it's all plastic, and it's still expensive. It really isn't fair, but automobiles aren't built today like they were. We used to figure a person would trade cars every seven years, but now...some people like their older cars because they are heavier. Now if we can straighten out the metal and do a good job it comes out about the same. If the metal can't be straightened or we have trouble getting parts, we may not get the job out as fast. But if we can do it at a reasonable price and do a good job, it comes out about the same. Automobiles are expensive these days, and the repair is costly also."

I asked Mr. Gilbert to tell us about Routt County and his philosophy of the area. "I think Routt County is as good a place as any, but in a lot of ways we are thirty years behind. We have a thirty year cushion to go on, so I see no reason not to have faith in this county. We have a lot of resources, and I think coal mining will go west and south with energy lines. I think we are losing out on forest permits because of the grazing, and if we keep from taxing ourselves to death, Routt County will be all right. Steamboat and the mountain have seen the biggest growth, and we see a lot of tourism. The ski industry is big now in this area. Skiing is a rapidly growing sport, and cross country skiing is going to be a big asset to Routt County.

"There used to be 1,100 ranches until 1960, when that number was down to 400. There have been a lot of changes in agriculture and mining. There used to be 1,200 miners, and now there's only about 150. All the small ranches are gone, places like Twenty Mile, and the once open country and sage brush is now all wheat. In this open country there will always be plenty of snow, no doubt about it."

After talking about Routt County, I asked Bob how Oak Creek has changed. "If they ever decide what to do with this town, that will be interesting. We have found that we can't compete with Denver or Steamboat. The best we could do is have about 2,000 people living here, and when you're on the bottom the only way to go is up. People can make a living here, and the community builds about three or four homes a year, and many are being remodeled even with no building boom. A lot of the young people that come here do so for cheap living, and a lot of people think that they are all hippies. Those that have stayed have built homes and have families.

"Oak Creek hasn't been any wilder than any other small town, but it certainly has been publicized more than most. It hasn't changed a great deal; we just have different types of people here, and you can make a living here. After all it's not such a bad place; I reared my two children here in Oak Creek."