

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.

UTAH Colen Sweeten Jr., 86

Eighty-six in the morning, by dark I'm 96.

*"When I was a kid,
There was a wolf at the door
Every day of the world, don't you
doubt;
Though he was thin,
He didn't try to get in;
He was doin' his best to get out."*
Colen Sweeten

Colen H. Sweeten Jr. grew up dirt poor in a place called Holbrook, Idaho, which even in its heyday didn't amount to much. There was a blacksmith shop, general store, grain elevator, flour mill, post office, six-room schoolhouse and a Mormon church. His family, friends and neighbors were strangers to leisure and perennially short on cash. Still, Sweeten counts himself fortunate.

"As I look back at it," he recalls, "it was a privilege to be raised out there and learn to work. Nobody had any money, but we were all alike."

Today Colen and Ruth, his bride of 61 years, reside in subur-



PHOTOS COURTESY SWEETEN FAMILY



RICHARD MENZIES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: George, Elbert, and Colen Sweeten, ca. 1930. > Colen is shown here with a scale model of the 42-foot-tall barn, once a landmark in Holbrook. > Horsepower was the key to successful homesteading in southern Idaho. Grain was harvested by means of a 10-horsepower threshing machine. > Married 61 years, Ruth and Colen are still in love. He admired her shooting.



ban Springville, Utah, but their landscaping includes a couple of Idaho sagebrush plants that Colen claims "followed" him home from his last visit to the Gem State. On the living room wall hang paintings depicting harvest time on the Sweeten homestead, and in the backyard workshop you'll find a scale model of the family barn, corals and hay derrick. In spirit, the nationally recognized storyteller and cowboy poet hasn't strayed far from his boyhood home.

"Dad, his father, his brothers and some of his sisters homesteaded out there. They bet \$16—which was the filing fee—that they could live three years without starving to death on that land. And they were supposed to make use of it, live on it so many months out of the year, and put up their own fences. That's when dry farming was first being experimented with."

With help from his younger brother Warren, Colen's father broke up the first 40 acres with a plow drawn by a team of three mismatched horses and a roan bull. Presently the romance of dry farming began to wear off, and as one by one his siblings retreated to the city, the elder Colen bought their claims. Eventually the Sweeten spread swelled to

3,000 acres, with 150 head of horses and a 42-foot-tall barn that could be seen from as far away as Snowville. Horses did the plowing and pulling; Colen and his six brothers and four sisters did the heavy lifting.

The 1930s was a decade marked by hardships—everything from bank foreclosures to crop failures to the hard winter of '32 that decimated his family's horse herd. At the same time, young Colen was amassing a wealth of literary raw material. He and his brother George won the contract to bus schoolchildren to Malad, a job that

required them to provide their own bus. The nearest thing the two could afford was a secondhand hearse, which they painted Allis Chalmers orange after changing the seating "from horizontal to vertical." Standard equipment included a loaded rifle—in case a coyote or fur-bearing badger should appear in the headlights.

"We made quite a hit with the school bus and we were learning a lot of things that didn't come out of a textbook," Colen recalls. "We

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didn't seem to cause a lot of excitement, but I hate to think what would happen now if we pulled into the schoolyard with a rifle in the front and a dead coyote in the back!"

With the outbreak of World War II, survival skills honed during the Great Depression came in handy. All seven Sweeten brothers served in the military, and all returned home safely. The Sweetens also fulfilled missions for the Mormon Church, and it was at a religious gathering in San Diego that Colen first spied the girl he would later marry.

Ruth Gerber, an itinerant carpenter's daughter, had grown up in the West and was herself a model of rugged self-reliance. Colen was first impressed by her beauty; second, by her marksmanship. On her first visit to the Sweeten ranch she succeeded in "picking" a flower with a rifle bullet fired from a distance of 50 yards.

Colen and Ruth have raised a family of five—"all boys but four." Three years ago their daughter Jan, her husband and daughter were all killed in a collision with a drunk driver. Two grandsons were grievously injured but have since recovered. So have the Sweetens, insofar as they have managed to come to terms with the horrific loss and continue on with their lives. Faith in an afterlife has helped, as has an inner strength formed by years of hard work and sacrifice on a hard-scrabble patch of ground in southern Idaho.

"I don't give up easy," declares the old cowboy.—Richard Menzies