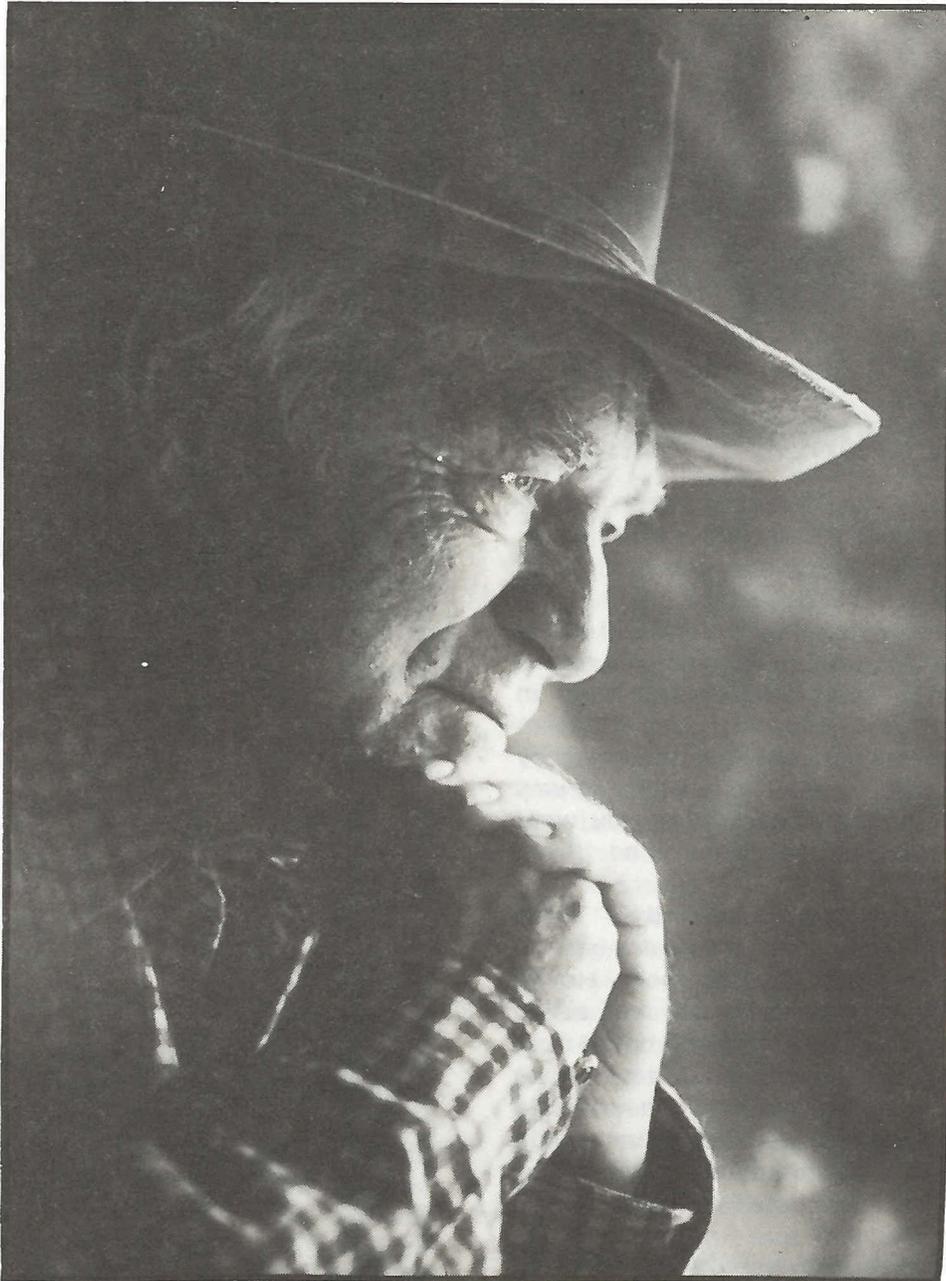


# MARCELLUS MERRILL



## **“How Steamboat was in those early days...”**

**By Jamie Lynch**

Since skiing is a major part of my life, I, Jamie Lynch, naturally wanted to write a ski related story. Through my research I found out that Marcellus Merrill knew a lot about the history of Steamboat and skiing. Since he now lives in Denver I wrote to him to ask questions about skiing. When he sent the tape back it was filled with information about the history of Steamboat. Since the information was about both skiing and Steamboat history I decided the focus of the story should be on Marcellus Merrill and skiing.

“I moved to Steamboat in 1904. I was born in Cairo, Nebraska, on August 7, 1900. When I was four we pulled out for Steamboat Springs. We got off the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad at Wolcott, and from there we took a stagecoach to Yampa. That was about a day and a half trip. I only remember the experience from my folks telling about it.

“We stayed over that night in the Antlers Hotel in Yampa, and then we drove on to Steamboat the next day. That was a rough drive, so I am



## The Antler's Hotel in Yampa

told. It was stormy, and the stagecoach turned over outside Steamboat along the Yampa River near Big Foot Smith's ranch that was next to the suburb, as we called it, of Brooklyn.

"Even though only four years old, I will never forget that experience, I can tell you. We rode a Concord stage. There is still one of them in Steamboat up at the Tread of the Pioneers Museum. As an engineer, I always thought they had a unique construction. The suspension was on leather, and it kind of rocked as you went along the road because there were no direct springs."

Marcellus then told about his family. "There were three Merrill boys. Two of us were born in Nebraska, myself and my brother, Hollis. Conrad was born in Steamboat. He was seven years younger than I was. As a small boy, I used to watch the stagecoaches come into town along main street on Lincoln Avenue. They would come down into Spring Creek. The driver would whip the horses, and down they would go. Water splashed all over as they came into the creek and went out again."

There weren't so many houses in Steamboat in the early 1900's. "At first we leased a house in the ancient part of town up near Spring Creek. Every weekend, my mother and father would take us kids down to the bath house, which consisted of some wooden sheds by the creek. It was fed by a hot spring, and we were given a good weekly scrubbing.

"It wasn't until 1909 that a bath house was added, when the railroad came in. At first, it was operated by a party of families named Baird, as I remember. We would rent one of the bath houses or sheds with water running through for about 50 cents for the family.

"Later, we built our home on Crawford Hill, the home still stands. It is laid out with corrals, a barn and also some of the cow pasture (which was in the back), and the horse pastures are in

back too. There was also a piece of land next to our house that we used as a playground. Behind the house, we usually had a big potato patch, and, boy, was it some job to dig and pick those potatoes in the fall!

"You ask about father and mother," Mr. Merrill continued by speaking of his parents. "My father was born in Iowa in 1869. He went to school in Nebraska and then on to Nebraska Teacher's College where he graduated. He never taught school, though. My father worked with my grandfather in the banking business in Nebraska, and was on the board of directors of the First National Bank which my grandfather had organized in Steamboat Springs. The original bank building is still standing across and to the south of the present RCNB building.

"My mother was born in Marietta, Ohio, in 1877. She taught school in Nebraska and then worked as a maid in order to go to teacher's college in Hastings, but she only finished two years of college. She met my father there, and they were married in 1900.

"My father, though, was not completely satisfied with the banking business, so he organized the Empire Lumber Company. The company owned sawmills in Craig and either Oak Creek or Yampa. At first, he'd had sawmills up on Sarvis Creek. When my grandfather's health started to fail in 1911, he sold his banking interests to the Browns, who still live in Routt County. Their uncle, I think, at that time, furnished most of the money; his name was Jones.

"Another aspect of early Steamboat Springs was the cow town atmosphere where ranching was everyone's way of life. It's hard for people to realize today how Steamboat was in those early days, especially before the railroad came in 1908. It was a real cow town, my mother said. Cattle came through here by the thousands, really, going to the high country. They had wintered in the low country all winter. One of the main businesses in Routt County in those days was ranching, especially the cattle business. That was the business in which my father went broke. We were an operation of big cattle; I don't know how many cattle we had. I know at one time we had 500 head that were branded up on Big Creek because Clay Monson had told me he'd helped brand them.

"Everybody seemed to have cattle and make a lot of money during WWI, and right afterwards, they lost their money. I worked on many ranches as a young lad all up and down the Elk River. During the fall in 1918, when they let out the school due to the flu, I worked on ranches way up until Thanksgiving. So, when it comes to ranching, I've always said, 'I know too much about ranching to go into the business.' But, anyway, I've always enjoyed ranching, and I used to hunt and fish, especially up in North Park.

"I also enjoyed riding the horses. A lot of them were half broken, but we had a lot of fun. Ranches were always a lot of interest to me. I also liked the ranch life because of the good food, and there was lots of it: basic foods, mostly beef steaks, meat, potatoes and gravy, and hunks of pie for dessert. Due to financial difficulties during WWI, my father only leased a ranch on Four Mile Hill, and we had lots of interesting events on that ranch, and others I worked on too, I can tell you!

"You folks might not realize this, but it was open country when we were there. They drove the cattle down, clear down west towards the Utah line, where they just left them there to survive as best they could. They were practically all Texas Longhorns, and those rascals could continually survive on just about nothing. Then there was spring round-up, and everybody would go down and pick out their cattle according to their brands. That's the way things were done in the early days.

"It didn't hardly cost anything to winter a 'critter'. Now, with these high breeds of cattle, it costs a lot, 40, 50, or 60 dollars a ton for hay to keep those critters through the winter. You can imagine the difference. Then homesteaders came in with the railroad, and they broke up the open range so that the whole of northwestern

Colorado was divided for individual owners.

"John Burroughs describes this well in one of his books. He says, 'I would give anything for your experience on these ranches, as it would help me so much in being an author.' I was forced to work on these ranches, and as I look back on them, it was a good experience, and hard work. I learned about the old west, something that younger fellows in better circumstances never got to know."

As well as being involved with ranching, Mr. Merrill was an intricate part of the skiing program with this area. "Oh, I do remember about skiing! First, we had those long skis that were about 10-12 feet long, that we made in the shed in the back of our house. Gosh, was that a job! My father would get some nick boards, planks from the lumber yard that were free from knots and so forth. We would plane them down with a draw knife and with old fashion blades. With these blades, we would round them out and make out the toes into a pointed tip. Then we would heat up a boiler of water on a little old stove in the wood shed. We would put those skis in boiling water head first or tip first and leave them in all night and part of the next day to make them good and soft. Then we bent them around in order to give them the tip shape. The bend that the ski had looked easy to form, but it



**After the jumper landed he had to watch out for the horses at the bottom.**

represented hours of hard work. Next, we would heat up some metal to put in the branding iron of the skis, and this was supposed to hold them in shape. Well, it didn't do so well, but it did the best it could.

"Then we put slots through the ski so we could fasten the bindings. The bindings were made up of a toe strap with thongs that would go around the heel with a half hitch over the instep. That was the bindings in those days, and they served pretty well, I would say. It took a lot of work from then on because on long trips the skis would absorb the moisture and stick to the snow, since they weren't made of hard wood. On long trips we'd lots of times stop and eat lunch until the snow got hard. These skis were used by the oldtimers as well as the snow shoes, which were made of web.

"As well as Alpine skiing, the Merrill boys did Nordic jumping. Carl Howelsen was the inspiration to whom we gave credit for our success in the sport. We built jumps all over Steamboat, on every little hill. We had three natural jumps in back of our house, not one, or two, but three. There was a jump cross town that we would visit every once in awhile to show how good we were. We, the Merrill boys, were not in the first ski jumping in 1913, but we were in the next one, though. Hollis performed so wonderfully that he was called the 'eleven-year-old wonder.' The first ski jumping competition was held on Woodchuck (where the college is now).

"A lot of the old pictures show how many of the citizens watched from below their sleds. There was a lot of snow in those days; gosh, I don't know where it all came from. It just piled up. That was from a boy's point of view, a salvation to his living. We got 15-20 cents an hour for shoveling snow out of and off the barns. After every snowfall we would start out with a shovel and ask one neighbor after another if he wanted his barn or house shoveled off. We used all kinds of systems and lots of times we'd make a contract. When we had a contract lots of times we'd slide a lariat rope underneath the stove and get it into a snow slide, so the whole thing would slide off. Most of the time that didn't work, but when it would work, we'd get 50 cents for about five minutes of work.

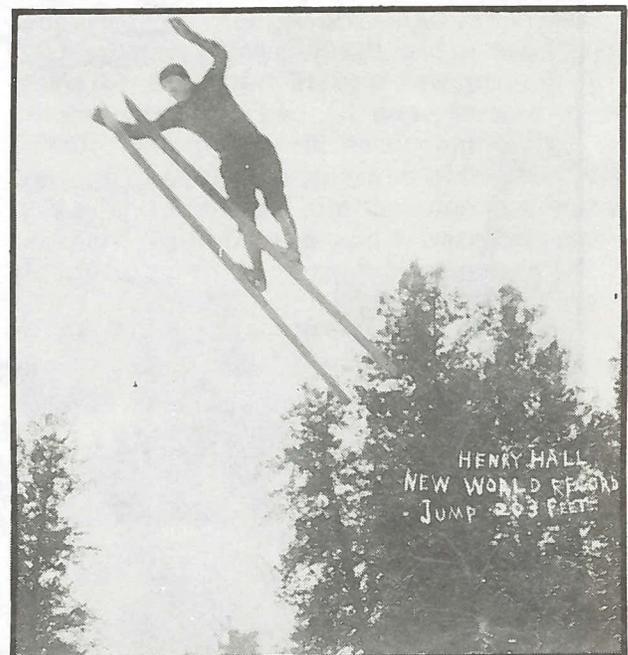
"Carl Howelsen showed up in 1915, and with Carl around everything changed. He was an unusual individual. He worked with us kids and never received a cent of pay. He worked us to death, driving us up and down that hill to get us into condition so we could jump. Golly, after a big storm, it was a job tromping up and down that snow, but Carl Howelsen said it was good for us. So we worked trying to get into shape.

"Carl Howelsen used to come by our home towards evening in the winter time, and lots of times he'd stay for supper, and sometimes he'd

stay overnight if the weather was bad, since we had a guest room there where we put him up. Other times he'd take off for a little ranch in Strawberry Park. He would use cross-country skis which are now in the Museum. Boy, could he go on those skis! Gosh, I don't think it was more than 10 or 20 acres at the entrance of the road up Buffalo Pass. My brother would visit him and stay several days and practice ski jumping. They'd built a hill in back of it. Then the ski jumping contest was moved over to, as we called it, Elk Bend.

"The jumps in those days were not too long. First, we didn't have the ski equipment, and naturally we didn't have the hill. We wouldn't be able to have a long jump like 300 feet in those days. The world's record then was 162, maybe 165 feet. But we learned about skiing, I can tell you. Before the season was over, we'd done some skiing.

"One year, I think it was 1914, or 1915, a fellow named Opland who belonged to the Chicago Ski Club came here. He was quite an individual. He was a clerk in the banking business and knew something about money. He didn't come off the jump more than was necessary to win. Jim Norvell, a cattleman, lived across the street and said to Opland, 'How much would it take to break the world's record?' Opland said, 'Fifty dollars.' So he, Opland, came off the hill and jumped 173 feet and broke the world's record, as I remember. Jim Norvell handed him fifty dollars. Henry Hall broke that record later in Steamboat when he had 201 feet, a magnificent jump. I didn't think he was going to ride it. He lit



**The style that claimed the world record in the 1900s (203 ft.)**



**David Russell shows the style of the 1980s.  
This jump was 102 meters (334 ft.)**

on one ski more or less, but caught his balance and rolled. Everybody yelled and hollered. It was Henry Hall's day for sure."

Marcellus also talked about how the public enjoyed the wildlife in Steamboat.

"There was a bunch of elk in an area, mostly for visitors to see when they came in the summer time. They had a big high fence around about 320 acres, maybe more, that enclosed a jumping hill. We would be jumping there, and sometimes we'd hear the brush break through. Then a big bull elk would come through. Boy, did that make us take off fast. This museum of 200 elk didn't prove very profitable as the elk would jump the fence and take off for the higher country up to Hamus Mountain, now called Emerald Mountain. So in the summertime no visitors could see them.

"We did have another little museum down near the river down towards the bridge at the Depot that people could visit. There was an eagle, a mountain lion, a bear, a bobcat, and several other specimens of wildlife. The people of Steamboat on Sunday afternoon used to walk down to look at the animals. The bear especially was of some interest. He used to get out every so often and I remember once a lady putting up some chokecherry jam. My gosh, she went up town, and when she came back she found the

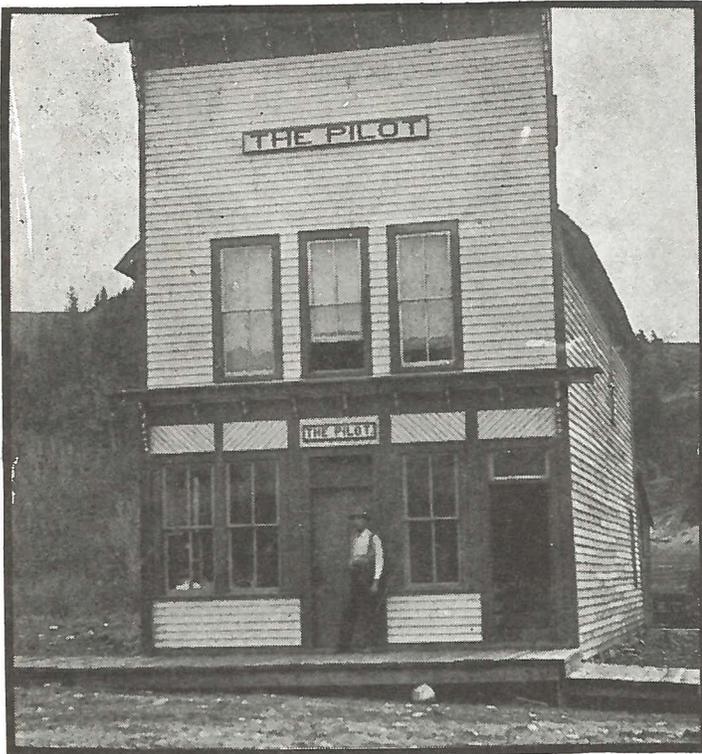
bear was there eating her chokecherry jam or jelly. She yelled and finally the marshal came down to get the bear out of there. The bear had a good time, but she lost her jam."

Since Marcellus spent his youth in this area, he remembers many incidents that occurred such as the conflagration of the Pilot.

"The Steamboat Pilot office was a wooden building right across from the Sheridan Hotel in those days. It was right near my father's Empire Lumber Company. One day there was a fire. It not only burned down the Pilot office, but the Whoople and Shaw Livery Stable as well. Gosh, I can remember that deal. The horses got so frantic, they could hardly get gunny sacks over their heads. Anyway they got some of them out, but some of them burned to death, but the whole Pilot office was burned, and the new one was built that you see today. Everybody was so excited about that fire, I guess they didn't know what they were doing. As one person said, they carried a mattress down from the Leckenby's apartments upstairs, and they threw Mrs. Leckenby's mirror, her looking glass, out the window, which shattered all to pieces.

Mrs. Merrill added an anecdote to the tape that was both funny and interesting.

"This story was told to me by a oldtimer up in



**The Pilot before it burned down.**

had three years of high school and missed many basic subjects, such as chemistry and mathematics. I did graduate in 1923, and I went to work at the General Electric Company. I worked there until my health failed in 1928, and I came back to Colorado.

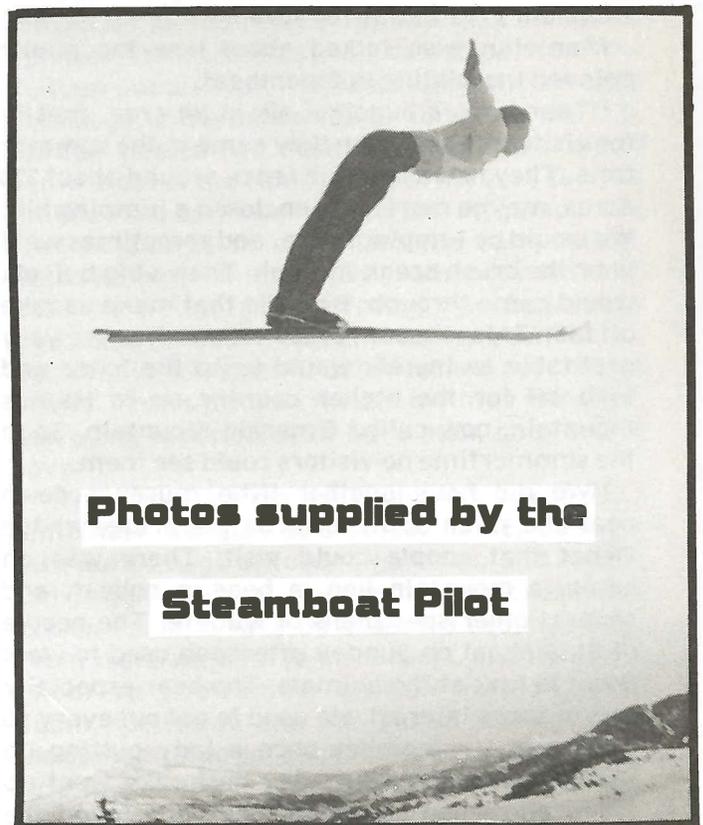
"Since my folks had lost practically all of their money during the Depression after WWI it was a financial strain to send me to the University of Colorado. I don't think it cost more than \$1000 for the four years of college but I worked for my board by waiting on tables. I once got fired as a dishwasher. My last two years I was a janitor for the St. John's Episcopal Church in Boulder. I can tell you, I shoveled thousands of tons of coal into their darned stove to keep that church warm. I held that job until I graduated."

Throughout Marcellus' tape, he spoke mostly of his childhood and skiing experiences since that was the information I solicited from him. Then he gave a brief update on his life today. "I am still trying to run an engineering firm, Merrill Engineering Laboratories, at the age of 81. Last week we received a quotation from a Canadian firm which could run well over a million dollars. I am wondering how we are going to accomplish this. I do hope the information I furnished is of some help as I think that this magazine is just wonderful for a group of high school students. I went to high school in Steamboat Springs, and I can't imagine doing a magazine back then. I bid you so long, and I say God bless you with your project."

Steamboat Springs: I am actually a foreigner because I was born in Denver. My only contact with Steamboat has been the many trips my husband and I used to make up there for fishing trips, ski carnival and the fourth of July celebration. One time, when we were up there, this gentlemen told about those very early days of skiing. The girls, of course, wore voluminous petticoats and long, long skirts clear down to their shoe tips. They would ski with long skis and carry poles that were 5 or 6 feet long. In those days material yard goods were very difficult to get, so every scrap of material was used in some way. The sugar companies and the flour companies packaged their products in cloth, a hundred pound cloth bag with the name of their company on them. There were often slogans and this sort of thing. When the bag was empty they would make them into underpants and underwear for thier daughters and themselves. The oldtimer told of one ski expedition where a group of young people were having a wonderful time. One girl, however, went head over heels into the snowbank. Her skirt went up over her head, and across the seat of her pants was the slogan of a flour company in Denver. It said, 'Pride of the Rockies.' "

Marcellus' childhood days ended in 1919 when he embarked on a successful career.

"My boyhood career ended in 1919 in Routt County, when my parents sent me to The University of Colorado School of Engineering. I had a terrible time the first year because I'd only



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**Steamboat Pilot**