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# Cow Camp Craving

This couple knows exactly where they want to be each summer, and it ain't the ranch office

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA HEMKEN

**W**hile the modern realities of today's cattle production have all but eliminated the need for summer cow camps in remote areas, that isn't the case with the Diamond D Cattle Company near Dubois, Wyoming. Its U.S. Forest Service lease wouldn't be possible without the seasonal range riders.

Steve and Kathy Mecum of Crowheart, Wyoming, have managed the Diamond D cow camps from July 1 to October 1 for 20 years. In the winter Steve fills his time building saddles

in his basement workshop.

"I used to start colts when it was 10 below zero, standing outside on frozen ground," Steve recalls. "If your feet are frozen long enough, you start thinking it would be nice to do something inside in the winter. That was the catalyst to me beginning to learn how to build saddles."

Steve found it hard to stay indoors and concentrate on leatherwork in the summer, though, and jumped at the chance to run the Diamond D cow camps.

"They were having trouble keeping

people," Steve says. "As soon as they saw a wolf or a bear sitting on a dead cow—and they were supposed to run it off—they didn't like it. But I guess I've been around enough bears that it doesn't bother me, or I'm dumber. As soon as people don't want to do something, I get more interested in doing it."

The Walt Disney family purchased the Rocking Chair Ranch, now the Diamond D Cattle Company, in 1976. The first working ranch they purchased in the area was in the DuNoir Valley in 1968. After Walt Disney passed away in 1966, his widow Lillian Disney and two daughters, Diane and Sharon, formed Retlaw Enterprises (Walter spelled backwards). Retlaw owned agriculture properties in Wyoming, as well as citrus groves and farms in California. The Wyoming ranches were a for-profit business and at their peak ran



Steve and Kathy Mecum have managed cow camps together for nearly 20 years.



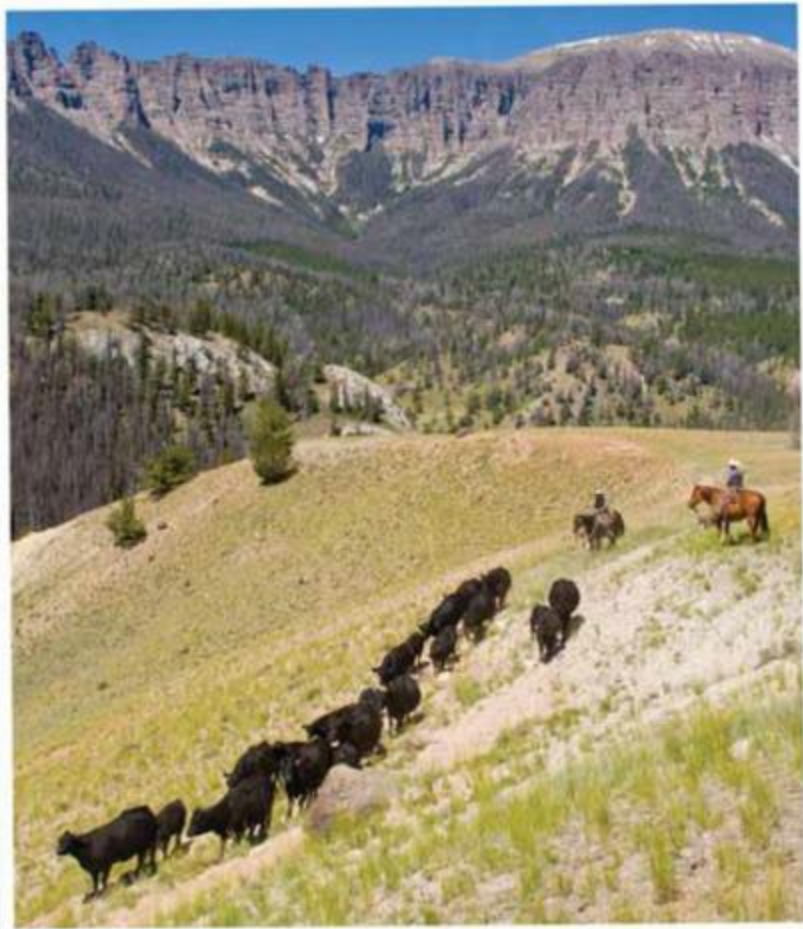


Steve Mecum has guided and worked out of cow camps in Wyoming's Absaroka Mountains for nearly 40 years.

The Diamond D Cattle Company headquarters is located north of Dubois, Wyoming.







(Above) Steve and Kathy Mecum trail cattle down to the river. The outfit runs commercial Angus, good sturdy cattle that can handle this rough country and come off the mountain in the fall slick, pregnant and in good condition with a great calf walking behind them. (Below) Steve and Kathy Mecum take a lunch break at one of the Diamond D's remote cow camps.



800 pairs and 2,000 yearlings.

Reg Phillips was Retlaw's last manager prior to the sale of their Wyoming holdings—the DuNoir in 1988 and the Rocking Chair (Diamond D) in 1989—to current owners Jeff and Susan Sussman. Phillips has managed the Diamond D for over 24 years and is responsible for the innovative techniques acknowledged by the Wyoming Game & Fish Department with the 2012 Landowner of the Year award. Over the years, Phillips has developed fencing layout and seasonal rotations of cattle to help reduce conflict with prime grizzly and wolf range.

Along with the fencing, the ranch utilizes range riders, the Mecums, to “run interference” between their cattle and predators. Diamond D cattle



graze Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, State, and private lands that host a significant number of grizzly bears and wolves in addition to deer, elk and waterfowl. The ranch also considered the migration path of the Wiggins Fork elk herd in their fencing layout to minimize obstacles that might impede their movement.

The Diamond D is the main ranch grazing the Absaroka Mountains in the Shoshone National Forest. There are four Diamond D cow camps, two with cabins that the Mecums use horses to pack their gear into, and two at which they use their camp trailer. The Mecums are in cow camp four to seven days a week, depending on what's going on with the cattle, predators, fencing and forage.

"Most outfits don't have [cow camps] anymore," Steve says. "They might have someone come look around once a week, but not riding daily. I am a little bit twisted in the sense that, while I don't like bears killing my cows, they are one of the most magnificent animals in this country and I love seeing them. I know at least 20 people who have been bitten by bears, so I have a lot of respect for them."

"The wolves are a bigger problem than the bears. They kill more stuff or they chew stuff up and don't eat it to

teach their pups how to hunt. They can do a lot more damage than bear."

#### RANCHING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Part of the Mecums' job is public relations for cattle and ranching to recreational users of USFS lands.

"We have folks that don't like cows, and the cows will go into the camp areas," Kathy says. "Cows really like ashes, they lap charcoal up. They love campfire rings. Other folks don't like the cows rubbing on their campers. Usually, first thing in the morning we

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go and move all the cows out of the campground. Everyone says 'oh thank you!' Some think it's neat to see cowboys and cows."

"Last week we had a sick cow and a lame bull," Kathy continues. "A Kansas family with young kids came over to watch us bring them into the corral. I went over and thanked them for being quiet, and explained what we were doing. The kids petted the horses and wanted to know their names. We try to go talk with folks as a PR thing. We've all got to share the forest."

The Diamond D range lease will hold 1,400 yearlings and 840 pairs. The cattle travel in a circle from ranch headquarters, leaving from the same gate they return to at the end of the grazing season. The ranch cut a trail below Horse Creek Road to access into their furthest range near Double Cabin, which Steve calls "the trail to hell."

"Normally we bring in cattle on the trail," Kathy says, "but it was in poor shape and one year we had a bunch of yearlings. As yearlings are like teenagers, we decided to take them

down the road. We were moving the yearlings during the week when there wasn't much traffic on the road, so we thought we would be fine.

"We come around a corner and there is a little girl on a bicycle with training wheels wearing a helmet. Her parents are right behind her in a vehicle, and they thought there would be no one on the road and were letting her practice. And here we come with a hundred yearlings.

"The yearlings see her and scatter like a flock of birds. The mother ran out and grabbed her little girl. After that we decided we're never taking them on the road again. It is easier to go through the trees."

### HUMANS PENALIZED

Each year the Diamond D works with the Forest Service to do a grazing plan, which can include changing rotation, moving cattle differently, and grazing certain areas for a shorter time period to increase forage and protect riparian areas.

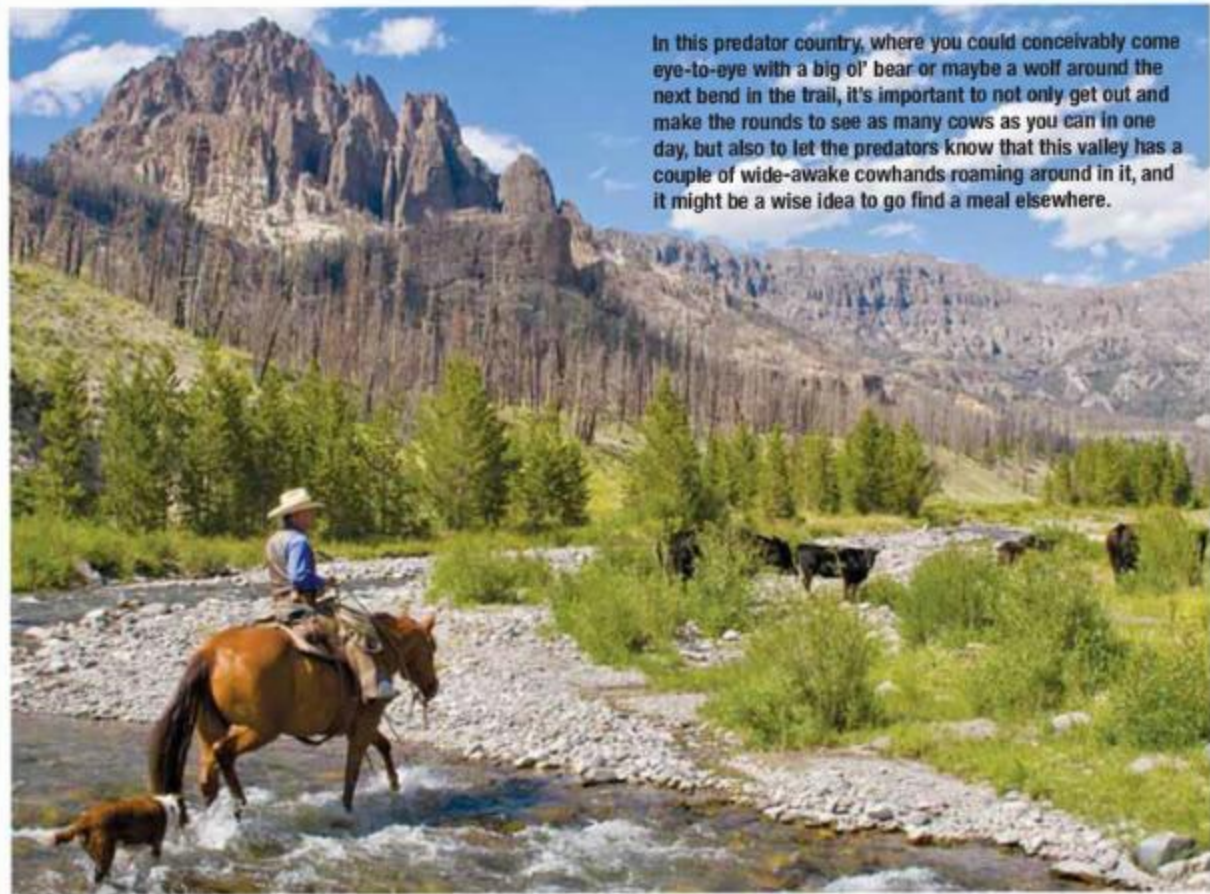
Steve has managed cattle and guided

for outfitters in the mountains between Dubois and Jackson for over 40 years. To him, a few of the Forest Service regulations are illogical some ways.

"I've looked at a lot of things that the Forest Service has done to make the human impact on the forest less. I've seen people get citations for where a horse has pulled back and ringed a tree. Within two hundred yards of that camp, I've seen a bull elk kill 10 trees in one spot from raking their antlers on the bark. Since we are humans out here we are penalized for it."

In 2011 the Double Cabin area had a lightning-caused wildfire. The Diamond D lost cattle when a wind caused the fire to jump ridges.

"The [Forest Service] is worried about someone ringing a tree, and then a wildfire comes right through that campsite and 25,000 acres are burned," Steve says. "This is big, huge country. There are natural changes happening on a gargantuan scale. Changes that no one has control over, but we get penalized for little things and I do not see the logic of it."



In this predator country, where you could conceivably come eye-to-eye with a big ol' bear or maybe a wolf around the next bend in the trail, it's important to not only get out and make the rounds to see as many cows as you can in one day, but also to let the predators know that this valley has a couple of wide-awake cowhands roaming around in it, and it might be a wise idea to go find a meal elsewhere.





The Mecums bring along some lip-smackin' hot dogs for the canine crew's mid-day protein snack.

## MOUNTAIN GRAZING

"There are a lot of people who think cows are stupid," Steve says. "Tom Dorrance would say 'people who think cows are dumb have usually been outsmarted by one.' That is an absolute true statement. When humans are put under stress a lot of them don't think very clearly, and cows are just a little more that way than humans.

"If we give them a little bit more time, stand in a little different spot, or come at them from a slightly different angle, things smooth out. This is really critical in this type of country. You don't have to worry about it so much if you're in a wide-open prairie. You can do all kinds of stupid stuff to the cow, and you can get the job done. That doesn't work so well up here.

"You have to handle cattle differently in the mountains. It is not a timed event. There are things you can do to cause your horse to sweat a lot and cows to run all over the place. If you learn how a cow's mind works, you can have things run a lot smoother if you just give them a little bit more time to figure it out. You can load a cow in a trailer by yourself on 500 acres if you approach it right."

Grazing cattle in the mountains requires good ranch horses that can

travel, and the Mecums' herd contains Quarter Horses, Tennessee Walking Horses and a Tennessee Walker/Andalusian cross that is Steve's favorite roping horse.

"I've never wanted to be a ranch manager," Steve relates, "because I like the horses and cows and being out here way more than being in an office dealing with the politics, paperwork and regulations. I like seeing how well

I can get my horses to work.

Steve strives to handle cattle in rough country in the most efficient way and not create more work for himself, not stress the cattle, and to achieve gain on the calves.

"That's what I like, so here I am. There are less cow camp jobs than there used to be. That's what I like about [the Diamond D], it's stayed the same for many years." **WR**



These tough horses know all about up and down, just like the cows. The Mecums' herd contains Quarter Horses, Tennessee Walking Horses and a Tennessee Walker/Andalusian cross that is Steve's favorite roping horse.