

Sue Patricia,

F.Y.I. We thought you
might like a copy of
my father's piece on the W.S.
Thanks for the house tour!

Best wishes,

Douglas E. Wilson

A HISTORY OF THE W S RANCH AND BRAND

Transcribed on tape by Brownlow Wilson

Interviewed by Anne Haslanger

This is Anne Haslanger at Vermejo Park. Today, June 4, 1980, I am interviewing Brownlow Wilson, former manager of the W S Ranch.

(In the text I refer to her as AH. BW)

My Father, Harold C. Wilson, who was living in Scotland, came out to the West in about 1879. He was hunting big game in Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. At that time he was in a private car belonging to the president of the railroad. It may have been the Southern Pacific; I don't know what it was called then.

As he went through New Mexico and he saw those wide open spaces, he thought, "What a marvelous place for a ranch!" In those days, you did not buy a ranch, you bought water rights. He bought some water rights on the Gila River near Alma, New Mexico which was about 80 miles from Silver City, and on some tributary rivers as well.

They started off with 600 head of cattle which were of very common stock. His partner was a man called Montague Stevens. Stevens was crazy about hunting grizzly bears. The problem was that he would get a round-up ready to ship and someone would tell him, "There's a hot grizzly track over at so-and-so," and he would turn the herd loose to hunt the grizzly bear.

He had only one arm and he used a .30-.30 with a lever action. I asked him, "How in the world could you reload if a bear was charging you? How did you work the lever with one hand?" He said, "I put the muzzle on my left foot and the butt under my stump, and I went like this," and he demonstrated the action. I said, "Was the bear charging?" and he said, "Sometimes." He shot

11 grizzlies. His book, Meet Mr. Grizzly, is an absolutely fascinating story. But the ranch couldn't pay because he was always going off like that, thus disrupting the cattle work.

Cattle were run on open range in those days. The ranchers would hold large communal round-ups. My Father said that sometimes their cattle would be found as far as 300 miles away. There were no fences. They would sort them all into bunches in many round-ups. Now, ~~maver~~ taking was very common in those days. A lot of rustlers operated with a long rope and a running iron. You would often find your cows with somebody else's branded calf beside them. Ranchers would lose a lot of calves that way.

Well, my Father decided that was rather a primitive system of running cattle without fences. He bought 125,000 acres in Colfax County, near Cimarron, New Mexico. The cattle were trailed up in 3 bunches. Now Captain French's book said that some of them went up by train so I suppose that must be true. My Father never told me that, however. I think the land cost one dollar per acre.

One of their head trail bosses was a fellow named McGinnis, who was one of Black Jack's gang of train robbers. Of course, my Father didn't know that. But, he said he was one of the best trail bosses he ever knew. Of course, it was a marvelous place to hide out because they never went into any towns and they were driving cattle about 300 miles. So, the sheriffs never got to see them. The young cowboys could go to town, but the boss said, "I've got to stay with the cattle." Well, he made 3 trips up. They drove them through Fort Union and came onto the W S

land that way.

Then they must have had to fence their range and the outside fence had to be in the neighborhood of one hundred miles. It was approximately a rectangle with each long side 30 miles and the short ones 10 miles. Two thirds of it was in the flats, and about one third in the hills, up two canyons; the Van Bremmer and the Cerossosso, up to the A 6 fence which was the original Bartlett ranch boundary. Later on they sold off about 25,000 acres as an irrigated tract, which was called a "French Tract" after the manager. I think that they got more for that than he had paid for the whole ranch.

AH asked about the cattle.

Incidentally, when they commenced the drive they had 14,000 cattle. And he had started with 600 originally. They also, of course, had sold a lot off in the interim. So, when they got up there they had to sell a lot more because 100,000 acres would only run about 3,000 head. We used to run that many when I was there. So, somewhere down the line they sold the balance. Now, up to that time, they had never made a profit. But, they must have done so after that drive. So, after selling off the French Tract they were left with 100,000 acres. And the old fence line and the deeds would read, "from a lone tree to a flat rock, etc., etc." In the main they followed the ridges and seldom went down into deep canyons. Of course, there was no way you could ever survey it accurately.

When I sold it I simply said, "All the land enclosed within

the existing fence line, which has been there for over 40 years. We paid taxes on 100,000 acres." So, instead of selling the land for so much an acre, I sold the 1,000 shares outstanding which we had in the company. And I said, "All the land enclosed in the existing fence line, 100,000 acres, more or less." But when they bought the shares in the company they also bought the bank account, what money we had in that. And the IRS accepted this. I figured that one out, and they never questioned it. The reason we had to sell it was because my Father died during the war. The executors said that if we didn't sell the ranch, they couldn't distribute any money to my two sisters. I could have got a lot more for it later on. But it had to be sold. My Father's executors instructed me to get half a million dollars for it, but I sold it for \$600,000.

The trouble was, from a money-making standpoint, the summer range, in the flat country, had a lot of salt grass, and that simply did not put tallow on the cattle. Our calves would weigh about 325 pounds in the fall, whereas the C S calves, which summered in the high country, would weigh over 350 pounds, and sometimes 375 pounds.

The W S cattle were of very common stock originally, and included many brockle faces, line backs and off colors. I bred the herd up by selecting the best marked heifers, and by buying the best quality, big-boned bulls, which we got from the Mitchell Ranch. By the time we sold the ranch in 1945, we had about the best quality cattle in Colfax County, but we were never able to get their weight up enough to make it a profitable operation,

because of that salt grass in the summer range. Our calves used to top the market by the pound. It is a lot of pleasure breeding up a herd like that and it gives great satisfaction.

My Father would come out occasionally, but he soon got too old for travelling. He had some heart trouble. He died during the war, and the ranch had to be sold to settle his estate.

Montague Stevens was really a partner, not a manager. James Cook, an old Indian Scout and frontiersman, was in charge in the beginning. He knew something about cattle, from the longhorn days, but his heart was not in the breeding-up process. My Father said he was easily the best shot with either a rifle or six shooter that he ever knew. He was more interested in scouting for the cavalry, and in his shooting, than he ever was in the cattle business.

Captain French came up to the ranch at Alma one time for a visit. My Father liked him. So, he took over the management. Actually, he never had a contract, he just sort of automatically took the job on. He was very profligate with money. I remember I found in the accounts that he had charged \$1,200 for wine in one year against the company. So, he never made it pay all the years he was there. On the other hand, the land was increasing in value, too. So it was a good investment. He stayed for a number of years. Then the lawyer in Denver, McBeth, said that he obviously wasn't doing very well. So, my Father let him go and he got another man named Phillip Garrett to run it. Unfortunately, this man knew absolutely nothing about cattle. He had been a bookkeeper on the J J Ranch near La Junta. But he

was a very honest man, but he could not ride because he had stomach ulcers.

I came out in 1923 and I worked for 5 years as a cowboy. And I mean really worked, I hardly missed a day. I worked under the foreman and I had more fun then than I'd ever had before. Then about '28 my Father came out. The lawyer said, "You've got to do something. It's not doing well at all." So, I took over the management in 1928. Then when the war started in Europe September 1939, the children went to Sunday school and when they came back, I was gone. I thought I would be gone about a year, but it turned out to be seven. Then, my Father died in '41 and the lawyers in Scotland said that the ranch had to be sold in order to distribute the money to my sisters, so that they could have something to live on. So, I sold it in '45. After that, this man Gourley from Ft. Worth bought it. Incidentally, he bought the 1,000 shares outstanding, and I told him that the shares in the ranch were worth the equivalent of what I thought the land was worth plus the money in the bank. He even took over the bank balance of some \$2,000 that was in the bank. And that is why the IRS never questioned it because he just bought all the shares in the company.

As for the W S brand, it came from the names Wilson and Stevens. That is also how it got the name W S Ranch, and the brand was registered in New Mexico. It is still used on all the cattle at Vermejo Park, because they took over the W S Ranch and brand from Mr. Gourley.

AH took me back to the Alma days again.

My Father bought some water rights on the Gila River, and some others on tributary rivers in about 1880, I think it was. I drove down to see the old headquarters from Cimarron, in 1938. I had never seen it before. We still owned some 1,200 acres on that river, which included the old headquarters. Surprisingly enough, those water rights controlled about 200,000 acres of land.

Hugh McKeen was a cowboy who worked for my Father for some twenty years for \$25 per month. He evidently saved all his money, because when I was there, he owned about 3,000 cattle. He would write me on an old typewriter, and the capitals would often come in the middle of the words, and seldom at their beginning. Incidentally, my Father had told me they had two curly haired horses on the ranch, which had long hair with two curls in winter, and short hair with one curl in summer. He told me Big Curly was the stoutest horse he had ever known of. I believe in one instance James Cook rode Big Curly 200 miles in two days, taking dispatches to Fort Bayard, when the Indians were on the warpath.

I asked Hugh if they still had any of those curly haired horses now. He gave me a funny look. "Well, we haven't seen any for over ten years, but we made a horse round-up last week. We had too many wild horses on the range. We have two of them in the corral right now." I went over to the corral fence, saw them, and took their pictures. They were in their summer coats, with

one curl showing. Hugh told me no one knew where they came from originally. They might have come over with the Conquistadors, but there is no record of it. He said that actually they had the most stamina of any horses he had ever seen.

Then, occasionally, they had a buckskin with a black stripe down his back and black stripes around each leg, low down. And they were mentioned in the Cortez Journal. It described these "yellow horses." And they still survived in the wild bunch.

They moved the herds up to Cimarron in 1901. I assume that the year before ~~that~~ they must have put the outside fence in because they didn't buy it fenced. Then they discovered they couldn't run as many cattle there as they thought. When I ran it, we ran 3,000 head in winter, which meant after the steer calves had been sold off and including the replacement heifers we kept. We used to run about 120 bulls with them.

Incidentally, that would be made up something like this: we would breed about 2,400 cows and out of them 300 would be replacement heifers that hadn't been bred before. Every fall we used to put a brand up on the neck. Like "0" would be born in 1900, "1" would be born in 1901. We never kept "10" year olds, so we started at "0" again in 1910 or whatever year it was. So you just had to ride through and you could tell their age by looking at that neck brand. But, in practice, when I took it over, some cows were good at 8 years old and some were gummars at 7. So, if they were in pretty good shape, we might keep a few 10-year-old cows. During the drought in the 20's we ran them all through the chute and found a lot of gummars. Of

course, for readers who don't know cattle, those cows have worn down their front teeth clipping off the short grass.

AH asked about cattle numbers.

We figured that it took about thirty acres to run a cow for a year on the ranch. We did not normally have to feed them any hay, except on very dry years. However, we had a lot of hay stacks during some good years, that had not been used for feed. We also had a long machine shed, which we hardly used. We then hired a baler, and baled up about nine hundred tons from these stacks, which we stored in the machine shed. During one very dry year, during the long drought, our cows were very thin in the fall, and during the winter they got progressively weaker, so we fed them most of that nine hundred tons we had in reserve. It made all the difference, and it enabled us to get through the winter fairly well, and that summer we had good rains, and the calves were in good shape, because the cows had plenty of milk for them to grow on. What hay we normally raised in good years we fed to the bulls, replacement heifers, and to the horses we kept up for winter work. We fed all the heavy cows (those about to calf) cotton seed cake, which gave them strength. Sometimes, on very dry years, we fed the weaker cows hay for a month or so, but usually only about a hundred of them. However, after we eliminated most of the cows over eight years old, there were comparatively very few weak cows that needed supplementary hay feeding. When I first took over the management of the ranch, there were a great many cows over eight years old, and

the hospital bunch, as we called them, required a lot of hay to get them through the winter. This is why it paid us to cull out most of the cows that were over eight years old each fall. During the worst of the drought years, we would run all the cows through a chute to look at their teeth. All the gummers were then shipped to market. We found some gummers only six years old, and a lot of seven year olds. They got that way from clipping off the very short grass. Then they become gummers, and when they lose those teeth they can't survive because they can't cut off the short grass. So we would just ship them.

Now, in the fall, we would probably ship say 300 head of old cows. We'd probably brand . . . I can't tell you the exact numbers . . . but I remember when I was there we would turn off about 1500 calves a year. We would cut the steers out of the heifers in the fall. Then, I would stand in the crowding pen and signal right or left and pick out the 320 or so replacement heifers. Then we would sell the rest of the heifers and all the steer calves. They would all go to somewhere in the corn belt to feed lots. So, having selected the heifers for 20 years and bought the bulls for 20 years, I was able to completely change the character of the herd. You had to have in your mind what you wanted them to look like and if they had weak rear ends, for example, we got bulls with big rear ends, and so on. That is how it was done.

We used to buy about 20 bulls a year. I got them from Albert Mitchell on the Tequisquite Ranch near Mosquero, New Mexico. I bought bulls for about 20 years from him.

AH asked me about our horses.

It took about 70 horses to run the cattle. Each cowboy would be given a string of eight head. We raised our own horses. We had 20 mares. But, in practice we would get an old gentle horse and trade him off for 2 broncs to somebody who had a dude ranch, for example, and wanted a gentle horse. So, we never had any trouble keeping good horses. Because such ranches had unbroken ones they couldn't ride and we had some bronc breakers who would break them.

The hill country of the W S was full of deer in those days. Elk never came down there. But just across the fence there were plenty of them on the Bartlett Ranch, as it was then called.

Water rights were very important for irrigation. We had some on the Ponil River. Then all the ranchers in Colfax County got together and decided they ought to have a water adjudication suit about water rights. I felt very skeptical about the idea, because there seldom was very much water in those rivers anyway. Some lawyers came down from Denver, and all of them had to stay in Raton for over two months. Finally the judge decided that the W S Ranch had water rights for 600 acres, but I knew we could never possibly get enough water for those many acres, because the water just was not there. So everyone got more water rights than they had ever had before, and they were all very happy. I believe it cost the combined ranches over \$100,000 in legal fees, but they never got any more irrigating water than they had been getting before. We never got enough to irrigate 400

acres after the suit, so all the money we collectively paid the lawyers was wasted. There is no way anyone can adjudicate water rights after twenty years of drought and even today the old bountiful supplies of it have never come back. All the water we drew from the Ponil River was what flowed below the Raton-Cimarron highway. The Chase Ranch had the next rights above ours, and I think they had more rights in Ponil Park.

During the eleven year drought, from about 1922 to 1933, our average precipitation only averaged 11.45 inches. Our two rivers, the Cerossosso and the Van Bremmer, almost went dry. There would be water for a mile or so, then none for perhaps another mile, then it would come to the surface again. Both those rivers dried up for about two-thirds of their length during that time, and the flow on the Ponil was drastically curtailed.

During the drought, I asked Mr. T. E. Mitchell to come up from Mosquero to water witch us some wells. After observing him for awhile, I found that I could do it myself, and we must have dug three or four wells Mr. Mitchell witched. In subsequent years I found a lot of well sites myself, which gave us more water in the dry pastures. Since that day, when we moved up to Douglas County, Colorado, I must have found over fifty wells for various ranchers and farmers, and some of them told me they would have had to move off their land had it not been for these wells.

Captain French was very profligate about money, and the ranch never made any profit under his management. He built a large stone house on the Ponil, but I never saw it because it

burned down before I came out. I believe he also built a carriage house, but that burned down also, so I never saw it. The big house he built had extensive lawns and gardens. All the stone houses near or in Cimarron burned down--the W S house, the Remley and Brooks houses in town, and the Charles Springer house on the Ponil. When the latter one did, Charles Springer still had a large stone garage, with store rooms above it. During prohibition, Charles Springer stored a lot of liquor in this storage space, enough to last him for years. One night, some Mexican farm workers broke into the garage, and started to syphon gasoline out of Mr. Springer's Rolls Royce. They evidently lit a match to see how much was left in its tank, the fumes ignited, and the whole garage burned down. Charles Springer did not mind too much about the Rolls, which must have been insured, but the loss of all that liquor was a major tragedy.

Charlie was Ed Springer's uncle, and during the twenties and thirties, Ed managed the C S Ranch. Ed's Father, Frank Springer, was a brilliant lawyer, who took the case proving out the title for the Maxwell Land Company. The C S Ranch was his fee for this job. It consisted of some 200,000 acres when I was there. That was the only major case Frank ever took, and it enabled him to retire in Philadelphia. Incidentally, the case came up before the Supreme Court of the United States, as no other court had jurisdiction over it. I believe his fee came to one million dollars, but to him that land was worth far more than money. Incidentally, the W S Ranch was also part of the Maxwell

Land Grant. It was originally deeded to Bobienne and Miranda, in Mexico City, and the authorities thought it probably consisted of about 200,000 acres. Actually the land had never been surveyed, and when Lucien Maxwell married Luz Baubien, he claimed two million acres, more or less. His beef pasture alone, which consisted of all the land in the hill country north of the present Raton-Cimarron road, and that alone came to over one million acres. It took in part of the W S Ranch, the Bartlett Ranch, Van Houten Ranch, Chase ranches, the Caliente, Phelps Dodge land, and many other smaller ranches as well. The land also included many of the ranches on the flats--the C S Ranch, W S summer range, part of the Philmont Ranch, and a great many others as well. Lucien Maxwell had a contract to supply meat and flour to the Indians, so he built a large stone mill in Cimarron, where the wheat was processed, and this building stands today, and Ed Springer always planned to make it into a museum.

When I first came to manage the ranch, I rode five days out of each week with the cowboys, and I am sure I learned more about cattle doing that than I could have learned in a lot of years had I confined my work to the office. When I first came out, I worked as a cowboy for five years, and had more fun doing this than I had ever had before. One day, when I was sitting in the Community building, watching a movie, three of our cowboys called me out. They told me that they and the foreman had been stealing our cattle. Now we had been coming up a lot short every fall, but the foreman said there was a lot of rustling going on all over the county. I had only been on the ranch for less than

a year at the time, and I was not the manager, but I told the three cowboys, "You know what this means. We will have to fire the whole lot of you and start over again with an entirely new crew." They readily agreed, and after I talked this over with Phil Garrett, this is what we did. Actually the foreman was responsible for everything that happened. He was away from headquarters most of the time, telling Mr. Garrett he was up most nights trying to catch the rustlers. However, I had begun to smell a rat, but could not prove anything until those three cowboys came to tell me what was happening. One of them, who was straw boss, came to see me several times in subsequent years, and we became good friends.

AH asked me where we got the new foreman from.

We asked Ed Springer if he could recommend any cowboy for our foreman. He told us Toke Harp was too good a man to be an ordinary cowboy, and since he already had a good foreman, he let us have Toke. He stayed with us for about twenty five years, until the ranch was sold, as a matter of fact, and he became one of the best foremen in Colfax County. We became very close friends.

I would rise with the cowboys five days out of each week, and spend the sixth day in the office. I would buy all our bulls, and select the replacement heifers, and if one man does that, he can shape any herd to his own standards, and it is fascinating work. First of all, we concentrated on correctly marked Herefords; then we began to breed only those cows with the best

conformation, and I selected the bulls to correct the main deficiencies in the cows. After ten years it was amazing what a transformation had taken place; we had a herd of cattle any cowman could be proud of.

Before I knew about our own foreman and crew stealing our cattle, I went into the bunkhouse at our Vermejo Camp one day to find the foreman, and the cowboys, and nearly all of them had guns in their hands. I made some facetious remark and they sheepishly put their guns away. Subsequently the straw boss told me they were telling the foreman they would no longer help him steal the company cattle, and there was almost a war between him and a few of his cowboys who wanted to go on with it, and a few who liked me, because I had ridden with them a lot, which is why they were telling the foreman they would no longer go on with his crooked scheme. There was a general belief back in those days that it was no crime to steal from a corporation. That is why absentee owners were fair game for rustlers. It was only when I, the owner's son, started to ride with them, and make friends with them, that some of the cowboys rebelled, and would not go on with the foreman's crooked scheme. If I had never gone out there, probably the rustling would have gone on for years.

Incidentally, I found cowboys to be some of the nicest men I ever worked with, and those five years, when I worked as one of them, were some of the happiest I ever experienced, anywhere.