# Ranching with Team Spirit

*by Barbara LaBarbara*

Twenty-five years ago, when Phelps Dodge Corporation began purchasing ranches in the southwest corner of New Mexico, the neighbors were angry. They could envision their valley being ruined because Phelps Dodge was diverting ranch waters to their nearby copper mines.

Instead, Pacific Western Land Company was created. With more than 615,000 acres, it is one of the largest and most profitable ranch conglomerates in the Western United States.

Under the management of Jimmy Shelley, this huge ranch is run much like any large corporation where the bottom line regulates the operation. Shelley has five district managers known as "cowboys" that work for him. One of the cowboys is Lauren Isaacks, a woman.

"I have no problem with having a woman cowboy; I was raised with it. Lauren handles her job. I'd hire her again," he declares.

As a rule, the cowboys work as a team, yet each has their own responsibilities. There are too many cattle to do it alone. Shelley attributes the ranch's success to the quality of cowboys. The cowboys attribute the success to good management.

"I can't be an effective manager and be in the office so I ride every day, Shelley says. Managing Pacific Western (PW) has been easy because I grew up here and know the country."

Once a year Shelley and the cowboys meet to discuss ideas and needs of the ranch. Giving them part ownership in the decision making process enforces the team spirit he has created.

They prioritize improvements based on cost, resources and need. In the last year, they have installed 12 permanent water systems, five storage tanks at windmills and miles of new fencing. A full-time fence man was hired.

The cowboys know expenditures for the ranch have to be cost effective. The bottom line has an effect on their benefit package. Besides their salary, house, utilities, freezer beef, new pickup, 401K pension plan and stock investments in Phelps Dodge, there is yearly profit sharing.

Shelley attended New Mexico State University and graduated with a general agriculture degree. He returned to the valley and taught school. In 1982 he joined PW as cattle foreman and now is general manager.

"I'm happy here and love what I do," he says. "It has always been my objective to make my living in the cattle industry—outdoors and in a management position."

A college education among the cowboys is not unusual. Isaacks, for example, attended New Mexico State University and was New Mexico State Fair Queen and Miss Rodeo New Mexico.

She started with PW eight years ago. She was doing office and computer work when she asked to become a cowboy. Today she wears many hats. She is administrative coordinator, purchasing agent and registered herd manager. She also does her share of cowboying.

*(top) Lauren Issacks working the hooks at branding time.*
*(below) Isaacks with her favorite Angus cow and calf*

Even though she works from sunup to sundown, she sees being free from the clock as one of her biggest benefits. When people ask her why she does what she does, she says: "If I have to tell you, you wouldn't understand."

As purchasing agent, Isaacks justifies every dollar that is spent, whether it is for hay, feed, medicine or new cattle.

"We are reestablishing ourselves as registered breeders," says Isaacks. "I began breeding for modern, more useful Angus three years ago. The average age of our Angus cows is 10 years and within three years those cows will be replaced."

All registered heifers and approximately 25 registered bull calves are kept each year. They purchased 20 registered cows for replacements last year and will buy 20 more this year.

They keep 250 heifers from the commercial herd each year. The balance of the calves go to a long-time buyer. They sell the calves off the cow at seven to eight months old and ship them immediately.

"Our primary interest with the Angus herd at first was to develop a Brangus herd," Shelley says. "Now we are upgrading our Angus program and are having more success there than with our Brangus. I think it has a lot to do with Lauren's management."

Artificial insemination (A.I.) is used on the registered Angus and Brangus herds. Doing A.I. and veterinarian work are two other hats Isaacks wears.

"I think A.I. is a miracle," she says. "You can mail order, get a straw, put it in a cow, and out comes a calf."

Because of the terrain of the ranch, bulls are selected not only for size and meat, but for endurance. The country is big, dry, rough, full of canyons, rock, brush and rattlesnakes.

"I'm torn with the management problem of teaching the cows to survive on the rocks and feeding them," says Isaacks. "I guess you either feed them and they look pretty or you put them out, they get tough and make good cows. Right now we are choosing to make good cows even though our heifers look like refugees from Ethiopia."

Shelley agrees there is a problem in drawing the line between economy and eye appeal.

"When I was buying bulls, all I could find was big, fat, show-type animals," he says. "The ones we raised were working as yearlings and the ones we bought were sore footed after six weeks of service.

"We haven't figured out how to raise a range bull with the eye appeal necessary to please the buyers. Yet I have not talked to anyone who has bought a bull from us that said he was not a good-doing bull."

Their objective is to raise bulls that can go right to work, but because they don't look good, marketing is a problem. That surprised Shelley because all ranchers talk about the same problems.

"We are learning success in the bull market doesn't happen overnight," Isaacks says. However, they do see results from their efforts. The registered herd is better, the calving percent is up, the calves are more uniform in age and size, and they bring more money because of the consistency. They have started using black bulls on the Herefords which has improved the overall calf quality.

Since Issacks has worked there PW has increased numbers from 1,500 cows to 1,800 with a marked improvement in the range.

One of the biggest problems they have with the ranch is corporate rules that are structured toward mining and are not cattle related. However, being a corporation, Shelley and the cowboys are mandated to watch the bottom line, which has made PW a profitable operation. Even though PW is run like a large corporation, there are things that stay the same on a working ranch.

"We keep track of our calves' value based on our expenses," she says. "We turn $1.5 million over to the parent company every year. That's a tidy profit."

Among her responsibilities as administrative assistant is recordkeeping. The ranch consists of 59,861 state-owned acres, 80,759 BLM acres, 68,892 Forest Service acres and 406,079 deeded acres. Staying current with the rules and regulations of each agency is a job in itself.

Cattle performance records are computerized. Computer experts at Phelps Dodge developed a sophisticated program that has a complete history of all cattle.

They run 1,500 head of commercial cows and 300 head of registered cows. The biggest difference between the registered and commercial herds is the registered herd is handled more and gets more feed. The registered herd is in a three-section pasture. They are fed every evening during the calving season. They wean 600-pound calves compared to the commercial herds weaning weights of 450 to 500.

The ranch has run Angus cattle for 25 years. At one time they had the best bloodlines in the country. As time passed, the herd became outdated.

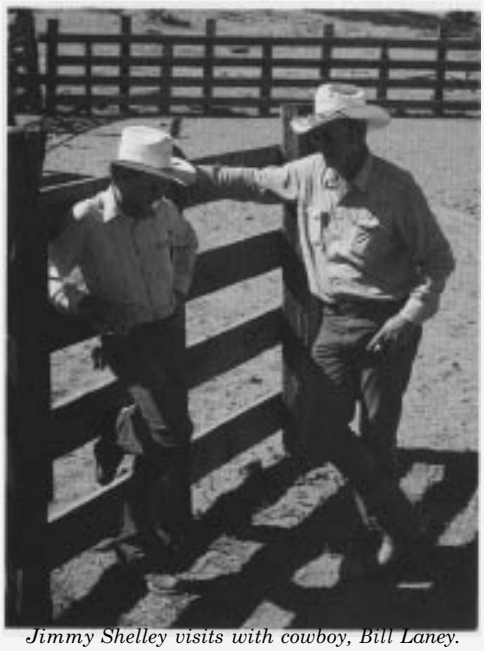
The month of June is spent gathering calves and branding. As the ropes twirl, the cowboys, including Isaacks, take pride in catching both hind legs of a calf with one throw. The horse stops on a dime and holds the rope taut. The dust from the roping and the smoke from the branding iron gives an illusion of the past.

In less than 60 seconds, a calf can be roped, branded, ear tagged, fly tagged, vaccinated and castrated.

The chuck wagon still comes at lunch time. Even though it is a new Ford Bronco the old west is alive in the fajitas, potatoes fried up with jalapeno and onions, beans and homemade corn tortillas.

Wednesday nights there is a jam session with a piano, guitars, a violin, a mandolin and lots of singing. Relatives and friends are there. The children play outside after dark.

There is the unmistakable sense of respect here. An old fashion respect that the cowboys have for each other, their cattle and the land.

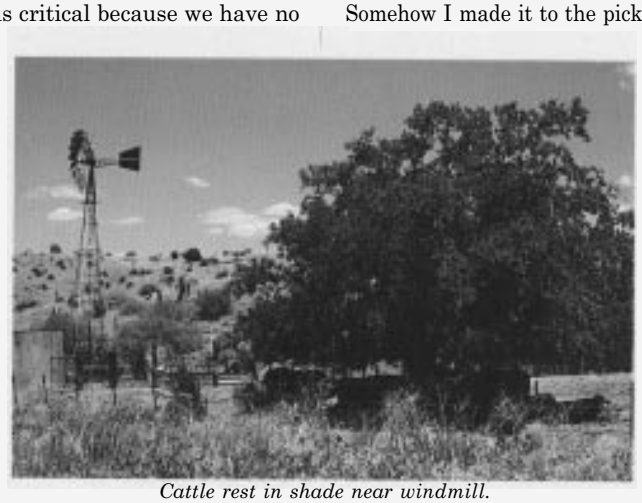


*Jimmy Shelley visits with cowboy, Bill Laney.*

Respect for the land has resulted in PW's cowboys attending the Alan Savory Holistic Resource Management School.

"We have learned to watch for grasses and plants that are dying out and how much bare ground and erosion there is," Isaacks says. "Our evaluation effects how we use each pasture. Right now proper management is critical because we have no water."

The entire ranch is managed with an emphasis on the environment. However, the Greenwood Ranch, which is part of PW, is subjugated to the Savory System and is on a planned rotational grazing system. The cattle are heavily stocked in small pastures to eat the tender grasses and break up the soil. They are moved frequently. There are seven miles of electric fence.



*Cattle rest in shade near windmill.*

At one time areas of the ranch had so many tumbleweeds they blocked the highway and knocked down fences. Cattle love young, tender tumbleweeds, so a heavy concentration of cattle were put in the tumbleweed pastures for short periods of time. Today the pastures are solid grass.

The ranch has a wildlife manager that supplements the deer, guides the hunts and monitors what is taken. The wildlife is intensely managed, including a growing population of mountain lions and bear. During hunting season the cowboys patrol the ranch watching for poachers.

The "5th Avenue Environmentalists" who know nothing of how to manage a ranch, cattle or wildlife are very vocal and a problem for the ranch.

The general public is destructive and belligerent when told they are on private property. Isaacks feels it goes back to not having respect for other people or their property

The biggest non-monetary asset that seems to contribute to the ranches success is "integrity." At first people in the valley hated PW because they are big. Today they have gained the goodwill of their neighbors.

Once a year PW hosts a barbecue and ranch rodeo. They loan equipment and spend about $2,000 a year at the local fair buying junior livestock. At shipping time they allow young people to choose a steer and raise it for a 4-H or FFA project and not pay for it until the steer sells. They pay the same price at no interest that the buyer paid at shipping time. Isaacks A.I.s juniors' cows free of charge.

The neighbors all came to help two years ago when Isaacks was thrown from her horse. The accident happened as she crossed a river chasing a stray. The bank caved in and while struggling to regain his footing the horse fell on her and stepped on the side of her face, breaking her jaw. He climbed to solid ground and waited for her.

Isaacks finally crawled from under the water knowing she was lucky to be alive. Not realizing how badly she was hurt, she got on her horse and herded the unwanted stray to the corral.

"By then I was losing it and knew I was hurt pretty bad. Somehow I made it to the pickup and radioed for help," she says.

Three surgeries later and with her jaw bolted and wired together for six weeks, she lost 35 pounds. It took nine months to recover. But as soon as she was able, she was back on her horse.

Isaacks has seven registered Angus cows and four registered Brangus cows of her own. Those are pastured at a friend's place to keep from violating PW rules of mixing personal cows with company cows.

She is president of the New Mexico Angus Association and is on the board of directors for the Southwest Brangus Association.

Her advice to other women is: "If you want it bad enough, you can do it. Remember ranching is a man's world and proceed accordingly."

Her goal for the ranch is much like Shelley's: "To have Pacific Western Land Company recognized for raising the best cattle in the country and in the process see continual improvement in range conditions."

"When I am old," says Isaacks, "I want to drive back through here, see good grass and be able to say I had a hand in making this country better."

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