

Yarns from Skyline

Yes, there were grizzlies in those days

BY MARION SOFTKY

Skyline rancher Jim Rapley sees more wildlife now than when he was growing up because there is less hunting now than there used to be when all the ranchers used to hunt quail and rabbit and deer.

Still earlier, in his father's day wildlife was abundant in the Skyline hills. Rapley recalls, "My dad said he could go down to Mindego Creek and catch a mess of trout in no time at all. He said the quail would sound like thunder in the evening when they would go to roost. There were so many quail; deer were everywhere.

"Then there were no laws and people trapped and hunted for the market. They put these box traps out; they could take a whole field of quail. It wasn't too long before the quail were getting scarce.

"They did the same thing with the deer. No limit. You could shoot anything—doe, fawn. They'd come up sometimes with a four horse wagon and load it up and take it down and sell the deer. They thinned out the deer population pretty quick.

"Then they started making laws." It still took a long time for the wildlife to make a comeback, Rapley notes. He himself doesn't do any hunting now. "I don't think I was a hunter at heart," he says, "In those days you hunted for meat."

Rapley has seen two lions, both a long time ago, and both in Spring Valley where they were laying the big Hetch Hetchy water line near the Hassler Health Home.

As for bears, Rapley has never seen one but recounts this tale of his father's:

"I guess my father saw the last grizzly bear when he was a kid—only 11 or 12 years old.

"He was picking blackberries and he seen these two little cubs reaching up, picking berries. And the mama bear and papa bear came out. Although he had an old

shotgun, he didn't stop running.

"My grandmother used to tell about it. She said he nearly dropped at the door when he got home. He never even looked back to see if they were coming after him."



Pictures on the wall and each an early day vignette

BY MARION SOFTKY

Jim Rapley's little office off his old ranch workshop is lined with faded pictures. And each picture triggers a vignette of earlier days.

On one wall is a photo of a beautiful Morgan stallion.

"I broke him myself for a man with artificial hands," Rapley recalls. "He bought the horse as a colt from Randolph Hearst. He used to ride it in parades."

"He was quite a guy, Charlie McGonigal. He was so good with those hooks that he spent most of his time going from hospital to hospital talking to amputees. After the

war some of them would be so disgusted they'd figure, 'What's the Hell's the use? I don't have any hands.'

"Charlie used to lace his shoes. He'd pull out his cigarettes and take one cigarette and light it. He'd do everything."

"He'd say, 'Well, Jim, I think I owe you a little money.' He'd pull out the checkbook (and write a check). I couldn't begin to write like him, you know, he had beautiful handwriting."

"So he made the best use of those hooks, I guess, going around encouraging people to see what they could do."

Another picture shows a man in suspenders standing

by an old-fashioned porch. That was "Jack the Ripper, one of the most famous characters around," Rapley chuckles.

"He was one of those old characters who used to go from one ranch to another doing whatever needed to be done—haying or rounding up or whatever."

"Jack the Ripper was anything but what that name implies. He was rather a gentle old guy. He'd rather be a tough guy, but it wasn't in his nature."

"Old Jack's been dead a long time. He spent his last days in Woodside."

The last cattle drive

BY MARION SOFTKY

Former Skyline rancher Jim Rapley likes to tell a story his father told him about the Langleys, early ranching family that gave their names to the road, the hill and the quarry.

"When the Langleys settled here in the early days, they were more concerned with the lumber business," Rapley explains.

"They were lumbermen, but they had a herd of cattle. They didn't do anything with these cattle; they just increased, multiplied and went wild."

The Langleys finally decided to round up the wild cattle so they "could start out again with something they could handle—gentle cattle, you know."

"So they hired Old Felix—he was an outlaw cowboy—and he hired about 15 cowboys to help him. They started to round them up. They were going to drive all those cattle down into Mayfield. A fellow by the name of Fisher was to buy them all and butcher them."

"And they did round them up pretty well. The idea was to have 'em all in what they call Fern Hollow. And they figured they did have those cattle in there. In the

morning they would surround 'em all and make the big drive.

"There was a lot of people heard about this big drive. So they came up with horses and buggies and on horseback and all.

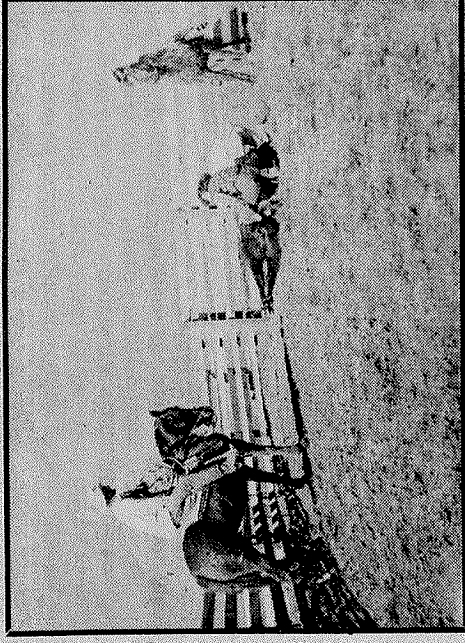
"The cowboys built fires all around, and that was supposed to keep the cattle from coming out. But when morning came, there wasn't any cattle to take out.

"They had all gone down through the canyon. They came out all over—they came out at La Honda; they came out everywhere.

"From then on it was gather as many as you could and rope 'em. They spent the day out there ropin' and tying each one to a tree. Then when they got so many together, they'd butcher 'em right out there and come out with the sled and load them and take them to town.

"The more they worked them, the wilder they got.

"My dad and his sister were going to school in La Honda on a little old pony. I guess when they were coming home, the cowboys had been running these cattle all day, and they were just coming down the mountain like crazy—pretty near to the kids.



JIM RAPLEY (at left) looks over branding in the old days at the ranch owned by the Williams sisters.

"This one guy, Cunningham, he was a hero from then on. He had his coat and kept waving it and turned the herd away from the kids."

Rapley leans back, looks up and smiles: "Yes, I guess it was kind of an exciting round up."

Yarns from Skyline

New Year's party at Searsville with the old prospector

BY MARION SOFTKY

People who used to explore around Searsville Lake before Stanford closed it off to the public may remember several tunnels which suggest early mining.

Oldtime cowboy Jim Rapley of Skyline has some vivid recollections of old Domingo Grasso, the hermit who had a cabin in a gully off Jasper Ridge.

Old Domingo "dug pits and mined and prospected for gold," Rapley recalls. "He shipped ore once a year. The story was that he had a sister somewhere who was well off. He had been wealthy—had money in the First Italian Bank. Of course, when the bank went bankrupt, Old Domingo lost all his life savings."

Rapley remembers Domingo's little "all up and down

board cabin" with Italian and American flags. It was very neat and surrounded by little paths lined with rocks.

"He had his own vineyard and made his own wine from his own grapes," Rapley goes on.

"When we were kids (in Menlo Park) we'd go up there Saturday. We were supposed to be hunting or trapping or something and usually wound up at Domingo's.

"That particular time he thought it was New Year's but it was four or five days after. I was with my older brother and a couple of other kids. Old Domingo thought he should celebrate with us so he brought out his homemade bread and his homemade cheese and his homemade wine.

"It was terrible wine. I didn't want any but my brother thought I should take part in the deal because

otherwise Old Domingo would be insulted. So rather than insult him, I drank some of that wine.

"I don't think I drank as much as they did, but I drank enough. They were still in there at seven, and I was out under an oak tree.

"I never saw so many robins in my life. As long as I lay down, I could look up into that tree. I saw one robin and he looked like a thousand.

"But still we had miles to walk out of there to Menlo," Rapley still remembers. "We came out of there in various by-ways. We all seemed able to walk, but it wasn't very straight.

"That was the first wine I drank. But it wasn't the last."

1/19/00

Jim Rapley, 97, and wife Anne, 87, survive fire

By ANNE H. KIM

A 97-year-old rancher, known as one of the last of the Skyline cowboys, and his 87-year-old wife are said to be resting and in good spirits after surviving a fire that destroyed their Skyline ranch home on January 15 in unincorporated San Mateo County.

After an overnight stay in the hospital to check Jim Rapley's vital signs, he and his wife Anne were taken to the home of neighbors Bruce and Hildegard Jackson where they will stay until other accommodations are found. Mrs. Rapley has laryngitis after inhaling smoke from the fire.

"They're both in amazingly good spirits," said Mr. Jackson. "Even in the emergency room, they talked about it."

A fire believed to have sparked inside the Rapleys' home, on Rapley Ranch Road near the Langley Hill Quarry, started at about 10 p.m. on January 15 according to Paul Trenholm, an engineer paramedic with the San Mateo County Fire Department's Skylonda station.

Mr. Rapley had just gone to bed and his wife was entering their living room when smoke and flames filled the home. Mr. Rapley, blinded by glaucoma, managed to find his wife and

(Continued on Page 20)

Rapley

(Continued from Page 5)

together got out the back door to safety, said Mr. Jackson.

"I think he was in a better situation in getting out by feel," he said.

A neighbor about a half mile down the road, saw the glow from the flame and called the fire department. But the narrow backroads leading to the Rapleys' 1800s' era home delayed the fire engines by about 15 minutes, said Mr. Trenholm.

Fire officials are investigating the cause of the fire.

The fire did more than destroy the Rapleys home, it took with it decades-old photographs and other memorabilia documenting the area's ranching history.

Mr. Rapley, who grew up in Menlo Park, is a well-known raconteur of the ranching life. At age 15, Mr. Rapley moved to Skyline where he established his first herd of cattle. He hung up his stirrups in the 1980s.



Jim Rapley

Yarns by ex-cowboy Jim Rapley

Prohibition brought 'business' to the Skyline

THIS IS another in a series of yarns from the old ranching days as told to Marion Softky by Jim Rapley, possibly the last of the cowboys who used to run cattle on thousands of acres of the Skyline hills.

JIM RAPLEY leans back in the snug little office next to the workshop on his Skyline ranch.

There was a "different kind of life in the hills" during Prohibition, he recalls.

"There were very few places that didn't have a still—every ranch that I know of," Rapley remembers. "Seemed like an ideal place. You went through someone else's yard to get there.

"When you saw a truckload of sugar going in, you knew they weren't feeding it to the cattle. Finally they cleaned it out when a woman got tired of her son coming home drunk and she squealed."

"The most spectacular still was right on Skyline—on the old Brown Ranch located where the Spring Ridge picnic area is now. The Browns had left the ranch and the buildings were vacant. This Armenian woman moved in. I don't know how many

stills she had in the house, but her two sons were doing all the manufacturing of moonshine in there. They slept, ate and stayed right in that house and made booze.

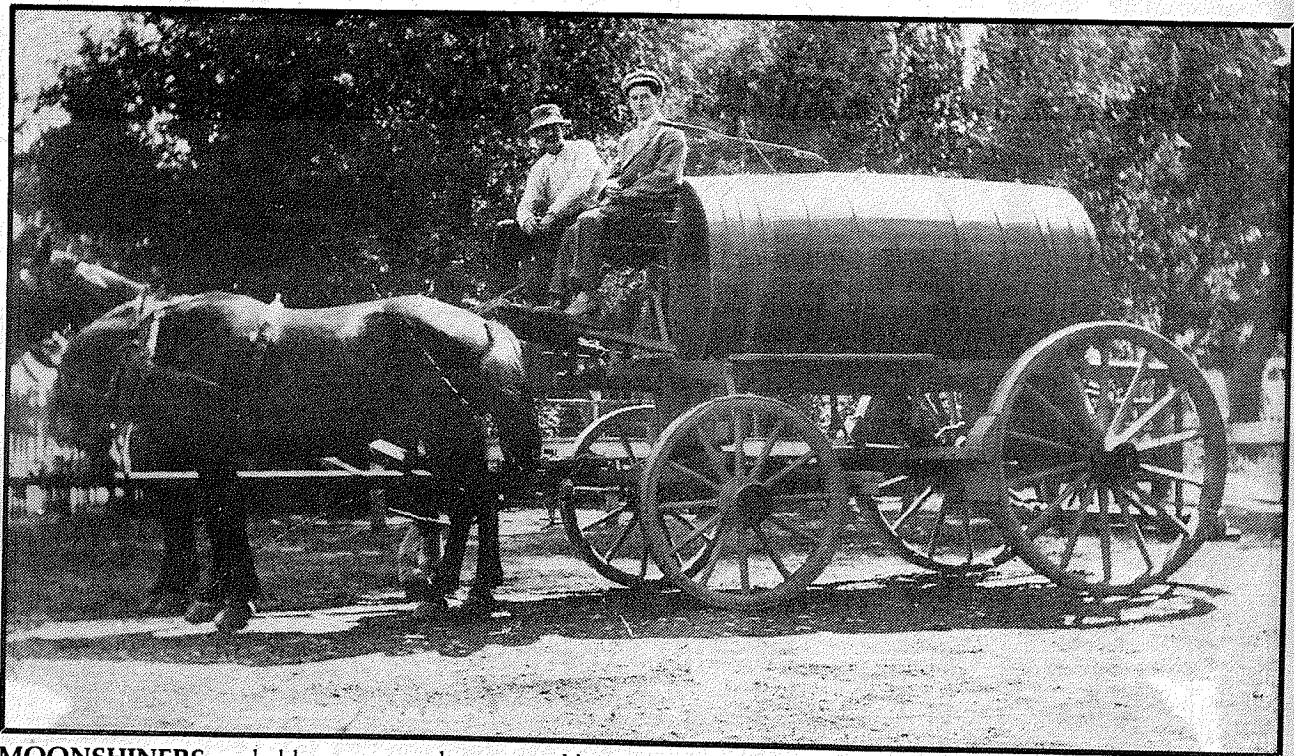
"They made 500 gallons per day, which is quite a bit of alcohol. People claimed the old house would vibrate when they were working.

"The woman did all the delivering. She had a nice car and always dressed well. I had an idea she had a lot of help from the law because she never got caught."

Rapley himself never got involved in moonshining, although he says, "I was in an ideal place, but I was too busy milking cows and shipping cream. The only time anyone ever suspected me was when I was shipping the cream from the express depot in Redwood. Some guys in suits and ties came in and took the lids off and started looking in the cans.

"I guess they thought I was shipping booze."

(Jim Rapley's "Tales from Skyline" will continue for the next several weeks.)



MOONSHINERS probably never used a wagon like this. Jim Rapley and Bill Hoff are shown on this water

wagon which was used in the hills in the days described in the Rapley yarns.