

RANCH REVIEWS:

Table Mountain Ranch, Lander Wyo.

by Dave and May Reynolds

EDITOR'S NOTE: We intend to run a series of Ranch Reviews—perhaps twenty in all—in the five regular issues of **BUFFALO!** over the next few years. This particular feature will not appear in the special Fall Sales Issue because of its larger circulation. The Ranch Reviews are designed to illustrate mistakes and lessons learned by established buffalo producers. Our current Directors will assist in this project, since just like everyone else, they've learned from their mistakes.

In describing our operation, May and I decided to organize our material around two MAXIMS and 10 Rules.

MAXIM 1. THE COOK IS ALWAYS RIGHT. Maxim II appears at the end of the article.

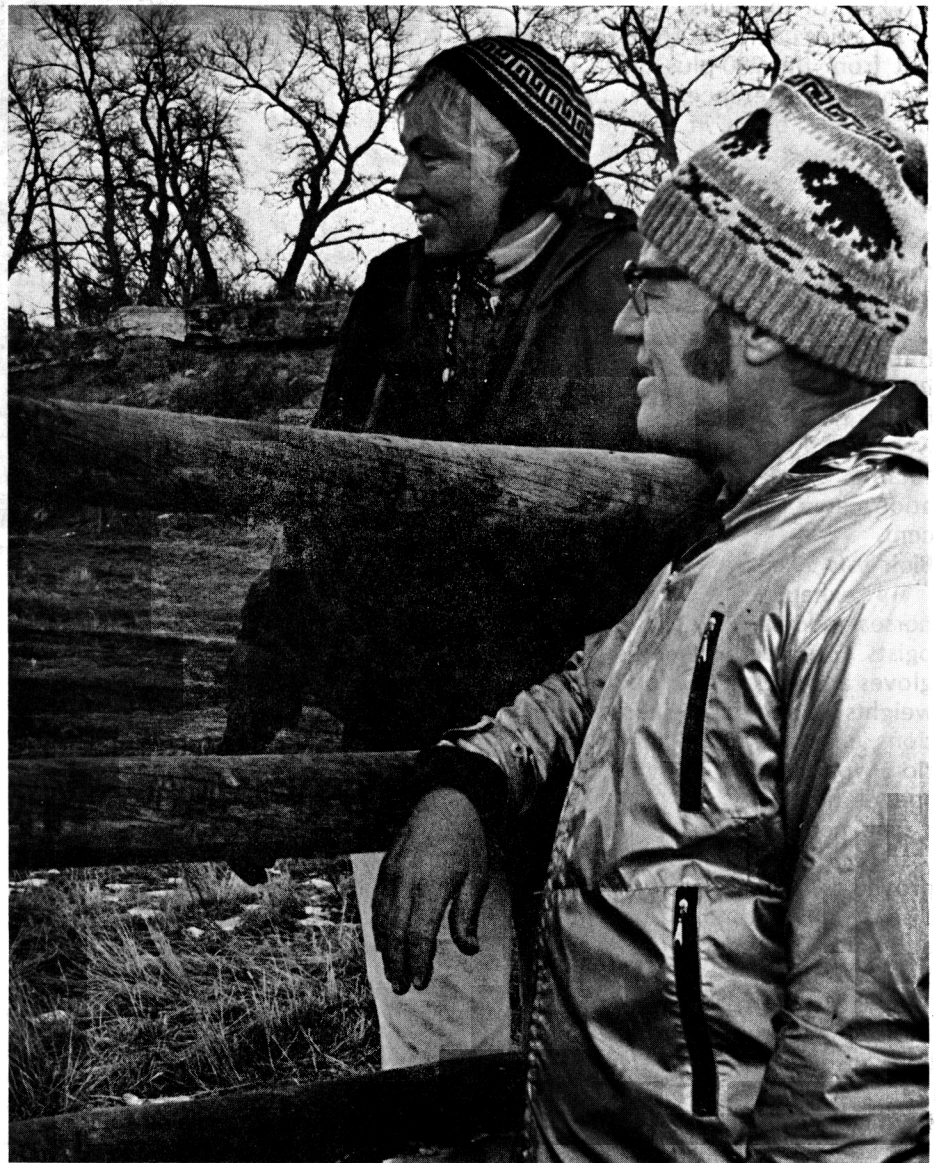
Rule 1. Get the Right Ranch: Most people get ranches by inheritance or marriage. Some, like us, get them by purchase. Of all the farm and ranch properties in the world, clearly some are not suitable for buffalo.

May and I bought 160 acres, near town, in 1965, while we were still in the diplomatic service. I woke up one night several years later in our house outside Paris after a horrible dream and told May: "We bought the wrong ranch!" In my dream, someone took off from the local airport in a light plane, flew one mile along our property line, and buzzed my dream herd of buffalo off the cliff at the end of the property. And it's true—we had bought the wrong ranch as far as buffalo were concerned. We didn't get the right ranch until 1976—and we got the ranch pretty well nailed down before we got the buffalo.

Rule 2. Strategy Should Define Tactics: Most governments and businesses get this rule backwards, and let what they are doing just now determine their destination. **WRONG.** Set your destination first.

In our case, ranching would not be our sole livelihood, and buffalo would not be our only source of ranch income and expense. Our initial strategy had two parts: see if we could raise buffalo at all, and see if we could selectively develop a particular bloodline. Naturally we had family and friends that advised us we were crazy with both ideas.

The first "if" meant that we would



May and Dave; in background a buffalo jump which is no longer used. Wyoming State Journal photo

start small and build a herd. In turn, that meant we wouldn't have to worry about sales the first few years. Also, it meant that external fences got built before handling equipment.

Bloodline development meant in our case that we intended to run a closed herd—this because we wanted to try bringing back Mountain Buffalo. If we had wanted to develop an improved Plains Buffalo bloodline, bringing in superior stock would have been a sounder approach. We, however, were limited to a small gene pool.

Rule 3. Seek the Best Advice: In 1976 we visited NBA President Lloyd Wonderlich in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

He gave us good advice on a number of aspects of buffalo raising, including the suggestion we join NBA. He also said, "Go see Roy." This meant Roy Houck, a founding member of NBA and a member of the Buffalo Hall of Fame.

Roy let us drop in on him virtually unannounced at his ranch north of Ft. Pierre, SD, and showed us parts of his ranch. His chief piece of advice was "If you ever think of doing something to your buffalo, **DON'T.**" I asked him why. He said: "They already know how to be buffalo!" Whenever I see Roy I thank him for his sage advice, and then confess the latest difficulties I got into by ignoring it.

We've never stopped seeking advice. Because of our interest in genetics, we've received valuable suggestions from Dr. Clyde Stormont, a member of the Buffalo Hall of Fame. We've tried to keep up with current genetic studies, particularly the evolutionary ones. Is part of the buffalo's advantage over cattle because we didn't domesticate the species? Perhaps one reason tame cattle don't live very long is linked to the taming process.

Our interest in buffalo as part of the human diet has been sparked by Diane Stoy, R.N., another member of the Buffalo Hall of Fame and a leader in George Washington University's Lipid Research Clinic. Together we've used sophisticated machines for a painless test of blood cholesterol at each of the last two semiannual meetings. Checking afterwards, it seems as if each time we have prolonged at least one participant's life. This is certainly a rapid and gratifying payout.

Rule 4. Know Your Seller: We had a ranch, and knew of some nearby buffalo with the right apparent ancestry. The owners, from Philadelphia, ran a dude ranch. It was chronically short of feed for their animals. We knew their animals often escaped to the adjoining Indian reservation, and sometimes fewer returned than left. Because we knew much less about buffalo than the sellers, we said that we would buy if they could deliver.

We were to get six pregnant cows March 15, 1977. May and I built buck and pole fence like mad in January-March, driving up to the ranch from our rented house in town. Fence building was fun—first we and some of our kids fabricated the bucks inside our machine shed. Then our middle daughter skillfully spread the bucks out on the ground one day while we were gone—just before a two-foot January blizzard. Each day as we began work on the fence, I would snowshoe around, probe for some bucks, dig them out, and then begin nailing on poles. May and I tried to be patient with each other; me with limited success. We were intent on this small fence—perhaps only a quarter-mile—because we thought the dude ranch buffalo might want to get out.

Actually, they didn't want to come anyhow. At shipping time, the Philadelphians showed us the truck

parked at a loading ramp near their house. Then we walked a quarter mile to a gate in their buffalo pasture. "Will they really go from here to the truck?" I asked. "Of course," the owners replied. They opened the gate. The entire herd rushed out, got spooked by onlookers, and stampeded off in the snow toward the reservation. We were impressed. We knew our sellers, and thus far had not paid a nickel.

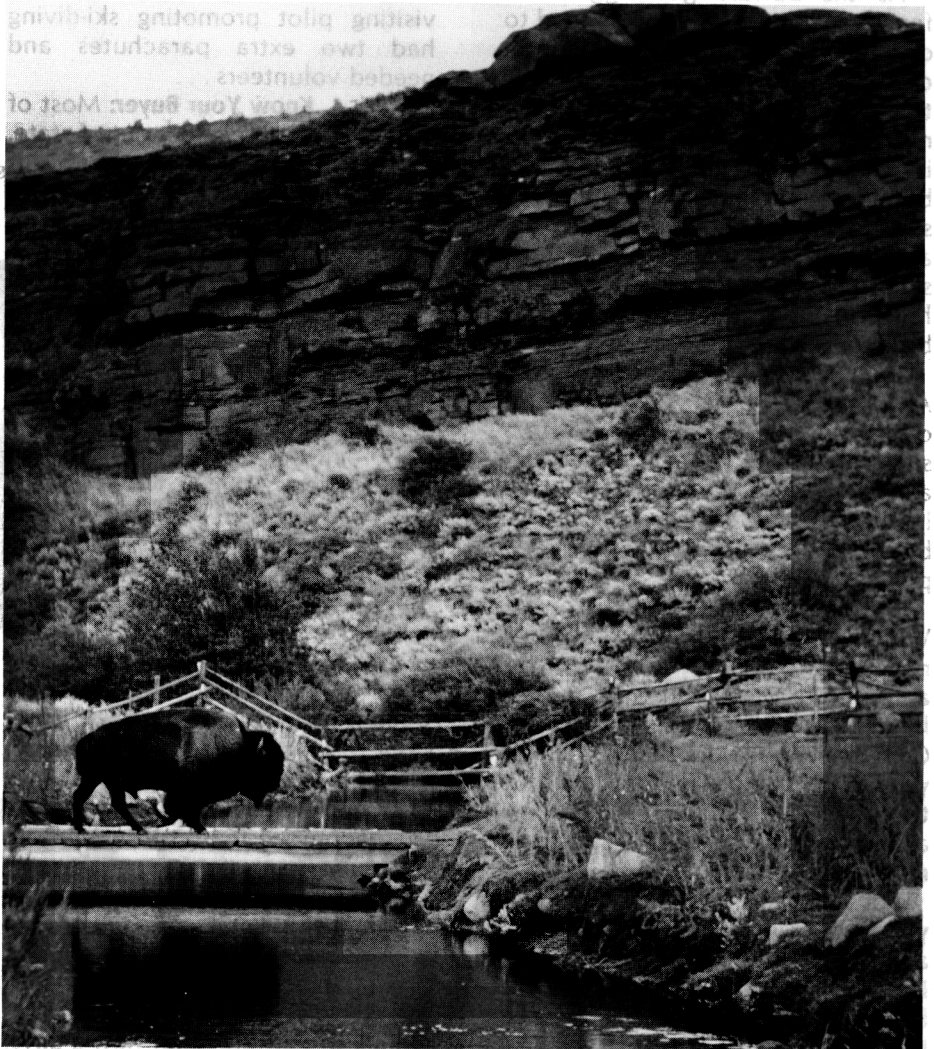
(Seven months later the owners managed to load our buffalo. The six pregnant cows turned into four cows with calves at their sides, four other females, and one bull. We adjusted our contract and paid.)

Rule 5. Buffalo Aren't Cattle: The great day. Buffalo to be loaded in the morning, then trucked 80-odd miles south to our ranch. We went up for the loading. It was so exciting that afterwards we needed a drink with the Philadelphians. Then May asked "Where's the truck?" No sign of it—apparently the driver had

already taken off. We chased after it in our old jeep, finally catching up a few miles short of the ranch.

The driver backed the truck up to my New England gate—several bars of 12-foot poles across a 10-foot opening. The buffalo jumped out of the truck and began to eat the grass in what we called the "Nursery Pasture." (Remember, the original idea had been six pregnant cows?) We slid the poles back into place, then sat on them, admiring our new animals. After two hours we were hungry. We left the herd safely fenced and went to our rented house in town for a late lunch.

When we returned for a late afternoon look, NO BUFFALO. MONSTER, the bull we'd received that morning as an unexpected bonus, had opened the gate with his horns, lifting off each pole just so. No New England cow, nor old England cow for that matter, has ever learned to do that.



THUNDER joins the others. Photo credit: Elijah Cobb, New York City

So we had our first buffalo escape the first afternoon. Fortunately, they'd stayed on the ranch, and we managed to get them back.

Rule 6. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors: As a young man I heard Robert Frost repeat his poem, and wondered at its implications. Many of us have learned that buffalo like to test fences.

After the first escape the first day, we changed the gate. For some weeks the buffalo seemed content in the small nursery pasture, but the grass kept disappearing. It seemed too soon to start feeding hay, and there was all that nearby pasture fenced with tight four-strand barbed wire by the last owner. Why not try that?

We did—and the buffalo showed us how they could jump over a wire fence. This was a skill they'd learned at the dude ranch. We got a crew to help, and hurriedly began to build more buck and pole fence right along the wire fence.

As the buffalo got bigger, the fences seemed to **shrink**. No need to describe the mutual learning process. The main thing we learned was that it was much better to have animals loose on our ranch than off visiting neighbors. After five years, our boundary fence had buck and pole, sheep wire reinforcement on top, and a high voltage electric fence inside to keep the animals from hoisting the wooden fence as they browsed.

Rule 7. Hired Hands Run Amuck: All of us need help at some time or other. We need two kinds: buffalo sitters, to check the animals if we're away overnight, and extra help for larger projects. The operation isn't big enough to need a full-time employee.

Buffalo sitters are vital for us. We've trained a variety of willing neighbors, and pay them a nominal amount for their help in order to have them protected by Workman's Compensation insurance. Once a year one or more of our children take over the ranch so we can go abroad briefly to satisfy our own roaming instincts.

For larger jobs we hire sturdy young people—often recent graduates from the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), which has its international headquarters in Lander. The basic rule of thumb still applies: one boy/one boy; two

boys/half-a-boy; three boys/no-boy-at-all. There's a variant: one boy, one girl/no-boy-at-all. If we have a boy and girl working; the best arrangement is to keep them at least half a mile apart, one over the brow of the hill so they can't even look at each other.

Part-time help needs close supervision; even then they can surprise you. One day two young men helped me put in a new cattleguard at the ranch entrance. We couldn't open up the road until 11:30, when six cars full of ladies drove in for lunch. They were due out at 2:30.

We opened the hole, started to set the frame, then took a lunch break. We drove into town in separate vehicles. When I returned, no crew, and a moat across the road. I started to shift the huge cattleguard myself. Where was the crew? A plane flew low overhead and circled, slowly. Two figures popped out, and parachutes bloomed, floating down on the neighboring ranch. Could it be? Of course! As they explained later, a visiting pilot promoting ski-diving had two extra parachutes and needed volunteers . . .

Rule 8. Know Your Buyer: Most of our breeding stock goes out-of-state, so it's unlikely we would know our buyers. But we know we have to satisfy them. This was very hard to do at first, as we were learning. Each state has different health rules, so these affect each sale.

Our ranch practice is that once an animal goes through the loading chute, it does not linger. So for holding pen tests (TB, for example, with a 72-hour recheck) we keep shippers at a pen we helped build at a local slaughter house. The buyer takes possession for cash when animals enter his truck, either at the ranch or the holding pen.

We try to put ourselves mentally in the buyer's shoes, remembering Rule 4, that he should know his seller. Often in preliminary discussions we find our needs don't match. There's nothing wrong with this—we hope our buyers will shop around. We encourage them to look before they buy.

Rule 9. If in Doubt, Innovate: When we began in 1976, there were no NBA books on buffalo management. While there was knowledge out there, it was much harder for an individual to capture than now-a-days. (Doesn't that make us sound like

"old-timers"?) So we learned a lot by trial-and-error.

At an early stage we decided to use some range cake to supplement winter hay. Then we decided to keep feeding a little cake each day, even in summer. That meant that our beat-up pickup went in to visit the buffalo each day. This was a good opportunity for us to check things, and something the buffalo sitters could do in our absence.

In time the use of cake led to an experiment with our loading chutes—couldn't animals be trained to **want** to go over the scales and through part of the chutes, then back to the nursery pasture? Yes—if they understood that there was cake in the chutes. So each year a new bunch of cows train their new calves. This is time consuming for us, but reduces hassles at shipping time.

Rule 10. Buffalo Outgrow Grass: Remember, our first strategy was to see if we could grow buffalo at all. Well, we did. Those first "six pregnant cows" multiplied. The seller called up from Africa in January 1979 and said his ranch was snowed in and almost out of feed. Could we buy ten yearling heifers? The result after a midnight delivery by full moon—eight heifers, an open 3-year-old, a pregnant cow and a young bull. We adjusted the contract and paid.

Actual numbers on the ranch moved from the initial 13 to the 20's, 30's, 40's, 50's. At one point I said, "maybe we should have 50 animals going into the calving period." We added on an unirrigated field for summer pasture. 60's, 80's, 105. Too much—the buffalo were outgrowing the grass. So we made a large sale of females for the first time.

What is our optimum carrying capacity? We don't know. When we got tired of buying hay, we leased a neighboring property's hay crop and put it up on shares. I have a suspicion that we maybe should have 50 animals going into the calving period, though we have hay for 85.

The key to the decision is the condition of the buffalo pastures. Are these being overgrazed, or are we partly noticing the effects of a seven-year drought? We're watching and learning.

MAXIM II. IF IN DOUBT, RE-MEMBER MAXIM I.