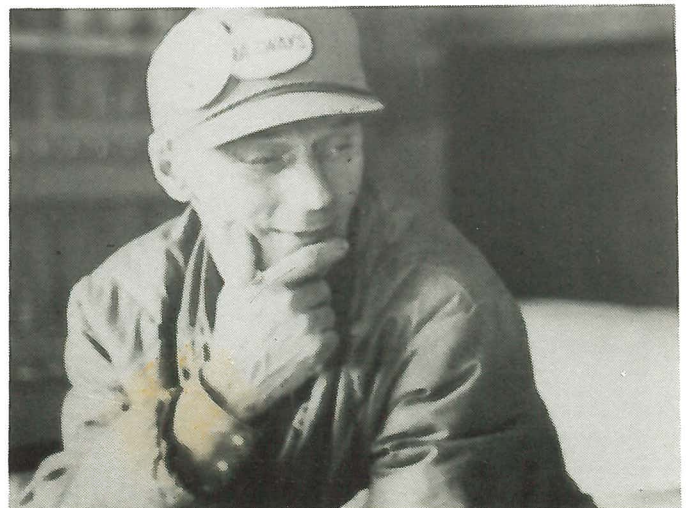
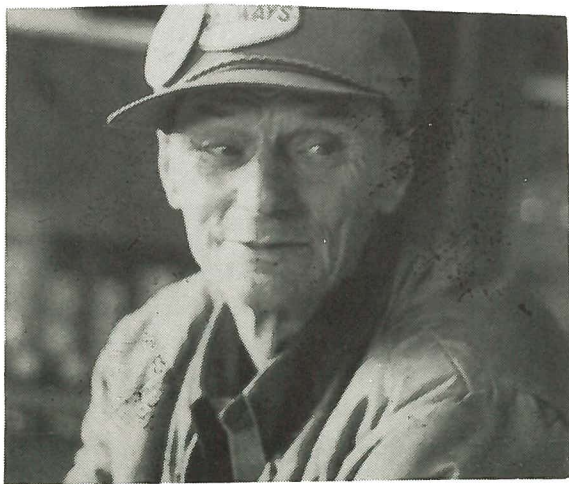


“Every town’s got one like him, but I think we’ve got the best.”

SNOWBALL



By Jill Lockhart and Judy Seligson

"He don't tell nobody nothin', but everybody knows him." An old-time friend's words seem to tell the story. It's hard to forget a man like Snowball. His gleaming blues eyes and soiled worn overalls make him one of Steamboat's most unique personalities. His is perhaps the most recognized face, yet least known heart in Routt County. "He don't tell nobody nothin'."

Snowball has been shoveling snow, loading buses, and tipping his hat to the ladies as long as anybody can remember. "I worked where it was to be done," he explains, shrugging off reports that he's done a nice thing for almost everyone who knows him.

Ralph Marion Heberlee was born on February 22, 1916, in Wray, Colorado. Although fifty nine, people guess him to be anywhere from forty to seventy-five. "It don't bother me none. Everybody's gotta grow old," Snowball reasons from behind a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Snowball doesn't speak much about his past. He left home when he was seven years old, leaving four sisters, four brothers, and his father, Marion Ralph, in Wray. "The family told me never to go to jail," he said, "and I never went. I just couldn't stand it. I liked to get out on the world, so I did. People think it's hard times now, but they ought've tried it in the '20's when I was out on my own. They'd think different.

"One time I was just makin' board and room and clothes. Then finally I got \$1.50 a month and I could buy my own eats and all."

Politics and government aren't especially important to Snowball, but he's got a lot to say about today's prices. "It was a hard depression in those days an' I think it's about time they go on one again. Now look at the prices an' what you're gettin'! Why you can make five dollars in half an hour now, and maybe even more in the city. Oh yeah, it was hard then, but I just know it's gonna be the same way soon."

Snowball worked for WPA repairing roads for almost ten years. "Oh yeah, it was rough, but we made out. I didn't care, I just liked to live,"

When he was seventeen Snowball joined the Army. "That was the way to see a lot of country in them days. We traveled clear from California north to the Dakotas and Canada. Went south as far as Omaha. Even went to New York but I couldn't hardly stand it. Too hot."

Snowball admits he never was much for religion or women. "Had a girlfriend til '45," he reflects. "Lived in Denver at the time and I'd see her everyday at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal. We both worked there. Oh yeah, she was real pretty.

"As for church. Well, I went to one of them Catholic Churches til '45, but I ain't been to one since."



"I just love the mountains."

Snowball first saw Steamboat Springs when he came here hunting in 1931. "I guess it was the cold weather and the mountains that made me come back. I just love the mountains." When he returned in 1949, after living forty miles west in Craig, Colorado, he was broke. With only a bedroll, he slept in the city park and earned his meals doing odd jobs.

It was Leona Todd who took Snowball in. Snowball calls her "Mother Todd" - his first friend in Steamboat. She calls him, "The most unusual and beautiful man I've ever known."

"I owned the Mountain Home Cafe then," Mother Todd recalls. "He came to me and asked if he could park his bedroll in my garage. He would clean the furnace and shovel snow, and we'd always tix him up with something good to eat. You know," she mused, "he used to get mad at the salesmen who parked in front of the Cafe without coming in to eat. So while they were gone he'd shovel snow in front of their cars. Then he'd stand back and throw snowballs at them as they were trying to dig themselves out. Ralph's been Snowball ever since." Too shy to admit it, Snowball simply explains his nickname as "from shoveling so much snow". "Only a few people call him Ralph now," Mother Todd adds, "I think it tickles him."

"He thought I couldn't do anything wrong, and he's never questioned me," Mother Todd continues. "I don't know anybody to ever hear him raise his voice. Well I'll bet he'd just whip somebody if they ever bad-mouthed me," she smiles. "I think the only time I ever saw him mad was when Wilma, that's my daughter, wouldn't let him come into the restaurant to eat because he was so dirty. He didn't come in for two or three days, but I knew he'd take a bath and come back 'cause he'd get hungry. We'd always make him take baths before eating. But I don't think he's had more than two since I closed the restaurant."

Another friend once stated, "Sometimes I think he's allergic to soap and water. But most of us overlook that. That's Snowball."

"Took me the biggest part of one winter to teach him to write," Mother Todd remembers. "See he quit school when he left home, he was about seven then, and he never did go back." Snowball doesn't read for pleasure, but he does when he has to. Even now, he writes his name with great authority, remembering the time he couldn't even spell it.

Ralph Heberlee

After a few nights in the city park, he moved into a small room next to the Mountain Home Cafe. "I'd shovel snow in the winter and mow lawns in the summer," says Snowball. "'Cept the first winter I was here when I herded sheep up in North Park." He later moved to the Occasia Hotel and stayed there until fire destroyed the building in 1971.

Now, as always, Snowball lives alone. He sleeps in a tiny room in the basement of the Harbor Hotel. He won't let anyone see his room because, he claims, "I'd have to clean it up first." The door of his room is always locked, and opens only a crack as a face peers through to see who's knocking. Snowball has never owned a house, but, he dreams, "If I did, I'd buy a little place. I'd buy me a little piece of country."

"I've got a lot of respect for the man. He works for what he gets and he don't ask for charity," states Clay Monson, longtime

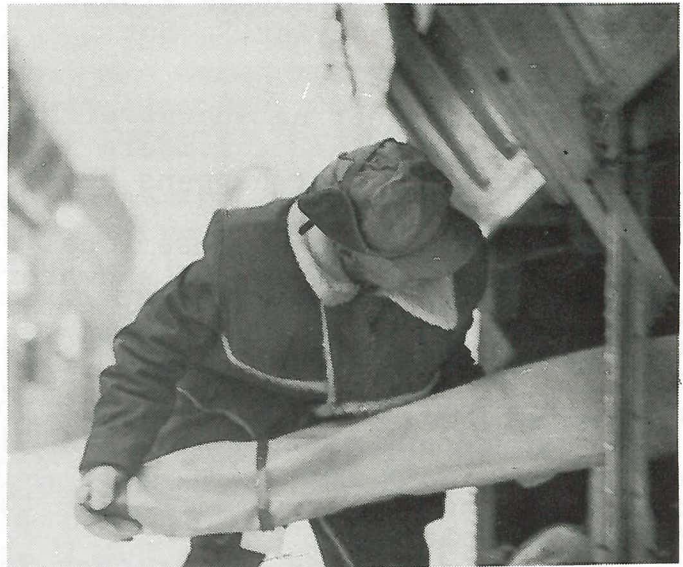
Steamboater and friend of Snowball. Snowball has always spent his winters shoveling snow, and just recently have problems with his health slowed him down. He charged a flat monthly rate and collected whether it snowed or not; but was also known to shovel walks for people whether they paid or not. The only two walks on Lincoln Avenue that he bypassed were those of shopowners who he didn't like for some reason.

Snowball used to work for Root Mortuary digging graves. Last year he lost the job by an underbid of \$5. "Well how ya gonna make a livin' at that," he exclaims, "I'm gonna like ta see this new guy try." In the past three years, Snowball has been loading, hauling, and delivering freight for Montgomery Wards, and the Trailway buses that pull into the Harbor Hotel.

His eyes brighten as Snowball recalls days as a volunteer fire fighter. "I fought a lot of forest fires from '44 clear to '62. Then the doctor made me stop - said the smoke was bad for my lungs. You know, I've seen a lot of fires. 'Round here and in California. Oh yeah, we was helpin' people an' we had a real lot of fun. That was the gold of life.

"One fire, up north-east of Craig, had about 1250 acres burning way up there," Snowball emphasizes pointing a rugged finger towards the west. "That'n lasted from July clear to September. That was a long time up there. We couldn't use bulldozers 'cause it was too rocky. We had to fight it with trucks that hauled water to us. An' take shovels an' fight it with them. Ever see 'em shoot the fire with airplanes? There's somepin to see. They spray it out. That keeps the fire from a spreadin'. We called that headin' the fire in.

"This Dakota fire guy took thirty people in an' tried to fight the fire from the inside," he scoffed. "Boy, he got caught. Got shipped right back to Dakota. The forest ranger wouldn't even let him stay with us when he found out what he was doin'. Why everybody knows you can't fight a fire from the inside out. You gotta stav out an' bring it in. "Oh yeah," he reflects, "I've seen a lot of ground.



"I just worked where it was to be done."



"I just love the mountains an' I love ta get out in 'em." With a shy, but broad smile he declares, "I've pulled 'em out of a beaver dam at two an' a half pounds a-piece" and "well, I always said the best place for the big game is Douglas Mountain, just west of Craig." But Snowball doesn't mention the time hunting in 1956 when he found a man freezing to death and cared for him for over a month. His quiet "Oh yeah" dismisses the act as nothing more than the right thing to do.

"He keeps up with things that happen 'round here, and he knows about things that never even did happen." Clay Monson speaks fondly of Snowball's love for a good story, however exaggerated it may become. "He keeps to himself, but he always has a story for a tourist." But



"That was the gold of life."

Snowball's tales that he shares with outsiders are never malicious. "He loves Steamboat and considers it home. He just wants people to know he's proud of what happens here," Mother Todd reasoned, "Besides, the tourists all like him."

Snowball likes to discuss local present-day news. He is quick to describe how an unexpected snowstorm effected the community, or recall the details of last night's fire. He's also very much concerned about Steamboat's future and the rapid growth of the ski area. "I was just up there once but it looks like a town to me. Don't it to you? The buildings are too close. You couldn't start to turn 'round out there without hittin' somebody. If you have one room, why it costs too much. Over \$200 a month to live out there. And if the winds would come up like they do in Wray it'd blow them buildings to pieces."

At one time, rumor had it that Snowball was one of the richest men in Steamboat Springs. The story said he hoarded his money and had it hidden away, possibly buried, somewhere in Routt County. "Oh no," Snowball laughed. "That ain't right," and the subject is dropped.

Mother Todd comments, "Spends money like it's going out of style. I don't think he does know the value of a dollar. He used to buy people gifts all the time. He bought me twenty-nine beautiful unmatched coffee mugs once when I had the Cafe, and see these?" she says reaching for a collection of glass stained animals, "He got me these." Snowball spends most of his earnings on Lena, his youngest sister. He sends her money and presents and writes to her in Denver once a week. Lena is the only relative Snowball sees regularly. "She comes to visit me an' I go to see her sometimes. Oh yeah, I just think the world of her," he gleams.

Snowball loves small children and it is not unusual to see him offering candy to a youngster he meets. "There wasn't a child 'ever walked down Main Street that he didn't go over or buy candy for," Mother Todd mused.

Snowball has never bought himself much more than meals, cig-

arettes, and on Wednesdays, the local newspaper, but five years ago he splurged. A John Deere tractor is the most expensive thing Snowball has ever owned. It makes shoveling snow and mowing lawns easy work, as well as providing speedy transportation to and from the cemetery at the edge of town. It even occasioned a write up in the Steamboat Pilot. Snowball remembers riding his new tractor in the fourth of July parade that year. "I had more fun than they ever saw. Boy, they couldn't get me offa my new tractor. You oughta seen that tractor go," he beamed.

In the morning Snowball wakes early. He shaves and puts on the overalls he wore the day before. Snowball doesn't like city clothes. His bright red Trailways cap is the finishing touch before walking to the Waffle Shack for one pancake and a cup of coffee. On the way to Montgomery Wards, Snowball nods a "Good morning!" to everyone he passes, stopping to chat with only a few. After a morning of moving boxes and exchanging stories with others, he walks back to the Harbor Hotel. This time Snowball strolls the other side of Lincoln Avenue, stopping at the Skee Inn for a dinner of anything except soup, which he hates. There's time for other things until 3:55 when the bus comes into town from Salt Lake. Snowball shares his afternoons with Marv the barber, and anyone else who wanders into the



"I didn't care, I just liked to live."

barber shop. "I see him seven days a week just like clockwork. Comes in at five and leaves at six," explains Marv. Snowball goes to the El Rancho for supper at 6:45 every evening. He sits alone, but there is an endless stream of familiar faces and greetings. After meeting the 7:50 bus from Denver, the rest of the night is left for talking with people; a short walk around town; and an early bedtime.

Snowball takes great store by what people think about him. His frequent "Yes'm" is as much a part of Snowball as his old bone cigarette holder. His lips closed, Snowball's blue eyes sparkle often to disclose an inviting smile. In a slow steady voice, changing from slurred to scratchy in the middle of a thought, he explains what has kept him in Steamboat for the past twenty-seven years. "People. Workin' 'round people. I know 'em. Know 'em all. Oh yeah..."