

# COMMUNITY NEWS

Thursday, Sept. 14, 1989

## RAISING BUFFALO IS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

In January, 1985, Jim Lawson brought three American Bison to his ranch on Highway 20. Today, Lawson has 50 head of these American buffalo.

A fire protection sprinkler specialist, Lawson purchased the property on Highway 20 a number of years ago. He thought it would be nice to raise an exotic breed and first looked at some llamas being raised by a friend.

"Those dumb things came from Peru, I said to myself" he says. He decided he wanted something from North America. "What could be more American than buffalo?" he thought.

Then he realized he didn't know how to locate anyone who had buffalo.

"If you want to buy a buffalo, how do you find them? Do you look in the yellow pages? Where do you look?" he says he asked himself.

He began asking business associates in the San Jose area.

"Someone suggested calling the Cattlemen's Association," he recalls. He talked to a member of the Cattlemen's Association in San Jose.

"They said maybe (I could locate someone) through the National Buffalo Association." Lawson was put in touch with an association made up of people throughout the United States who raise buffalo.

remained in their pen for a few days and then jumped the fence and went up the hill. At first, he thought he had lost them. However, as it turned out, they returned later.

Lawson and his foreman, Merle Parker, have spent long hours building miles of buffalo-proof fences.

According to Lawson, there is a lot of information for cattlemen on raising cattle, but very little information available to the buffalo raiser.

"There are so many things they don't know about the buffalo," he says.

Among some of the things Lawson has learned about this breed of bovine are the following:

- Life expectancy of a buffalo is around 40 years. They are productive between 30 to 35 years.
- They are basically wild animals and can be dangerous.
- Buffalo owners need special fencing to enclose their animals.
- If a buffalo sees a hole, it believes it can go through it and often does; or tears down the fence or equipment trying.
- Buffalo cannot be herded like domestic cattle breeds. If you are trying to herd them

• In an area where buffalos have the choice of standing under shade trees or standing in the open, they

will stay in the open, even on a hot sunny day.

• The cow goes off by herself to give birth. If young calves disturb her, the bull will chase them away.

• After the calf is born, and the mother has cleaned and fed it, the bull comes over and licks the new baby. He is followed by other members of the herd. They all take turns welcoming the new arrival in his way.

Lawson says a newborn calf takes nourishment almost immediately after it is born. It drops out, stretches, stands and nurses.

As a testimony to the importance in the herd of leaving the calving mother alone, Lawson and Parker

witnessed the bull's authority in this matter.

Two young bulls and a heifer were cavorting around near a cow in labor. When they seemingly ignored accepted procedure, the large bull came to the area and roared, sending the youngsters hopping.

"It sounded like the roar of a lion," Lawson says.

Although the buffalo raiser says there are no natural enemies to his herd, he is not talking about illness. Over the years, he has lost five head through pneumonia.

He says this is hard to believe, since these creatures will stand facing a blinding snow storm and survive, where cattle will freeze. The buffalo, however, does not travel well. Changes in climate often can be detrimental.

The animals he has lost to pneumonia died in the summer, rather than during cold weather. He believes the animals born on his hillside ranch are more acclimated.

Pneumonia robbed the buffalo raiser of his very first bull. Everything he and the veterinarian could possibly do was done to save it. Tears were shed when this big animal succumbed.

( CONTINUE ON THE NEXT PAGE )

**"Buffalo have no natural enemies other than man."**

His first three -- a bull, cow and heifer calf - were purchased in December, 1984, from the Umatilla Ranch in Hermiston, Ore. They were delivered in January, 1985.

"Raising buffalo is an educational experience," Lawson says. One of the first things he learned about his new livestock is they are far more agile than they appear.

He says they are as fast as a quarter horse for short distances and can jump flat footed over any fence they can put their heads over.

According to Lawson, his first three buffalo

into a small area, they will always go around. However, if one of them does go through the other will all follow.

- They are creatures of habit, which is helpful knowledge when herding them.
- Once in a new enclosure, they will travel the entire perimeter checking out the fence line.
- The buffalo have no natural enemies other than man. They are left alone by mountain lions, panthers and even grizzly bears. These predators may attempt to prey on the calves but never on the adults.

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( CONTINUE ) His head now hangs in the Lawson game room, not as a trophy, but in remembrance of his majesty.

According to Lawson, because the buffalos are wild creatures, they will not allow anyone close enough to them to feed them by hand. Because of this, he was surprised on the day he removed the bull's head and hide and disposed of the body. While he and his helper were parked in the pickup near the herd, two of the cows came over and licked their arms.

"We had worked a long time that day on the bull. We must have had his scent on us," he says.

It is possible for the men to work near the herd, but the animals will move away if they come too near.

"They won't bother us, but they watch us all the time," he says. "If a person gets too close to a new calf, however, they get that look in their eye and their tail rises, he says.

Lawson has added to his herd only twice. He got some public animals sold at auction in Denver and recently purchased several from Sonoma County.

He says the animals from the Denver auction are descendants of the last 100 from, the great herds that were saved at Yellowstone. He bought seven head near Healdsburg from a vice president of Louisiana Pacific, but as yet only

has six of them. Other buffalo owners have not acquired the handling expertise of Lawson and his foreman.

"Stock trailers are no good for transporting buffalo," he explains. This is because of the "hole" psychology of the beast. Most stock trailers have a feed loft through which light enters to help livestock feel secure. If the buffalo can see out, it thinks it, can get out and tries.

Using buffalo psychology, Lawson and Parker have prepared special pens for gathering the animals once a year to vaccinate them and give them any individual personal care they require.

These ranchers have developed a system of fences through which the buffalo gradually

are herded into a narrower section. In one part of the system, there is sectioned turnstyle. The animals are herded into it. The walls gradually turn until they face into another pen into which the men want to hold the animals.

Another trick Lawson and Parker have learned in herding Ute animals is to take them the same way every time, taking advantage of this natural habit in the buffalo.

Because Lawson is not eager to put his herd through any more trauma than is absolutely necessary. They are penned only when absolutely necessary. Health care is important and Lawson's herd is certified brucellosis and tuberculosis free.

Whenever the Highway 20 buffalo raiser purchases new stock, it is kept separate from the other animals for an incubation period.

Although Lawson has traded some of his animals, he has never sold any his buffalo for slaughter. He says many buffalo raisers do and say the meat brings double that of beef cattle. Not only that, all parts of the animal are saleable. The man from whom Lawson purchased his first animals sells hoofs, horns, and hides and well as their meat.

"He makes buffalo robes and, clothes from the hides," says Betty Lawson, who once accompanied her husband on a trip to the Umatilla Ranch in Oregon.

Lawson thinks he has all the buffalo his spread can handle. So far this year his cows have had 15 calves with 11 more due. For the first time, since he started raising buffalo, he is faced with selling some of his animals.

The buffalo raiser thinks it is interesting that hunters had brought the creature to near total extinction between 1885 and 1890. He says

maybe 100 to 300 of the great herds survived. A few of these were the woods buffalo from Canada as well, as the plains buffalo from the U.S.

Today there are approximately 600,000. They are mostly privately owned, he says.

Probably the biggest worry of this buffalo raiser is the public. Although there are "no trespassing" signs along his fences on Highway 20, people still will climb the fence, or, hang

over it to take pictures.

"One day we found a woman in the middle of the field, trying to take a picture," he says.

By FAE WOODWARD

Contact James Arens at  
udjja@pacijic.net