

The Rancher Retires

By LYN HARRINGTON

Photography by Richard Harrington

NO one likes to think ahead to the day when his eyesight's not so good, wind not what it was, and when both mental and muscular reactions are slowed down. But it happens, just as inevitably in man as it does in the herd. The difference is that the rancher has a lot more to say about what's going to happen.

Some men look forward all their lives to retirement, when they can "just sit back and take it easy". If any cattleman is of such a disposition, then I've never met him. Most consider themselves indestructible, it seems. They figure on "dying with their boots on".

Today, what with our Old Age Security pensions and so forth, greater attention is being paid to fitting oneself for retirement. It creeps up on some men so quietly, that they're 70 before they feel they've got into their stride . . . and are still apt to consider their sons of 50 as inexperienced "youngsters".

Today people live longer, even in frontier areas, in spite of heart disease and cancer and arthritis and other bugaboos of our day. The question of how to spend the latter years of life is important. You want to enjoy them. You want the folks around to enjoy your presence, not wish you were in the company of the angels instead.

The fact is that most of the crabbiness and crotchety ways of old men are a result of boredom, of fear of the future in life or death. The realization that they are no longer the king-pin, or even really needed, is a blow to their self-esteem.

I know one such case. The man retired only at the age of 85, with good eyesight, hearing and general good health. He makes life nearly intolerable at home, because he has nothing to do with his time except find fault. It's the result of having no second string to his bow. When his life's work was finished, he had no plans for the remaining years. He will probably live to 100, outlasting his heckled womenfolk.

As a matter of fact, men in retirement have a low life-expectancy. In some occupations, such as railroading, the grim statistics show that the survival is only 3½ years. Once the main occupation is gone, time hangs heavy. There's plenty of time to develop real and psychosomatic ailments, and nothing much to combat them.

Look around you. How many ranchers have any retirement scheme planned for themselves? Would you like to be sentenced to 20 years of talking? Yet many a retired rancher and wheat farmer does that to himself deliberately.

You find them in the lobbies of hotels throughout the west, in town, city and village. They occupy the same chair every day, for hours at a time, just looking on at life, or reminiscing about the old days. Or you'll find them in the beverage rooms, putting away inordinate amounts of liquor out of sheer boredom. If they are hard of hearing as well, they've a mighty lonely time of it.

Very few of these men have a hobby, a secondary interest on which to spend their enforced leisure. Yet in all retirement projects, a hobby is stressed, for maintaining an active interest in life, a solace for loneliness.

Reading is good, but it's not enough in itself. And it's no great pleasure to a man who never willingly opened a book before. A handicraft may be sneered at by the active rancher. Yet it can be a boon to fill idle hours, and often can be a profitable expenditure of the time.

Of course it isn't only ranchers who fail to take serious thought for the future. You'll find it in business men everywhere. "A place in the country" is the average business man's dream of retirement, not realizing that he's unfitted for such a life. A sudden shift away from all the customary stimuli of living makes a discontented man.

(It might be well to mention right here that women take retirement much better in their stride. For a woman's duties seem to go right on, though in reduced amounts. She still cooks and cleans and mends to some extent, no matter where she lives. So that life does not have the sharp and sudden break that men experience on retirement.)



A small place of his own on the ranch is often the happiest solution for the retiring rancher.

One rancher solved the problem neatly. He had formerly ranched 1500 head of cattle. He sold these, moved to the outskirts of a cattletown in British Columbia, and now keeps 50 head. It means he is still amongst his cronies, that he has an interest in life, something he knows best and some income from it, but without overworking.

"We're going to the coast", is a standard plan amongst the ranching fraternity, it seems to me. And they



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flock to Victoria, to California, to Vancouver and other spots completely dissimilar to the familiar wide open spaces. Often they find themselves thoroughly discontented with the new state of affairs, and out of joint with the times and the neighborhood.

A man who has dealt in thousands of cattle doesn't readily settle down to growing pansies, even in a choice climate. Why should "gardening" seem any panacea for loneliness to a rancher who never grew a nasturtium in his life? There just is not enough active interest in it for him. And so he drifts off to the hotel lobby — or the grave — at an early date.

"We're going to travel," says another group of men heading toward retirement. Well, travel's a fine thing. But believe it or not, it becomes pretty monotonous unless you travel with a purpose. You can't spend your life looking up relatives and enjoy it, even though they are the nicest people in the world. A man gets tired of being "company".

One former rancher of my acquaintance has a system which works well for him — and for lots of elderly people. His trailer is a large and comfortable home on wheels, and his migrations between Alberta and Arizona are as regular as the birds. He has gathered a group of friends in both places, acquaintances he renews every year. I wouldn't call it a very full life, but it suits him.

Retired ranchers have a contribution to make, one that is entirely in keeping with their lifelong interest, and within the family group, so to speak. Many now living in town or village are active in sponsoring the local stampede. A few give their attention to baseball leagues, or curling teams, or to the activities of the local service club, or take a greater interest in politics.

Others recognize the value of the pioneer days, and are the main backers in the small museums in the west, such as at Calgary, Medicine Hat or Maple Creek. There should be more of this sort of thing, and of writing down the local history. It's more rewarding than swapping yarns in the hotel lobby with some old crony. Retirement can have a lot of fun, if you plan for it.



An elderly rancher will find more satisfaction with his grandchildren than in peaceful exile in town.

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Where it can be worked out, I think the happiest solution is for the rancher to stay right on the ranch, but in his own dwelling. If he's under his daughter-in-law's feet all day, she may wonder whether she married him or his son!

The habit of authority is not easily unlearned. The retiring rancher would be wise to start recognizing his son's ability while Junior is still willing to learn from the Old Man. Dad's advice can be valuable for years to come, if he learns how to offer it, and then stand back without criticism when the son makes minor blunders. There is no question but that the rancher will find himself happier in the midst of a pack of grandchildren than spending a peaceful, but lonesome, exile in town.

Retirement is not an end in itself. It is a new phase of life. Like the matter of growing into manhood, or taking on a new occupation, it must be learned. The youth learns something daily, and not all the lessons of becoming a man are easy or pleasant. Neither are all the lessons in retiring. It's hard to step aside — doubly so, if it's done all at once.

But it can be done gracefully, and indeed with pride, little by little. Father and son can make out a partnership agreement, and as the former wearies,

he can take pride in the latter's growing proficiency.

With the Old Age Security payments, and his own savings, the rancher need not fear starving to death in some alley. His financial arrangements with sons and daughters depend on his own personality. But they should be worked out ahead of time, not left in a snarl to be untangled after his death. It is most unfair to leave an estate to be divided equally amongst the children, when only one has shown any interest or put any work on the place. Often the rancher-son has to mortgage his future to pay off the rest of the family. A poor reward for his faithfulness!

Without children to carry on the ranch, the cattleman may lease his land for an assured income, or sell it and invest the proceeds in gilt-edged securities. He should still make his will — it doesn't hasten death by so much as one second. But while the financial aspect of his retirement is important, it is secondary to his own social adjustment. It's a matter for serious thought to anyone over 40.

"Leisure," wrote Alexis Carrel in *Man the Unknown*, "is even more dangerous for the old than for the young. To those whose forces are declining, appropriate work should be given. But not rest."

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