

Meet John Gottlieb Holzwarth, Jr.

John was born November 7, 1902. He attended school in Denver and as a teenager was “borrowing” cars to go for joy rides. Papa and Mama decided to move him to the mountains to keep him busy. He helped build the Mama cabin in 1917 at the age of fifteen.

Johnnie attended parochial schools in Denver through the eighth grade. Johnnie took a class in ballroom dancing in Denver when he was 15 or 16 years old. He drove a Vim delivery truck and worked for a casket maker during flu epidemic where he screwed handles on caskets. He also worked as a plumbers' helper at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital and at Hilb and Company.

“First night I spent on this ranch was right where the corner of that building is (Mama Cabin). I laid down on a spring and a mattress with a tent and rain in my face to boot, after falling in the creek!” remembered Johnnie.

Johnnie came up in 1919 and his first night slept out in the rain. He stayed for three weeks and then moved back to Denver. Johnnie wrecked his motorcycle in Denver and then decided to move back to the mountains. He moved permanently to ranch in 1919.

Johnnie always kept a fishing pole over the kitchen door. Fishing bait was a sort of salamander like creature that resembles a bullhead catfish. Johnnie used to look for them under rocks in the river. He waded in, used stick to turn over the rocks, then speared them with a kitchen fork. “In 1916 the brooks got into the beaver ponds and established themselves, and the natives stayed in the ponds I would say off and on for about 8 or 9 years. Somewheres around in the 30's the cutthroats were gone.”

“I used to be able to catch them fish an average of three a minute; they were so plentiful. And this actually is what got me in the dude business. A bunch of men, friends of my father's came up, and one Sunday afternoon I caught 25 fish from my bridge up to where the Timber Creek campground is. (60 fish in another version and yet again - “One Sunday afternoon I caught 150 fish for friends of my father.”) I brought them home two baskets full. And my father said, "Here give him a five dollar bill, somebody." And if I remember right the man's name was Zolk. He gave me a five-dollar bill and he and the other men got in an argument over how they were going to divide the fish. And my father had gotten sick and puked all over everybody and my mother had to clean it up. So she and I decided we were going to get in the dude business. We were going to make a charge. And we talked this over a good bit. We talked it over with my sister. We came up with the idea of charging \$2 a day and \$11 a week, and this included a horse, board and room and lodging. And my father said, (German accent), "You are not going to charge my friends to stay here, they are my friends!" And my mother said, "I'm not cleaning up for nobody anymore," and I said, "I'm not catching any fish anymore until I get paid for it properly." And from then on I began to charge pretty well for my services. When I got up to be about 25 I asked \$10 a day to be a guide and furnished my own horse and that was a 24-hour deal, not just a few hours.



When Johnnie turned 21, his uncle gave him \$20 and said, "You're a man now – take care of yourself." In 1923 Johnnie went with Barney McCoy and a Dick someone to California on the Burn. He spent a few months "on the road" as handyman and laborer to California and back.

Barney McCoy came to NSR as an extra cook in 1926. He worked with Johnnie several years. McCoy taught Johnnie about trapping and the habits of animals. Barney was also a good teacher about plumbing. He also helped build the Lodge in 1929. Johnnie learned McCoy was wanted for robbery in Wyoming and for murder of bank teller in Utah. McCoy feared Dirty Bill Lemmon who shot him for the theft of some beaver hides. Bill Lemmon taught Johnnie all about the habits and trapping of beaver.

In November of 1920, Johnnie and his father discussed their finances and decided they needed \$125 to get through the winter. Johnnie became a trapper and had up to 100 miles of trap lines extending over into North Park. They trapped for marten and beaver primarily. Most animals trapped in the Park were trapped with Park Service approval as predators; however, some differences of opinion existed as to the definition of a predator. Beaver and ermine netted Johnnie several hundred dollars per winter during the 1920's. The most beaver I ever caught, I caught 28 beaver in 31 days, just about a hundred yards above the bridge.

In the spring of the year I used to have a fishing pole stashed up by Timber Creek which was a good place to catch mink. I caught 15 great big mink one spring up there. The only thing I could catch them mink with was fresh fish. So every day I'd walk up there and replenish my traps. The trap I had was the simplest thing in the world. It was up by a steep bank where a little trickle of water came down on the left of it, and I'd take a fish and take a stick and poke it into this bank to hold the fish up 14 or 15 inches high above the water. And I just put the trap against the bank right there. The mink would come a swimming along and they'd see that, and the water wasn't very deep and there they were. I'd catch em by the hind feet, or sometimes by the front feet, you could never tell. If I'd catch it by the front feet it was then they climbed into the trap, but if I'd catch em by the hind feet it was when they raised up to try to get the fish.

Johnnie used to make wooden rabbit traps. Once he reached in one and out ran a white weasel which had already killed the rabbit. Johnnie made \$1,000 in 1933 trapping. He got 300 to 400 muskrats that year. Johnnie had trap lines in a circle. He was great at skinning and stretching skins. The record for skinning a muskrat was 15 seconds. Johnnie could skin as fast as John III could stretch. The only kids that would associate with them were trappers; they smelled so bad.

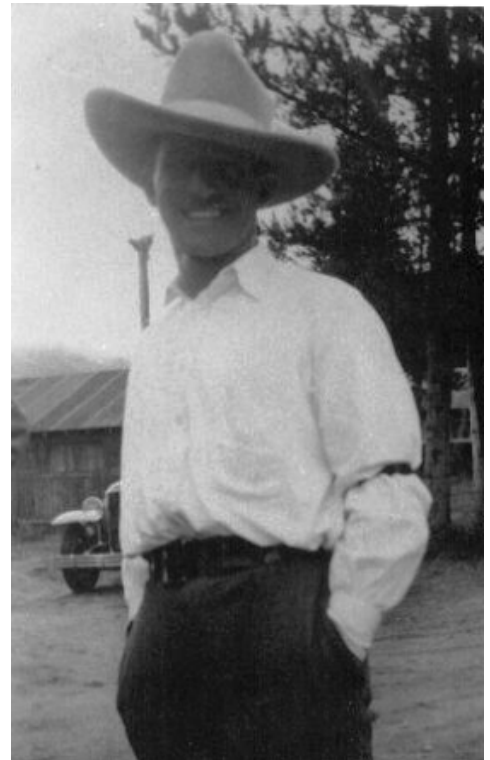
1928 – Johnnie bought a truck and began to freight grain from Loveland to Grand Lake. The truck was rated at 3500 pounds, 50 sacks of grain, but sometimes he would “cheat” a little and try to get over the top with 55 sacks. If the wind were particularly fierce, they would often have to stop a half-mile below Fall River Pass and carry the 5 sacks over the pass by hand. It was worth the chance since each sack represented \$1 in profit.

“When I came into the country it was about the end of free range of cattle roaming all over the country. The used to bring cattle from Ft Collins over the hill, over Poudre Pass and down into our valley. And they had to give it up because many of the cattle at that time, they was just beginning to wake up to what it was, it was disease, the cattle couldn't stand the altitude. When I came into the country Morris Cowgill had a herd of registered Hereford cattle, which was bought for his brother which was killed in WWI. He leased the school lands which was part of Pontiac's and part of my ranch, and he had 640 acres there to graze these cattle on. And there was about 20 or 30 head of horses that run up and down the canyon, belonging to the Harbisons and everybody else. Most of them were colts. The Harbison's cattle were all over the place, anywhere from where headquarters is now, into Grand Lake, down to Columbine, and almost up to Green Mountain Ranch. They were always lost half the time.”

“We soon got into quality Holstein cattle. We'd get these little calves from one of our first customers that also was a dairyman. We always had probably the best milk cows in the valley, which we would sell or trade. We'd usually get two cows for a mature cow because she'd give three times as much milk as one of them mountain cows. We made all our own butter, we made some cheese, and talk about good cottage cheese! That is a thing that will have to be there, the milk in a little like a flour sack would be hanging on one of the trees out in the yard where the water would drain out of the cottage cheese. You mix that up with caraway seed and cress seeds and you had something to eat!”

Johnnie hid a whiskey barrel in the woods one time. He rode up to check it and to get some whiskey for a dance and it was empty. A chipmunk had eaten the cork out of the barrel. Johnnie worked hard at the ranch but he also played hard. He was known to be a rabble rouser in Grand Lake. Although he wasn't a musician he regularly attended the neighborhood dances. His daughter said he'd been known to ride to Hot Sulphur or Kremmling, dance all night, and return in time for chores the next morning.

The Holzwarth's started with five head of horses in the early 20's and the number gradually increased until 100 head wintered at the ranch. Johnnie felt the horses were stronger if they stayed here.



Johnnie ran a little woodpecker sawmill which averaged around 300,000 board feet a year. “I bought a sawmill in 1923 which was my first sawmill. I didn't know nothing about timberwork or sawmilling. I paid \$600 for it. I paid off half of it with furs...., and I paid off the other half with lumber I sold for \$20 a thousand. That's the way I paid off that little ole sawmill. Many of those first old buildings were built from that sawmill, and the logs were cut right there at the ranch.”

“Every building that is on this ranch, I cut the logs in the woods and saw-milled them, and nailed them. Most of them together, myself, and then I hired finished carpenters – I never was a good finished carpenter, but I was a good rough carpenter. And three of those buildings I built before my men came to work in the morning. I was a man that smoked, see, and ah, I went to bed just to get up to smoke. And I would get up at 3 o'clock in the morning and dress, go out, and with a lantern, and lay a log or two before it was time to milk the cows, Smoke cigarettes. I got up to where I was smoking 4 packs a day. And I wish to God I'd never had, built the houses or smoked the cigarettes, cause that's what's making me move from the country.”

His second sawmill was near the Holzwarth campground, south of the ranch, across the river, moved from the original homestead about 1948 – 49.. Johnnie sawed over 5 million feet of lumber here. They stopped running the sawmill about 1966.



Ice cutting:

Johnnie remembers clearly that the "absolutely hardest" work he ever did in his life was when he cut ice and loaded it at Grand Lake.

"Ice plow – Rocky Garber gave us and it once belonged to Harry Harbison."

"Every year about Christmas time, when lakes were frozen, we hitched up the team and took the ice cutter and saws and set off to Grand Lake to cut ice –125 - 100-pound blocks of ice were stored in the icehouse. Packed in sawdust, the ice would last all summer. Workers were paid 4 cents for cutting a block of ice, 5 cents if they took it out of the water. Blocks measured 20" x 20" and as thick as the ice was, weighed 100 lbs. A good man could cut 125 blocks a day."

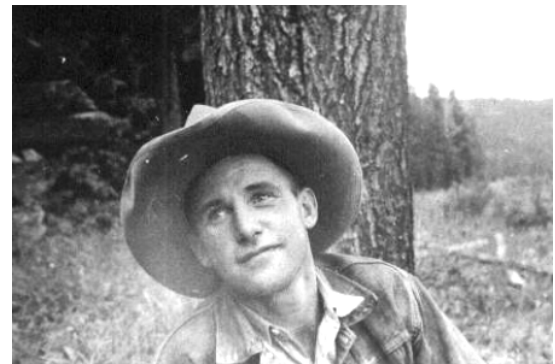
"For many years we cut ice off the beaver ponds, and then we went to hauling it in the truck from Grand Lake. I worked for the Lodge putting up over 2000 cakes of ice. I got paid three dollars and a half for taking care of six head of horses and having them ready before 6 o'clock. And at 7 o'clock we were hitched up and drove to town to haul ice. We could haul about 21-28 cakes to a load, and we'd make three loads a day with one team of horses. I remember when I finished that job, the Grand Lake Lodge bought a brand new sled, which was certainly a mighty fine thing, and the next year they threwed four horses on it and I drove a couple of days for them, and they were hauling about 40 cakes to a load. It was a mighty fine sled compared to what we used when we first started. That was all sawed by hand. The ice saw is still at the ranch. I can honestly tell you that the hardest work that there is to do is saw ice."

"There was a great big stout guy, Clint DeWitt, and we took on the job of sawing ice for five cents a cake and pulling them out. Sun Valley was part of his homestead. He was one of the first men I met, and Morris Cowgill, and Al Hause, and Harry Harbison, and old Jim Cairns. There was a lot of talk about old Jim Cairns, all he knew and what he did. But anyway he certainly made sufficient money to take care of the Cairns people. He acquired quite a bit of land."



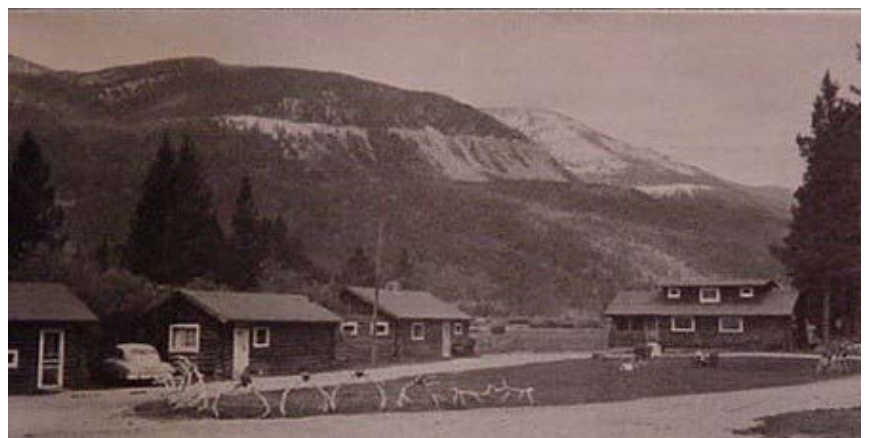
Johnnie was married on September 25, 1931 to Caroline Elizabeth Lyman Pratt at Pratt's summer cottage at Grand Lake – Johnnie age 29, Caroline 24. Johnnie said “She married me because I had two saddle horses.” They honeymooned on an eight day pack trip through Never Summer Range and over Continental Divide to Estes Park.

Johnnie and Caroline lived in a small cabin with extra rooms added as more children were born, until 1951 when they moved into the house Johnnie occupied at the time of the sale to the park. Daughter Fran remembered hearing that Caroline told Johnnie when they were married that she was never going to chop a stick of wood.



Johnnie killed three sheep before he killed a deer. He killed a deer in 1920. Johnnie killed 25 deer in one year for guests. Johnnie is on record for having shot the 12th ranked elk in the United States in the 1958-59 Boone and Crockett Club competition, mounted head was so large an 8 year old could stand upright under it. Antlers of Johnnie's 7th largest elk weighed 53 pounds – killed "out of the park". Johnnie had the antlers displayed on the circle and a park ranger came by and commented on their size. That's when he sent the information in and got registered on the Boone and Crockett register. The antlers were stolen in 1962. A few years later all the antlers had been stolen.

Neversummer Ranch 1959



“I always chose my piece of meat that I'd like to kill. I took my time and deliberately, whether I had a doe or cow license made little difference, but I always liked to pick a nice animal to eat what would start our winter off. It was almost the end of the season when I hadn't shot any elk at all. I had a small haystack which meant a tremendous lot to me, and it was just north of the cabins there up in that meadow. It was in the evening and I had just got my buckets ready to go out and milk the cow, and I looked up there several hundred yards and I saw this big elk come down and look at the haystack. We had a buck fence, and he just took his horns and locked them under the fence and give it a big yank and turned over 5 panels of fence! And it made me mad because that hay was really precious to me. I said to John, who was tagging along, I was going to go milk the cow, "John, you go get an axe and a saw," and I went to the house and got my gun. I said, "I'm going to kill that elk." So I walked up to this haystack, which was in the Park at the time, and legitimately, the elk could get between me and the stack and run west across the river. So I just walked to the river, crossed the bridge and come down in the willows. He was in the willows, and all of a sudden he started up in front of me and I shot him. It turned out to be a record animal. At the time he was recorded, he was the 7th largest elk in the world. But when I looked at him and cleaned him I knew that I couldn't eat any of that damn strong meat. But in my business I must have something to tell to my guests, you know, about animals, so I told this story that this elk was so old and tough that when my wife cooked him she had to grind the gravy just so you could get a fork in it, he was so strong that you could smell him three days before you cooked him, and then after I ate any of him, I walked outside and if there was a blonde within 10 blocks, I started bugling!”

“Have you heard the story of where I shot the horns off the elk? This is true. In other words, I had bought these two big race horse colts. I mean, I paid premium money for them. And John had a good quarter horse mare. About that time I had gone to Denver and I had bought a couple of ton of alfalfa, and I had opened up the back door: in the back of the barn, the corral still runs that way, there's a ring there on the east side of this cow barn about 4 feet wide and then it turns at the south end of the barn and its about 6 feet wide. And there's a back door, which is now the boys' bunkhouse. I opened that back door just enough so the cats could get in and out. And this was real bright, nice alfalfa. One day walkin' in to look over this hay I opened up the door, and here was a little ole porcupine, a little bit of a fella, up there on top of this alfalfa. He didn't try to scramble away, and I decided I was going to try and feed him, you know, get him kind of tame. So I got to bringing out every morning some apple. I had just gotten this little ole fella so I could scratch the top of his head, when one day I went to my milk cow, which I was



keeping in my horse barn at the time, and her whole face was full of these little ole quills. And I said, "That's the end of my little porcupine." So I killed my little porcupine. And about that time I figured I'd better close the door. And when I got to the back of the barn, the door had a hole in it where at least 8 or 9 bales of hay were eaten. I didn't think anything and I shoved it shut. About the time I shoved it shut, the next day one of these colts was dead. I wondered what in the world. About two days later here was this other colt, but this colt was all scratched up. And then I begin to check up and I realized it was an elk

that was coming back to get into that alfalfa. So I said, "I'll fix Mr. Elk." So I hung a lariat on part of the fence and part of the building, and the next morning I went out there and I had Mr. Elk. I've got some movies of this. I had him around the horns.

When I came out to milk, which was just getting' daylight, that elk was standin' in this runway that goes N & S along the barn about 4 feet, and man he just, whew! right over the top of the fence and that rope just caught him in midair. Threw him end over end. Joe Bloder (Onahu Ranch) and I think the Gills (Kawuneeche Ranch) were there then, and I called Fred McLaren, and John and I. I roped this elk again and pulled his head up against the fence, and we got the other rope off of him, but that elk wouldn't go. Regardless of what we'd do we couldn't get that elk to move. I can see Fred McLaren quick trying to get him with a whip, and I can see Joe kicking some snow off of the haystack into his face, and John shaking some bells in his face, and so forth like that. He was standing right out back of that door. I went and got a bell and shook it in his face like this; and boy he would strike at it and everything, and somehow I dropped it. Some way or another I couldn't reach it. I stuck my head out that door and he struck me or hit me on the head with his horns, but it didn't hurt me. We tried for three hours to make that elk move, but it wouldn't go. It was right around Christmastime so the whole bunch of us went over, we decided we'd better have a little ole drink, so we drank a quart of rum. Then we decided we were ready to chase the elk, but we still couldn't get him out. I prodded him with a pitchfork and everything but we still couldn't make that elk move. Now this is the way I finally moved that elk. I got a long board and I laid it on the fence and I kept poking him in the face with it. He kept backing up, and all of a sudden he got past the area where the rope wouldn't hold him anymore, and with that he jumped over the fence and I have a picture of him running around through the yard. About a week later he scored up this quarter horse of John's, he just cut it right across the butt. So I called Fred and I said, "I'm going to kill him." He said, "OK, I'll be up." The elk was standing in the little hay pen. Fred and I stood in the barn. I had snared him again, and the rope had caught him around the base of the horse. I said, "I'm going to de-horn that elk." Fred said, "How are you going to do it?" I says, "Fred, I'm going to shoot his horns off." I took my 30-06, which I have with me right now, and I took 10 steel-jacket bullets, and this one of the most interesting things I've ever done in my life as far as shooting is concerned. Not that there was any distance at all, the first shot that elk stood there, he never moved, he never wiggled a horn, or anything like that. He never even blinked an eye. I took five shots and I shot the horn right off his head. Now then, the second horn I did a little better job, and this is what I call the interesting part. The 4th shot, the elk was standing there, I mean he never moved, and on the 4th shot the second horn began to move, begin to turn down like this, begin to come alongside his face, and he started to shake his head or something....."(tape ran out, darn)

For several years Fred McLaren was the only Park Ranger on the West Side of the Park. One of his primary duties was to prevent poaching the National Park. Johnnie Holzwarth was a past master at spreading rumors and he was always bragging about the numbers and kinds of animals he was taking from the park, most of the time it would be out of season. These stories would immediately get back to Fred McLaren. This went on for quite some time and a cat and mouse game developed. One spring Johnnie was in the Never Summer Range, which was outside the park at that time, and shot and killed a large Bighorn Ram. He brought it down to the Homestead and began butchering it out behind the cabins. The sound of horse steps coming across the valley got his attention so he ran down to the Mama Cabin just as Fred McLaren came around the curve. He dismounted and the two of them stood around and talked about various things, and after a half hour or so Fred got on his horse and left. After he had gone around the curve Johnnie went back to butcher the Bighorn. No sooner had he started until he heard the sound of a horse running across the valley. He again ran down to the Mama Cabin and just in time to see Fred McLaren coming around the curve again. He rode up to Johnnie, got off the horse without saying a word and walked over to him, picked a hair off his shoulder, and said, "Johnnie, if I didn't know better I would swear this hair was a bighorn sheep hair." He got on his horse and left without saying anything else.

Holzwarth Ranch – 1942>



John Holzwarth was loaded with stories, "and some of 'em are true."

"It was part of my job to sit at the table and you tell a story and another guy tells one, and it reminds you of another one, see, he'll tell his own story and of course you try to outshine the guy. But you're not a good dude rancher unless you can tell a story, and keep your guests entertained."

Johnnie built his 800-acre ranch "from scratch, with an axe, a fishin' pole, and a gun."



We stayed here regardless of the good days, the bad days and all. One year in 1943 when we were just partially open during the War – I borrowed money to have myself a couple hundred head of cattle and I borrowed money to put up hay and I lost \$1,400 plus all my work! Then I had an accident and cut this boy's arm off and hit him across the chest and I thought my whole place was gone. But I made it, came out of it and just by hard work. I went to work in the tunnel for a dollar an hour and milked for what averaged about 35 cents an hour, but I worked 20 hours a day. I worked to pull us out of the hole.

Johnnie's last fist fight took place on the site of construction for the Colorado Big Thompson Project at Lake Granby.

"I owned about 1200 acres of land down there at the time, and they never asked me permission to be digging on it, and they had a house built and so forth. Old Jim Harvey was running the government crew down there, and I went down to my place in the Granby reservoir. We went over there and this big government man came over and got ahold of me and said, 'Get the hell out of here.' About that time I started going up in the air. He was a fellow about 6'3" and weighed about 225 pounds, and I got him by the necktie and said, 'You son of a bitch, I own as high as you can see and as deep as you can dig, and if you think I am getting out you better start thinking.' (The fight begins) "And I walked around and kicked him in the ass and said, 'You son of a bitch, you crawl out of my sight or I'll kill you,' and so he crawled about 30 feet and then got up and run!"

John Holzwarth, II was active in the Grand Lake community. He was an Arapaho National Forest Counselor for 27 years, member and past president Grand Lake Rotary Club, member and past president Chamber of Commerce, member Colorado Dude Ranch Association, member and past president Grand County Pioneer Society, chairman of committee researching a book of Grand County called Island in Rockies, and originator of the idea for a ski tow for Grand Lake School ski hill, and secured money to install it.

On December 24, 1971, Christmas Eve at midnight at the Trinity Church of the Pines in Grand Lake – minister James C. Kenney married Johnnie Holzwarth and Wanda V. (Beck) Fiechter.

Wanda told on June 12, 1977 how she met Johnnie. She's from Longmont and had been divorced fifteen years before she met him. She was raising a daughter by working at Safeway and had been transferred to a Denver store. She didn't usually work at the checkout lanes, but on one particular day she was. She was checking and saw this guy in ski clothes pacing around impatiently with his basket. She figured he was in a hurry so she went out and got his basket to check. There wasn't any real food in it, just junk or party food, so she asked him if he was having a party. "Yes, do you want to come?" "Where is it?" "Grand Lake." "Where's Grand Lake" He told her, and she said, "Why would anyone want to go clear up there this time of year?" "If you don't want to go up to Grand Lake, how about going to the Stock Show with me?" She hemmed and stalled, and finally said she'd go if he'd pick her up at her sisters. She wanted her sister's approval; after all she'd only just met him at Safeway? That evening she went to her sisters; she waited and waited and he never came. "Here I haven't had a date in fifteen years and now I've been stood up!" Finally she went home. But, all along, he'd been in the right apartment building looking for her, but he'd lost the apartment number and forgot her sister's name! He called her the next day and told her what had happened. Instead of being mad she laughed and laughed, and they knew right away they'd hit it off. And so they went to the Stock Show that night and eventually were married.

In 1974 the Homestead was purchased by the Nature Conservancy and held for transfer to the National Park Service after Congress approved the funds and purchase of the land. Tours were given by the Nature Association at the ranch in 1974 followed by ten years of Living History by park interpreters.

John supervising Porgy & Bess - 1974



John Holzwarth and RMNP Supt. Contor





Wanda says, "Johnnie is a very unusual man..." John had stroke in 1974. Wanda and Johnnie lived a year in Mama cabin. They'd cook breakfast on Admiral Blue. She grew a garden behind the shop – lettuce mostly. They stay in Denver so they can be close to medical care. Wanda and Johnnie still travel often. In 1977 they did the Civil War, a 6,000 mile trip to Georgia and south. Wanda drives the big camper and even drove it all the way to Alaska a few years ago. This summer, 1977, they plan to fly to Alaska for two weeks to visit Wanda's daughter and family Suzanne Jones, who lived there.

In 1971 they bought an apartment in Littleton and a hunting cabin near Springfield. There he made a private hunting preserve and during the last five years he raised race horses. They made an annual trip to the Kentucky Derby and hunting trips in the fall. In the fall of 1982 Johnnie killed two birds in one shot despite a stroke that had left one arm almost totally useless.

Wouldn't he have loved to tell this story around the campfire?

Johnnie was sometimes ornery and often stubborn, sometimes bigoted and sometimes sympathetic. He is remembered as not the kind of man people feel neutral about – either you liked him or you didn't like him. (from obituary by Allen Best in Winter Park Manifest)

John G. Holzwarth died Friday, April 1, 1983 at Swedish Medical Center. He was 80 years old. Memorial services were held at 2 p.m., Wednesday, April 6 at Trinity Church of Pines, Grand Lake. Memorial contributions went to the Grand Lake Historical Society. His ashes were scattered in his hay field on the ranch.

