

SECTION B

Friday, September 4, 1987

Blacksmith forges life on West Virginia frontier

FAIRMONT, W.Va. (AP) — Twenty years ago, Ronnie Utt was helping to forge the "New Frontier." Today, he's returned to the forge to help children understand frontier ways.

Utt, 53, a former technician at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, is a bespectacled musician who doubles as blacksmith at Prickett's Fort State Park in Marion County, W.Va.

He helps to recreate for school tours the West Virginia life of the late 1700s — including old Appalachian and British ballads and Irish lullabies that have been passed down through the generations.

"It's the first time my machinist and music interests have come together" in one job, says Utt, who peaks and sings in a drawl that's reminiscent of country singer Willie Nelson.

"It's great," he says. "And to think, I found it only eight miles from where I was born."

The job calls for "showing the old and the new" to help children comprehend how pioneers lived, he says. For example, he tells his young visitors that chores they do at home are much the same as those performed by frontier children — such as taking out the garbage.

He also leads sing-alongs of the

ballads and Irish lullabies that some of the children's parents still sing.

Utt grew up on a farm outside Morgantown, W.Va., and the rural life fostered in him a passion for both traditional Appalachian music and tinkering with machines.

"My stepmother sang the old songs," he says. "I'd sit up and sing far into the night with her."

His father had a hand-cranked forge, which young Ronnie ran when his father made tools and farm equipment — including a tractor built from scratch.

Utt joined the Air Force shortly after high school and became a machinist. He was stationed in central Louisiana, where he sang in a gospel group, and then Texas, where he worked in the oil fields after leaving the service.

Then Utt "went looking for greener fields" and joined Philco — now Ford Aerospace — in 1965. He helped design and install the Johnson Center's control-room consoles — "that room you see on TV with the green lights" — between 1965 and 1980, from Gemini 3 to the first Columbia space shuttle flight.

But the job entailed chemically treating the circuitry and consoles to prevent corrosion. "After 13 years of spray painting and working with chemicals, it was affecting my

health," Utt says.

He developed allergies and sinus problems. He also had a 40 percent hearing loss due to the chemicals — "a scary thing for a musician," Utt says. The chemicals, combined with the high humidity and pollution of Houston, drove him behind a desk.

"But by then, the damage was done. So I moved home," he said.

His health cleared up once he returned to West Virginia and the outdoors, he says — ironic in view of his current job, since frontier blacksmiths usually died young because they breathed so much hot coal dust.

Utt says he's devoted to his new state government-paid job. He insists upon dressing correctly for the part, including hand-sewn linen frontiersman britches and blouses.

Utt even lives in a log cabin dating from the 1830s. It has electricity and running water, but other facets — including a well-used cooking hearth — retain the frontier feeling.

At the end of the day, however, when the school buses full of children have departed, Utt slips out of his leather moccasins and into his work boots for the trip home. He drives to a gas station to tank up his battered car with the Pittsburgh Steelers decal on the rear window.

"I've got to get back to the 20th century now," he says.

Hart to face questions about Rice in 'Nightline' appearance Sept. 8

DENVER (AP)— Gary Hart will face questions about his political future and personal life on a special one-hour edition of ABC's "Nightline" next week, spokesmen said Wednesday.

The Sept. 8 show will be the first time Hart has agreed to answer questions since speculation erupted last month that he might re-enter the race for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination.

Laura Wessner of ABC said that Hart, who dropped out of the race earlier this year amid questions about his relationship to Miami model Donna Rice, will be ques-

tioned "one-on-one" by Nightline anchorman Ted Koppel.

Asked if there were any limits placed on the questions, Wessner said there were no conditions attached to the interview.

Speculation that Hart might re-enter the race for the Democratic presidential nomination was kindled last month after his former campaign manager, Bill Dixon, said it was "likely" Hart would do so.

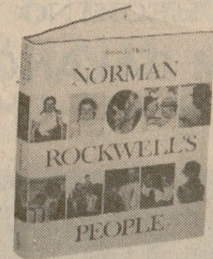
Hart quit his campaign on May 8, five days after the *Miami Herald* reported he spent part of a weekend with actress-model Donna Rice.

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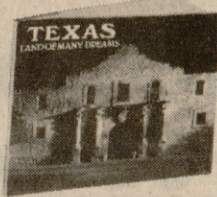
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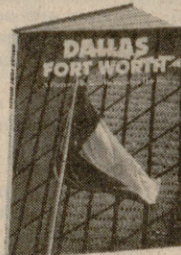
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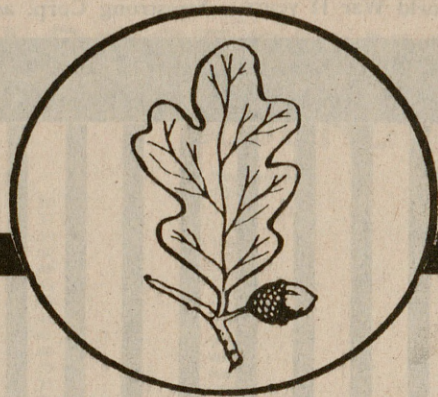


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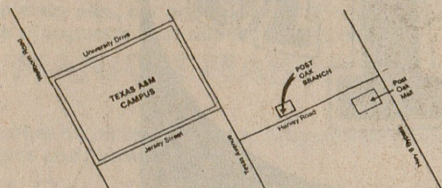
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