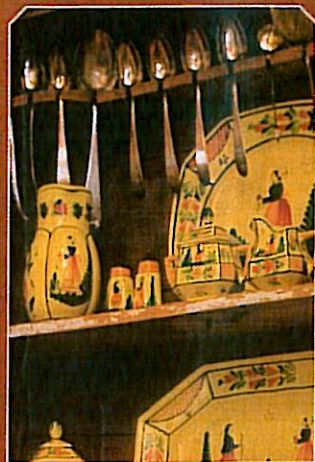
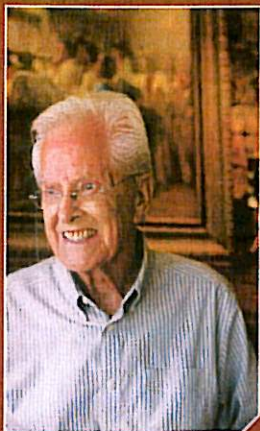
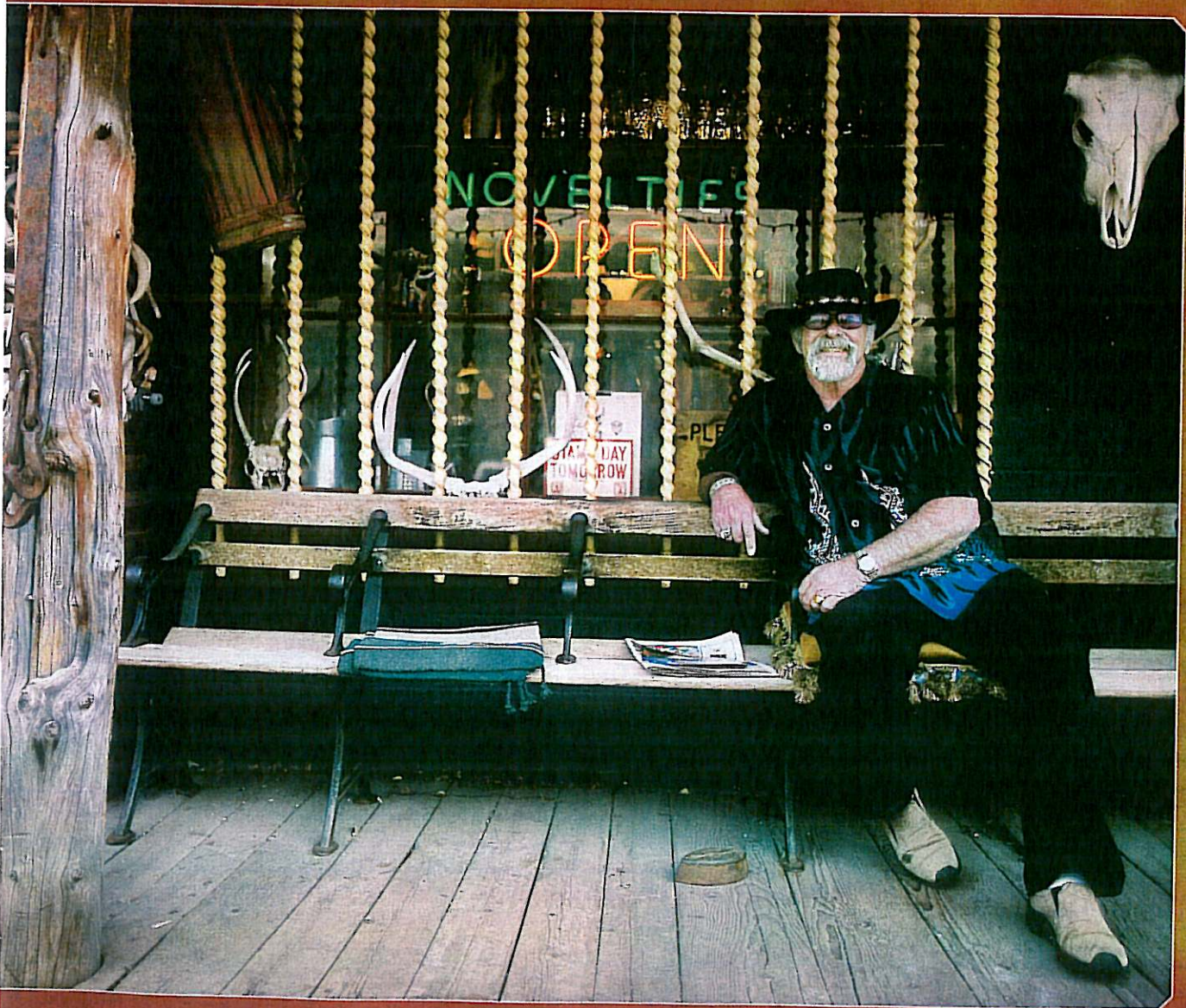


THE collectors

BY
Traci J. Macnamara
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Dominique Taylor



FOR SOME,
IT'S ABOUT
THE THRILL
OF THE HUNT;
FOR OTHERS
IT'S A DEEP
APPRECIATION
FOR BEAUTY
AND HISTORICAL
SIGNIFICANCE.



trading | post

The first time I walked into Minturn's Battle Mountain Trading Post, I creaked open the front door and stepped into a room filled with an array of eclectic stuff: fur-covered chairs with hooves for legs, turquoise jewelry, vintage posters, paint-chipped wooden sleds — all of it mashed together so tightly that my eyes strained to take it in. I didn't know what all I was seeing, but still — I couldn't help but smile.

"What do you collect?" asked a man named Bill Reis as he stood behind one of the glass display cases and startled me out of my stupor. His words were drawn-out and relaxed, making him sound as if he'd been stationed there since the beginning of time.

"Well — I don't collect anything, really. Not right now, anyway," I said,

Bill Reis sits on his favorite wildlife-watching bench in front of Battle Mountain Trading Post in Minturn. His complete slipper mug set is from the 1950s.



• TREASURE •
Bill Reis' collection is diverse, including items like this Lurner stove from the 1880s.

knowing that little more than curiosity had drawn me there. I'd seen the old orange truck out front, stacked precariously high with antlers, and caught the flash of an antiques sign as I drove by. What was that place? I'd wondered, and what was all of that stuff I'd seen in a colorful blur as I passed by?

Five years later, Bill Reis is still the man behind that glass display case, and now I return in search of answers to a different set of questions. I want to know how he's managed to make a career out of collecting — and why.

"Well, for me, it's all about the treasure and the hunt," he says when I ask him what motivates him to keep filling up the Battle Mountain Trading

Post with the wonder-worthy items I find there today: a collection of old miners hats, colored glass bottles, a wooden horse rearing up on its back legs, and a large Indian head that just sits there and stares at us as we talk.

Reis, who says he's been a collector for almost all of his life, moved to Minturn in the '70s from California, where he began making redwood furniture. Originally, he crafted and sold his furniture at the Battle Mountain Trading Post location. But not long afterwards, he started going to auctions and yard sales to see what he could find. Eventually, the items he collected and sold began overtaking his business, so he turned to antiques and decided to let what he found take over the space.

Reis still gets excited to go out hunting for the things that make him smile — and for the things he thinks his customers will like. "Nice things, unique things," he says. "I like to find things that I think will stick around, things with an enduring appeal."

And occasionally, this treasure hunter strikes gold. I hear the excitement in his voice when he tells me about buying a particular box of frames at an auction. Once he got home, he had more time to inspect his findings, and Reis happened to find what someone else had missed: a little painting of a Navajo shepherd tucked behind the glass in one of those frames. The painting turned out to be a Gerard Curtis Delano mini master, worth more than 100 times what he had paid for the entire bundle.

"I held onto that painting for a long time," Reis recalls. "But one day, a man came in and knew exactly what it was — he wanted it right away. Passing it along to another collector who got excited about finding it was just as much of a treat as it was for me to find it in the first place."

norwegian | wood

While some collect for the hunt and the treasure, others collect more organically. Take Axel and Janie Wilhelmsen, for example, who have gradually acquired a collection of centuries-old Norwegian farm furniture to fill their home. Like birds that gather twigs for their nests, one perfect piece at a time, the Wilhelmsen's have collected the items that make their house a home, which reflects both Axel's Norwegian heritage and the couple's belief that beauty is in the details.

Owners of Axel's clothing store in Vail Village, Axel and Janie Wilhelmsen aren't wary of surrounding themselves with beautiful things. Their

"AND WE'RE
VERY LUCKY
TO HAVE
ROMANCE IN
EVERYTHING
WE DO
TOGETHER"

store expresses a classic style and an appreciation of Americana, which is evident from its exceptional tailored clothing and handmade British shoes to its cowboy boots and silver buckles that are essentially wearable art.

Axel and Janie's home displays the same eye for beauty, as well as their desire to carve out a soulful space for themselves. The life and charm of wood immediately appeals to the guests who walk through their front door, but ultimately they've chosen to create something that's uniquely their own.

"Most people wouldn't want to fill their homes with Norwegian farm furniture," says Axel, "but it reflects who we are and the heritage that we love." Axel began collecting what he calls "old pieces with personality" when he was eighteen and still living in Norway. When he saw a beautifully crafted pine cabinet built in the 1600s, he knew that he wanted it to be in his own place one day. So he bought it, and it now rests in the couple's hallway.

Axel met Janie when he was working as a young man in New York, sharing a bare-bones apartment with a Norwegian friend. When Janie invited him to her apartment, he was stunned to find that she'd filled her space with colorful Portuguese and French painted pieces; in them, Axel saw a reflection of the same

Scandinavian furniture that he loved.

"My friend and I had nothing in our apartment," he says, "so I couldn't believe it when I met this exceptional woman who also shared my same love of color and character." After they married, Axel and Janie lived for seven years in Norway, where family members gave them some of their first pieces of furniture, and where they began collecting their own. Eventually, they shipped these pieces to the United States and had their Vail home literally built around them.

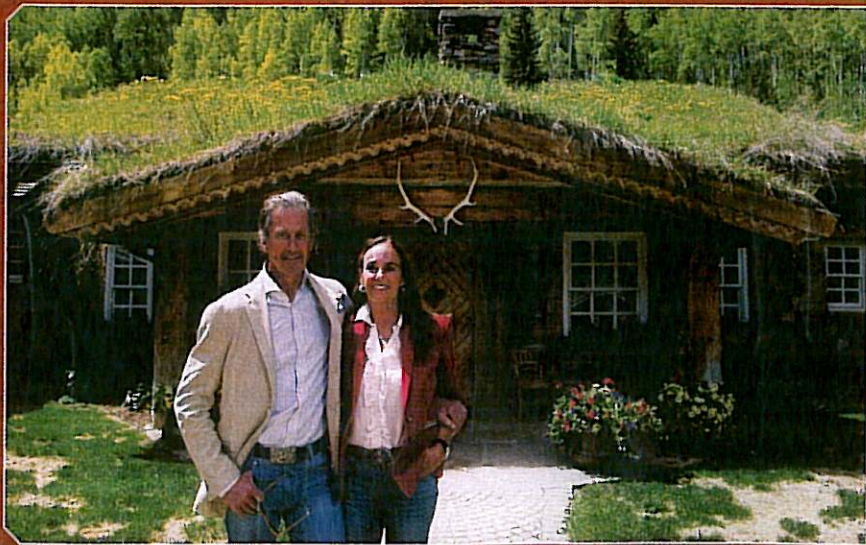
A bed is built into the entryway, and colorful Norwegian cabinets mask all kitchen appliances. A hand-painted wedding dowry cabinet from the 1800s serves as their pantry, and a bright green roll-top desk fits perfectly into its space in the wall. Nearly every piece of furniture in their home is a Norwegian antique, but at the same time, it's "multi-purpose and functional," says Axel. "We use all of the furniture we have in our home."

Although their children have grown up and moved out into places of their own, Axel and Janie continue to enjoy the stream of family and friends who visit their home; it is their sanctuary, which seems to grow even more vibrant with each passing year.

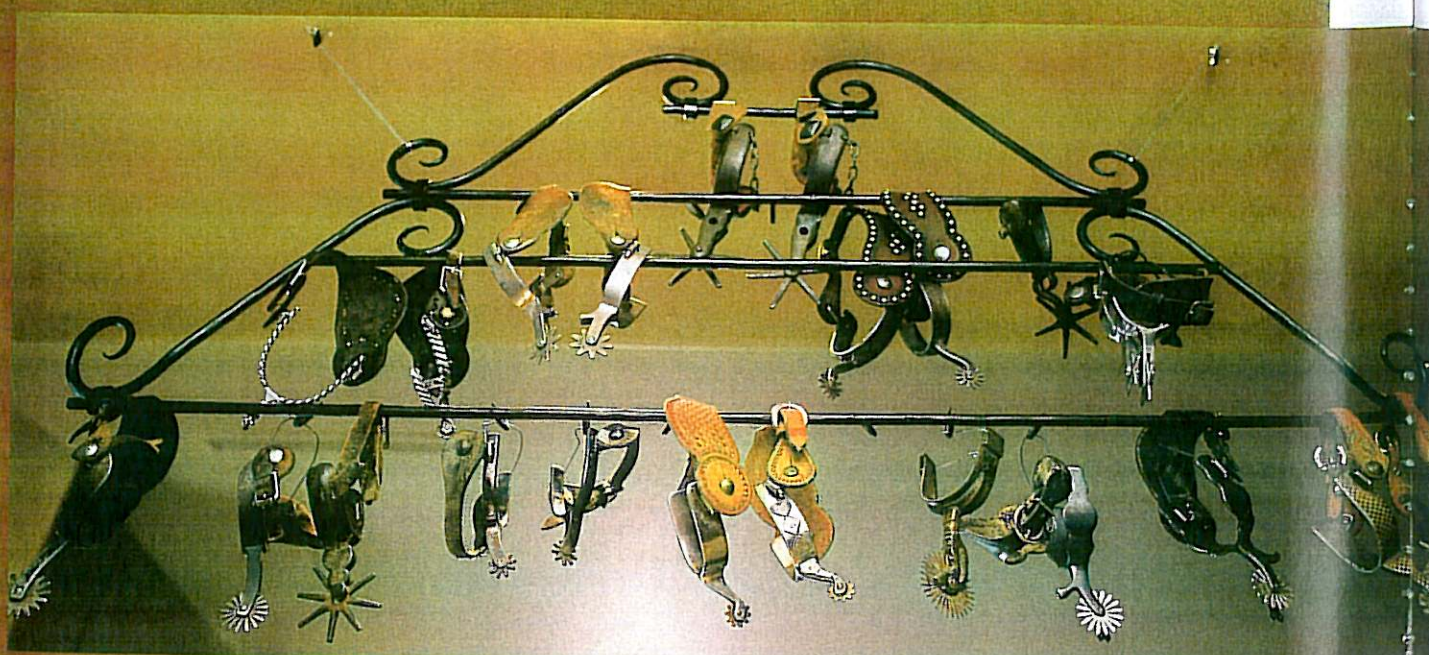
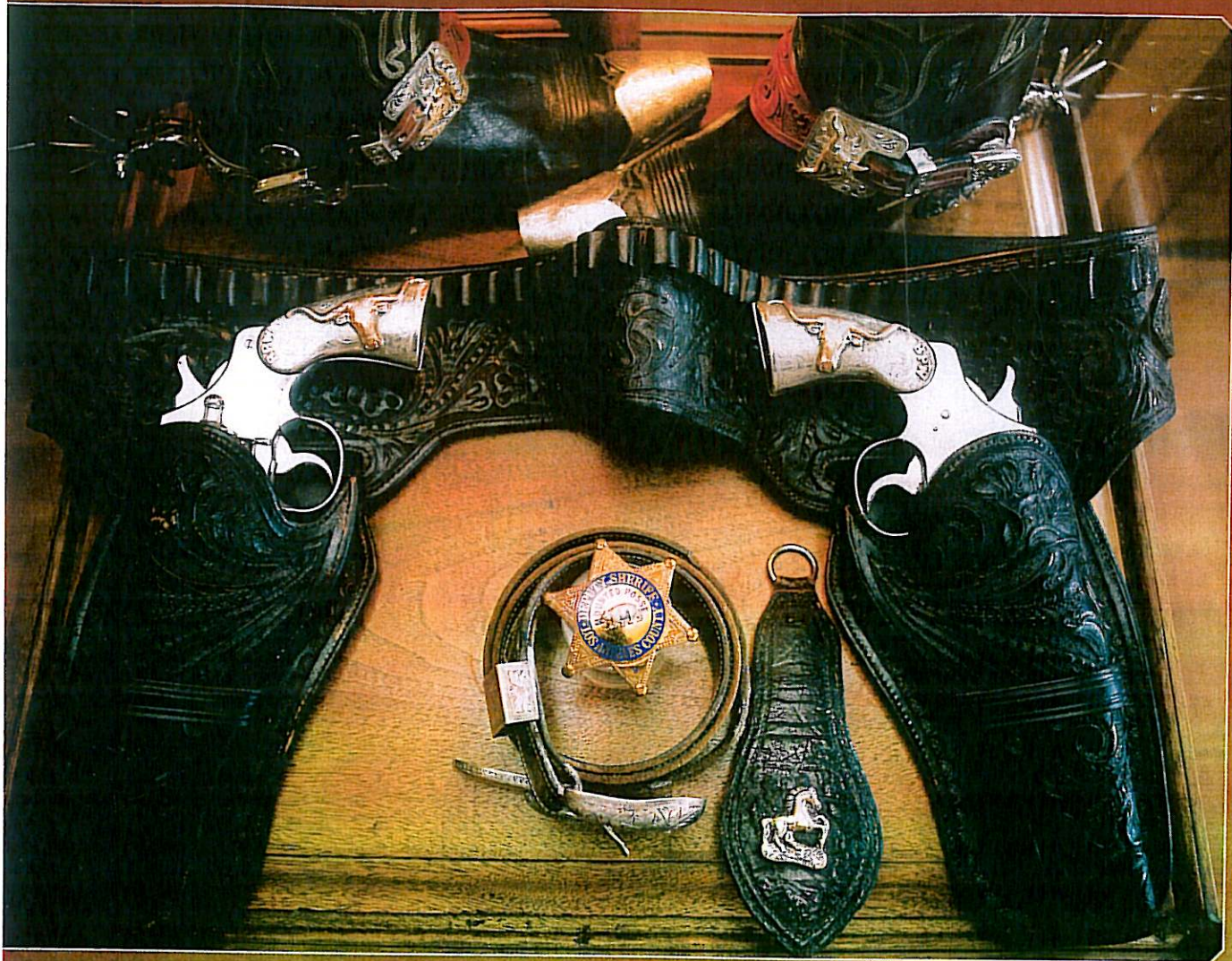
"There's romance in this place for us," says Axel. "And we're very lucky to have romance in everything we do together, whether we're working with beautiful things for our business or coming home to this beautiful place."

A hand-painted wedding dowry cabinet from the 1800s holds dishes above a bright green roll-top desk that fits perfectly into the wall. Colorful and beautifully detailed Norwegian pine cabinets mask modern kitchen appliances such as a refrigerator.





• BEAUTY •
Axel and Janie Wilhelmsen's home is a testament to their love of peace and beauty.



cowboy | collector

Some collections begin with the love of a specific thing, growing ever onward from there. For Ron Ward, it all began with a love of horses. He remembers watching Roy Rogers and John Wayne movies as a kid, which he says made him think “it would be pretty keen to be a cowboy.” But Ward lived in Los Angeles, a place that wasn’t exactly the wide-open West.

One way or another, Ward managed to get his first horse when he turned 14, and then at the age of 15, he began galloping horses at a training track in south L.A. owned by Jack Benny sidekick Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. Ward would wake up at 3:30 in the morning so that he could gallop horses for two hours before he went to school. He remembers vividly what it was like to gallop through the fog on chilly winter mornings, to see the first rays of sunlight through the mist.

Now in his Arrowhead home, Ward surrounds himself with a museum-quality collection of Western art and artifacts, including a series of Edward S. Curtis Native American photographs, a collection of antique spurs, and a shiny pair of Colt revolvers. He proudly displays

Ron Ward's extensive Western cowboy collection includes a shiny pair of turn-of-the-century Colt revolvers in traditional leather holsters. His extensive spur collection hangs on display over his kitchen.

the first item in his collection, a Red Ryder BB gun, on a deer foot gun rack. Ward received that BB gun when he was 12, and his collection now reflects the maturity of someone who has had more than seventy years of practice choosing what pieces to keep and what to pass by.

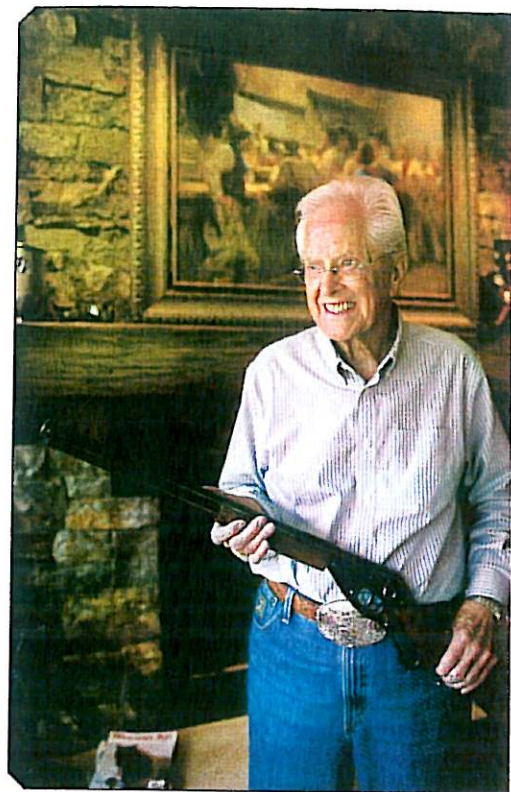
Ward reckons that he didn’t become a “serious collector” until he moved to Colorado when he retired in his fifties. By that time, he’d had a successful career as a developer, and he wanted to live in Colorado, where he could enjoy the mountain landscape and ski in his spare time. He bought a house in Lake Creek, and it looked like a big, empty space devoid of anything that mattered to him. So he became determined to fill it up with the things that reflected his love of the West.

Ward began going to Western memorabilia auctions and scouring listings for antiques and collectibles. He also developed a passion for finding unique items made by leather craftsman Edward Bohlin. These are the things that he treasures most in his collection, displaying saddles in his living room and other smaller items — holsters and belts — in display cases.

“It’s all about the craftsmanship and detail,” he says of a Bohlin saddle that he has displayed in his living room, “this saddle — it’s a piece of art.” Even though Ward has never placed that saddle on a horse, he’s still managed to fulfill some of the cowboy dreams he had as a kid.

One item in his collection, a silver trophy belt buckle, rests in a display case not because it’s particularly valuable or artistic but because it was hard-earned. After Ward moved to Colorado, he bought a cutting horse and worked with a trainer to hone his skills cutting cattle. He competed in weekend cutting competitions and eventually won his division at a Western States Cutting Horse Association championship. The belt buckle serves as a memento of his hard work and of his childhood dreams come true.

Whether these people collect to connect with the past, to preserve their heritage, or to surround themselves with beautiful things, one thing emerges



• COWBOY •

Bob Ward sports his trophy belt buckle while holding the first item in his collection, a Red Ryder BB gun.

as a common thread in each of their stories: joy. Bill Reis smiles when one of his clients finds the perfect piece in his store. Axel and Janie Wilhelmson find happiness within their home, and Ron Ward still gets excited when the things in his collection remind him of those misty mornings he spent on a training track as a teenager, sunlight poking through the fog. ■