Financing, Family Ranching, Traditions

Bob Bunker

"From my dad," says Kent Radcliff, "I learned the finance, the administrative situations connected with the ranch, like how to deal with people and how to hire and fire. Firing me is the hardest thing anybody ever has to do. When you walk up to a man you are going to fire with his wife and two kids standing on the porch and say, 'Man—it's all over with—here's the severance check and write when you get work.' That's worse than shooting a horse. I learned that from my dad, but I still haven't learned all about it."

"From my Uncle Billy I learned in 6 years what I needed to know about the mechanics of running a cowherd—more than everything I read in 4 years of college. Then there's my uncle's son-in-law, Clarence Brazle. The two of them taught me almost everything I know about grass and putting up hay. Clarence taught me all about farming—when to plant alfalfa, what kind of fertilizer to use, and how to build a tight fence. I hate fencing, but they sure are pretty when they're done right. I tried hard to remember what I learned from those 3 guys.

"Now, I have 3 sons and a daughter and I'm just 1 guy; I must disseminate all this knowledge out to them. I've got to teach them how to finance a deal, how to put a cattle deal together. If a guy sends you a sorry load of calves, what recourse do you have, without being nasty? Just say, 'Sorry, we can't do business anymore because you know what you are doing? You're spending my money but you're not giving me what I'm paying for.'

"I've been teaching my oldest son that this is not a 'laid back' operation. There are some days you can lay back and there are other days when you better hit it 14-16 hours or your're never going to get done. But when he gets kinda laid back, starts showing up about 8:30, I say, 'Hey, summertime, that ain't going to get it.' He says, 'What about wintertime?' And I say, 'That ain't going to get it either. This isn't a vacation down here.'"

THE CONVERSATION SPURS Radcliff's memory of a warning he got from his father about ranching. "I remember one night we were driving to Wichita. It was dark and we were just sitting there riding along. I was 15. He asked me what I wanted to do. I said, 'Well, what I've always wanted to do—run your ranch.' He just laughed at me and said, 'That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You can't make any money doing this. Why don't you make records, sing on the radio or something? You know, go where the money is.' I said, 'No, I don't want to do that.' He didn't think that I REALLY WANTED to ranch."

Surely there are days when the decisions that have to be made, the gamble, the stress, just pile up and make a rancher think of selling out? Maybe just hire on somewhere as a cowboy? "Oh, there are days," says Radcliff. "Like yesterday."

"I came in and said to my wife, Paula, 'What the hell am I doing out here?' But then, I'd probably just buy another ranch. I'd be in the cow business somewhere. I don't know, but I couldn't sell it. It's been in the family for so long, I'd hate to be the SOB who got rid of it. But there is a lot of sentiment involved in the whole operation. And then there are times when you must get plumb divorced from it and get practical. Then you got to say, 'Well, old Freck and Lop Ear and all the rest, you have to go.' Old Ruthless strikes again. Tradition and family history is there, and I'd hate to be the guy who was so stupid he lost it all. Nobody likes to have a label; I wanted..."
to do this ever since I was high enough to remember what it looked like."

KENT SAYS HE HAS BEEN trying to give his son, Byron, an accurate view of ranching and some preparation for it. "B.J. (Byron) went to college, but didn't like it," he says. "He came back here and said, 'What I want to do is get a piece of this ranch.' I asked him what he was willing to pay for it and then told him it was going to take between $25,000 and $50,000 just to get in. He said, 'What do I get, a piece of the stock?' 'No,' I said, 'you get 50 steers out there and you learn how to feed them. You learn how to brand, fix fence and every thing else. You get out there and freeze in the winter-time and sweat in the summertime, and hope, like I do, that they will make you enough money so you can get by until next year. If you do good at it, we'll see what else comes up.'

"I told him I would give him the opportunity—only. 'You go to the bank and get your own money and buy your steers, and I'll provide you the grass at my cost. Then, you can feed them this winter and worry over the ones that die and what that percent death loss is going to do to you. You can worry about the cancer eye, the moon eye and you can worry right along with me when that buyer shows up. You can sit in the truck and sweat right there with me about what that guy is going to do.'

"Well, B.J. was tickled to death, 'till the price came. I said, 'Well, it looks like you are going to be in for around $25,000 to start.' 'Wow! That's a lot of dough,' he said. I said, 'Well, you pay your money and take your chances. Fifty steers is a nice figure to start with. If you lose on them, it won't be much. And if you make it, you won't make much, but you'll have the experience. At least you'll know whether you want to continue in this line of work.'

"Of course, in the process, he's working for me, drawing wages. I'm paying him what he's worth. He is mechanically minded and is working on the equipment a lot.

"I TOLD HIM, THE ONLY WAY he was going to learn how to run a ranch was to get out there and do all the uninteresting and dirty jobs, like mowing weeds around the road, fixing brace posts that are falling down, cutting down trees that are on fence line, etc. I said, 'All the unpleasant and dirty jobs you have ever thought of, you're going to get to do.' Because, like my father told me, 'You'll never learn how to run a crew until you go out there and do it yourself. Then you'll know what you're doing. And if they are doing it wrong, you'll know it.' So, I think now B.J. is getting his college education. He is also working under the guidance and supervision of my foreman, Melvin Young, who is a good cowman."

Management of the ranch is different, Kent says, from the way it was when his father held the reins. For one thing, the ranch itself is different. It's smaller, 6,000 acres smaller. We called it the East ranch and I didn't sell that place because I wanted to. When my dad died, I had to sell it or something to pay the inheritance tax. A lot of it was capital gains; that's the government for you. That's what I paid them to stay here. If you want to watch me turn red, I'll talk more on the subject..."

ANOTHER HOT SUBJECT, the Prairie National Park, ranks this rancher. "I can't fault the park people for trying to get a park," he says. "But their prime motive is to preserve what it used to look like. They will never achieve it. First of all they want too much. And second, they'll never be able to return it to its pristine state, as they say, because they won't

burn it. So, in about five years, they're going to wonder where all the hedge trees came from. Then, the only way they're going to get it in pristine state is with a chain saw. But they say, 'Well, we can't go out there with anything mechanical that burns gasoline.'

"They'll never get what they want, but they'll cost us dearly to try. Now, they have adopted the attitude—the public and ranchers be damned! They say, 'We're going to get that park if it's the last thing we do in our lifetime. We're going to have a park.' Well, I'm the same the other way. The last thing they're going to get is a park in my lifetime."

"The idea of it being the 'people's land' is real fine if you don't mind having Brezhenev for president. Their arguments are 100% Mom, apple pie, flag and for the people and all that stuff and then all of a sudden you get to thinking about it and say, 'Yow! But you're confiscating private property in the legal sense and it's private and has been paid for with U.S. dollars and it's been earned. It hasn't been stolen at auction or anything like that. That the people who have the land have acquired it by sweat and that you want to take it away without any effort and tell them to go find another line of work.

"THE MOOD OF THE COUNTRY has changed. The population has changed. Hardee's is selling fish sandwiches and McDonald's is selling chicken sandwiches. The cost of living and doing business have gone up. It's the cost of starting this ranch up on the first day of January and what you end up paying for it on the last day of December. It's totally different from what my dad was running.

"On January the first, with the cowherd, I figured my cost per cow at $475. That's to walk up the first day of the year and turn the key on the gate and say, 'Okay, boys, let's go with feeding cattle. Let's fix some fence. Let's put up some hay. I'll pay you X amount of dollars a month. I'll furnish your house, I'll furnish some beef. You know, the bottom line cost for the whole year applicable to one cow will be $475. I have 508 of them.'"

Radcliff says his father believed as he does, that a person or a ranch is always progressing or falling behind—never remaining in one place. "But Dad's rate of progress was slow, conscientious, deliberate. He didn't make radical changes,

Records, carrying capacities, and modern decision making tools are all important to Radcliff. He knows what his calves weigh at weaning and the daily gain on his steers as does any rancher. But he also can tell you what the carrying capacity of each pasture is based on an evaluation of the range resource.
He would have taken more like 10 years to make the changes I've made in 6."

Farming on the ranch consists of 200 acres each of brome and alfalfa and 400 acres of prairie hay. "What we do is rotate the alfalfa to brome about every 10 years," says Radcliff. "When the alfalfa starts going to grass, we sow it to brome and take part of the brome up and put it to alfalfa."

PASTURES, TOO, ARE ROTATED. Not in the usual way, however. The Radcliffs tried rotating cows some 10 years ago in a pasture that already had a crossfence in it. It worked. The successful experiment spurred Radcliff's enthusiasm for building crossfences in other pastures. "That's when Clinton Owensby (Kansas State University) and Carroll Lange (Kansas Fish and Game Commission) showed up. They said, 'We'll teach you how to rotate those pastures with a matchbook. We'll show you how to burn and not make a mess of it, so it won't be dangerous to your neighbors. With the right back fire on the right day and with the right equipment, we'll go out there and burn. That way you can utilize all of the pastures all year around and still achieve the results.'"

"Well, it worked. That impressed me more than spending all that money building crossfences and spending all that time on horseback, moving the cows 3 months here and 6 months there and then 3 months back, etc."

Radcliff says the burn causes the cows to rotate around the pasture just like the early intensive steers. He also believes it increases the pounds of grass taken off the pasture. "I proved that to my satisfaction on the steer program," he says.

"I try to maintain an attitude of harvesting the grass instead of raising beef. It's how many pounds of grass can I get. That's my crop—grass. Some guys harvest wheat; I harvest grass. I sell it through the cow or calf. I watch the grass instead of the cows, so to speak."

MOST OF THE RANCHERS SCS District Conservationist Jeff Hart has helped with their grazing systems have been able to rotate pastures without additional fencing. The pastures don't have to be the same size. If one is twice as big as another, the cows can be left twice as long in the larger one. "I have to take a hard look at a guy's pasture before I suggest he put in miles of fences and a bunch of ponds so he can rotate his grass," says Hart, "because in some cases, he's never going to recover that cost."

"I'm still working on Kent. In some areas, I think he should be using rotation in combination with burning." By stocking more cows in a pasture and leaving them for less than the normal grazing season, distribution is improved, according to Hart, because the cows are forced to different areas of the pasture. In addition, removing them early permits the grass to rest and build up its carbohydrate root reserves.

Hart explains how the burning Kent does improves distribution. He says the areas in the pasture that are grazed down close this year probably won't have enough fuel or carryover grass to carry a fire next year. But those areas that are not grazed this year will have plenty of fuel, will burn off, come up lush and cause the cattle to shift from the area they concentrated on this year. They flip-flop back and forth from area to area from year to year.

Radcliff does a real conscientious job of stocking his pastures, according to Hart. Soil surveys and range site information are considered in setting his stocking rates. Kent apparently sticks to them religiously.

"I think he's more concerned about the land than most ranchers," says Hart. "Plus he's spent time with a pencil and realized that he can make more money with proper grazing. He's not putting on as many cattle as he could get by with, but he's got more grass that's in a better condition. So, in the long run, he's coming out ahead."

MEANWHILE, WEANING weights of Radcliff calves are increasing. He recalls they averaged 485 to 500 pounds for fall steer calves 5 years ago. This year's crop (1981) weighed 647 pounds. Grass management was not the only reason for the increase. Breeding helped too.

It was a banker, according to Radcliff, who was partly responsible for the ranch running both spring and fall calving herds. "Sometimes you sit down with your banker and he says you've got to have the volume in order to get the money. Cow numbers for collateral.

"ANYWAY, RATHER THAN CULL off some real good fall cows because they missed a calf, I wrote those off as mistakes and kept them. Some people are going to say that's pretty crazy, but I was pretty choosy about the cows. The decision to do it was when cows were costing $115 a year to keep. I figured I could absorb the $8.34 a month that it would cost me to keep her until she got rebred four months later in a spring situation. Okay, I'm still talking about a year away from a calf, or maybe 13-14 months. But back then, I figured I could absorb the cost. It probably hurt but isn't noticeable now. I kept my numbers up and made my banker happy and I got me a spring cowherd; now I have spring calf replacements and fall calf replacements. Probably the most important thing now is that I market 3 or 4 times a year. I'll market heavy and light springs and heavy and light falls.

"Everybody that you're buying from kind of expects to have their money in 30 days; it's a traditional approach to paying bills. If you don't have any income coming in, then you have to go to the bank and borrow. You're borrowing at 18% and paying this guy $2,000 for twine and paying the gas man $1,500 for a load of diesel. They are not going to carry you for 12 months. You have to keep those people happy or you don't get to do business. But in order to keep them happy, if you market only one time a year, you must borrow the whole amount and then hope that they bring in enough
income to pay off the loan. If it’s at 18% to 20%, you have a world of hurt coming. With steers, it’s a one time shot, but it’s another opportunity to get in the market place and get some of that money."

SOME PEOPLE ARGUE that a spring calving cow is cheaper to keep than the fall variety. And Radcliff believes most of the ranchers in Cowley County, where he lives, are spring calvers. "Their theory is that keeping the cow through the winter doesn’t cost as much because all you have to maintain is the cow."

Despite the trend, Kent’s father operated a fall calving herd. "His theory was even though he spent maybe a little bit more in the wintertime to maintain the lactating cow and the calf, he made it back on the calf when it hit that April grass," Kent explains. "By then, he calves are 4-5 months old and their digestive systems are pretty well intact and ready to go. They were with the cows, but what grass they did eat was lush and they made good gains.

"I’ve never had any spring calves that would match weights with my fall calves at the same age. Fall calves are able to participate in the early grass, whereas the spring calf is just there. He just got there. He didn’t know grass from butterflies. And it takes him almost until the end of the growing season to figure out what he’s supposed to be doing out there. Our spring calves always go off at least 150 to 175 pounds lighter than our fall calves. Our spring calves are born in February and March and sell in October and November at 9 months of age. Fall calves come in September and sell the last of July weighing 600 to 650 pounds. The springs, at the same age, will come off from 475 up to 550."

THE STOCKING RATE for each pasture is now calculated scientifically, according to Radcliff. It may be 14 acres per head for one pasture, but only 8 acres per head for the one across the road. He is amused that the various rates for the 11 pastures average out to 10 acres per head. "That’s just what the old timers have always used as an average," he explains. "But instead of carrying 100 cows in that 1,000-acre pasture east of the house, we have only 88 head in it, based on this scientific application of the stocking rates. Whatever I’ve lost in numbers in one pasture, I’m able to make up another pasture, based on soil type. Soil types tells you where your grass production is."

Hart points out that each type of soil has a “range site” that’s peculiar to it. A range site is the particular plant group that will grow on a certain soil. "Let’s say a soil has a range site of Loamy Upland," says the conservationist. "There, you’ll find maybe 30% big bluestem, 20% Indiangrass, 10% switchgrass, etc. Then on another range site, you may find more little bluestem, less big bluestem, more sideoats grama, etc." He says that with such facts, you can look at a soils map of the ranch and know what kind of plants, and in what proportion, normally grows there. By determining how many acres of the different range sites a pasture contains and using each site’s capability in animal units, you can determine how many cattle that pasture will support.

November is a good time to size up a pasture, according to Radcliff. "If it’s in what they call high good or low excellent," he points out, "you can go out there in November and see reds and browns and golds. If your pasture is in poor shape and you’ve got weeds and cheat, you’ll see a pale yellow color. If it’s a bland yellow or almost white, then you might have silver-beard or silver crest bluestem. It’s an invader and a bitter grass. Cows won’t eat it even though it is a bluestem. "But if you go out there and you have nice reds and brown hues and golden hues, then you have got yourself bluestem and Indiangrasses, because that’s the seedheads. That’s where you get your color. You can drive through the countryside in November and tell who is taking care of their pastures."

Kent welcomes the opportunity to play a part in the rebirth of native grassland. Last spring he seeded 50 acres to big bluestem and Indiangrass. The area was an old crop field with thin soil and he thought it should be back in grass.

"There are people today who will still go up these hills and put in a wheat crop," says the rancher. "It isn’t worth it. It won’t pay. Crops should be down in the creek bottoms. After you have plowed the hill up and decided it was mistake and then put it back into grass, it will be 5 years or longer before it comes back.

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**Time to Plan for Convention Exhibits**

Noel Marsh, exhibits chairman for the 1983 SRM convention in Albuquerque, is asking all firms and organizations with plans for exhibits to communicate with him no later than January 15, 1983.

Mail for Marsh may be sent in care of the Albuquerque Area Office, Bureau of Indian Affairs, P.O. Box 8327, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87174.

For the information of the exhibitors Marsh listed the following points:

- **$100 charge for commercial exhibit booths.** Make checks payable to SRM Annual Meeting 1983 and mail to Marsh.
- **Booths are 10X10 feet and include a table, two chairs and 7X44-inch sign.**
- **No space for outdoor exhibits or large equipment.**
- **Those pre-shipping exhibits may contact Disco Display, Inc., 3123 Central Ave., NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87106.** The firm will receive exhibits and take them to the Hilton Inn for $15 per hundred pounds.
- **Security will be the responsibility of the exhibitors. Services are available collectively or individually through the Burns International Security Services, Inc., 2121 San Mateo Blvd., NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87110, (505) 265-8806.**