

ROBBINS: Engineer will be guest at science event January 26

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Inn at the Seventh Mountain and Black Butte Ranch.

He was project director in Portland for the restoration of Washington Park reservoir. He was the civil engineer whose geotechnical skill plotted 500 miles of powerlines from Medford, Klamath Falls, Lakeview and Jordan Valley to Twin Falls, Idaho.

Among his proudest accomplishments is his dedication to the reinvigoration of Pine Mountain Observatory (operated by the University of Oregon Department of Physics), where some of the world's best telescopes enrich the study of the history of the earth and the universe.

It is a pretty impressive résumé for a man who describes himself as a Wyoming "hillbilly sheepherder." However, he was never able to reach his biggest life goal.

"I wanted to fly planes so bad," Robbins said with a hint of longing still in his voice.

Born on a homestead where his father raised horses, then cattle, on the wild open lands of the northern prairie, Robbins' childhood was as rich as Western novels. There were bears, barn dances and blizzards that took temperatures to minus-50 degrees with nothing but wood heat to combat it. Telephones reached distant neighbors and electricity came from batteries.

When Robbins was 10, his family became sheep ranchers after disasters wiped out the family's cattle herd.

In 1934, grasshoppers invaded the Midwest in a Biblical cloud of destruction, swallowing up grasslands section by section, state by state. The federal government's WPA came to the aid of ranchers with an insecticide blend of arsenic, bran mash, molasses and sawdust to curb the onslaught.

At the Robbins ranch, the

poisoned grain was stored by the WPA in a cellar near the only livestock water source at a spring-fed beaver dam. A suspected rogue fisherman broke into the cellar and left the door torn loose. Cattle found the opening when they came for water and gobbled the grain before anyone was aware.

"My father and I spent days on horseback searching for our cattle," Robbins reported, "until one day we noted a putrid smell." The entire herd had died from eating the treated grain.

"We were left with one cow and a calf which were in a fenced paddock at the house," Robbins said.

Financially desperate, his father went to work for a sheep-ranching neighbor. He returned home at the end of the summer with a herd of 200 sheep and a few rams as half his pay and a wallet filled with cash as the other half. The family was obliged to learn a new form of livelihood on a severely stretched budget over the next few years.

The ranch was salvaged through wool and mutton.

By the age of 13, young Ken became the ranch's shepherd, living in the company of his sheep dog and horse through summers until he finished high school.

His sister or father rode out regularly with supplies, returning the same day to ranch duties, so his summer days were solitary.

How does a boy survive the loneliness of shepherding? Robbins diffused loneliness by dreaming of flying airplanes and learning to play a guitar on afternoons when the sheep lingered in shade.

He sparkles when he talks about riding his horse to town when he was 11 to pick up his Montgomery Ward guitar at the post office. It was a gift from his mother, in trade for his promise not to smoke until he was 16.

In the silent high meadow sheep camps across 15

sections and 5,000 acres of grazing territory, Robbins honed his knowledge from the few chords his uncle taught him on annual visits with the family. He also learned from the bands that played at all-night barn dances, where, he said with a grin, "There was lots of food, company and an ample amount of bourbon."

In the winter, Robbins lived as a boarder and worked for the family that housed him in the town that had a high school. In his spare time, he carved and built model airplanes.

A 7,400-foot Wyoming elevation wasn't high enough for the young, ambitious sheepherder. He was determined to become a pilot. Following high school years, he joined the Enlisted Reserve Corp.

"I didn't want to be a doughboy, I wanted to fly," he reiterated. He picked the Navy, hoping for Pensacola, Florida, pilot training. His poor vision ended that dream in his first military physical examination just a few weeks later.

Undaunted, Robbins focused on aeronautical engineering or becoming a Navy officer. Again, limited vision tweaked his future.

In a long process from 1942 to 1946 that included short study at the University of Wyoming, boot camp in Idaho, and prerequisites for officer-candidate school during his reserve active service, Ken found opportunity.

"If I can't get in the front door, I'll sneak in a side door," was his attitude of optimism.

One of those side doors opened because Robbins had taken what he calls "girl subjects" in high school. His 80-words-a-minute typing skill landed him an assignment (that he almost rejected) with an admiral of a new carrier squadron.

While still in the reserves, Robbins studied at the University of Washington on the GI Bill. In 1951, he graduated with degrees in civil



PHOTO BY GARY MILLER

A guitar was a good friend in Ken Robbins' youth.

engineering and geology. He retired as a Navy Lieutenant Commander after 26 years of service.

Robbins' passion for astronomy began when he was taking post-graduate continuing-education geology classes for his master's degree at Portland State University. Already employed as a civil engineer, he never missed guest lectures by the former director of Pine Mountain Observatory.

When the astronomer explained that he was having difficulty with his research because of wobbly, worn gears on the telescope, Robbins asked what it would cost to replace the gears. (The budget for the observatory was extremely tight.) Robbins pulled his checkbook and wrote a \$200 check so the research could continue.

Thus began a relationship of 40 years. In 2007, he was honored as the Friends of Pine Mountain Observatory Member of the Year. In 1997, he and his wife relocated to Central Oregon to be closer to the observatory and the friendships formed there.

In August 2014, Robbins was present for the unveiling of Pine Mountain's futuristic roboticized telescope, which is dedicated to him. There are only four of these in the

world: Spain; Chile; Hawaii; and Pine Mountain, southeast of Bend. Robbins financed the robotic wonder, which will eventually allow students in Oregon (or Robbins, from his home) to remotely observe and research from their school computers.

In his log home, he still does woodworking, building cabinets and furniture. He also built the cabinets in the Pine Mountain Observatory home that houses the managing director, Mark Dunaway, a close personal friend. His walls are covered with his photographs and paintings, including one of the Wyoming home where he was raised.

Among Robbins' greatest desires is the hope to get more people involved in the Pine Mountain Observatory.

"Ken quotes poetry often," says his close friend, Kathy Johnson. "He often cites Longfellow's Psalm of Life: Act — act in the living Present ... leaving footprints in the sands of time ... still Achieving, still pursuing. Ken wants to be a person who leaves footprints in the sands of time."

Anyone who has an interest in volunteering or learning more about Pine Mountain Observatory is welcome to email martie@uoregon.edu or pete@uoregon.edu.



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