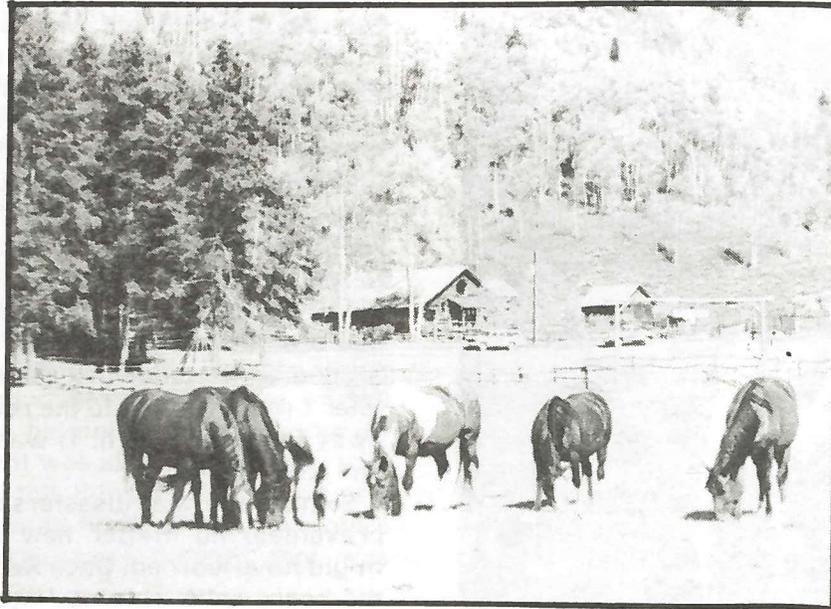


Vista Verde: The Green View

By Jenny Newton

With much thanks to my mother, Katherine Knight and my former co-author, Jan Fishback.



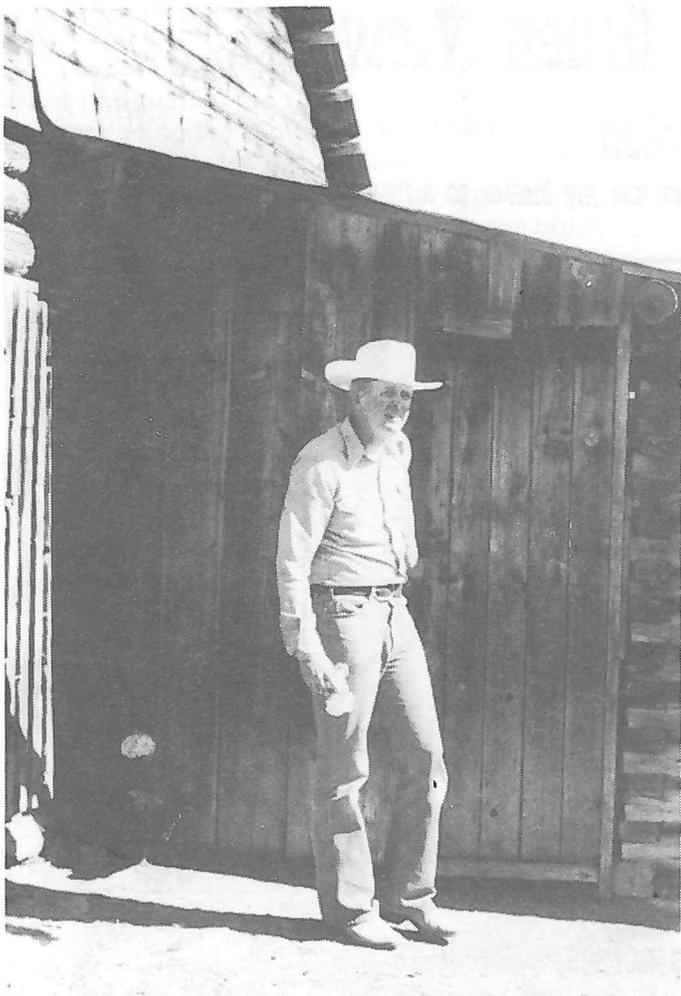
Some of the Brophy's horses.

Twenty-six miles from Steamboat Springs, up a dirt road named Seedhouse Road where the forest service once stored conifer seeds, is 550 acres of beautiful and sometimes treacherous country. On three sides forest service land surrounds the guest ranch called Vista Verde. The ranch began in 1939 and is now owned by Frank Brophy, known as Red, and his wife, Winton. Why would someone want to move from New York to Steamboat Springs and live so far away from the town and the mountain? That was the first question I asked the Brophys about their current lifestyle. Winton replied, "We had a family business back East, a very large dog boarding kennel. We sold that within the family and decided to move to ski country. We looked in New England, but survival there was very touch and go. So we thought, Gee, if we're going to do this right, we ought to come to one of the places in the country where the skiing is really super most of the time. We spent the summer touring around Colorado looking for a family-type lodge at the base of a ski area."

Red expanded, "We were a bit distracted, turned off, if you will, by the extreme commercialization in family-oriented lodging facilities. We had misgivings about pursuing that kind of business objective.

As the Brophys worked their way home from their exploration of Colorado, they stayed at Devil's Thumb, a guest ranch in Granby. Winton reflected, "We were very impressed with the life that the owners had had and we thought, 'That might be a good idea, to run a little dude ranch, and that is something we could do as a family.'" They made an offer to purchase a portion of the ranch plus the improvements, but the owners did not want to split up the acreage.

"That was in the fall of '73," Red interjected. "We came to Steamboat first in June of '74 because we had some friends here. We liked it and thought it was a good place to start. Among the leads we had been working on was Vista Verde. We made an offer which was turned down two weeks before Labor Day. Bethany and Duncan had to start school somewhere. We had been camping and living out of our travel van. By fall we had rented a condo at the mountain. Four months later I saw an ad in *The Denver Post*; the verbiage was exactly what this place was. So I re-contacted the Tufflys, and we got into negotiations again: this time they went more smoothly, and we purchased the ranch in March of '75. We moved to the ranch in mid March."



Red returning from tour of chicken house.

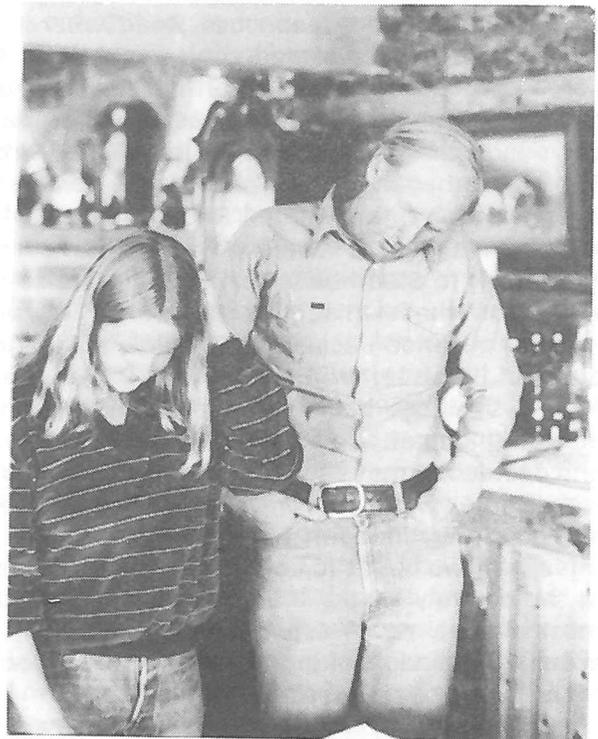
During the first year the Brophys insulated, carpeted and sided the existing three cabins. They also composed a letter to many of the Tuffley's former customers informing them of the change of ownership and of their intentions to preserve the same rustic atmosphere...no tennis courts or swimming pools. Still, they lost all of the original summer customers, a fact which they now remember with wry humor. One family wrote back saying they hoped the Brophys wouldn't "ruin the ranch and that the Tuffleys would get it back." Another responded with, "How dare you buy the Tuffley's ranch?"

Vista Verde had been owned by the Tuffleys since 1939. They had operated it as a cattle ranch with a small summer guest business and a good hunting season business. "We had to take a business that was 85 percent cattle oriented and 15 percent people oriented and turn it around to that the emphasis was just the reverse," Red volunteered. Especially in that first year the neighbors were a great source of assistance. They helped with the cattle, with broken equipment, plowing and that perennial problem--being stuck. That first hunting season Hollis Tuffley even came back to show them how to run

a hunting camp.

One of the Tuffley's former employees was there to help. The horses had been brought in from pasture and shod. Saddles, packs and panniers had been repaired. The area they were to hunt had been scouted. Winton had done the pre-season baking so hunters staying in the cabins could come to the kitchen at 3:30 a.m., to eat and be on their way promptly. Red had completed the course in guiding and outfitting the previous summer. But he still worried--not about losing a party of hunters, but about getting himself lost. He admits this concern was justified. "I hate to say it, but I had a compass that my wife insisted I take. I took it out when I realized I was lost. But I didn't really know how to use it. For two hours I went in the wrong direction, until I realized I was using it wrong. It had been snowing ever since I had gotten turned around while following some elk. Three hours later I made it back to the road about four miles away from the ranch. It was then about 5 p.m. and still snowing."

Some of the near disasters could not have been prevented, no matter how much the Brophys might have learned. Once Red was cutting wood; the board split, and his finger was yanked into the saw. It was within 1/8 inch of being severed. Winton drove him to the hospital in Steamboat where the flight-for-life helicopter took him to Denver. The first hunting season Red rode with a white boxing glove on one hand and his arm in a bandage.



Checking over my story.

where there was little possibility of my continuing to be involved in international management."

From very sophisticated business careers, suddenly that first winter the Brophy's major worry was that the driveway would blow in so solidly that the family would only be able to get out on skis. Winton recalls that the two teenage children did indeed ski in and out many times. Car and team alike were stuck frequently, and the Brophys became expert at putting on and removing chains. Still, the kids "were great," Winton announced firmly. "I was such an adventure. They didn't have the pangs that sometimes came later about living so far away from what was going on in town."



I put on some final touches while Frank & daughter, Carrie watch.

Another time he was leading a trail ride. Winton explained Red customarily chews on a pine needle or a piece of grass while riding. This time the needle stuck in his throat. "I was choking and gasping and finally wheezing. No one knew what was happening; they all thought the noises were from my horse. Finally I nearly fell off. Chris, one of our trail guides, tried to help but she was too small. By this time I was unconscious. A very large man from Chicago knew the Heimlich method of dislodging objects and was successful."

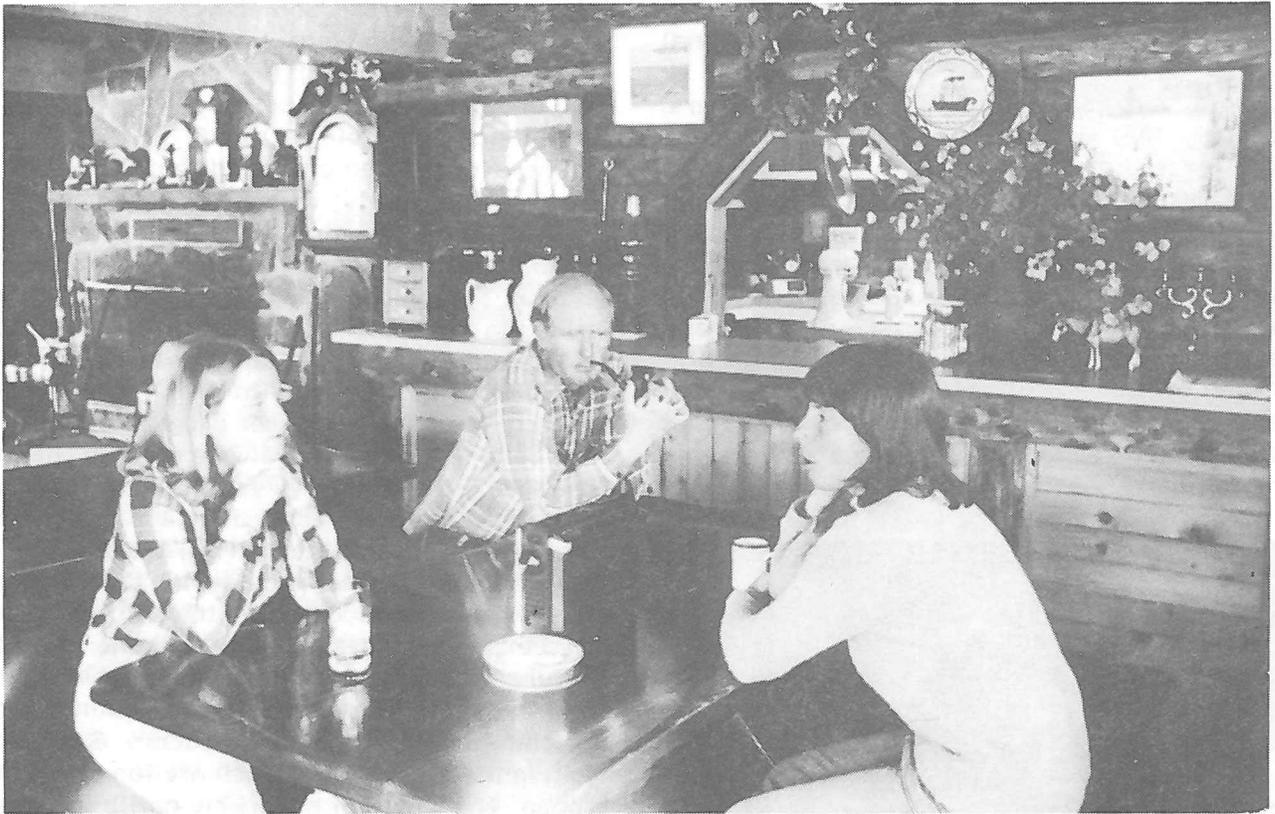
Once while coming down the steep trail from Dome Lake one of the two pack horses Red was leading nearly slipped over the edge. She was the largest of the two; and the other one, who was

tied to her tail, froze. Somehow the rope had been tangled in her hind legs. Red had to crawl under the front legs of one, cut the rope from the other's tail and untangle it enough so she could, with his assistance, scramble back on to the trail.

The Brophys had projected that it would take them three years to gain a solid summer business even though they had inherited a good hunting business from the Tuffleys. Toward that end of September, 1976, they remodeled and added to the main lodge. Four new cabins were built. And though Red admits they never really sat down and talked with the Tuffleys about exactly what their summer programs had been, he believes there have been some definite changes. First, the Tuffleys sold them 18 horses; they now have 47. Guided trail rides, weekly breakfast rides and pack trips, steak cookouts, hayrides and three meals a day served family style in the main lodge keep the staff of 13 busy. Red explained guests can participate in guided nature walks, back packing trips, fishing jaunts and flyfishing instruction. In the evenings group singing and square dancing occurs. Guests can join in the gymkhanas which are fun and games rodeo. The flavor of a working cattle ranch still remains, even though the two hundred head of cattle summered at Vista Verde no longer belong to the Brophys. The neighboring rancher, who owns these cattle, now does all the doctoring for them, and the Brophys do the irrigation. Since so much more is done for the summer guests than the winter guests, the summer rates are higher.

Pricing of a summer dude ranch vacation is predicated by competition within a ten state area. Red told me, "We must make a certain percentage of profit; to determine our own rates. We must take into consideration every expense--food, staff, maintenance, shuttle service to and from the airport. About half of our summer guests fly to Steamboat with the summer guests staying about a week. The winter guests usually stay three or four days, and most drive. We are open in the winter now, which we weren't for the first two years. Cross Country skiing has become quite popular. A lot of our winter business has come from the Front Range--Fort Collins to Colorado Springs. We see that changing now--lowans and people from Kansas are driving in for a week. With our five cabins we can handle 20-25 people and offer them 10 to 12 miles of cross country trails."

According to the Brophys the turning point in the guest ranch business, which they thought would take three years, has actually taken five years. "We are at a point now where we can see the light at the end of the tunnel," Red said. And the worst adjustment was psychological. "It took us four years to feel somewhat confident about what we were doing--somewhat comfortable about being at the mercy of Mother Nature.



Conversing with Frank & Winton.

The Brophys agreed that the first winter was hard using a cat, Phil Ward found and bulldozed the mile long road into the ranch. A particularly heavy winter had left everything under four feet of snow. But there were some light moments. "It really was incredible," Winton recalled. "When we got here we couldn't see the buildings. We knew there was a ranch out here somewhere." They dug down and found the front porch of the main ranch house, but they soon found that that same front porch was not theirs alone to occupy. The Tuffleys had always wintered in Clark. But the skunks had always wintered at Vista Verde. So along with the problems of coping with a backed up septic system and frozen water lines there were those other occupants...sitting on the front porch, wanting to get in the front door, preventing anyone from getting out the door.

"The first year we made no changes; we did no building, served no meals and were not open for guests," Red reported. "We gave ourselves eight or nine months to learn a great deal about what ranching life was like. The people and business side didn't present as much of a transitional problem. We had to learn how to irrigate and fence, to doctor and brand, and generally to take care of livestock in larger numbers than we were used to. We had to learn to adjust to living out here. In contrast to Eastern winters or to the one we spent at the mountain there was a tremendous adjustment to be made.

"We didn't know where anything was. Since

the Tuffleys had bought a place in Rifle and were living there, no one was here to show us where things were. The water was turned off in the upstairs bathroom of the main lodge. I recalled that there were some valves in the kitchen that controlled the water upstairs. I don't know if it was rusted or what, but by turning it on I broke the hot water valve. Water was spurting ten feet across the kitchen. I didn't even know where the shut off valves were. I had to call the Tuffleys in Rifle, but Hollis wasn't in, and Jean couldn't quite remember where the shut off valves were. Finally with a flashlight we found them in the basement ourselves. And when spring came I couldn't find any of the other valves to turn on water to the cabins. Hollis had put these in himself and thought anybody should be able to find them. But my lifestyle had never before required that I even pick up a hammer.

"I had worked with Ford International for eleven years and for eight of the eleven years I had been abroad...England, Japan and Thailand. Sometimes I worked as a management consultant for automobile dealers, advising them about what we had learned in this country about marketing, financing and bookkeeping. For some years I helped realtors develop plans for purchasing land and buildings for automobile facilities. I resigned with reluctance because I had had a good time, gained valuable work experience and lived in some interesting places. But Ford had wanted me to work in Detroit,



Returning from my interview. This is "May."

Would they do it all over again? Red replied without hesitation. "Yes, definitely. I enjoy having my own business. Here I can see the end product of my work and that makes it all worthwhile." Winton quickly added, "I wouldn't give it up for the world. It has been an excellent learning experience...I just don't think I could live the suburban city life anymore.

Vista Verde is a strange name for a place that is blanketed in snow for six months of the year except that 'vista' suggests a long view or prospect and 'verde' means green--characterized by spring growth, by inexperience, life and vigor. The name seems an accurate description for what the ranch has demanded of the Brophys and of what they have contributed to it.

