

**"I HAVE ALWAYS HAD A GOOD HORSE AND IT WAS MY WAY OF LIFE." WINSTON SPANGLER.**



**IT WAS LONG HOURS AND HARD WORK, BUT THE GUYS WHO STUCK IT OUT MADE IT.**

**BY LARRY BALL, ROGER MUHME, AND ROGER BEDELL**

Winston Spangler, a quiet-spoken modern day rancher and ranch manager, has been the manager of the Elk River Grazing Association for the past 15 years. His involvement with this association and his ranch management abilities seem to portray him as a new breed of western man that exemplifies the old time cowboy. A husband and a father of two boys, Winston and his family reside two miles south of Clark where they manager over 1300 acres of prime grazing land. His innovations as a rancher who freezer-brands his stock makes him a modern day cowboy. Here's his story.

"I was born in Illinois on June 25, 1912. I was a farm kid who went to school in town and not a country school. We made our own entertainment. We sledged down hills in the winter time; every kid had his own sled. There wasn't any skiing in that country, but we also did a lot of ice skating. Sometimes we skated right down the pavement to the school. There were a lot of brick streets in the country and on those old street stones we could skate right to school. We might have had to carry our skates back if the ice melted, but it was a cold country.

"I never did much skiing. I had an old pair of skis that I bought when I first came here at a farm sale. I never used them that much, except to go and scoop the snow off the stacks in the spring time.

"I grew up in a town of about 17,000 people. I went to high school in Ottawa. I didn't have time to go out for sports; I did play a little basketball, but that's all. Kids didn't get around much in those days. Not that we didn't date because we did and most of the boys ran around together. As we got older, we did more, I guess.

"I worked on a farm a lot even when we moved to town. We raised pigs and we had to feed them and the chickens. We had to carry the corn cobs and other stuff that we always hated to do. We had to take care of the horses and the cows when we were young. When we got older, we had to help milk. Everybody had to milk a few cows for their own use. Farming was a whole lot different in that country than it is here. Horses were used year 'round there, and of course, that was years ago. We grew up doing all sorts of farm work.

"My mother was an Irish woman. Her name was Ethel. My dad's name was David Spangler;

he was a Missourian. He died when I was 10 years old and I didn't really have a chance to get much advice from him. My mother had her hands full raising five boys, and we got a lot of advice from her. She was a good mother and she held us together pretty good. I had two older brothers and two younger brothers, but no sisters.



### **I HAVE ALWAYS ENJOYED THE COUNTRY LIFE.**

"My father was a farmer, and later on we moved to town and he was a mail carrier. He had a horse and a mail wagon with a little stove in it. I worked there all the time until high school, and then I moved to Colorado.

"I came to eastern Colorado first. I had an uncle who raised wheat and I worked for him for three or four years in the 30's. Then he left, and I worked for some other relations on the state line by Nebraska, south of Julesburg. It was a pretty good sized outfit. They raised a lot of cattle and a lot of wheat. I've always worked with stock and I don't remember when I wasn't with them. I have always had a good horse; it was my way of life.

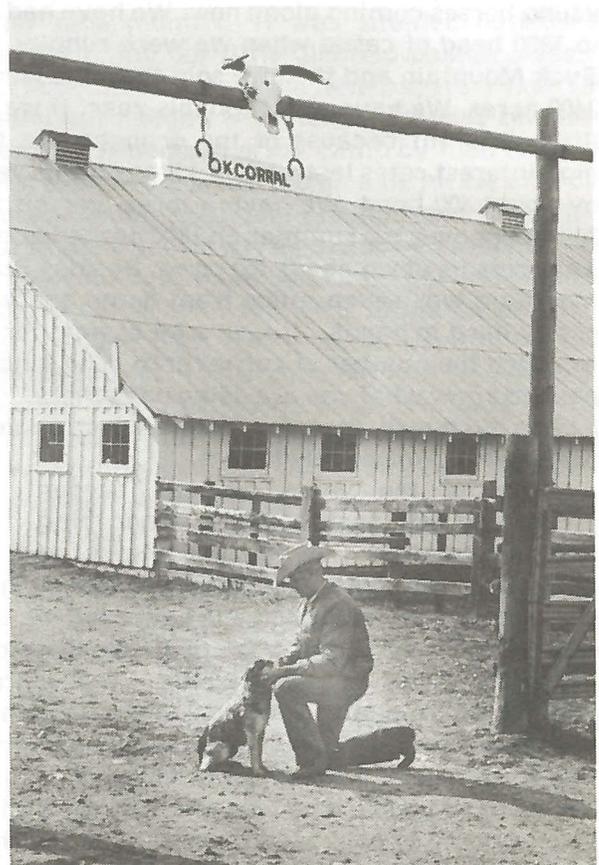
"When we first came here we ran the George Phillips' ranch at the foot of Rabbit Ears Pass and we lived there seven years. We had a few cows and sheep. Then in 1948, we moved on top of Fish Creek where the Lodwicks live now. It was the Kemmer ranch, and we lived there three years. Then in 1950, we sold out and went to Oregon. We didn't like it there so we came back to Steamboat. In 1957, I bought out Jack Arnold and went into a partnership with his dad, south of Steamboat on the highway.

Virginia and I were married in Grout, Nebraska in 1939, and we moved to Steamboat in 1942. I had a two day vacation from my job. We have two sons now, Gene and Lynn. They both went to school here in Steamboat. Lynn was born in Steamboat and Gene as born in Julesburg. Now Lynn is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, going to Bible College and Gene's ranching in Colbran, Colorado. He raises registered herefords.

"I never owned any land in Routt County. I have always leased, yet when I came here land was cheap. We never had any money to put a down payment on a ranch then, and now there is no way! We have always leased ranches and done pretty well. The partnership with Irvy Arnold for eight years helped and I have been the manager of the association for 15 years."

We asked Winston about the Grazing Association. "The association was originally started by a bunch of small ranchers that needed extra grazing pasture they could depend on from year to year. These ranchers got together and bought this place. It supplemented a program that they already had. I took over the association in 1965 when it was organized. I am the only manager they have had so they don't know if I'm good or not. I was 53 years old when I took the job. I think there are 15 members at the present time, but they are all original members. When we started there were 17 members and we have only lost two through the years.

"We had been ranching south of town a long time and then the ranch was sold. I stayed here the summer of '65 and helped get that going. In the fall we thought that we would go to Arizona, but Vernon Cook was on the Board of Directors of the Association and he was advertising for a manager. He talked me into filling out an application. I was accepted but I only told them that I would run it for a year and help them get it started. Anyway, that's what I had in mind and I



**THE OK CORRAL LIVES ON.**

am still here.

"Originally this place was put together by J.E. Barbee. Some of the old timers will remember him. I think some of these buildings were put up here in 1942. He raised Black Angus bulls and Tennessee walking horses here, and then he went to Arabians. They didn't seem to be able to stand the weather or walk here in the mountains so he went to Quarter horses and did all right.

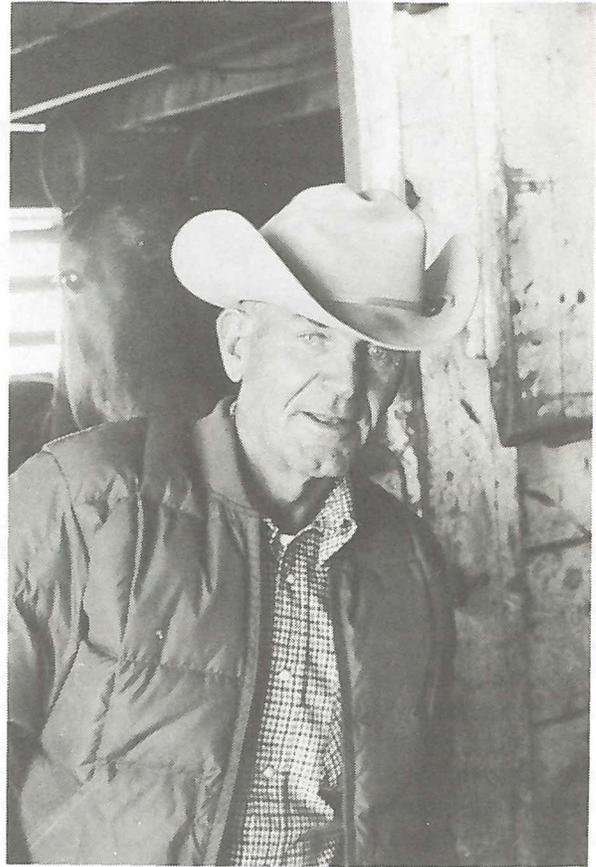
"It's a hard job with a lot of responsibilities. It was a challenge because everybody said it couldn't be done on account of too many hands in a pie. However, it has really worked out well. There are good members who are easy to get along with. I am responsible to the Board of Directors, and everything has worked out fine."

Winston continued by telling about experiences since being with the association. "Yes, I got in trouble one time with a horse. We were loading horses to go to the mountain and a horse kicked me. I spent 40 days in the hospital and six months to get over that. Norm Frentress took over and worked all fall for me. He helped get the cattle gathered and shipped. Then I came home in November, and I was up and around. We didn't have any cattle in the winter so my wife fed the horses. By the spring I was in pretty good shape.

"Today's horses have a little thorough lined in them which I think is good for running. The best horses I ever raised was old Tom. He was good any place to do anything. I have some good young horses coming along now. We have had up to 1800 head of cattle when we were running on Buck Mountain and then we sold that, the whole 2400 acres. We have about 850 this year. It was a little different because of the draught and the high interest rates last spring. I was off this year by about 400 head. We have a forest permit for 300 steers over the summer on 1300 deeded acres. That cuts us down about 400 cows. Besides Buck Mountain was seven miles from home and was pretty hard to handle. It took a lot of time for us to watch the number of cattle there. You kind of have to know what you are doing back there. You have a big bunch, then you have a few stragglers that are hard to get out of there.

"Most of the years we can account for everything; our death loss is a minor thing. This year all together I've lost two steers, and we accounted for them because we found their carcasses. I am now short one heifer but we will find her I'm sure. Here we don't winter stock except a few of my own horses. The winters don't bother me but in the spring the snow gets deep and I feed with snowmobiles. I can go over the fences in March, and go wherever I like. Today most people who feed stock in the winter, have a dozer to plow feed trails. Years ago they had to move snow with four head of horses and a scoop shovel."

We asked Win what he thought of the possibilities of a young man starting a ranch now. "The average man is just holdin' his own. The appreciation of the land is saving him. Cattle business has had its ups and downs. Through the years the Grazing Association has just about broke even. Some years we make pretty good money and other years we lost a little, but land appreciation has been a great thing for us too. I think now the ranch is about to be sold to a German family.



**WIN WITH HIS HORSE TOM.**

"I keep one steady man all summer and hire a fencer in the spring to help a little with irrigating. The members are good about helping out too. Like when we are working forest cattle I can generally get extra help. There just aren't any good cowhands; used to be I had a list of men who wanted to ride in the spring but not now. It's a little bit better than it was four or five years ago. Then I couldn't get anybody. I think that the influence of building caused that because everyone is a carpenter today. They don't like the ranch hours and being out from town. Today most young men don't know how to ranch because they haven't grown up with it. You can't take a rodeo cowboy and make a ranch hand. There is more to being a cowboy than just ridin', ropin' and havin' fun. When it gets down to hard work, that is when you weed them out."

We asked Win what it was like during the Depression. "When I first came to Colorado in the 30's, I remember the dirt storms on the wheat



### WIN REMEMBERS THE GOOD OLD DAYS.

farms. The farmers would plant one to two thousand acres of wheat and a lot of the years they couldn't even harvest an acre. The wind would blow and a lot wouldn't even sprout, but what did would get so high and then wilt. Corn was the same way. They planted dryland corn but at three or four feet it would wither. The wind from the south would blister it right through July.

"I had a good job on the Nebraska line during the Depression. I got 25 dollars a month but a lot of months I never got paid except I always got room and board. There was always somebody coming down the road that wanted a job. It was long hours and hard work, but the guys who stuck it out made it.

"I spent most of my time down by Imperial, Nebraska. In the fall I would bring all the cattle down from the sandhill to the hardland. I remember one time we started for home with a bunch of steers and we got caught in a blizzard, me and another guy. About dark we got into a little deserted ranch, put the cattle into the corral and the boss came down to pick us up. The next morning we brought the cattle home in the storm. We both froze our feet, faces and hands

pretty bad and weren't much good for a couple of weeks.

"It was all prairie and one time I got lost on horseback in a dirt storm. I only had to cross some open ground but one of them storms came up and we had to corral the cattle. We took off for home only four miles away in open country. The horses came to a stop at our fence. I recognized the woven wire so I knew I was home. We had only missed the gate by 50 feet, but we couldn't see it.

"Another time I had about 200 cows that I was herdin' and we had a spell of bad weather. When the wind didn't blow, we watered from the windmills since there weren't any creeks or lakes. The railroad came to Sterling from McCook, and they had shippin' pens at Venango, Nebraska. We took the cattle there everyday to water. We had to be there at 11 o'clock and we kept them there until one o'clock. We did that for twelve days. The wells were deep, and nobody had pump jacks or motors so it was hard times."

Win told us about the changing prices. "Steers used to bring 21 to 22 cents a pound. This year for good big yearlings, it was 75 cents per pound. Other costs have got out of line like labor, feed and repairs. Everything has increased. The price of pasture is what hurts you. 34 years ago cattle weren't worth much. In the Depression a cow could be bought for 11 or 12 dollars. Hogs were worth \$2.00 a hundred weight, and wheat was worth 25 cents a bushel. But then nobody had wheat nor corn. White gas for tractors was 10 to 12 cents a gallon and things people bought were cheap, but we didn't have much money to spend. A pair of bib overalls were a dollar, but maybe we didn't have a dollar. Today everything is higher but people seem to have money to spend. They are better off today than back then, but I don't think so.

"Our two boys went through school in Steamboat in the 50's and graduated. It seems like the town was better off then. You knew everyone. When I moved up here this road wasn't even paved. Everyone today is in a hurry; it's run, run, run."

We asked Win if branding has changed a lot. "No, not really, it's easier the way we do it now. Same old markin' the critter, getting the smoke in your eyes and the smell in your nose. I got started branding over in Eastern Colorado. We don't do it with irons. We don't have to cut wood and we don't have to keep somebody movin' the irons around. We get the irons hot anytime and it's always fun branding. Our neighbors are always there, trying to make fun of somebody if nothing else. A lot of the cattle are branded and vaccinated before we get 'em, so we might only have to do three or four hundred head.

"We don't have much of a cattle drive here as when I worked in Eastern Colorado. We used to



**THERE IS MORE TO BEING A COWBOY THEN JUST  
RID'N, ROPIN' AND HAVING FUN.**

ride four days to go to the Sand Hill pasture with the cows and calves in the spring and in the fall when we came back that was only a two day drive. We used to have a chuck wagon on an old truck. We'd have a couple of guys and a couple hundred cows and calves.

"We did a lot of riding in those Sand Hill pastures when I first came to Steamboat. And when our boys were small they rode young colts around here. The colts were easier for them and me to handle.

"We bought colts cheap, rode them around the corral and then go out and ride. A colt could be broken in just a few days, if he was gentle to start with.

"Win then told us about some of the accidents he had while ranching. "I think that everything that a horse can do to a man they have done to me. Over the years I have had a lot of broken bones and have spent time in the Denver hospital. I was thrown from the road by the Clark store, broke some ribs, split my head open, and the funny thing was there were 20 cowboys along

and nobody actually saw it happen.

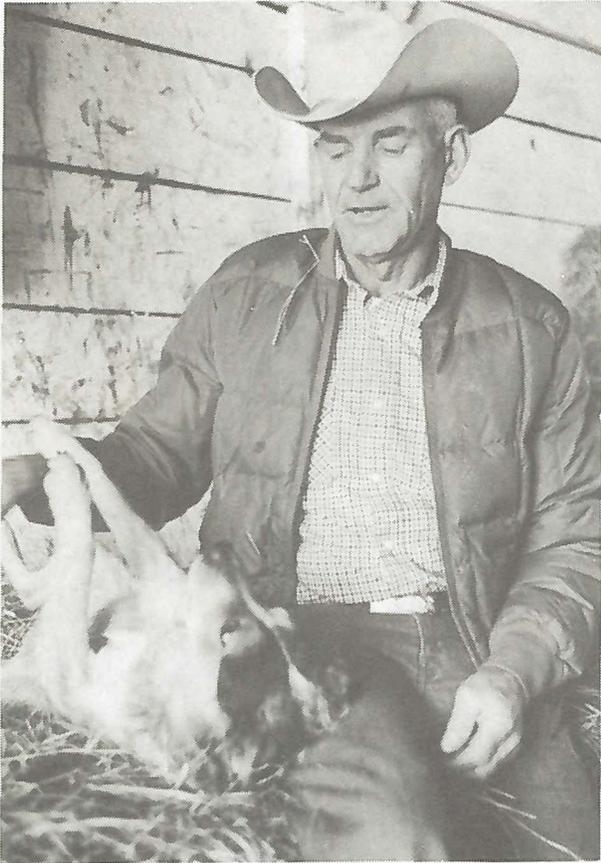
"I got jerked off a horse a couple of times, especially when I would dally. The horse often turns into the rope or goes past the steer, and the rope knocks you off the horse. Another time in the field, we were doctoring a steer. After we fixed him up and turned him loose, I got the steer between me and the horse. I should not have let that happen but he took after me and I ran for the fence. He just caught me from behind. It didn't hurt me; he just wanted me to get away.

"I freezer brand all of my horses. First I shave the hair, then I use dry ice and alcohol on the spot for about 40 seconds before branding. It doesn't hurt them as bad as the hot irons and the hair grows back white. After they have been branded, they go to the vat of disinfectant. Everything that comes to the ranch goes through into the vat where we have a toxaphene solution. It's good for almost everything: insects, lice, bugs, and ticks. It is a swim vat, and they get a pretty thorough bath. We disinfect for the biggest problem which is pink eye and foot rot. In the spring and fall we find some poison and respiratory disease. When we doctor 20 or 30 head a day we do it where we find them because we can't bring them all back to the ranch. We really don't have a lot of problems, but prevention is necessary.

"I think that we will always have some cowboys, just like the ones we have today, but they are going to be fewer and farther in between. They are being pushed back into drier country and higher mountains like in Nevada and Oregon. Cowboys here in Colorado are almost a thing of the past. In the future the only cowboy will be the rodeo cowboy. Ranches are getting smaller and the cattle are getting fewer, and cattle are handled differently today."

Win compared country life to city life. "City life today is in the country. We have a lot of conveniences, the roads are paved, we have school buses, mail, T.V. and phones. Why live in town? There are always things that we don't like, but if we had everything in life it would be boring. Life is still what we make it. I've enjoyed life, raised two kids and now we have the grand kids.

"The only change I would make would be to invest in real estate while I was young. Other than that, life has been pretty good. The trouble with life today is, it's too fast. People are always in a hurry. I think most older people today have seen life when it was rough, and I think a lot of the younger generation don't respect older people quite enough. When we were kids, we were taught to respect adults and be polite. That doesn't carry over today as much as it should. I wouldn't say kids have it easy, for the simple reason that they have too much. It isn't all their fault. A lot of kids don't have enough things to take up their time. Kids are active and they have



**WIN WITH PATCHES IN THE BARN.**

to do something but it must be channeled right. I think the only thing is for the kids to work. A full day's work for a full day's pay, and everyone will be more satisfied."

---

Since we last talked to Winston the Elk River Grazing Association has been sold. It brought approximately 1.9 million.

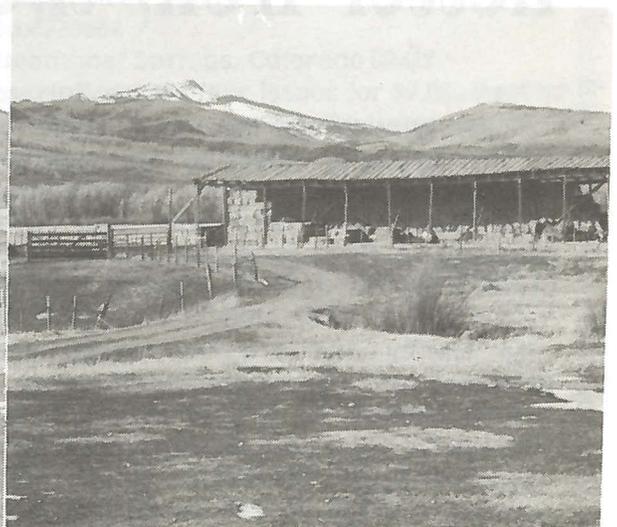
The sale took place in March, but Winston still plans on being the manager until the new owners have things under control. Winston thinks he will still be working there for the next year or so.

---

**John James Audubon:  
American Woodsman**

"He had roamed the length and breath of the American borderline with all the freedom of the wild creatures he knew so well and recorded so faithfully. He had talked with Daniel Boone. He had hunted and camped with the Indians along the frontier; he knew their ways and may have spoken their language. He had traveled by ark and keelboat with the rough rivermen of the western waterways, and he could speak their language eloquently."

**By Marshall B. Davison, 1907**



**YOU CAN'T TAKE A RODEO COWBOY AND MAKE A RANCH HAND.**