

Bob's Place a Snug Gas Oasis in Sea

By TIM MCGOVERN
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It's a "changing neighborhood" of sorts—the dairies have sold out, skyscrapers have gone up, flashing neon signs and billboards line the street and 57,000 cars whiz past every day.

But Bob's Place — and Bob — remain where they have been since 1929. A dusty sign above the office door proudly proclaims the tiny gasoline station at E. Alameda Ave. and S. Colorado Blvd. as one place "where the West remains."

Competing with the slick, Madison Avenue blitz of outdoor advertising around it, the station has stuck with its own "gim-

mick" for more than 30 years—a small script sign on its roof saying, "Howdy Folks!" It is a registered trademark.

THE SURROUNDING area used to be called COWTOWN. Bob's Place is its last remaining half-acre.

The proprietor of this island of incongruity is, by modern standards, pitiable.

Seventy-three years old, his right arm severed by a train's wheels nearly 50 years ago, he pumps gas seven days a week—16 hours on Sunday—and lives on a monthly salary of \$133 and a Social Security check.

He is John (Bob) Gilmour, and you could feel sorry for him.

Until you realize that he's sitting on a gold mine.

The half-acre on which his station and small home rest was part of a two-acre purchase made by his father in 1903. Price: \$350.

IN THE 1940s, an acre and a half was sold to Economy Lumber for \$18,000. Later, according to Gilmour, the lumber company sold its portion for \$395,000 as S. Colorado Blvd. grew into one of Denver's most desirable commercial areas.

Gas stations, particularly, went up in droves.

"Now if one hose won't reach, the next one will," said a nearby businessman,

Don Denton, whose family owned the Cambridge Dairy, which was located near Bob's Place.

Purchased for a total of less than \$150,000, 37 acres of the dairy's land have been sold since 1968 for more than \$2 million, Denton said.

The remaining five acres now are occupied by the Cherry Creek Inn.

GILMOUR SAID he has been approached by more than 50 persons interested in purchasing his land.

"They don't make an offer," Gilmour said. "They ask me to make an offer."

He's not really ready to sell, he said, but he tells them he'd consider a quarter of a million dollars as a starting point. "I'm not saying I'd sell for that," he quickly added.

Most of the prospective buyers want to build a restaurant or a liquor store on the site, Gilmour said.

HE DOESN'T PLAN to get slickered on a deal for the land.

He grew up there when his father owned the Cottage Home Dairy and he was made to look bad once before.

That was the day he herded the cows across the dirt road called Colorado Blvd. to take them down to Cherry Creek for a drink of water. His collie dog, Buster, went along.

"I fell asleep on the creek bank, and by the time I woke up Buster had herded all the cows up and was just bringing them back through our gate."

After a stint in the Navy, Gilmour went to work with the Burlington Railroad. One day in 1928, he fell off a rail car and the train's wheels severed his arm.

HIS FATHER gave him one acre of the land, and the station went up the next year.

It stands today, reinforced with steel in a few places, just as it did then—large rocks cemented together, concrete floor, small desk—no extras.

In 1929, a gallon of regular gasoline sold for 21.9 cents. Today it's 57.9 cents.

Until 1973, Bob's Place competed successfully with the slicker, full-service stations in the burgeoning area because it sold gasoline at about three cents per gallon cheaper.

THEN CAME THE Arab oil boycott, gasoline shortages and skyrocketing prices. Since then, business has been cut in half.

Pointing to a deep hole at the rear of the station where some pipes are being repaired, Gilmour joked, "Business is so dead I'm going to bury it."

So, why not sell out?

"I'm happy here," he said. "I've worked all my life, and I'm satisfied here. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. A fellow's got to have something to keep him busy."

His 74-year-old wife, Mayodell, who cooks his meals at the house next door and sometimes brings them to him, said she'd "like to get away from all this noise (from the traffic)," but that the decision is "up to him."



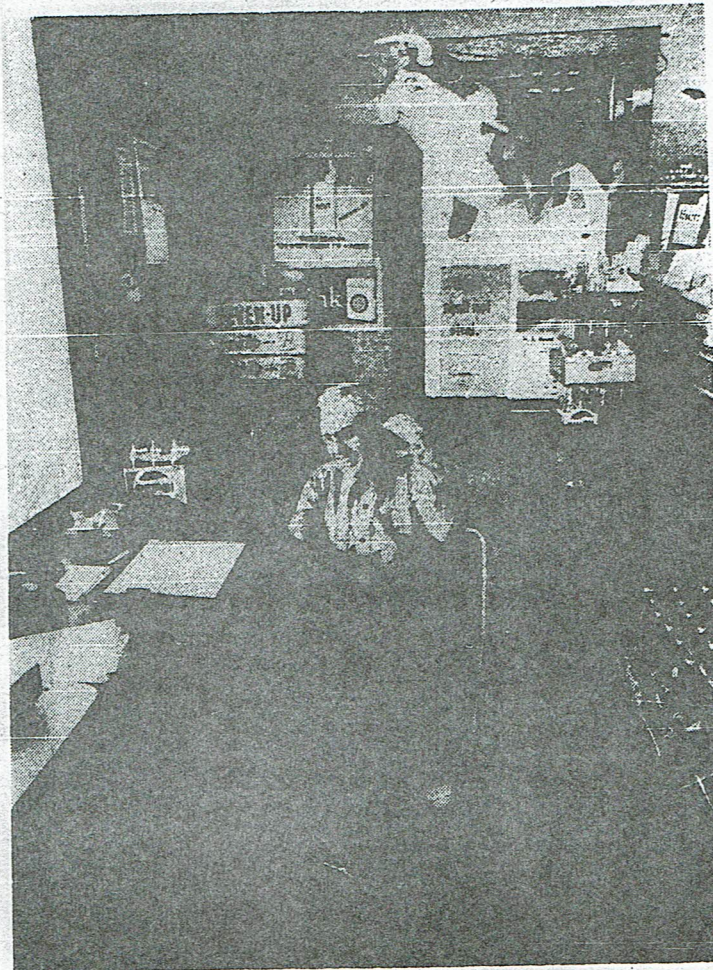
SEATED IN HIS VINTAGE 1929 GASOLINE STATION, GILMOUR LOOKS OUT ONTO COLORADO BLVD. When it was a dirt road, he herded his father's cows across it to get a drink at nearby Cherry Creek.



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GILMOUR IS STILL ALERT AND GOOD HUMORED AT AGE 73
Inflated bull behind him is "pretty new—I've only had it 20 years."

BUT, SHE SAID, "Maybe he could raise a garden. He'd be good at that."

A regular customer drives in. He's Don Cramb, 53, of 1050 S. York St. He drives two miles out of his way to come to Bob's for gas.

"You don't get your windshield washed, but I like Bob. I've known him a long time."

Cramb, who said he has been a customer for 18 years, said, "It's the kind of station I knew as a kid. Maybe that's why I come. It's like a gas station in a small town."

GILMOUR, A SIX-YEAR member of the Glendale City Council, recalls earlier days when the station sat alone at the intersection. There wasn't even a signpost for the east-west road, and so the "Alameda" sign was nailed to the north side of his station.

"In 1929, they used to drive horses and wagons down here—and Model Ts."

In 1947, as residential neighborhoods spread southeast in the city, Gilmour thought of a way to capitalize further on his "Howdy Folks" slogan.

HE BOUGHT A mule, named it Folks

and began taking pictures of customers' children riding the mule. The only problem, he said, was that not many customers wanted to wait three days for the film to be developed.

"If we'd had Polaroid in those days, it would have worked better."

A likeness of the mule remains painted on the station's south window, along with the partly faded message, "My name is Folks. I'm the Howdy Mule."

Today, Gilmour's small business profit and Social Security check allow him and his wife to live happily and without suffering.

THE BIG HOUSE on a hill somewhere will have to wait.

"I plan to live as long as I can," Gilmour said with a smile. "That's up to the good Lord. But my father stayed with it, helping me here until he died when he was 91. He used to come out and help me close up, and he was 91 then."

Living in wealthy retirement just doesn't appeal to Gilmour right now.

"I'm not wealthy today, and I probably won't be wealthy tomorrow," he said. "But I'll sleep like a log tonight."

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