

# CONFESSIONS OF RED MEAT SURVIVORS

**Some of ranching's old-timers admit to ignoring the problems of cholesterol and other unnamed and often unsubstantiated handicaps. They believe that red meat is good, which is proven here, simply by age and attitude.**

the famous Kentucky Derby winner. A few years later, he was driving the buck rake for the overshot stackers.

"The overshot stackers would take one load of hay," Rib says. "Beaver slides need three loads. A team pulls the load into the air and drops it on top of the stack. One guy had to be on top of the stack to make it square. It was a matter of pride to have nice-looking haystacks."

A high school senior when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Rib became a Navy pilot as soon as he could. "I was finishing operational training just as the war ended. We were ready to go over and annihilate Japan."

Instead, he rodeoed: bulldogging, calf roping and team roping.

"I bulldogged for 35 years. You don't just dive off onto the steer.

## MONTANA

### Rib Gustafson, 80

Never pass up a good deal.

Whether he's dragging a cow through a 100-foot tunnel, writing his memoirs, or raising cain in a honky-tonk, Rib Gustafson works and plays hard.

Raised on a cattle and sheep ranch at the head of Big Coulee, between Ryegate and Rapelje, Mont., by the time he was four, Rib was leading his Shetland pony up to the chicken house so he could climb aboard. At seven, Rocky Mountain spotted fever stole his father. Within the year, his oldest sister and youngest brother died, too. By then, Rib was halter breaking his own Omaha, named after

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Rib at 4, in 1929. ▶ Navy Ensign in WWII.

▶ Rib, during filming of "Hidalgo." Movie makers trapped all gophers, filled the holes, and released them after filming. Rib was in charge of 500 hoof-branded horses so he could tell who owned which horse. ▶ Rib sits in with his son Wylie & the Wild West during the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nev., in 2005.



You put your hand on his back and let your horse carry you forward,” he says. Between rodeos, he worked on threshing crews as a spike pitcher.

“That’s how I learned ‘Way Up Higher in the Sierry Peaks.’ There was an old phonograph in the bunkhouse and that was the only record. We played it over and over.”

Four years of veterinary school and his wedding to Pat Galt on Thanksgiving Day, 1953, fit in there somewhere. It was a busy practice for the only vet in north-central Montana. During the calving season, Rib hired a driver so he could sleep between ranch visits.

As a boy, Rib had to entertain himself after his mother moved the family to Bozeman, so he built ski jumps on the local golf course and taught himself to ski by strapping pine boards on his boots. He taught Pat to ski on their honeymoon. Their five kids were on boards as soon as they could walk. Rib and Pat always reserved the week between Christmas and New Year’s for a family ski vacation.

Rib could never pass up a good deal. When a solid ranch came up for sale, he bought it. As Pat tells the story, Rib walked into their Conrad home one afternoon in 1971 and announced that he had just purchased a ranch that sat in the middle of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, 40 miles away as the crow flies and a million miles from Conrad’s culture.

“Rib was lucky he lived when he pulled that one,” says Pat. Their son and daughter-in-law run black-baldy cows on that ranch today.

Vets do more than just pull stubborn calves and one of Rib’s career highlights was working on the set of the 2004 movie “Hidalgo” where he cared for 550 “practically wild” horses.

“The hard part was keeping track of their owners,” Rib says. “Fifty or 60 owners brought horses. We hoof branded them to keep track of them.”

He documented other highlights in two of his six books. “Under the Chinook Arch” and “Room to Roam” tell vet stories that would make James Herriot turn over in his grave.

Rib savors every cut of beef, but his favorite is the tongue, boiled at home, packed in to a remote spot on the Rocky Mountain front, and sliced into sandwich meat.

“My wife has to be gone when I cook it, though.”—*Lisa Schmidt*

