

From a Housewife to Range Manager

Belle Frasier

Our sandhill ranch was a family operation with my husband Wilber making the major decisions. We were close, as are nearly all ranching couples. We were together 24 hours a day. He didn't pack a lunch and leave for the day. Together we fixed windmills, made fence, painted buildings, bought and sold cattle. We even shared hobbies, or worked at them simultaneously. While I quilted, he painted. We designed personalized Christmas cards, using photos of his oil paintings. Together we played a great part in the revival of square and folk dancing that swept the country over 30 years ago. Wilber became one of the best callers in southwest Nebraska.

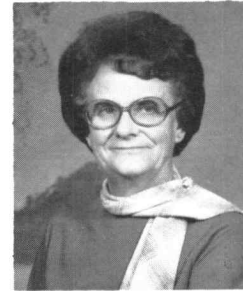
Over the years I served as advisor to and confidant of my husband. Our operation as a "separate but equal" business arrangement that could be proved as being mine in "more than name only" began in our early years together. With a \$900 inheritance from an uncle I slowly began to build my own business. I remember well that first year I bought 9 head of yearling heifers, mortgaged them at the bank, and bought 10 more. When they sold, I doubled my money. I was off and running! I remember, too, how we laughed together because the sales ticket listed the purchaser as "Belle"—my not-so-often-used name. No other was necessary. In successive years I bought more and more, keeping them separate and branding on the shoulder—not the hip and side as Wilber had done.

But then came one fateful day in March 1975. It was not the first time that a prairie fire had swept across the pastures, but it was the first time that one had raced with dead aim on our home. Only the valiant head-on efforts of the Rural Fire Department saved our buildings. As in the past, we were thankful that no one had been hurt. However, it was thought necessary that Wilber go to the hospital. He had collapsed from smoke inhalation and had been treated by the resuscitation unit.

His last look backward as he left his beloved home was a sad one. The fury of the fire had subsided but the area of charred grass came within 100 yards of the house. It was a scene of desolation. Fences were down, rows of firebreaks were running without seeming pattern, wisps of smoke showed where cowchips were still burning embers. The fire trucks left, but clumps of neighbors and friends were still assessing the damage and shaking their heads at the tragedy of a prairie fire on a windy March day when the grass was crackling dry.

Early in the morning of the second day in the hospital Wilber passed away. Such things happen all the time; but this could not be—this was Wilber and I needed him.

Almost before I knew it the funeral was over; the children and grandchildren had gone home and I was faced with putting the pieces back together. I knew there was nothing



Bentz Studio Photo

Belle Frasier

worse than being a rancher without grass. Take care of the grass and it will take care of you. So fences would be needed to separate the burned area from the other pastures to give the new growth a start—cattle prefer the tender shoots and would not give it a chance. Planned for, but not yet purchased yearlings for the pastures had to be bought. I was helped in this by my brother-in-law, C.O. Frasier, who went with me to sales and helped buy the necessary stock. After that they had to be branded, vaccinated, and dehorned. That was a one-time operation, and I have branded hundreds of head before, but the surveillance and treating of sick ones lasted for weeks.

There were the usual unexpected minor crises—one day I noticed a heifer with two complete loops of wire drawn tightly around its ankle, cutting into the flesh to the bone. I



The prairie fire that caused the death of Wilber Frasier.

Belle lives on 4W Ranch, Parks Neb.

Editor's Note: Congratulations to the author, mother of the editor-to-be, for a job well done.

knew it would probably cause the foot to drop off. To catch and throw it with a horse would have been simple for Wilber who could rope scores of calves by the head or heels without a miss. My hired man and I had to do the job with a pickup. This meant a frantic chase around and around, back and forth over ruts and with many missed loops. Finally, we made a catch, then had to throw the critter by brute force. I was knocked down and began to wonder if it was worth it. Since then I have had a horse run away with me, stumble, and throw me over its head. There were to be other mishaps.

Even more difficult was my having to re-adjust the loan from the Production Credit Association (PCA). It was a touchy arrangement, since the previous year had been a financial disaster—we had dropped around \$40,000 on our cattle operation when the bottom fell out of the cattle price. The PCA was very helpful, but it was suggested that the following fall they would probably have to rewrite the paper to mortgage the ranch again. I am proud to say that was not necessary; the cattle that year showed a substantial profit.

For several years I continued to buy stock heifers in the spring, run them on grass all summer, and sell them in the fall. That made it possible for me to go, worry free, to visit my children and grandchildren in the winter.

Four years after the loan re-adjustment I installed two center pivot irrigation systems covering 360 acres. The resulting big corn crops have been miracles. My brother-in-law, C.O. Frasier, oversees the actual farming operation.

Only a widow who has been left as I was knows the turmoil of settling an estate. I had a very good lawyer who gave me great confidence. We discussed every aspect of the case and he recommended we file a wrongful death suit. The fire was a result of carelessness when some workmen on a neighboring ranch, installing a center pivot irrigation system in an old field of waist-high grass, started a welder at a time when fire danger signals were out, all vegetation was crackling dry, and a high wind was blowing. I had three lawsuits before I finished. It did not bring Wilber back, but it helped with the estate taxes.

I had had a feeling of despair for a while because Wilber's premature death had come before we were able to arrange an orderly transfer of property to future heirs. We had been considering forming a family corporation to insure an orderly transition to heirs when we were gone and to save on estate taxes. I went ahead with our plans and since June 1st, 1979 have operated as FRASIER's Inc.. I can not ever be sure what will happen when I am gone, but at least it should not be necessary to sell the place to pay the inheritance taxes. I started "gifting" shares of stock to my children and grandchildren so now they all own substantial shares of Corporation stock. I sincerely hope they all continue to be pleased with this arrangement.

The figuring of the estate taxes by the Internal Revenue Service was simplified greatly by the fact that I had a complete record, correct to the penny, of my venture since it started with \$900. It showed that I had bought and sold, kept my cattle separate, and helped on farm expenses. I had even bought an additional 80 acres of land that Wilber had insisted be in my name only. He had been proud of it all.

I heartily recommend that other ranch wives keep similar records of their contributions. Of even greater importance, participate in the operations at least to the extent of knowing the state of the business.



The author branding cattle.

It was such a relief to have my lawyer tell me that everything we had done for several years facilitated the transfer of the estate with minimum taxes. He said it was almost as though we had anticipated the crisis and planned for the best way to meet it. Everyone knows that the next time, when ownership of the family ranches passes to succeeding generations, will be much more traumatic, but I have found wonderful peace of mind in knowing that everything is progressing in an orderly fashion.

I continue to learn. As I mentioned before, there is nothing worse than being a rancher without grass. Take care of the grass and it will take care of you. Learning about grass seems to be a continuous learning experience. Suddenly last summer I noticed with great surprise that a hill that had not been pastured for 40 years had an enormous growth of sagebrush—much thicker and heavier than across the fence in the pasture. It amazed me—it was a direct antithesis of what I had been led to believe. I discussed this with my brother-in-law, Kenneth Frasier. He said he was equally surprised this summer to find more grass in the pasture he used than in one he'd let lay idle—that one had a growth of weeds. I am sure there are many more interesting things to learn.

It will be 48 years this spring since I was married and moved to a sandhill ranch in southwestern Nebraska. With the exception of two years when my husband and I owned a ranch in the Colorado mountains, now the site of the Vail golf course, this has been my life. It has been a life with a good many hardships, but also one of a lot of satisfaction. I am always glad to get back here after a trip to the hurly-burly of California or other places congested with people. Here I can find places out in the pastures where no fence is in sight and see the country as it has been since the beginning of time.