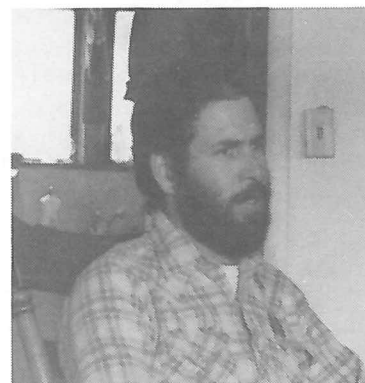


Dave Whittlesey

and the High Wire Ranch

BY Chad Huntington
and
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"I ranched cattle for the two years,
it was a losing proposition."

Many years ago there were millions of buffalo roaming the countryside. By the early 1900's the buffalo were down to just a few thousand. Now, in the 1980's, the population is rising at a very steady rate. One of the reasons for the rise of population is the increase in buffalo ranches. For our story we interviewed Dave Whittlesey of the High Wire Ranch. On the ranch there are more than 100 buffalo, 17 reindeer, and 18 llamas on 960 acres. To begin the story, we asked Dave how he got started in the business.

"My parents bought the HighWire Ranch and I bought it from them, but it's not a long term family ranch. My family didn't run it; they just rented it out to people. I've been here about 11 years. I ranched cattle for the first two years I was here, and it was just a losing proposition, so I went back to work. I made my living as a carpet layer for about six or seven years. I started buying buffalo and llamas until I had enough animals to support myself. I started out with five buffalo and one llama for about six months, then I bought a group of five and then a group of six buffalo. Plus, I've raised cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese and

turkeys, but the buffalo are my favorite. I've had them the longest. Since they're native to this country and this area, I just think there ought to be more buffalo around. There's probably 100 people in Colorado that have buffalo now. There's even one ranch in Hawaii, and there's three or four guys raising them in Alaska. There are even buffalo ranches in every province in Canada."

We asked Dave what buffalo tastes like and how hard they are to handle. "Well, it's probably halfway between elk and beef in taste. It's very lean like elk; it's the leanest meat there is. It has a flavor more like beef than anything. It doesn't have a granary flavor. It has more flavor than beef.

"Our biggest buffalo is around 2,000 pounds; he's named Boom Boom. They're getting less wild all the time. Some of the buffalo that are coming out of the national parks are pretty wild; they can be hard to handle sometimes. I won't say that my buffalo have caused trouble, but they've been out. My neighbor's cattle cause me more problems than I cause the neighbors. When they get out they come down my driveway and

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"Buffalo meat is one of the leanest meats."

get into my haystacks. We had some rented hayland that wasn't fenced, and we had problems keeping everybody else's wild cattle out of it. It's just been like that.

"When the buffalo do get out, they don't take off; they center on a place once they've calved on it. The only reason they get out is if they're out of feed or out of water. They don't tend to roam and wander all over the country except if they have a reason. If there were buffalo all over the country out here you would probably have bulls getting out trying to get in the neighbors' herds."

Dave told us some of the care-taking procedures he has to follow in raising these unique animals. "For buffalo, you need a higher fence, five or six feet tall. Your fence and your corrals have to be a lot taller and a lot heavier than with the cattle.

"The reindeer don't take any particular fencing, but because of their feed habits, you have to pay a little more attention to what you feed them. The reindeer, of course, have to have a very specific feed because of their native feed environment; you need something to substitute. They don't take a whole lot of fence. We have a specially formulated feed that we use for the reindeer that has a recipe that was developed by the University of Saskatchewan in Canada for reindeer."

We asked Dave what he does with the buffalo meat and buffalo by-products. "We always have buffalo meat for sale in our freezer. Also, we supply some specialty meat shops in Denver and some local restaurants.

"Buffalo by-products are also profitable for us. We sell skulls for around \$100. We save the hides, salt them down, and then we sell them. We get at least \$50 each, and we usually sell them at around \$100. We have some that cost \$300-\$500. It costs a lot to tan them. We sell buffalo pretty much year round. We prefer to sell more meat in

the winter because we'd rather butcher in the winter when their hides are much better.

"Summer is generally better for selling llamas. Fall and winter are usually not a good time to sell llamas. People buy a few in the winter, but, for the most part, it seems spring, summer and fall are the best. The hardest part about this business is that your market is not just right around the corner; perhaps you can't run them over to Ft. Collins to market, but it's worth your while to do so. Most ranchers spend 364½ days raising their product and half a day marketing. We probably spend one-third of our time marketing stuff. We go to Denver to find more meat outlets. We go to conventions; we haul our animals a lot of the time to different places. We take them to shows and sales, like the National Western Stock Show. We took buffalo and llamas this year. One of our female llamas placed fifth, and a buffalo bull calf placed second. I was on the buffalo show and sale committee at the National Western Stock Show



"Our biggest buffalo is around 2000 lbs."

this year. We also worked the booth at the stock show. We answer a lot of phone calls and referrals at home, and if somebody wants something, we try and help them out. If people want general information we contact the main offices in Denver and get them some literature on the animals.

"A few years ago I donated some buffalo to the Wounded Knee Community on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The idea was to try to get a little self-sufficient community going. They were trying to get a little herd going where they could butcher a couple of animals every year to supply meat for the community and use the by-products, such as skulls and bones, for traditional rituals. I got interested in this when I met an Indian from Denver; he was sponsoring this whole idea. He was trying to get the Indians to put in gardens, little poultry flocks, goats and

things like that. His idea was to provide things that would help them provide for themselves: crops, food, or industries that will grow, without throwing a bunch of money at them, and have them buying something they don't need. And a year later it's sitting out in the yard."

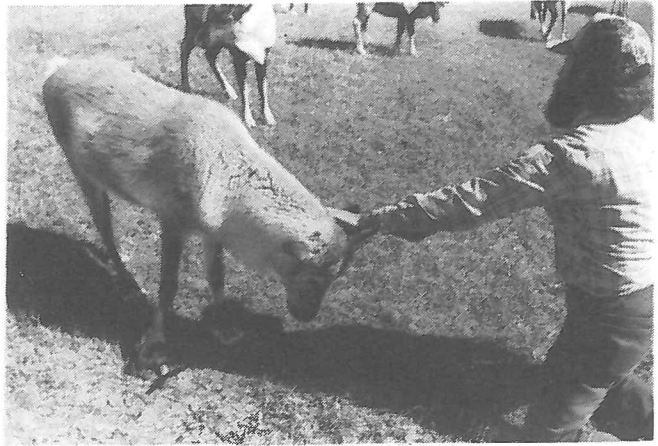
We asked Dave what he does with the offspring. "We sell the offspring; we make a living out of it. We also butcher the buffalo for meat and sell the llamas to other people for breeding stock. With the reindeer we do that, and we also do Christmas displays. We do sell buffalo for breeding stock. We usually sell our heifer calves and then keep the bulls back and butcher them.

"We caze our buffalo cows. We put out a pellet during breeding season which keeps them ovulating; it flushes them and helps them get pregnant. So we will go out there every day with a bag of pellets and spread it on the ground. The bulls get a little huffy sometimes; they want to grab it right out of your hands, and they'll snort and squeal at you, and sometimes you wonder if they are going to eat you.

"The llamas were native to real high altitudes, and they came from a real cold climate. All these animals are originally very well-adapted to our climate. The buffalo are native to this very severe climate, and the reindeer come from the Arctic zone. For the most part, the llamas have their babies in May and June. We hand breed the llamas. They're copulation induced ovulators. Their sperm will live much longer than normal. It's kind of sluggish compared to most animals. When the first vets started looking at them in this country, they didn't think they could possibly reproduce because the sperm are so slow compared to anything else. It's kind of a case where the sperm will stay in the females for days and days and stay fertile. They probably get bred over half of the time on their first breeding.



"You can walk up and pet the reindeer, that's how friendly they are."



"The reindeer are very playful."



"You can hand feed the reindeer."

If the female will not accept the male within about two minutes she's probably bred. So that's what we do; initially we'll put her back in with the males. We'll leave them together two or three days and then four or five days later we'll check them again. If they breed again we'll keep doing it until they quit breeding. Then 20-21 days after the last breeding we'll do a blood test and send it to a lab to make sure she's bred.

"The reindeer breed in September. The big bulls are very aggressive with the young ones. They spend every minute during breeding season chasing the young bulls. They get really thin, and they are still a little thin after breeding season. That's normal behavior with the reindeer.

"Our vet bills are very expensive. We probably have more vet bills than most people raising livestock. Part of it is, we feel that with the value of these animals it is worth spending more money on the vet. We do more vet work ourselves all the time as we get more familiar with each animal and the things they need. Some things, by law, such as brucellosis and tuberculosis testing, have to be done by a vet.

"One advantage we have over a lot of cattle people is we butcher all of the time, so we monitor the organs of the animals we butcher, and we can tell whether we are having parasite problems or things like that. For instance, if we



"The big bulls are very aggressive with the young bulls." buy animals, we just about always worm them, and then we quarantine them for a period of time before we turn them out, to make sure they don't have any problems. Pretty much all of the buffalo we've purchased were either tested or retested here for tuberculosis and brucellosis. We vaccinate all of our female calves for brucellosis, and we test whenever we buy or sell anything. You test the bulls for brucellosis, and in some states they require tuberculosis tests. Neither of us has veterinary background. I've taken some pre-vet classes at the college, and I've gone to some seminars and some vet shows."

Dave told us about a problem with hunters and hunting. "Somebody shot one of our buffalo cows in September. That's really the only problem I've had with hunters. Several years back we had hunters all over this place; I counted 80 people back on my fence."

One of the ways Dave helps to meet his ranch expenses is offering black powder hunts for his mature bull buffaloes. "You've got to get within range; that's one thing I did last year with one guy. I made sure he was within range before I would let him shoot. He was about 30 yards; I would want them within 50-60 yards. So that's going to take a little skill to get that close to the bull I want him to shoot. You can go out there in a truck and get in the middle of them, but as soon



"The reindeer have a specific feed they eat."

as you get out there on foot they will start moving away from you. So you do have to sneak up on them. We wouldn't sell any meat off of an animal like that. For instance, if we end up keeping some meat out of it we would just keep it ourselves. Legally we could sell it, if we sell meat in the state. In Colorado, buffalo meat doesn't have to be inspected if it's privately owned and butchered. But if it goes out of state it has to be done in a USDA plant. We do all of our butchering in a USDA plant."



"The Llamas are very curious."

Dave concluded his story with his future plans for the High Wire Ranch. "As we expand we want to diversify more, and that gives us more market potential. Zoos have already had a difficult time raising moose, and there is some demand for moose for that reason. We think we've hit on a formula for a way that we can raise moose and do it reasonably and get offspring out of them. The problem with zoos is they haven't been able to afford to feed moose because they eat so much, and they end up having to go buy food out of grocery stores. When you feed 50 pounds of produce to a moose a day, that starts adding up. We would have to build some better pens and bigger fences. We had tentatively planned to do that last summer, but we just didn't have time. We want to build an eight foot fence which is called a high tensile electric fence; it's a smooth wire which is electrified. It's super strong; you can run a car into it, and you bounce off of it."

We enjoyed interviewing Dave Whittlesey, the owner of the High Wire Ranch. His animals are not your normal everyday ranch animals. The buffalo, llamas, and reindeer are a sight to see. Dave Whittlesey is willing to give up his time to take anyone who wants to go on a tour of his ranch or to see the animals. If you do want to see the High Wire Ranch, please call first to make an appointment at 879-3987.