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A HOME WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM - RIGHT HERE

MENDOCINO COUNTY - A virtual Utopia for fans of the Wild West, this spectacular sanctuary is home to 63 majestic Bison and five humans on approximately 1,000 acres.

J Bar S Ranch is perched on Highway 20 just west of the Lake County line. Though modest from the roadway, beyond the gated entrance is a western wonderland.

"I've kind of got it made," Jim Lawson, owner of the ranch admits from his home on Buffalo Road, surrounded by the beauty of the beasts.

People shuffle in and out of the small store all day, buying Bison products such as New York steaks, Rib-eye, Tri-tip, hamburger and hotdogs.

A large fur hangs from the wall over the cash register, across from leather vests hanging above Buffalo cookbooks. The grounds, the store, the animals are kept immaculate. Lawson doesn't believe in doing anything unless he does it with perfection. He was born and raised on ranches and originally hails from Texas, a place he says is "a great place to be from." He loves living in Mendocino County and says he's been all over the world and wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

The ranch boasts wedding venue with a private lake overlooking the mountains. Recently Chef Emeril Lagasse visited as a feature on preparing Buffalo meat. Bison are not simply grand, prehistoric looking animals that lend to the landscape. Nutritional comparisons provided by the FDA reveal that Bison North American Buffalo, is lower in fat, calories and cholesterol than beef, pork, chicken and salmon. It is also higher in iron, protein and vitamin B-12. The meat is processed and packaged in Lewiston, Utah where it is USDA stamped. According to the FDA, "the meat from Bison is a highly nutrient dense food because of the proportion of protein, fat, mineral, and fatty acids to its caloric value."

Some area shops and restaurants are sold on the taste and benefits of Bison. The Blue Bird Café in Hopland, Redwood Valley Café



The bison at the "Buffalo Ranch" along Highway 20.

in Redwood Valley and Renee's House of B's in Garberville serve it. Mariposa Market in Willits, Harvest Market in Fort Bragg and Ukiah Natural Foods buy Bison from J Bar S Ranch.

However fabulous the meat, it pales in comparison to a visit to the ranch. A tour on a revamped military truck uncovers a rainforest-like terrain. A stop at Lawson's home leaves the spectator with a dropped jaw and the thought of having a dime for every time WOW! is expressed. A home built by Gary Masson is complete with an elevator, built for Lawson's late wife to facilitate moving through the home when she became ill. A saloon was re-created with the décor of the early 1900s, complete with a Brunswick-Balke-Collender Co. bar that was built prior to refrigeration and a pool table of the same brand with intricate legs. A national cash register gleaming golden is the first National Cash Register with the features of lights and receipts.

A Wurlitzer juke box bubbles in neon with songs by artists like The Drifters on vinyl. "King" one of the first three Bison Lawson owned looks protectively over the room above a fireplace. The blackjack table was the first with a woman dealer. Each piece of furniture has a story rich with Americana. Antique slot

machines line the walls. The "Dewey," made by Mills is from 1904. The Big Six Wheel hovers high above a man of six-foot-tall with colorful horses on the wheel. The collection in the saloon, though vast, is mere smattering of Lawson's casino antiques.

Jim Nehrkorn is the mechanical guru who repairs the slot machines which are displayed in a museum-like room near the store. The wood and details are perfectly preserved. A 1928 Mills Romanhead has a carved Adonis-looking profile, while the 1906 Caille's Centaur can be examined for hours in admiration of the fine craftsmanship of the era.

All accounting is handled by Michelle Dunnington, whom Lawson speaks highly of. He recruited a family-style team to share in his vision of a perfect life.

Lawson and his wife Betty made a home where the Buffalo roam, among friends, among American history just around the corner from Lake County.

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