

## Flitner family sees value in ranching as a way of life

RUFFIN PREVOST Gazette Wyoming Bureau

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Carol Bell brands a calf at the Diamond Tail Ranch in Shell, Wyo. Bell is the great-granddaughter of Arthur Flitner. Ruffin Prevost/Gazette Staff

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SHELL, Wyo. — When Arthur Flitner came to Wyoming, he bought 160 acres in the Shell Valley for \$30 an acre, and 160 head of cattle for \$24 each. He began operating the Diamond Tail Ranch in 1906.

His grandson, Stan Flitner, figures the economics of ranching haven't changed much in 100 years, at least by one benchmark.

"That's still about what an acre of land is worth for ranching — around the same as what you'd pay for a cow," said Flitner.

But plenty else has changed, with the ranching business seeing cycles of boom and bust, and four new generations of Flitners working the land.

In a modern culture that both idealizes and ignores the struggles of the family rancher, the Flitners continue to do what they've done for the past century — plan for the worst, hope for the best, and work as hard as they can to leave something worthwhile for the next generation.

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The Diamond Tail ranch has grown to around 4,000 deeded acres, with about 6,000 acres of U.S. Forest Service land and 30,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management land.

Stan, 66, and his wife, Mary, 64, operate the ranch with their son, Tim Flitner. The cow and calf operation has around 340 head of cattle and 60 horses.

Though the ranch is out of debt and financially stable, getting there wasn't easy, and keeping it thriving is a constant worry for a family eager to maintain a legacy that stretches through five generations.

## **'A grinding struggle'**

"We've been broke two or three times in our lifetime," said Stan, who met his wife of 43 years while at the University of Wyoming in Laramie.

In a 2004 Christmas letter to friends, Mary recalled the grim times of the mid-1970s.

"In 1973, we had sold cattle at record highs — 73-cent calves (per pound) — and then the following year, President Nixon devalued the dollar and froze consumer beef prices," she wrote.

"Our whole industry hit the skids. The following year, our calves brought less than half — 29 cents per pound, and costs were escalating."

With the market hitting bottom, the only thing that could get worse was the Wyoming weather, which was hardly ideal to begin with.

Temperatures from November 1978 through January 1979 averaged around 15 degrees below zero. There were days when it got as cold as 50 below.

Around that time, Stan and his brother, David, who had run the ranch together, parted ways, splitting the land as fairly as they could figure. "We had different philosophies and different priorities," said Stan.

David owns The Hideout at Flitner Ranch, a guest ranch adjacent to the Diamond Tail Ranch. The split, Stan said, has turned out well for him, allowing him to focus on traditional ranching.

In her letter, Mary recalled ranching during the 1980s as a "grinding, hopeless struggle," but remembers, "We didn't believe there was anything to do but work harder and pay back what we'd borrowed. We didn't want to fail at ranching."

Key to their success, said Stan, has been adapting to changing times, and thinking beyond the two assets most ranchers typically sell to raise money — land and cattle.

Leveraging the free labor of four hard-working children, the Flitners tried everything to stay afloat: raising sheep, guiding hunters, selling electric fence equipment, breaking colts, harvesting timber from their land.

But for the Flitners, the real value of ranching goes beyond the price of a calf at market. The work is its own reward, and the way of life is worth more than any wages or dividends.

"To me, there's nothing more efficient than a cow's stomach," said Stan. "What a miracle, to look at that land and know a cow can turn it into protein. Something where you can take your wife out for a steak and make your stomach feel happy. That's a miracle."

When asked why he sticks with the business through the financial stress and family strain, Stan struggled for the right words, and then simply gestured at the Bighorn Mountains outside his living room window.

"Just look," he said, overcome with emotion.

## **A way of life**

"They believe in the importance of agriculture in the world, and not just for the obvious reasons," said Carol Bell, Stan and Mary's oldest child, who lives in Cody, but still sometimes helps at the ranch.

"It's a rewarding way of life in a world where many jobs are not that meaningful," said Bell.

"It's still a big deal for me to go and help out whenever I can," she said. "And I enjoy being around my family."

Many ranchers in the Shell Valley still help each other with chores like branding or putting up hay, showing cooperation among competitors unseen in most other businesses.

"It's a way of life that depends on your kids and grandkids working with you, and also on your neighbors and the community helping out," said Bell.

On a beautiful Saturday in April, around 50 friends and neighbors stopped by the Diamond Tail Ranch, many to help brand calves, others to serve food, chat or just catch up after a long winter.

"That work would have taken us two weeks to do by ourselves," said Mary.

After a hearty lunch with dishes brought by dozens of people, many of the hands spent the afternoon helping another neighbor with his branding.

With fewer families ranching, things get harder on those left in the business, said Stan. "It's a diminishing culture, and that's not good," he said.

"When there were more ranches, there were more people in the community with like objectives," said Mary.

Saving that culture requires that ranchers be involved and active in their communities, said Stan, working to convince everyone from environmentalists to government administrators of the value in ranching.

Stan is a past president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, and Mary has served on the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission. Stan's father, Howard, served in the state Senate.

Partnering with some environmental groups when possible makes sense, said Stan. Being open to new ideas about ranching is also important.

Stan has spent countless hours working to restore an oxbow along the creek near his home, and even more time creating new wetlands in adjacent areas.

"We had been trying to drain this for three generations," said Stan. "But it doesn't always make sense farming fencepost to fencepost.

"I started worrying when I stopped seeing the frogs," he said. "I figure if a frog can't swim in it, I don't want my cattle drinking it."

Stan revels in wandering through some 15 acres of marshy bottomland of his own creation, and ticks off a list of once rare or never-seen animals now found there in abundance, including foxes, moose, geese, sandhill cranes, turkeys and blue herons.

## Privileges of seniority

As Stan finishes his wetlands tour, his son, Tim, arrives, frustrated by the latest problem in running a sprawling and complex ranch. A 75-foot culvert is clogged, making irrigation impossible until it is cleared.

While Tim is anxious that the week's already tight schedule will be thrown off, Stan is sanguine, sure the issue can be resolved without much trouble.

"We've got a pretty good deal around here now, me and Mary," Stan said with a smile. "Tim handles a lot of the heavy load, and we're old enough to where we get to holler. It just keeps getting better."

Stan has high hopes that his 16-year-old grandson, Luke Bell, will become the fifth generation to run the Diamond Tail Ranch, and Tim will enjoy the same privileges of seniority some day.

"Luke's got a gift for this. He'd be a good rancher if he wants to," said Stan.

"I enjoy working there," said Luke, who attends high school in Cody but spends summers and most weekends at the ranch. "I like spending time with my grandfather and uncle and everybody.

"I like the horses the best. If I could, I'd spend all day with them," he said. "But I'm usually the one who has to do all the stuff no one else wants to do.

"Sometimes I feel a little pressure, and I wonder if this is what I want to do," said Luke, mindful of the family legacy. "But other times I'm sure I want to do it."

Luke said he might pursue a college degree in business to help in running the ranch someday. But it's the outdoor life that appeals to him most.

"I love the place," he said. "I'd like to take it over, so I'm hopeful that works out for me."

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