

# Ranch Review: Thistlewood Farm

## Owners--Wray and Roma Dawson--Chantilly Virginia

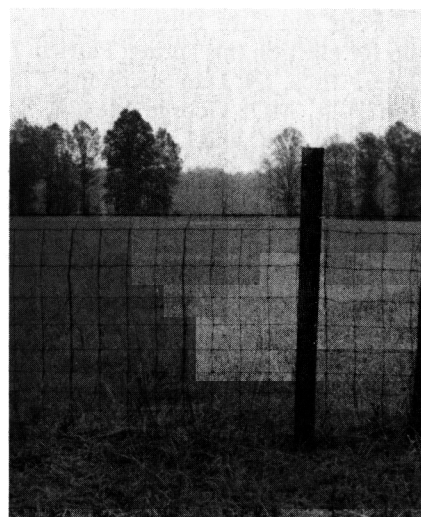
The 225 acres we call home is *Thistlewood Farm*. It is approximately 35 miles from Washington, DC and about 40 miles from the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. We bought the place in 1972 from a group of speculators that had let everything run down. The 3/4 mile lane which runs from the main road to the house was so grown over with cedar and thistle you could hardly get a car through. The barns were falling down as was the log house which was built in 1734. It took three years of tearing down and rebuilding before we were able to move into our home.

I had always been intrigued by buffalo and had tried to get any information I could on the subject. I found that very little was really available. I had checked the Department of Agriculture, the National Zoo and anywhere else I felt might be of help. I received very little. In 1973, I finally located some animals in the Valley of Virginia. I decided to fulfill my dream and purchased nine cows and a bull from Bill Neff of Harrisonburg, Virginia. After

I got into raising buffalo, I sold all the black angus cattle.

For four years we sort of did things by trial and error. Most of the time it was more error than trial. I am sure many of the buffalo people have done much the same thing. I started with the typical fence for cattle with some electric wire which I put 3 feet high and about 2 feet inside the regular fence. I attached it to metal post about every 30 feet. Needless to say it took a few days before the buffalo had that electric fence strung all over the place. Horns, feet and everything were all tangled. I have now replaced all the fence with 47-6-11 American Wire with one strand of 12 1/2 gauge barb wire. The posts are five inch creosote treated and placed about ten feet apart. I set the American Wire about ten inches off the ground.

When it came time for the decision on a corral and some handling equipment. I turned to the Thorson headgate as was advertised in "BUFFALO!" I had all sort of plans put together but was not sure of any of it. After several phone calls to my good

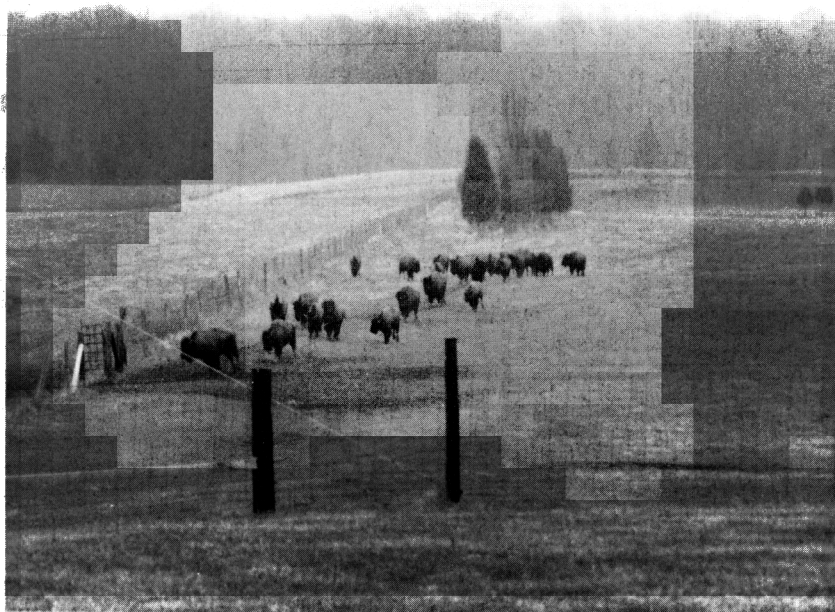


**My fence 47-6-11 American Wire with a strand of 12 1/2 gauge barb wire on top set on creosote treated post placed 10 feet apart.**

friend Charlie Tucker, I decided to visit his place in Homestead, New York. Charlie was able to give me a lot of pointers on the corral system. Since we both had about the same number of animals on the approximate same acreage, I learned that Charlie and I had a lot of the same problems with the grasses and health and our soil is very near the same. I found I needed to add vitamin A and E to my feed, as the grasses in our areas are lacking in these minerals.

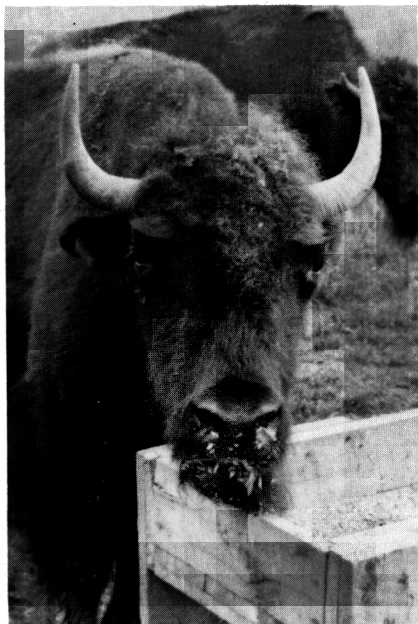
Buffalo seem to have some of the same health problems as sheep. It was also at this point I began adding the Phenothiazine with the salt. This I purchase from the Sheepmen Supply Company in Barboursville, Virginia. Information I received from Jerry Houck was also very helpful in planning my corral system. It was after attending a National Buffalo Association meeting in Pierre, South Dakota, visiting the Houck Ranch and seeing firsthand their setup, that I felt I could come home and build my corral.

The first catch pen is 150 x 150 with 4-gauge, 5-foot galvanized bull wire set one foot off the ground. I used locust posts 12 inches in diameter and 9 feet tall. In one corner, I put a gate



**Buffalo coming from the pond through the gate to get their cracked corn.**

to be operated with ropes from a distance. This gate opens into an alleyway 150 feet long which leads into the crowding alley. The entire setup is made from 9 foot telephone poles and rough cut oak. My son, Steve, and I were able to do most of the work ourselves with the help of my tractor and front end loader.



A little cracked corn keeps the animals happy and follow the tractor because they know it is goodie time.

Our first roundup did not prove to be too successful as we were using tractors with front end loaders. This process cut the animals too much. After putting about 10 animals through the headgate and getting two in the pen which were to be shipped, we had a large cow get into the alleyway and somehow get herself turned upside down. What a time we had getting her out without breaking a leg or killing her! After this experience, we did some redesigning of the corral. I also made a piece for the front end loader to cover all the sharp edges. Now they don't get hurt if they bang into it.

In the spring of 1978, we purchased 18 buffalo from the herd of Arthur Godfrey, who had his ranch near Leesburg, Virginia. We were only able to get 13 to our place alive. Godfrey had hired some cowboys to transport the animals. They had no loading facilities so turned to tranquilizing and

roping. As most all of you know that is a definite NO, NO!!! The tranquilizer was not given in the correct amount and they used the ropes around the neck.

In the buffalo business, you have to be your own entrepreneur. We are very fortunate in this area, as we get a great deal of free publicity. It seems that the novelty of our place with the truly western atmosphere of our farm which lies in the mist of the Blue Grass Hunt Country, where some of the greatest race horses in the country are raised, attracts writers.

I love the buffalo business with the many challenges it offers. We have tried many things as far as marketing the buffalo. We sell very few live animals. Mostly, we sell the meat by the half or quarter. However, we do sell a lot to individuals who either come to our place to buy or from one of the Health Food Stores and small markets that handle our meat. A lot is sold to organizations for special events. We continue to do the sampler pack which consists of eight pounds of boneless meat packed in a nice box with a cookbook then put in a

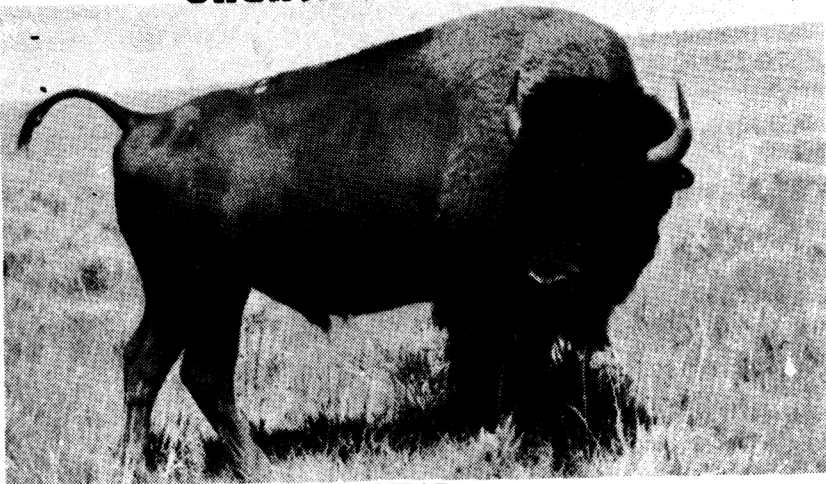
polyfoam outer box with dry ice for shipping.

We butcher mostly in December and January when the pelt is prime. There is usually always someone waiting for the skins to have made into robes. We have several Indians that take most of our skulls and hooves to use for ceremonial objects. We are also able to supply a few artist with the products they like for their work.

When we bought our first buffalo, we certainly did things by trial and error. We felt very fortunate when we discovered the National Buffalo Association. We joined and attended our first meeting in Florida in 1977. The information received then from other producers has been priceless and continues to be a great source of information. We have continued to be active in the organization hoping to help others as much as we have been helped. We enjoy visiting the different operations across the country and always welcome visits by any NBA member visiting our area. Many of our dear friends are among the members of the National Buffalo Association.

## Thistlewood Farm

### Chantilly, Virginia



#### MEAT

— Steaks, Roasts, and Ground —  
Our Specialty — 8 lb. Sampler Pack ALSO  
Hides — Heads — Skulls  
Choice Eastern Acclimated Breeding Stock

## Thistlewood Farm

Wray and Roma Dawson

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