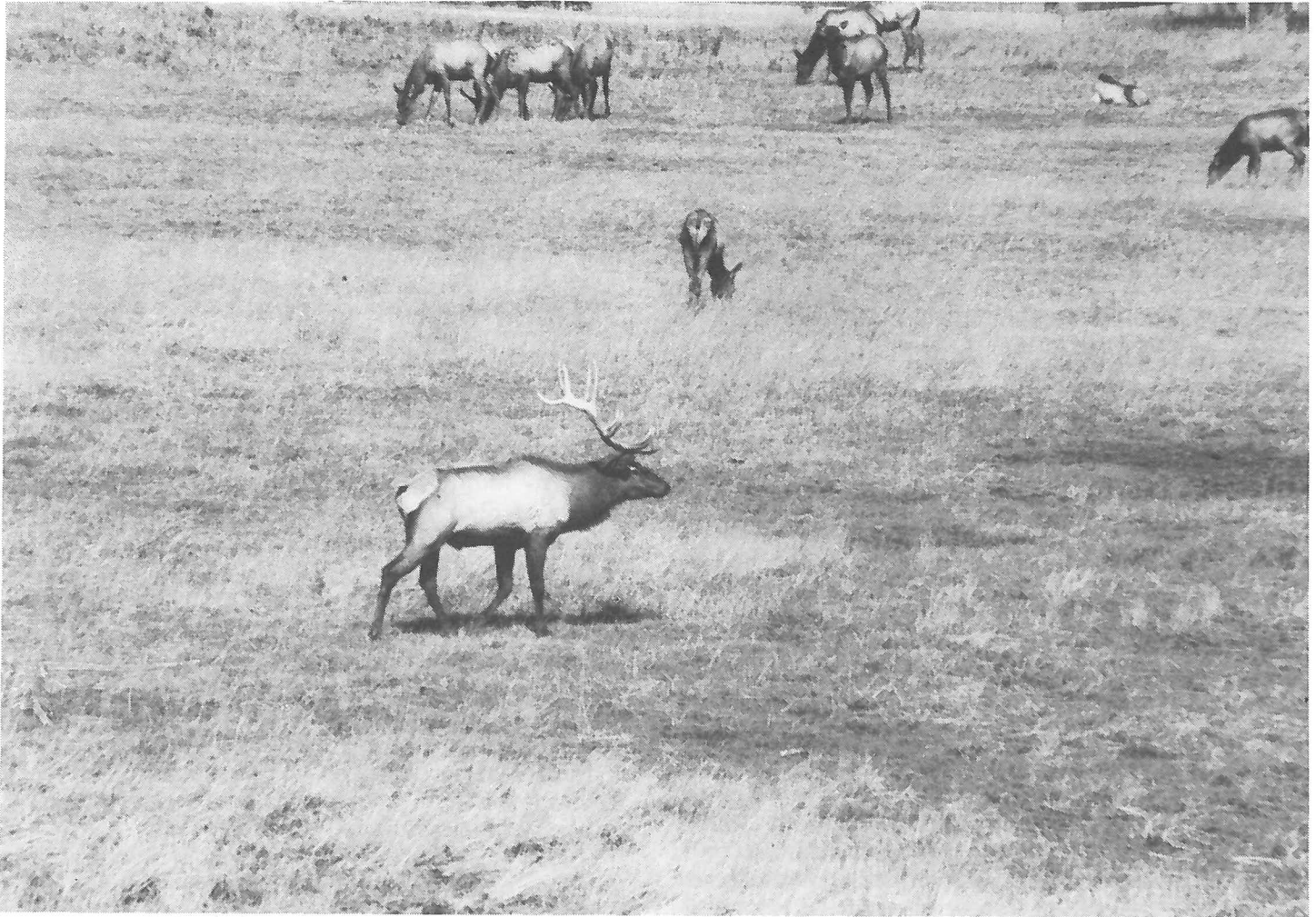


# ELK RANCHING; IT'S MORE THAN JUST HUNTING. LOU WYMAN

BY CHAD WHITMORE AND SCOTT SIS

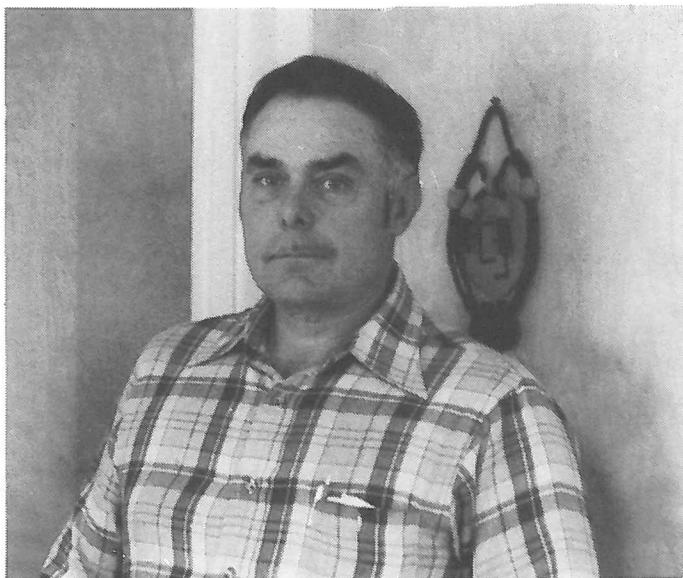


In the northwest part of Colorado, elk hunting is one of the biggest events of the year. People come from all over the country just to hunt in this area. We decided since elk hunting is such a big thing that we would do a story on it. We were lucky to find a man who raises elk, and is a guide and outfitter. We contacted Lou Wyman, and he told us that if we wanted to do a story on elk we'd better get out to his ranch before hunting season started. His ranch is located 17 miles south of Hayden. It was October 2, 1985 when we made our first trip out to the Wyman Hunting reserve. He was so busy he couldn't sit still long enough for an interview. But we did help load two elk that were being sent to market and we got a bunch of great pictures. It wasn't until October 8 that we finally got Lou to stop working long enough for us to get our first interview. Lou

started telling about the history of the ranch.

"My father was born in Gaylesburg, Illinois in 1882, and he came over to Meeker and homesteaded in 1900. The homestead he took up was where the Meeker Massacre took place. Where the Indians ambushed the troops that were going to rescue Meeker, in Thornburg; that's the ground that he homesteaded. To me, the funny thing was that, well, at the time he homesteaded if the outline of the trenches were still there, and all the bones of the horses that had been killed were still laying out in the field. It had been 25 years or so since the battle. They had to gather up the bones, because there was a lot of them. I don't know how many horses got killed. They had to cart all those bones over and throw them in the wash, so they could plow the ground up.

**THIS STORY SPONSORED BY THE STEAMBOAT PILOT**



### **"I DIDN'T MIND GROWING UP ON THE RANCH."**

"My father then moved south of Hayden in 1918. He bought our ranch from Tom Dunston. Then as he could afford it he picked up homesteads, 160 acres at a time, until it is about the size it is now, 10,000 acres.

"I was born in Hayden (that was the only hospital in the area at that time) February 26, 1933, at the beginning of the Depression, and I've lived here on the ranch all my life. I didn't mind growing up on the ranch. I had a lot of pleasant childhood memories. I had a good time. After I got big enough to get around much, my father took me with him a lot, I think really just to open the gates. That was kinda' fun, because I got to go with him around the ranch. I got to do a lot of things around the ranch at a young age. Because I was the only child at home."

Lou told us how he got started in the elk raising business and the complications he had in getting started. "Paula and I raised both sheep and cattle. We decided that we could extend our hunting season by owning elk. That's why we got started, to extend our hunting season. We've been raising elk for 17 years and we now have about 250 head.

"When we started we bought about 60 head. Most of them came from the city and county of Denver and Genessee Park. They have some buffalo on what they call Floyd Hill on the way to denver, and that's where most of the elk came from. We had quite a time getting them. They were kept in a pretty large area. I had to get a whole bus load of trustees from the jail and they just formed a long line and walked through the area and hazed them into the corral. We then loaded them up on trailers and shipped them up here to the ranch.

"They haul easy and they stand up, but are

pretty hyperactive. They won't hurt themselves, either, but they're not like an old cow or sheep that might get down and let others stomp on them. They really ride well. In fact, they have always been that way wherever we've shipped them.

"It wasn't easy for us to get started. We had to get a permit from the state. When we started nobody was raising elk. Paula and I went to Denver and lobbied the legislature to allow us to raise elk. There were no laws that said you couldn't, but there were none that said you could. They didn't spell out how you could do it. For example, it has to be all on private land; you can't 'fence-in' some of the state-owned land or federal land. The elk all have to come from a legal source. You can't just go out and fence part of your ranch, and trap what elk are there and call them yours.

"We make quite a bit of money from them, more than we would cattle. It takes longer to realize an income from elk. For one thing, if you are butchering the elk, they have to be at least two years old before you sell them as opposed to maybe having a cow or calf operation where you can sell the calves the first fall. Elk have to be carried over for at least another year, so that does add to the cost. There has been a lot of interest in the last couple of years, people wanting to raise elk around the state, maybe as an alternative to farming. But unless you started a long time ago, when the costs were not so high, like I did, it takes too much money to get started to be a really profitable thing now. For example, the fencing costs \$5 a running foot. So you're talking about a lot of money, and the animal itself costs a lot of money. The breeding stock or even calves will run \$700 to \$800 a head, maybe



**"ELK WON'T HERD LIKE CATTLE, THEY TAKE OFF RUNNING IN EVERY DIRECTION."**



## **"A LOT OF OUR ELK GETS SOLD FOR MEAT."**

even \$1,000. When we started we bought the animals for around \$200 a head and the fencing seemed like it was expensive then, about a dollar a foot, but that's a lot cheaper than now. I don't think someone could do it now and make a profit.

"It took us two summers to get the fence built to the point we have it now. In fact, we've added on to it a little in the last year or two. The original large area we fenced took two summers to build. We had the elk the whole time we were building the fence and we kept them down by the house where the pictures were taken. The fence is eight feet tall! Elk can't jump more than eight feet, but I have seen them in a corral where they were pressured and they scaled or knocked down an eight-foot fence. The elk don't tear down the fence if it's made right, and it's a good fence like a chain-link fence. We use a real heavy grade v-mesh wire. They can't and haven't ever torn it down. If you use just a regular sheep-type wire they can get their horns in it and tear it up.

"We have about 2,000 acres of the land we own, fenced in to hold the elk. One large pasture has a little over 1,000 acres, and then there are several small ones, including some of the meadows down close to the house. You couldn't keep that many elk on 2,000 acres unless you had some of it irrigated."

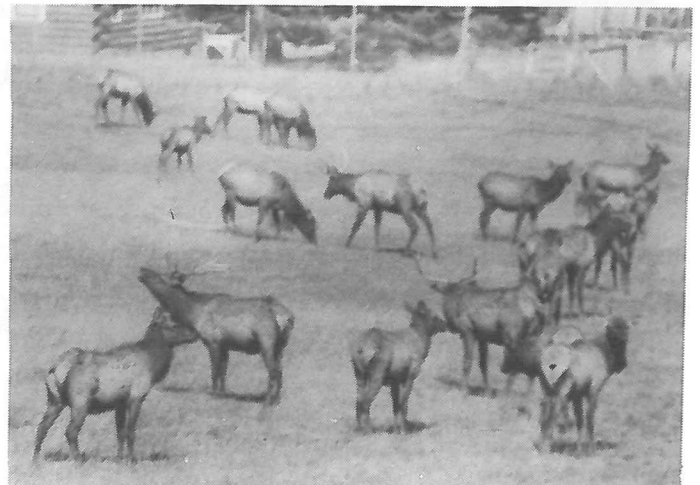
We asked Lou how he went about selling elk as a business. "There's two ways to measure elk, body-wise and horn-wise. We have weighed a lot of elk and we have had a number of elk that have gone over 800 pounds live weight. That's a pretty big elk! Horn-wise we have several elk that have had eight points on each side. They weren't necessarily really heavy-horned animals, but we have had one with a 60-inch spread. He didn't have eight points, only six points on each side.

"One of the ways we harvest them would be to sell them to other breeders, people interested in trying to raise elk. We've sold quite a few to different breeders, people down in Texas. Elk will live down in Texas and they were at one time

probably in every state. But they don't do as well in a real warm climate. For one thing, the flies and screw worms bother them.

"A lot of our elk get sold for meat. Not just restaurants in Colorado, but all over the United States. We'll ship the meat anywhere, to anybody who will spend \$4 a pound for elk burger. We get about \$12 a pound for the real choice steaks. But right now we're making a lot of the meat into elk jerky, and that's selling pretty good. All our elk are butchered at either the Craig or Steamboat meat processing plants and are federally inspected. Because we're selling the meat to the public we insist on federal inspection of the meat.

"Our major competition would be the Red Deer from New Zealand or Scotland. They are fairly closely related to elk, but are not as big and there are many more of them. It's easy for New Zealand to export into this country. They'll bring those Red Deer in and sometimes label them as elk, and that's legal, because they are so closely related. You have to get to a subspecies before you have to call them Red Deer. I know some people who sell Red Deer and call it elk. At some restaurants you order something that you think comes out of the Rocky Mountains, but really it may be coming from New Zealand."



Lou's biggest income in the elk business comes from selling the horns. Lou said, "I sell them to the Orientals. The Orientals use them as an aphrodisiac. It's primarily a sex potion or stimulant, although I've had the Koreans tell me that they give horn powder to pregnant women to ensure development of a healthy baby or sometimes to small boys to help in their growth and development. If we could make enough money off the meat we wouldn't cut the horns."

We asked Lou if the aphrodisiacs worked, and he said, "That's a good question. I get that asked all of the time. I'm not old enough to have to worry about whether it works or not. I guess another example would be when we had some in the house here. The cat got into it and ate it, and took off, and we never saw that cat again. I've had several of the Koreans that I sell to say that it works about as good as eating a cookie. I think that it must help some people psychologically, because they do buy it. It's pretty valuable by the time it's been processed. They have to dry the horn and then prepare it, either in a tablet or wafer, sometimes just as a powder. Then they use it in a tea, brew it and drink it that way, or just eat it plain. I've seen it just put in the mouth and eaten. It doesn't have much taste to it. It's about \$2,000 a pound when it's been processed. I don't even know if marijuana is that high."

"There's quite a culture built up around it, out in California. In the L.A. area, for example, there's been killing over the control of the Oriental horn market. In Korea when you go into the country they specifically make you write out a declaration if you have any horn powder. They don't just ask you, they make you write it out, and there's a pretty stiff fine if they catch you with horn powder coming into Korea. It's more of a political thing. I don't think, basically, there's anything wrong with it. I don't think they ask you if you have marijuana or cocaine on you, but you better not have any horn powder, because there are some politicians, and other people in Korea who control the market, and they just don't want any other elk or horn powder in the country. When we first started selling elk 12 or 13 years ago, we sold a whole planeload to Korea, not to the government, but to the people in Korea. Right now the price is down to about \$35 to \$40 a pound. It was up to \$100 a pound a few years ago and for that price it's worth cutting the horns."

We asked Lou about the problems he has in raising the elk. "Elk won't herd like cattle. They take off running in every direction. Once we got a bunch of elk in a corral and a big bull made room for himself by goring a cow. I suppose the worst complication with raising the elk, or the hardest, would be to keep them in so that they don't get away, because if they get away, they're gone. There's no way to round them up, like you would

sheep or cattle. Over the years we have had a few get away. We had a cow get out this last winter when we were getting ready to take several to town to be butchered. The tailgate on the trailer came open and the cow just stepped out and took off. It was outside of the preserve area so we lost her. A few other things like that have happened. So that would be one of the biggest concerns or problems.

"We have to keep the fence in good shape. We have to watch that we don't have a flood in the bottom of a draw that takes the fence out. We have to check for trees that fall on the fence, and, of course, we have to make certain that the gates are never left open. We don't brand the elk; it's not required. We do try to ear tag all of them so there is an identifying mark on all of them."



**"WE DO TRY TO EAR TAG ALL OF THEM."**

We asked Lou if the elk ever get into fights or battles. "Once in a while. They don't really fight much. They'll tend to do a lot of sparring when their horns start to get hard. So they try each other out, and they pretty much know which ones are the strongest. They do fight occasionally, especially if one of them is defending his herd of cows. The bulls tend to not eat much while breeding and may get weakened. Then if another bull challenges him, they might fight for awhile. They could kill each other, but as a rule, if they get into a fight, one bull will run and then he would be out in a big enough area that he could get away. If they were in a small, enclosed area they would possibly kill one another."

"I know a breeder back in Illinois who cuts the horns off his elk every year, just so they won't injure each other fighting. We used to run the bulls and cows together, in a corral, but when they've got horns, they can really hurt each other. They'll just start hitting one direction and then turn around and run and hit the other direction at any animal in the way — bull, cow,



**"IT'S PRETTY HARD TO SNEAK UP ON AN ELK, UNLESS THE WEATHER CONDITIONS ARE JUST RIGHT."**

or calf — until they've made some room for themselves. Sometimes they inflict fatal injuries.

"Occasionally we will have an elk die, but we never have had any of them die from the cold. They're really pretty healthy, and don't seem to have much of a disease problem.

"Elk will eat about one-third as much as a beef cow will. A full-grown animal will eat about 10 pounds of hay per day, depending on how cold it is. They get by in the winter pretty good. The hair on elk is hollow and insulates them from the weather so they don't feel the cold like a beef cow would, therefore, they don't require as much feed for energy and warmth.

"When we notice that an elk is sick, we try to give it some penicillin or get him off by himself and give him a little extra feed. We have a tranquilizer gun to facilitate treating sick and injured elk. We use a drug called Secostrin which is actually an immobilizing drug, not a tranquilizer. It takes about five minutes for an animal to drop and become immobile once it's been shot and it takes about 30 minutes for the effects of the drug to wear off."

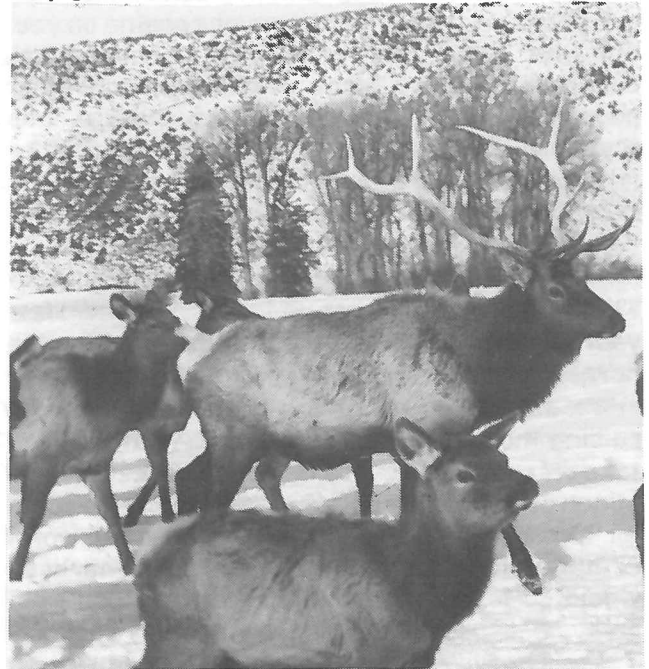
Do you like the new "four point or better" ruling? "I think that it will be all right. It will be hard this first year, but I think that it won't hurt anything and I hope that they continue it. I hope they keep a good record of the animals that are killed."

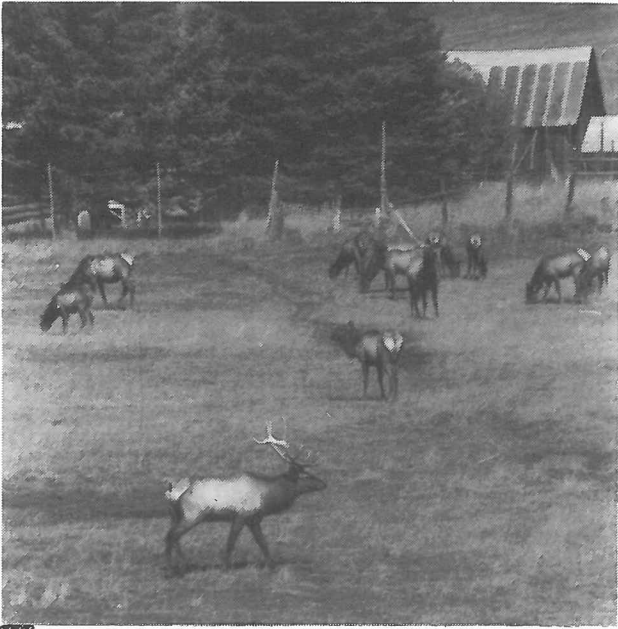
Lou told us a story about one problem he had with a bull. "Occasionally we've had people that would hunt, or even people that would come through the country who would want to take a

bull. A year ago one of my hunters wanted to kill a large herd bull that I had. It was a six-point bull. I didn't really like him, in that he had a fairly narrow rack, but his points were long and he was big. We thought that we had the bull sold to a man up in Montana for \$4,500 for a hunt, so we were saving him for that man. The hunter that was here and wanted to buy the bull offered us \$2,500. Since we thought that we already had the bull sold we didn't take him up on it. That was in October. Then in December the bull hurt himself. I think that he was jumping into the fence around the haystack. He became really weak and sick, and then he died. We lost the whole thing."

Guiding and outfitting is a very big part of Lou's business. Just before hunting season starts every year, it is very hectic around the ranch. It is a big job to get everything organized and ready for his hunters. We asked Lou how he got started on his guide and outfitting business. "We started by letting people come hunting free, just friends. You would be surprised how many friends you have when it's free. People that you would never see all year or know until hunting season. Then they call you up and want to hunt. A few of them, out of appreciation, began to give us some gifts, for example, a radio or stereo set. We began to think that if it was that important to them maybe we should charge some of them. We also found that by charging, we did away with the freeloaders and all the problems that we had when hunting season started.

"Once we made it a business, it was easier to tell people that we were taking hunters as a business, so we can't let you come for free, and it solved some problems that way. We charge hunters \$1,250 for a hunt, whether they get something or not. We charge the same whether they get a small or a large bull. It's their choice.





**"WE CHARGE THE SAME WHETHER THEY GET A SMALL OR A LARGE BULL."**

We've had hunters who wouldn't kill one at all, because he couldn't kill a small bull. We've had about 100 percent success ratio for the past 18 years, until the bad winter we had two years ago that killed a lot of elk. And since then our kill rate has been down a little.

"We haven't had an elk make the record book yet. But we've killed at least two deer that have made **Boone and Crockett Record Book**. They measured them point-wise, and they were like a four-point animal; they had pretty wide spreads, and long points. **Boone and Crockett** is more concerned with the animal's horns being symmetrical, rather than massive. We've had some big elk taken, but none that made **Boone and Crockett**.

"In the beginning we advertised a year or two in **Outdoor Life**. We began to build up a clientele, and we had pretty good hunting, and we have had a lot of repeat business, and we've never advertised since then. It's been mostly repeat business ever since. Now we kind of kid, but it's sort of the truth. About the only way you can get in to hunt with us is if somebody dies, making an opening."

Guiding and outfitting is hard work, and we asked Lou what was the hardest part of the job. "I guess the biggest part would be getting ready in the fall of the year just before the season starts. Another thing that is hard is to try to be enthusiastic about it. When somebody comes to hunt they like to have the guide or the people that they're hunting with be enthused. After you've done it for so many years, and after you've done it for six weeks with no days off, towards the end of the season it's pretty hard to be enthusiastic about what you're doing. Sometimes the weather will help. For one thing, the elk will show up better against the snow background, and it's

easier to track the elk. The thing that would make it harder to get around is whether it's in a vehicle or on horseback. From that standpoint it's harder. I like good weather hunting myself.

"Most of the time we take our hunters to the hunting in vehicles. We may put them on a stand in a park to watch an area or opening where they have a chance to shoot. It's pretty hard to sneak up on an elk, unless the weather conditions are just right. Snow helps because it covers the dry leaves and muffles the sounds. It just absorbs the sounds."

What's been the funniest thing that has happened to Lou in guiding and outfitting? "I don't know that there's been one particular thing that would be especially humorous, but several things over the years that we remember, and seem to tell again and again. One was about a hunter who got left three or four different years in a row, and had to walk home. Everybody seemed to think it was funny; I don't think it was very funny to him. He walked down off of the mountain three or four miles, to where an old farmhand was plowing. He tried to get the old man to bring him to the house, because he was pretty tired. As it turned out the old man didn't care much for hunters anyway, and he told the hunter to take off, and he had to walk the rest of the way on his own. He was really dragging by the time he got in. Since he had to walk home several different times, he thought that the rest of the hunters and guides were plotting against him, but we weren't.

"Usually the deer hunters get up a 'pool' where they all put up \$10 or \$20. The hunter bagging the heaviest deer would get a portion of that. The one to kill first would get a portion, and part would go to the one killing the largest spread. One of the hunters who liked to have me as a guide always bragged that we brought in the largest deer. We didn't necessarily, but he liked to have me take him; he's an older fella. A large deer had already been taken that first morning, and we were trying to beat that deer for weight. We knew the one he killed wouldn't weigh as much as the big deer already in camp. So when we came by the house before we got to the lodge, we cut some holes up under his front legs, and put about forty pounds of lead in there. We took it on over to the lodge then, and hung it in a way so that the lead wouldn't fall out. We still hadn't guessed it quite right and we were about three pounds short of having the heaviest deer. We tried to adjust the scale a little bit, and they caught us. They were pretty disgusted with us, because they knew by looking at him that he wasn't as big as the other one. They couldn't believe that he weighed as much as the scale said he did. And we missed having the heaviest by just a few pounds. If we had put one more five-pound weight in we would have had the heaviest, and wouldn't have had to adjust the scale.

"Over the years we've had quite a few humorous incidents. One time there was a group that had hunted with us for about 10 years and they liked to go to town all dressed up. One of them was named Rudy. After they'd been to town one night the telephone rang, and I answered it. This woman wanted to talk to Rudy, so we got Rudy on the phone and he talked probably for 20 minutes. When he got off the phone, everybody was interested who he was talking to. We thought that maybe it was some lady he had met in town. He said he didn't know who it was. He didn't have any idea who he'd been talking to for 20 minutes. Later we learned that my brother, who lives down the river, and is on the same phone line, had a man working for him whose name was Rudy, and this woman had called up, and gotten our number instead of my brother's, and asked for Rudy. I think she was drunk. She didn't know she was talking to the wrong Rudy, and he didn't know who he was talking to.

"The scariest thing that's happened to us is we've had several people in the 20 years of guide and outfitting who have accidentally discharged a rifle. One time into the house, and one time through the door of the pickup. I guess that would have to be about the most frightening incidents. Nobody has ever been shot, but when you have a rifle discharge in the pickup that's kind of scary. We had a man break his hip one time, and it wasn't scary, but it was hard to get him off the mountain." We asked Lou how the hunting has changed over the years. "I don't think the hunting was as good back 30 years ago as now. Although I think it's deteriorating some now from what it was five years ago. It's a lot tougher now getting the game. The elk used to stay in the area all year, winter on the ranch. There's so much hunting pressure that they move off the ranch and out of the area completely. That makes it tougher to hunt. The early bow and arrow season makes it hard on hunting from the fact that the bow and arrow hunters scare the game out of the country before the regular season ever starts. A lot of the elk move to the land owned by the mines, and power plants. They're more or less protected there, and they soon learn that. That's where they head when the season starts. Up in Jackson, Wyoming, the elk are protected on the refuge. When the season starts, the ones that are close all head there. And they do that some in this area now. We've noticed that change in the last 10 years.

"In future years there will be some hunting, but it will have to be more restricted than it is now. The Game and Fish Department has tried a lot of things to spread the pressure out, like splitting the season. I feel there should be some type of hunting. It may go to a drawing. And if it does it will affect the guide and outfitting

business, because people that draw may not necessarily be the ones that can afford to pay for a guide and outfitter. If we could make enough money doing something else, I think we would quit the hunting business. Maybe I've hunted about three years too long. It gets to where we more or less don't enjoy it as much as we used to, and we don't look forward to it. It's really a lot of work, and there's long hours. It runs from 4 in the morning until sometimes 10 at night, depending on when the group gets in. So hopefully we will get to a point where we don't have to do it."

Lou gave us some advice for future guides. "They wouldn't have to own their own property, but they would need to find an area that would have some promise of game. I think that's important. A lot of people, I guess most of them, think that they are in an area where there's a lot of game. It's important to know the area, and to be able to show game and not have hunters dissatisfied. That would be one important thing. I think that there is room for other people to guide and outfit. I think that you need to make a business out of it, and not just do it on a weekend basis."

What do hunters like most about hunting here? "In the past it has been the availability of the game. But I think we do a good job. This year some of the hunters that hadn't been with us before, didn't have anything to compare the hunting with. All seemed satisfied. In fact, they said they would like to come back. Effort and attitude and accommodations are important."

In conclusion, we asked Lou about the future of his ranch. "I still enjoy ranching. There are many challenging aspects, such as tagging the animals to identify them and working on horn development. I think the horn growth is a hereditary trait that can be developed through selective breeding.

"I think my operation could be helped by having better facilities...more fencing, a building where I could put the squeeze chute inside. I would like to develop more small pastures to use to separate the elk when working them. This would make separating and weaning the calves possible — an important factor in developing a larger, stronger herd of elk."

**"IT'S REALLY A LOT OF WORK, AND**

**THERE'S LONG HOURS IN EVERY DAY."**

#### 1986 Hunting Season

Oct. 11-15 — 4 pt. Bulls and 3 pt. Bucks

Oct. 18-29 — 4 pt. Bulls and 3 pt. Bucks

Nov. 1-9 — any Bull Elk and any buck deer