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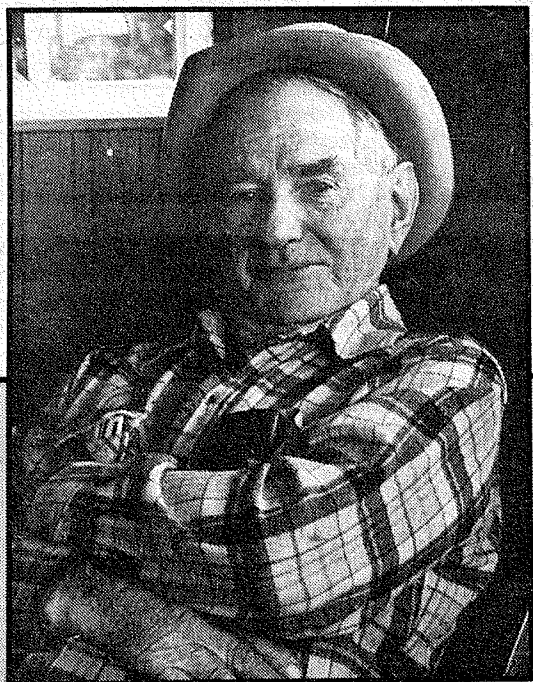
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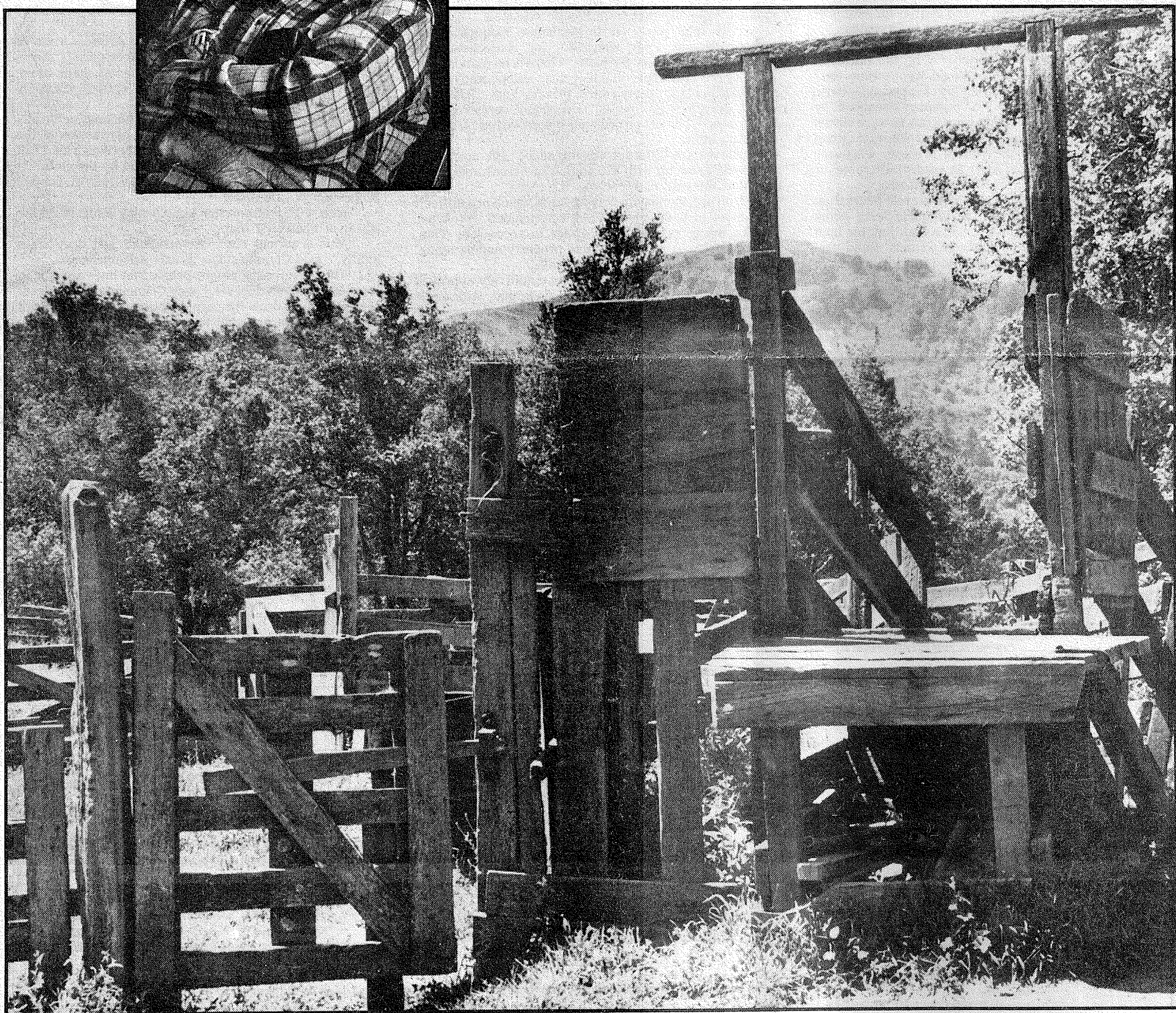


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The old corral quiet now...



Jim Rapley, last of the Skyline cowboys, has switched from horse to rocking chair and he's full of tales of the past... See page 11



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Jim Rapley: Last of the Skyline cowboys

Yarn spinning will occupy his time now

by Marion Softky

For many of us last winter was memorable for deluges, floods and landslides.

For Jim Rapley this was an easy winter.

"Ordinarily in the cattle business I had to be out riding the hills. This winter all I had to do was stay in the house and keep warm," says Rapley, who has only recently retired and sold off his last few cows after 55 years of ranching on Skyline.

"I've been running cattle the best part of my life," Rapley adds. "I started my first herd when I was 15 years old. It was not a very big herd, but it was a beginning."

Since World War I Rapley has been an integral part of the Skyline community of ranchers. He is a carryover from the era when people made their living off the land rather than driving to it for sleep or recreation. As horses and wagons were slowly giving way to cars, he worked cattle on some 3000 acres still labeled by the names of the old ranching families—Williams, Isenberg, True, Rapley.

But Jim Rapley, now 80, is best known as a spinner of yarns. In the age-old tradition of story tellers, he brings alive the old days—the mud and the dust, the characters that peopled the land, the events that shaped their lives.

Rapley's cozy office off his old workshop is lined with pictures of the old days—old "Jack the Ripper," 12 oxen pulling redwood logs, the last of the great rodeo cowboys, two gamblers who used to hang out at the old Pioneer in Woodside, a purebred Morgan stallion. And each picture stimulates another yarn, another piece of the past.

Rapley talks slowly, deliberately, with the twang of the hills. Then, as he winds up a story—or delivers a deadpan punch line—he leans back, chuckles, and smiles a slow, wonderful smile that glints with a single gold tooth.

"In the old horse and wagon days, why getting to Woodside was a pretty good chore," Rapley recalls. "Those roads were all dirt roads. In the winter time they were mud, in the summer dust."

"People never went to town unless they were out of everything. It was too much of a chore."

The automobile age came very slowly to the hills because of those dirt roads. "You didn't have any Skyline Boulevard," Rapley remembers. "The old road along Skyline was beautiful with old rail fences and the brush gone. It was a typical country lane following the line of least resistance."

Rapley still lives at the end of a long dirt road. His cozy green cabin is set in a sheltered bowl with a panoramic view of Pescadero and the ocean beyond.

The cabin, far older than he, was built over a hundred years ago as a "temporary home" to go with a magnificent barn. The barn has long since burned down, but the cabin remains under a grove of trees surrounded by a white fence and garden. A couple of dogs and two horses are all that remain of the bustling activity that used to fill the weathered ranch buildings and corral.

Actually Rapley grew up in Menlo Park, although both his parents came from ranching families. His father had grown up in La Honda and had a ranch at Bear Gulch, and his mother had also spent time in the mountains.

"Going to school, going to town—everything they did was so hard, my mother figured she'd had enough mountain business," Rapley explains. "She didn't want to have her kids growing up here. So that's how we moved to the lowlands."

Thus Rapley, fourth of nine children, spent most of his childhood in Menlo Park—except for glorious summers visiting grandparents on the mountain. He attended the old St. Joseph's school, the one that was torn down because it did not meet fire codes.

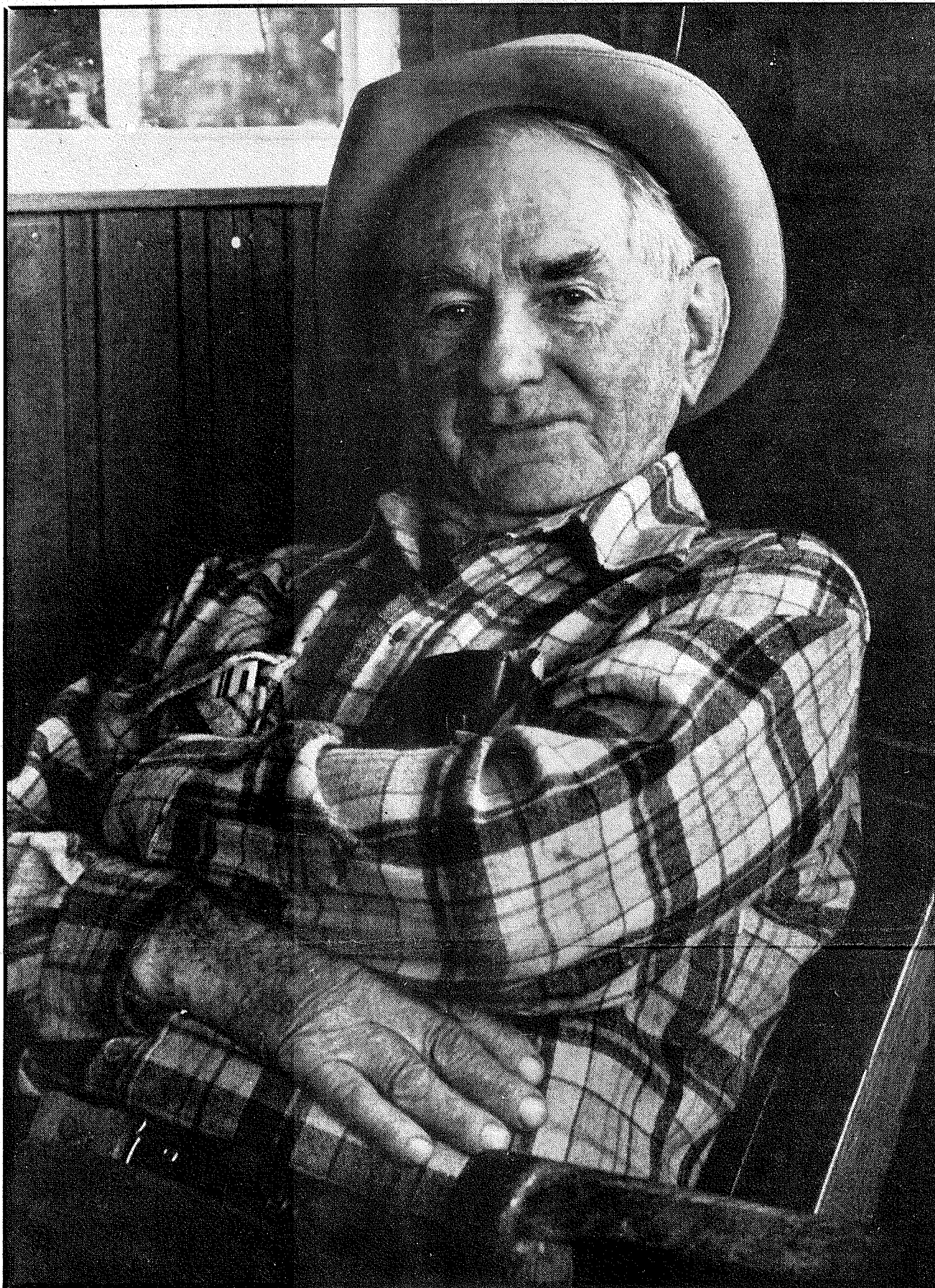
Rapley remembers the 1906 earthquake which came when he was about four years old. "I remember not so much the earthquake as the excitement with it," he recalls. "After the big quake I remember my father going around checking on everything that was broke."

"Everybody was so excited. At night time you could stand in the yard and you could see the sky was red. Where we lived in Menlo, they had a big old barn. These people were coming, wanting to sleep in the barn, carrying a parrot, or pushing a baby buggy or anything with something in it."

"There was a lot of little quakes after the big quake. I remember them more than the big quake. We had a girl working for us, supposed to be my nurse. She was hysterical," Rapley looks up and laughs, "and she got me hysterical."

While Rapley was growing up, his father used to "team out of the mountains." He would cut and haul wood; he would haul hay and grain; he did a little farming in the valley, too. And young Jim would often ride along, taking in stories of the land and its people.

"He mostly used to point out what happened along that road," Rapley recalls, "a whole family buried under



JIM RAPLEY remembers when Skyline was cow country. Photo by Marion Softky.

that oak tree; a guy hung under that other oak tree down by Searsville."

Rapley's father also drove the water truck that provided fresh water for residents of the Menlo Park and Atherton area in summer when Bear Gulch Lake became too bad to drink. Rapley can remember helping with the water truck—filling the buckets from the tank wagon and delivering them to homes.

Instead of going to high school, Rapley moved up to Skyline when he was 15. There he had a little cabin and a corral and started building up his herd of cattle.

His bachelor quarters became a popular place for relatives and friends to leave their children in summer for some wholesome work and play away from town.

'It really was a different world; Today we take everything for granted.'

"I had quite a layout when I was batching," Rapley recalls. "People would dump their kids off here, and half the time I wouldn't know who the people were who owned the kids."

The sister of one of the girls who used to come up was Anne Foley from San Francisco. She became Mrs. Rapley and still helps keep the cabin cozy.

It was really a different world. Rapley reflects, "Today we take everything so for granted. You want to keep something cool, you put it in the refrigerator. Well, they had no refrigerators."

In those days you would partly cook the meat and

store it in a cool place under fat; keep butter and other things in springhouses by cold springs; cover food with burlap and let a faucet drip on it.

"We worked around the clock. No one was in bed at daylight. Chores were done with a lantern in the morning, and chores were done with a lantern at night." In winter he had to ride the hills during storms to look after the cattle.

"I did a lot of my cowboying alone," Rapley remembers. But he also worked with other ranchers moving cattle, roping, branding. For a while he operated the Isenberg Ranch.

Besides the hard work, there was also time for old-fashioned fun. There were rodeos and barbecues and dances at one ranch or another. "Somehow or another people used to amuse themselves pretty well," Rapley recalls. The dances would move from one barn to another and sometimes they would "import girls from Redwood."

No longer does Jim Rapley ride the range watching his herd. He tends his vegetable garden and mends his house. He also helps other ranchers occasionally, although he grumbles at the inexperienced help they have. And sometimes he warms up to stories of the old times with other hill people, at barbecues and roundups, for local historians, or even—reluctantly—for a reporter.

Back in the cabin—all modern and comfortable inside—Rapley pulls out albums of old photographs. There is the old water truck, roping, branding and bull riding at nearby ranches, haying with old fashioned equipment, and skating on the Isenberg's pond.

But Rapley still doesn't think of himself as an old-timer. "These days it seems it doesn't take a very long time to become an old-timer," he says. "I don't consider myself an oldtimer, but when I start making comparisons I suppose I am."