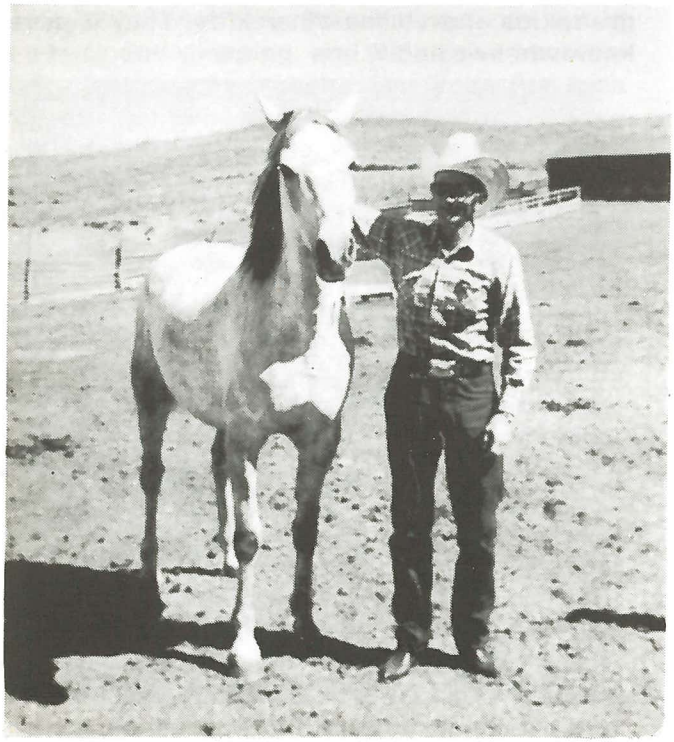
"A PERSON REALLY HAS TO LIKE RANCHING TO DO IT."

DUANE ACORD

"YOU DON'T DO IT FOR THE MONEY OR THE GLORY."

RUSSELL CRAWFORD



BY MARK BANGS
DAVID HUDSPETH

"Opportunity Was Better Then, Than It Is Now"

We chose to do a story on ranching, first from the standpoint of a man who owns a ranch, and second from the viewpoint of a ranch hand. We wanted to know how ranching used to be and how it is now. We also were interested in what the jobs were in a present day operation. Our story is about Duane Acord, a ranch owner south of Yampa, and Russell Crawford, a ranch hand in the same area for over thirty years.

Duane Acord

Duane has been ranching all of his life and has owned his ranch near Yampa since 1966. He starts this story from the beginning. "I was born November 29, 1935, on the upper end of the Williams Fork. There were several of us in the family and we all got up at 6:00 a.m. for breakfast together. We always had pancakes and eggs. Before we left for school at 7:30, we had to milk the cows and gather firewood. It was four miles to school and we walked, skied, or rode horseback to get there. We skied an awful lot in them days and dad made all of our skis until we got older. He made them out of pine lumber. Bent 'em, shaped 'em up. They was good old skis. After school was out, we'd ski home and do our evening chores. When I got older, there was lots of dances in the winter. My brothers and I courted lots of gals by skiing to all of those dances.

"We had moved to Granby when I was five and that's where I got my schooling up to ninth grade. I had to quit to support our family because my dad got sick. He had come to the mountains from eastern Colorado in 1928. He was awfully strict. He could look at you or growl at you and you wanted to crawl under a rug. He got very ill, and that's when I quit school. My little brother wasn't old enough to work, so I had to. I got along pretty well in school and had tried working at the same time to keep going, but it just didn't work out.

"There were lots of job openings for anybody that wanted to work. Opportunity was a lot better then, than it is now. That was when they were just starting to build all of those water tunnels -- the Vasquez and those in that country. I tried to work on the tunnels, but I decided I liked ranch work better. I didn't know what it would be like working underground. About this time a cowhand was making around $150 a month including room and board. That was pretty good wages in the '50's. That was about what everyone was making. Everyone around there had about the same financial status. They got along, but no one was really well off. It wasn't all that hard to support a family on the wages back then, but you still had to watch how you spent it just like today. When I got married in 1958, we got along all right with the money we had. As a matter of fact, we got married for five bucks. We took a short honeymoon to Carbondale, and then came back to work on the dairy my dad and I had. We milked sixty-seven head of cows morning and night. My wife worked with me and she could sure cook too. She fed me better then, and I guess her cooking is part of what keeps me going.

"The dairy was a pretty good business. It was too expensive for us to hire our products hauled into Denver, so I did it. I used to take the Berthoud Pass route with a load, and then on the way back I'd haul grain for the ranch. One time I had quite a wreck on the Pass. I had a load of feed on, headed back, and an early November snow storm hit. The road got slick and the truck took off like a sled. There was nothing I could do! I wasn't hurt, but the truck was a total loss."

Four years after he sold the dairy, he bought the ranch he's on now for $80 an acre. Most of the place is used for grazing. He has 3,000 acres of deeded land and 1,500 acres of leased land. He feels people used to have more time to do things, but now a rancher has to have more land to pay for equipment and expenses. All of this keeps him busier. "For many years ranching didn't see much progress, but in the last twenty years there have been lots of changes. Things started to move a lot faster and more efficiently. The most important thing to a rancher is expenses. You used to be able to hay for a hundred dollar bill, but now it costs seven or eight thousand, and it's mostly for equipment. I have two balers, one swather, a cutting machine and a bale wagon to pick up the bales off of the field. This amounts to over $30,000 worth of haying equipment. Last fall I bought a new swather. I try to buy a new piece of equipment every two or three years. You got to keep your equipment up and not let it go to heck."

Duane recalled the differences in equipment and ranch practices. "When I got my own ranch I had machines to hay with, but when I was a kid

it was all done with horses. We didn't own a tractor until '52. It didn't take nearly the time to cut hay because you didn't have nearly the land. My dad and I could put up about three-hundred tons of hay on the old place and we were always done by the time school started in the fall. We didn't have to worry about equipment breakdowns since we used horses. We'd just keep plodding away, changing horses one a day. We would mow in the 'fore noons and stack the hay in the afternoon. Often times, especially during World War II, we'd help the neighbors with haying since there wasn't enough help around. One neighbor we helped a lot, later became my brother-in-law. After the War, the brother-in-law decided to buy a hay baler, but that didn't set too well with my dad. He was content with the old ways of ranching. It was hard to convince him to go to machines."

We discussed the value of good work horses to ranchers, and I asked if horses would become obsolete in a modern operation. "As long as there are cattle to feed, there will always be horses. In this part of the country with our deep snow, a lot of ranchers prefer to feed with horses instead of tractors. They're so darn much more efficient than a piece of machinery that there is no comparison. I learned to hay with a team when I was younger, so I took a liking to the pulling horse. You have to have a good pulling team so when the snow gets deep they can take the place of the tractor. You have to feed your cows everyday and not miss so when you go to market, they bring a good price.

"It's hard to find good pulling teams for heavy loads. I could have sold mine last summer to some neighbors, but I didn't. If you go back East where pulling teams are popular, you could pay anywhere from thirteen to fifteen thousand for a good horse, but it's just a hobby back there. I sold a team of colts for $1,600. I don't know if that's good or bad, and I still wish I wouldn't have done it now. I would like to go back to horse power if I could make a living that way. One of the bigger expenses of ranching is fuel so I have my own bulk tank. I can remember giving eighteen cents a gallon for gas, and now it's more than tripled. Most of my equipment is diesel now. It used to be all gas. Diesel is cheaper. Along with fuel expenses, taxes are a worry. They're quite high for a ranch of any size. I remember reading that taxes in this county are the third highest in Colorado."

We asked Duane about the responsibilities of a rancher and haying was the first thing he mentioned. He puts up twelve to fourteen-hundred tons of hay a season. This year, although it wasn't his best year, he came out just a tad shy of seventeen-hundred tons. "When August 1 rolls around, we get busy haying and we're usually done by October 20. One time we did the place in twenty-three days. The weather had been good and we didn't have many breakdowns. I use most of my hay on my own cattle and horses. This past year I had a little extra to sell. Two years ago when we had the drought, a rancher could have sold all of the hay he had for an excellent price.

"During the summer a rancher spends many hours irrigating his pastures. I have excellent water facilities for my land. I get water from the Bear River and my rights allow thirty-two second feet---that's a five ditch total. This is measured by a yardstick device at the ditch head. My water decree allows me to run a full head of water through the ditches from May until October. Irrigating isn't hard, it's just time consuming. The main chore is getting the ditches cleaned in the spring. They're usually full of rocks, sticks and weeds. There's a lot of bogs downhill of the ditches and they're very dangerous. I personally have seen them swallow a horse up past the knees. Where my headgates are located on the river is dangerous too. Highwater and floating trees are problems. I start irrigating two weeks after the snow leaves and irrigate into the fall."

Fence fixing is always a headache for ranchers in this country. "It seems like no one can ever keep all of their fence up at once. Fencing is done in the lull between calving and haying

season. Many people think that deer and elk jump the fences. They can in the summer, but in the winter they can't get the height jumping in two or three feet of snow. Most of the time they tear the fences down by running at them, bouncing off, and trying again. This means you have to work hard at keeping the fences up. The price of barbed wire like everything else has tripled. Ten years ago it cost only $7 a spool, now it costs over $22 for the same amount."

Additional chores are calving and rounding up cattle. Calving is not all that hard, but it's something you always have to be there for. The biggest problem is keeping the newborn calf warm after birth. "I usually have about two-hundred and fifty calves per season. I expect to lose about ten head during the calving season. Then during the summer I usually lose another ten or so for some reason, and after weaning I'll lose another one or two. I don't think natural predators are responsible for much of my loss, but I do think I lose some to the two-legged predator. One day you see a calf, and then you don't see him again. It makes a rancher wonder.

"In the late fall, we round up the steers from the pastures. We usually have between two and three-thousand head to move from the pastures to the pens. We still do the herding on horseback and we have to move down roads with fences on both sides. The traffic is a problem to us anymore since we move about seven-hundred head at a time. We just keep pushing them along and keep them out of driveways. Sometimes we have as many as forty people helping with the drive and the loading. About seventy-five percent herd and the others load the cattle into railroad cars. That's how we sent our cattle to market."

Feeding is a daily chore for the rancher. Winter feeding is especially demanding. "I do all of my winter feeding with horses. My neighbors and I like to see who can get done first. I get the team harnessed and fed, then I milk the cows and eat breakfast. I leave the house about eight to start feeding. I'm usually done with the first feeding about noon. I feed about a hundred bales of hay in the morning and about half that amount for the afternoon feeding. It's a common problem to get stuck feeding, especially in the early spring when the thaw starts. Then we have to dig out by hand. The feeding trails build up and the sled and team can't stay on top of it."

Feeding is a major expense to a rancher and we talked about the cost when feed is lost. "It's a mess when the cows break into the feed yard, and they can waste quite a bit of feed. The elk tearing down the stacks is always a problem too." Like other ranchers in the mountains,

"Opportunity was a lot better then, than it is now."

Duane uses elk panels to protect his stacks. They are 1" by 4" slats nailed into a panel shape. "Even with these panels the elk still tear down the stacks. They climb right up the panels. Many years ago when the hay was stacked loose, the elk would climb all over it. I think the Game and Fish boys take advantage of the rancher. A lot of animals are staying on private ground since the backpackers go up where they usually are. That forces the game down here. The thing that gripes me the most, is that you end up feeding the animals twelve months out of the year, and then you have to pay to shoot one. I think the Game and Fish could do a better job of management. They could feed the animals in the winter and scatter them in the summer. In the summer of 1977, I had eighty head eat up a whole pasture. I sent in a complaint, but there was no reply. The state doesn't pay out enough money to cover the damage caused by wild life."

Our conversation turned to the problems related to livestock. Cattle are always subject to

disease, but Duane manages to keep his losses low. "I never have figured my losses percentage wise, but it would be low. I only have to doctor my animals a little, but it's quite costly and figures out to be a little under two dollars a head. It generally takes about two days to vaccinate all the cows and calves and I think last year it cost a total of thirteen or fourteen-hundred dollars. I always have the vet vaccinate my heifers in February for Bangs disease. I don't like to see cattle brought up here from across the Mexican border because they bring all kinds of diseases up here. The two worst are anthrax and Bangs disease."

Buying and selling livestock is vital to the ranch operation. When Duane came to his ranch in 1966, he brought about a hundred head of Hereford cows with him. Now he has over three-hundred head of mother cows. He ships about two-hundred head of "long" yearlings annually. A "long" yearling is about eighteen to twenty months old at their peak. He also ships "open" cows meaning they have not been bred. Prices are good now, but in the future who knows. "Cattle prices fluctuate, and I don't trust the government reports. It's mainly judged on supply and demand, but there are arguments as to other contributing factors. If the demand is low, so are the prices; if the demand is high up go prices. Two years ago, the nation had an excess of eight to ten million head, now we're the same amount short. That's why prices are good now. If the government would stay out of it, that would be a help!

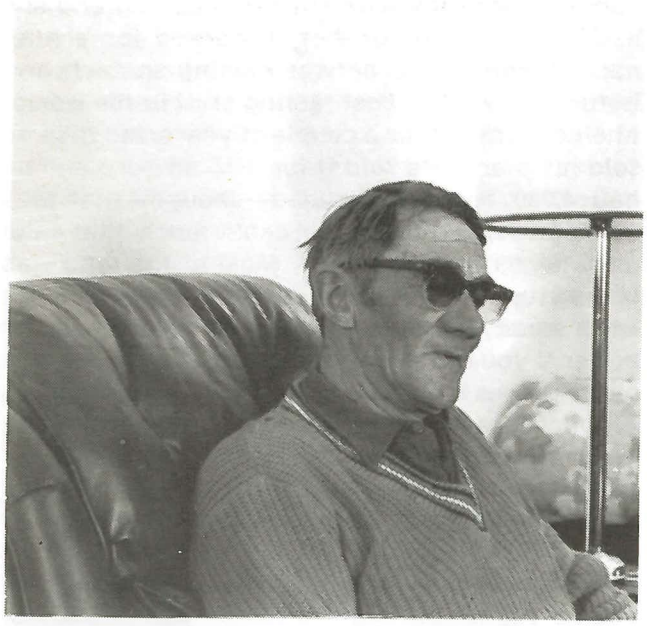
"I like to sell my cattle at home, then I can bargain on my own ground, but I send a lot of mine to Omaha. I usually don't do business with the same company. I sell to different ones. I can nearly always get the price I want. This year I got sixty cents a pound out of my steers and that's what I had hoped for, but not expected all summer. I haven't bought much outside livestock in a long time. Once in awhile, I buy a few steers from the neighbors or a friend."

We asked Duane about imported beef and its effect on the American rancher. "It really doesn't hurt the fresh meat market that much. It's the packaged meat that it hurts. It takes a lot of that business away from our country's ranchers. If the government shipped in a million tons, it would do away with a lot of the ranchers around here. This year they don't have to ship and that helps the price. One man that I rely on, said he took a load of refrigerated meat to the coast. They took the meat off the truck and out to sea. There they ground it up with bad meat so together it would pass inspection."

We discussed the status of American agriculture and Duane's feelings about ranching. "I wasn't active in the farmer's strike, and I don't think it's had much impact. Their intentions are good, but they went about it in the wrong way. To say you're starving to death while you're driving around on a thirty or forty-thousand dollar tractor! They aren't too bad off.

"I don't see any major changes coming up in ranching in the near future. I have just one wish—to see green grass under the snow. You have to like ranching to stay with it. I wouldn't trade it for anything because I like being my own boss." Many people envy the rancher and the atmosphere he lives in, but Duane concluded this way, "When you come in with grease and manure all over you, you wonder. Many times supper isn't eaten until 10 or 11 o'clock at night. It's for sure, you don't do this job for the money or for the glory."

"THE COWBOY IS A DYING BREED."



Russell Crawford

On our second interview, we talked to Russell Crawford who has never owned a ranch, but has worked as a cowhand on several ranches for over thirty years. He came from the Midwest, and was born in Mercy County Illinios, and grew up there. In November of 1949 he came to Gilcrest, Colorado, and spent the winter working as a mechanic. He met a family in Gilcrest whose relatives owned a ranch in the Yampa Valley. They were in need of someone to fix fence, so Russell and his wife came up to take a look at the area. They liked what they saw and stayed.

"It was hard to get used to the cold, and the altitude bothered me, but I'd done ranch work all of my life so I liked it here. My beginning wages were $150 a month." On some ranches wages were paid by the hour and on others the pay was monthly. Many ranchers include 'found,' that's food and a place to sleep. On many ranches the bunk house may not be much to talk about, but the grub is always excellent. Ranch wives are good cooks! Whether you're a wrangler or a cowboy, the pay is the same.

"There were some good cowboys around Yampa when I first came here. I remember Dick Jones Sr., Johnny Bert, Pat Perry, Doc Marshall and Lana Bert. Lana Bert was seventy-one when I came here. He was the first settler around and had been a cowboy all of his life. There were some younger cowboys too -- Bud Keer, Kelly Klumker and Ferris Kirby. There were some good ones then.

"I jumped around the country when I first came. I used to think I wanted to work with pure bred cattle, but that was a little too much. I tried it and it was a lot of work and it seemed like we never had enough help. There was days when I fed all day and stayed up all night calvin' those pure breds. We'd have to nurse the cows, tie the calves and put the calves in, turn the calves loose to different cows and then tie them up, and then turn them loose again. It was a lot more work than it was worth. We had 300 head of cows and calves. The owner was known to have the most registered Shorthorns in America at that time. Most other people in the area had Herefords then. I also hand milked fifteen head of cows. It took me a long time, but now they have equipment so you can do lots of milking in a short time.

"In the summer time I usually just fenced. We had a crew of four to six men and an old wagon. We could build or repair twenty miles of fence in pretty good time. That's mostly what I do now, is build fence for the boys. I like to build fence better than anything else. I'd rather do that than ride a tractor all day. The hardest thing I've ever done is irrigate. I don't like it because I don't like water that well. I haven't irrigated for many years and I just won't do it again.

"I like to feed in the winter time. I really like working with a good team of horses. You can do the job by yourself then, and you don't have to have another guy to drive like you do with a tractor. Good pulling teams are expensive and they're hard to find unless you breed them yourself. If you have the horses from the time they're colts, you know if they're going to match as a team. I like to enter pulling contests after a team is two or three years old. The object of the pulling contest is to match teams and pull more weight than the other team. I got a second in a contest last year, and my team was just young then."

We asked Russell about his preference in a good cow horse. "That's a matter of opinion. Most of the cowboys like Quarter Horses, but I like the Appaloosa. If you are in racing or rodeoing, then the Quarter Horse is your main one. Horses are as good now as they've ever been. I want a horse that will get its head down and watch what they're workin' on."

Russell talked about winter conditions in the Yampa Valley and its effects on ranch jobs. "The winters aren't that bad around here. There might be a day or so when we have a little blizzard or a foot of snow overnight, but it's not bad. The moisture is what bothers the cattle the most. We can usually get around to feed pretty good in spite of snow. The cows usually tramp down the feed yard pretty good and so you have a feed trail. If you have to break one yourself the snow can be so deep that you can't go, and that means you have to shovel. You just drive the team around and around to break a trail in the snow, hitch up again and pull the sled. I remember the

RUSSELL HARNESSING HIS TEAM.

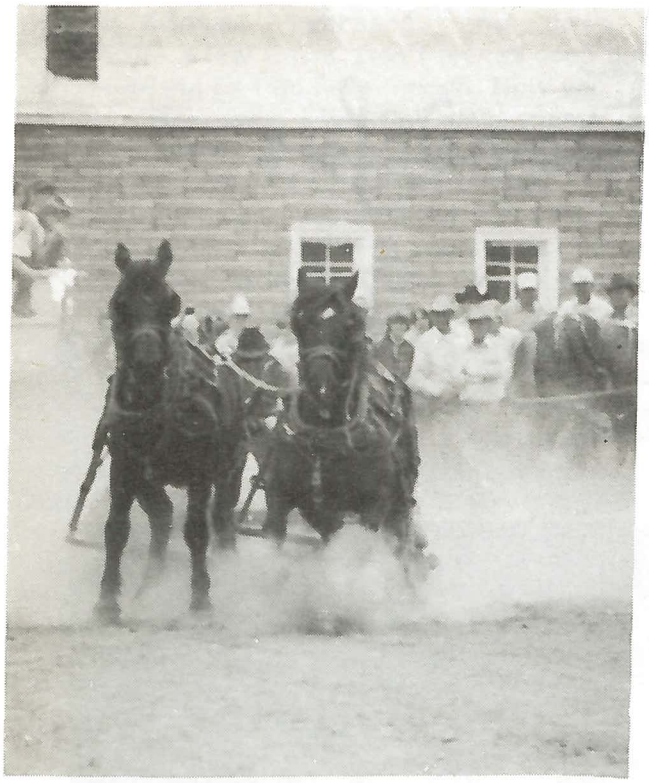
big snow in the winter of '51 and '52. It got so deep that we were snowed in. It was four days and there was no way to get out, but we had plenty of groceries and wood. We just fed the cattle and enjoyed being by ourselves alone from anybody else. The next year we had another big storm. We had cattle up in the Pleasant Valley and we had to feed them. We went over the hill to Hudspeth's place. There was one snow bank six or seven feet high that we dropped off of with the team of horses. We managed to feed and started home about 4:00 p.m. We just left the sled behind, since the horses could barely get themselves over the snowbanks. We were one of the few who fed that day."

Mark asked about the problem of predators and livestock. "Coyotes are lots of trouble to the sheep men, but I've only seen them get a couple of calves. That was during calving season when the animal was very young. Dogs are a bad problem too, especially for sheep men. Everybody seems to think they need two or more dogs on their place, and they can be worse than coyotes when they get in a pack. Just like coyotes, when they get a little taste of an animal they want more and more. I like the dog and I'm not against people having them if they are kept under control. In town, the dog owner swears that his dog never runs off and causes any trouble, and then a rancher has to shoot the dog for killing sheep three or four miles away from town. That's what I mean about people keeping their dogs under control."

Russell talked about changes in the use of the land and the costs of buying land. "When I first came up here my wife started teaching and she had the first four grades. I worked for a man named Holten and he was raising spinach and lettuce. It was the best tasting stuff in the world. I helped him out for a couple of years and then he sold his place. He sold it for $150 an acre and he had 4,280 acres. Everybody thought that was outrageous, but now you can't touch that land anywhere near that price. Most of the land was bought up when I came here, but the ranches were small. If you have a big operation, it's a lot better if you have the grass to feed your livestock on, so places keep getting bigger. The best places around here have been handed down from one generation to another and kept in the family for many years. There was a time here, that a few thousand dollars would have bought a place, but now it takes hundreds of thousands. The taxes can be worth as much as the ranch alone. If you're young and want a ranch you just about have to inherit one. Big land companies are pushing some ranchers off of the land. I hate to see that. They should be using the land that is not good for ranching, because good ranch land is hard to come by. Once it's destroyed, no more cattle can be raised on it, and that means no more meat. Meat has to be raised somewhere, and I don't think city people realize that."

How do people get started in ranching with land costs so high? "Like I said, they either inherit a place, or they have some money put away to buy one. Small ranchers now are working other jobs on the side, and with the help of friends they run the ranch too. Ranching is unlike any other job; it doesn't pay off every week or two. It takes a year or so before any money is seen. The rest of the year buying of supplies must be done on credit."

"BACK IN ILLINOIS WITH HIS FAMILY"



"Pip and Moon Pulling in 1977"

We asked Russell if the cowboy's way of life is slowly turning into a legend. He agreed that the image people have of the cowboy is dying. Outside of rodeoing and tending cattle in feed lots, cowboys and their jobs are vanishing. "Nowadays instead of checking cattle on horseback, many ranchers use motorcycles. They don't do near the riding they used to. A lot of 'em will throw a saddle horse in the trailer and haul them up to the timber and ride 'em there. It's harder and harder to find good ranch hands anymore because wages are not competitive enough with other local jobs such as mining. I wouldn't be doing my job now if I didn't enjoy it, but I don't want to do anything else. I just take less pay and enjoy it a lot more. I like working outdoors year around with cattle and horses. I didn't grow up knowing how to rope and I don't rodeo. I can catch a cow with a rope out in the brush but I'm no good in the arena.

"There's time for other things too when you're a cowhand. In fall I used to have time to get in some hunting. When ranch work lightened up I worked other jobs. I worked at a sawmill for five years and that was quite a different experience. There were four of them near Toponas when I first came here and they were cutting up in the Gore area. Most of them have gone out of business now.

"I don't think the ranchers around the Yampa area have much future and others tend to agree with me. I hate to see the rancher go, but I don't see how they can help it. Things have changed so much in our lifetimes, it's hard to predict the future. If a young person like you, Mark, wanted to get into ranching, I'd give you this advice. Take a real interest in it, put all the money you can afford into it, go at it as strong as you can and do the best job you know how. Be everything -- a businessman, bookkeeper, mechanic and livestock man, but most important find a rich wife!"

Our story about Duane Acord and Russell Crawford has taken a look at ranching from two sides. So much depends on how hard you work to make a living and on the money you make to keep the business going. It was hard in the past and it's still hard. We can't see into the future, but we hope there will always be ranching in the Yampa Valley.

Duane elaborating on ranching.