



# Coonridge Digest

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## Listen and Learn

*March 6, 2003*

Greetin's from the Ridge.

You'd hardly notice Ralph Ginch. He sits in what he calls "the far corner seat of a round table" down at the liar's table at the coffee shop. Eighty-four years old, slight of build, dressed in farming garb that's seen little wear. His blue eyes are amazingly vivid for having seen over eight decades of Coonridge life.

Ralph Ginch lost his wife several years ago, and it's still a puzzlement to him as to why she went first. He'd never imagined that, and he's still feeling his way around the bachelor's world. Neighbors still bring more pies than he can eat, and he'll never get up the nerve to tell them, "I've got plenty of food, folks. But I do appreciate the conversation."

Ralph Ginch is punctual at the liar's table. Nine a.m. sharp, after the kids have cleared out, and then again 3:30 to watch the after-school crowd come trooping in. Ralph Ginch doesn't discriminate. He sits with whoever's there. And the most appealing thing about the man is that he agrees with whoever's speaking.

Sometimes he plants himself beside Robert, a Vietnam vet who's still reliving the last war and proclaims his opposition to the coming conflict in loud and sometimes profane language. When Robert starts his tirade, Ralph Ginch will nod his head and agrees that there's a good deal of truth to what he says.

Then there'll be days when a more hawkish crowd invades Ralph Ginch's corner. Many of the men will have sons or grandsons who've been called into military duty. Ralph Ginch sees the fear and anxiety in their eyes, and he allows how there's a good deal of truth in what they say.

Ralph agrees with everyone - not because he's hypocritical, but simply because he doesn't know for sure. He's a World War II vet, and although he understands little of world politics, he knows how awfully lonely a soldier can get. Ralph held a gun for two years in Europe, and that was all the conflict he ever wanted to experience.

In 1962, he and his wife, Hazel, took canned goods and jugs of water to their basement. Khrushchev had pounded his shoe on the U.N. table,

Castro thumbed his nose at the world, Kennedy put his foot down, the world held its breath, and Ralph Ginch hauled canned tomatoes and Spam to his basement.

For reasons he can't quite explain, two cans remain on a dusty shelf. If you were to ask him what they were for, he'd say he's forgotten, but he hasn't.

Ralph Ginch goes to church and prays for peace. Ralph Ginch listens to the nightly news and hopes the president is right. He hopes the boys will be safe. He hopes it will all end soon.

I don't know Ralph's politics. I doubt that he has many partisan feelings. But I know his patriotism. It's soft-spoken and sure. He knows that freedom needs protecting. He hopes that's what we're doing.

When you ask Ralph Ginch what he thinks about our country going to war, he'll say, "Well, I just don't know. How 'bout you?" then he'll look at you with those blue eyes and he'll genuinely hope you speak with wisdom.

Ralph Ginch really wants to know.

Ralph Ginch never imagined living in a world where a handful of powder can wipe out a city, where a lunatic with a death wish can cripple a nation with fear and where there's so much that we just don't know or trust. This is not how Ralph Ginch hoped to spend his retirement years.

So Ralph sits in the corner seat of a round table and listens intently to each opinion laid out for consumption. He agrees with everything said. If he knew the truth he'd be glad to share it, but Ralph Ginch just doesn't know.

We don't argue much in Coonridge. We wait for you to leave the coffee shop then we'll talk about you. To Coonridge thinking, this is not hypocritical. It's diplomatic.

We toss our opinions into the conversation not so much to make a point but to see if anyone agrees.

Like Ralph Ginch, sometimes we just don't know.

You ever in Coonridge, stop by. We may not answer the door but you'll enjoy the trip.

*Freida Marie Crump chronicles the comings and goings in Coonridge for the Journal-Courier. © Ken Bradbury, 2003.*