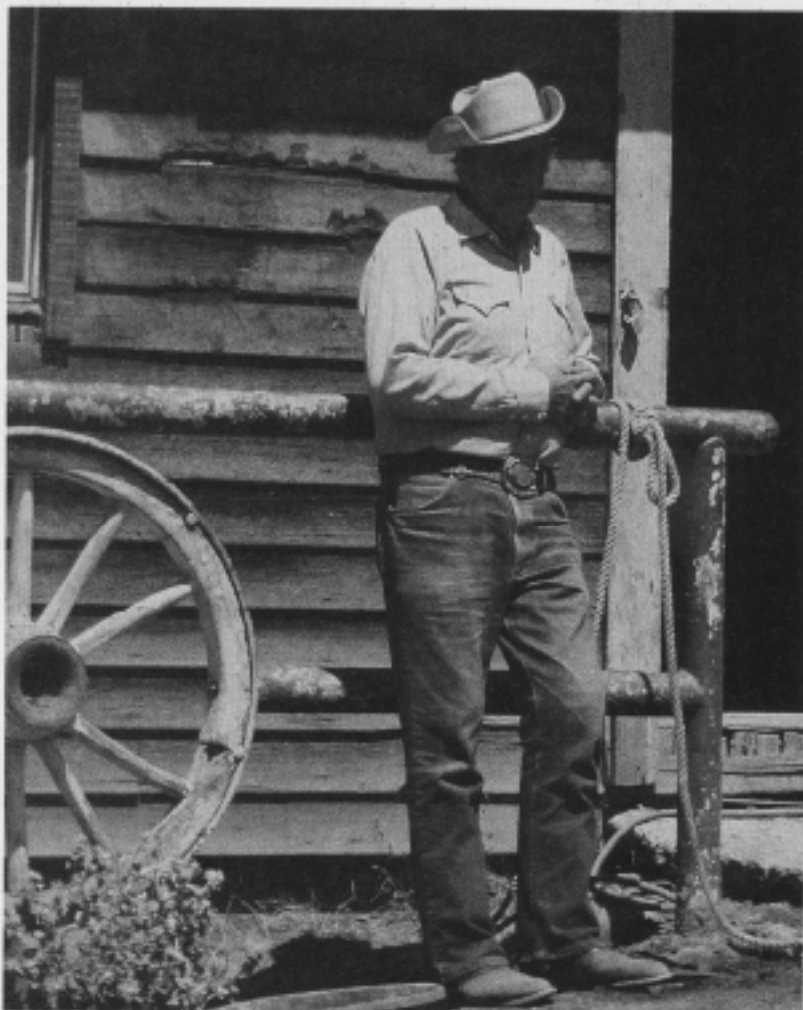


# Where the West Abides

*Rivermere Ranch, set in the rugged foothills of the Sierra, is home to rattlesnakes, mountain lions, Angus cattle and a pioneering cattleman named John Hershey.*

**By Barbara LaBarbara**



*John Hershey Jr.'s pioneer spirit helps him manage a 1,000-head herd of commercial Angus cows on 30,000 acres.*

**Q** uiet. You can almost hear the silence and feel the stillness.

Off in the distance, there is a whistle and a cowboy's voice echoes through the canyon. The bellow of a cow and an occasional yip from a dog break the silence.

"They are coming," John Hershey says in a whisper.

We wait. A few moments later, the first black heifers cautiously step into an opening and head toward the spring.

On the horizon a young Indian woman pauses, shifts in her saddle, whistles and watches as the dogs gather the cattle. A cowboy and his horse appear, urging more cattle toward the water.

A heifer breaks away. "Front," yells the cowboy. Within seconds, the dogs have the heifer back with the herd.

A working Rivermere Ranch lies in the rugged foothills of the mighty Southern Sierra. Here, for 21 years, John Hershey Jr. has battled the elements of nature and embraced an Old West cowboy's way of life.

With a certain eagerness, he faces the challenges of running 1,000 head of commercial Angus cows on 30,000 acres. Water shortages, no electricity, 500 miles of fence to fix and 100 miles of roads to cover only slightly stifle his pioneering spirit.

Bordered by the Tule River Indian Reservation on the north, the ranch is located 20 miles east of Porterville, Calif.

The ranch headquarters are five miles from the main road. The property rises quickly from an elevation of 1,200 feet to 7,000. "It goes up pretty fast and we have lots of trees, brush, and rocks," Hershey says. "It's rough country out here."

Besides rattlesnakes there are mountain lions, bear, bobcats and coyotes to contend with. According to Hershey, the mountain lions have been a problem recently. He has found three of their kills this summer.

There is an inescapable beauty here. Wild flowers, green grasses, and Buckeye trees adorn the spring. In late summer golden grasses and oak trees accent massive rocks that protrude in strange forma-

tions. Buttonwillow growing along the creek banks, wild turkeys and Indian corn grinding mortar and pestles worn in the rocks nearby remind you of a time past when the Indians were the masters of the land.

The ranch's foothills are covered with dryland grasses of filaree, brome clover and wild oats. Big pastures are fenced off to allow the cattle early and late feed. "The cattle know the ground and work their way back and forth," Hershey says. "They are their own conservationists."

This rancher has 15,000 deeded acres and a 15,000 acre BLM and Forest Service lease. The BLM lease is through the Department of Interior and the Forest Service lease is through the Department of Agriculture. They charge a fee based on animal unit per month.

The leases are an important part of cattle production on the ranch. The cattle are equally important in preservation of the forest. If the grasses were not grazed off every year, they would add to fire hazards which already exist here.



PHOTO BY OWS PHOTOGRAPHY

*Rivermere Ranch foreman Dave Carter oversees the Angus operation.*

Hershey has 52 water rights for the natural springs. He has riparian rights in the creeks running through the ranch, which means he can use the water 100 feet on both sides of the creeks.

Since water shortage can be a problem, Hershey has mastered the technique of developing springs. When they find a clear flow of water, they either build a dam or sink a perforated pipe to guide the water to a place it can be useful.

"When we came up here 21 years ago, there wasn't enough water and not a decent corral on the place," Hershey says. "Now we have seven corrals and are holding our own on water."

Hershey had to build his herd from 250 cows to 1,000. He did it by saving replacement heifers 10 years."

Then in the 1977 drought, he lost about half the herd and had to start building again.

Today, the herd is stable and he takes pride in keeping it that way. He runs 1,000 head of cows and keeps 100 heifers each year. At the other end, he culls 100 head of cows. With this routine the herd

is replaced every 10 years.

He chooses his replacement heifers on the criteria of visual appraisal. He hasn't bought a heifer in years.

The mothers are on their own when they calve. With the type of operation Hershey has, it is hard to figure what percent calf crop he gets, but he believes it is about 80 percent. In two of the sections where the country is a little tamer, he gets close to a 100 percent calf crop.

They calve year-round because it is impossible in the rough country of Rivermere to get all the bulls out at one time. Hershey says a neighbor once told him, "You are a whole lot better off with a little calf than no calf at all."

The weaning weights on the calves average 450 pounds. They don't get pampered or get any extra feed. The bull calves are castrated whenever cows are gathered.

He only buys two truck loads of hay a year for the horses and to feed the weaning calves for a few days to keep them from wandering off.

The bred heifers get some block sup-

plement to maintain their growth pattern while they take care of their first calf. Hershey believes if you don't take of them, their size suffers accordingly, and you suffer later on when you cull.

Hershey runs 50 head of bulls and replaces them every five years. His bull buying is based on visual evaluation and reputation of the breeder and the herd.

This year he bought nine yearling bulls and 11 two-year-olds. He usually purchases all two-year-olds.

The older bulls gather their own herds during a season. When the breeding is done, they go to the top of the hills, rest and get ready for next season.

When the bulls are out in the wild, they get really aggressive. Hershey says they have a few "Orahana" bulls that have never seen a person. They will wait in the brush, see you come by and charge you. "Orahana" is a cowboy term used to describe bull calves that are inadvertently left in the wild.

"When we were selling bulls, we raised them on roughage and didn't pamper them," Hershey says. "I wouldn't buy a

halter broke bull, they just won't herd."

He maintains the registered breeder should visit the ranches and see how the commercial man really operates. They should be more aware of the commercial producer's needs because in the end, that is where his cattle go.

Gathering the cattle on the Rivermere Ranch is a big job but not impossible. The first day they pick up about 30 percent or better. They wait two to three days, make another gathering, and pick up another 30 percent. Then they start hitting it every two or three days. That gives the cattle time to rest, regroup and get in the open again. Because the cattle can climb and fields are steep, the horse and rider both better know what they are doing.

After the cattle are gathered and sorted they either go to the Three Brands Feed Yard at Shafter or directly to Western Stockman's Market. It depends on which market is better.

He has sold several airplane loads of feedlot cattle to the Japanese in the past three years. They fly the cattle live to Japan to keep from paying import duty on carcasses. The Japanese have been buying the hides for years. The packing houses just salt them, roll them up and ship them.

Like most ranchers, the biggest problem Hershey has in running the ranch is getting good help. He has two excellent couples working for him now.

Dave Carter, the foreman, and his wife, Dannette, have been with Rivermere Ranch for six years. Originally from Colorado, Dave was a driver for Bruce Forbes, champion bronco rider, and worked some race tracks before he and Dannette were married.

"Dannette's family taught me about the cattle business," he says. Danette is a Tule River, or Mission Indian. Her father owns an adjoining ranch to Hershey. She has been on a horse since she was three years old and loves ranch work."

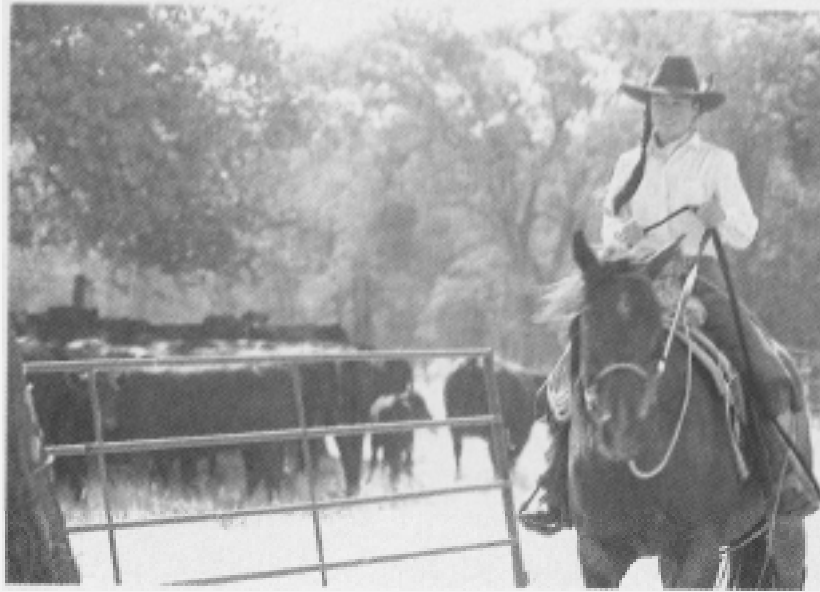
Brian Franco and his wife grew up near Rivermere Ranch also. They came to work for Hershey in July of this year.

The neighbors trade help back and forth during branding. It is all done on horseback. With sufficient help, they can brand 30 to 40 head an hour. Squeeze

chutes are seldom used on the bigger ranches in Kern Country,

The corral that is used for branding will hold 500 head and is built out of telephone poles. "When you get an Orahana bull in, you better have something to hold him," Hershey says.

Horses and dogs play a critical role in the operation of the ranch. They have 20 stock horses which Hershey either raises or purchases as foals. Due to the mountain conditions, it is important for them to get acclimated before they break them. All of the horses work and are trained for roping. There are six working dogs on the



*Dannette Carter has been on a horse since she was three years old. She loves ranch work.*

ranch which Carter says they couldn't get along without.

Hershey's parents were dryland grain farmers. They pioneered in Kern Country. He was raised on a homestead 12 miles east of Bakersfield.

When he finished junior college, Hershey went to work for the Bank of America. He received a \$5 raise when he was there a year and decided that wasn't for him. He went to work for Richfield Oil Company (now Arco) and did taxidermy work on the weekends. He was there for three years before he went into the service. He served as an airplane mechanic at Minter Airforce Base during World War II.

After the service, he got a job with another oil company. He and his first wife saved their money and bought 35 acres by the river near Bakersfield. The deal included two cows and a bull.

The 35 acres grew to 1,700 and Bakersfield grew around them. After the insurance company paid for five or six head that were killed on the road, Hershey sold out

and moved to the present location.

When he had registered cattle, he showed at Reno, Phoenix, the Cow Palace and county fairs. He had Supreme Champion the first year of the Western Futurity, held in Santa Rosa. The last time he showed he had second place get-of-sire at the Cow Palace.

After being in the cattle business 43 years, Hershey's advice to a young person thinking about going into it is, "Stay out of it!"

Nevertheless, Hershey has lived through the hard times and thrived in the good times. He has accolades to his

credit that verify he has given back as much as he has received from the ranching business.

The list includes: director of the Pacific Coast Angus Association, president of Kern Country Farm Bureau and Honorary Director of the Farm Bureau. He was chosen Cattleman of the Year in 1982 by the Cattlemen's Association. In 1988, he was selected Agriculture Man of the Year by the Farm Bureau.

After having two hip replacements and seven surgeries in the last five years, he has been demoted to desk cowboy and has educated himself to the fact that is important too. Even though

he can't ride a horse anymore and his doctor tells him he "has too much mileage," he still spends about three days a week at the ranch. He and his wife, Faye, live in Bakersfield which is an hour drive.

They spend a lot of time at the cabin Hershey built on the ranch eight years ago. It was built from a kit like Lincoln Logs. It is all cedar logs, tongued and grooved, and has two bedrooms, two baths, a great room, dining room and kitchen. There is a pond stocked with bass and perch just out the back door.

"The most rewarding times in my life were when I could get on a horse and work the cattle. I didn't realize how much I enjoyed that until I lost both hips."

Ranching the old west way in rugged country isn't easy. It takes good horses, good cattle, neighbors and help you can rely on, a pioneering spirit and belief in the Almighty. John Hershey has it all.

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