

**Oral History Report  
Bill Burton  
Rancher  
Kodiak Island, Alaska**

**J. D. Cole  
Alaska History 341  
December 15, 1993**

Well, my father had a ranch in Florida. We had a place at Lake Istokpoga which is about in the center of the state, north of Lake Okeechobee. We raised Brahma cattle. I went to the University of Florida and majored in animal husbandry. That's when I married my animal ( He married his wife). My wife's name is Kathy. I met Kathy at the University of Florida. We went into the Navy. While I was going to the University of Florida my oldest brother wanted to visit Alaska. He talked to my next older brother Jim and got him all excited. Jim had just got out of the Navy and graduated from the University of Florida, so while I was going there he said "Let's go on up". So during the summer time we drove up to Alaska. We came up there three different times. This was about '58, '59, '60, it was. After we came up there we worked out of Anchorage in construction and stuff. Then I went into the Navy. After I got out of the Navy my brother Jim wrote to me. He was looking to get back in the Navy. He had majored in animal husbandry too. He was in Montana and said, "Why don't you come on over and look"? So I did. Me and Kathy drove to Montana and worked on a ranch there called Galveston Gateway. Worked there for a year. A really beautiful area, I really enjoyed it.

Jim went back to Alaska working construction, because, of course, you can't make any money working for a rancher. They don't have the money to pay you. Back then I was making top dollar; \$400 dollar a month and room and meat. That was good money back then. But still you're not making anything. So he wrote to me, and wanted me to come back up there (Alaska) and make some money. So I did; working construction. At the end of the season I heard of the ranches here in Kodiak. There was an old timer up there, I can't remember his name right now. He knew about the ranches. I went to talk to him and he gave me all the names of all the different ranchers down here and the addresses. I wrote to them all and they said come on down and see what you think, so I did. I came out on the ferry. I drove a car, I believe.

I worked for Joe Beaty, who owned this ranch here. I just fell in love with it. It was a beautiful fall and everything. This country reminds me of Montana. It looks like the high country of Montana actually. The mountains go up just almost identical and everything. Of course you're stuck at five thousand feet down there. Here you're at sea level. There is a little difference there. So I don't know, I came down here and I really liked it. I'd been working for Joe a couple of months I guess. Kathy came down with her little poodle. He (Joe Beaty) was a real mania for cleanliness. This place he kept it just super clean. You could eat off the floors. In the kitchen he always put papers down so you can walk in. I washed the dishes, he generally cooked. About half the time he would wind up washing the dishes after me. I'm pretty clean. Anyhow, Kathy came down and we had that little poodle. Joe Beauty said, "I don't want that poodle in the house". Well it was down about 10 degrees or so. So she brought him in that one night. So he fired me the next day.

Well, I went over to Joe Zitner's place right there at Pasagshak and we stayed there for about a week. And then we had planned to go on South anyway for Christmas time. We were going down to see my folks. So we drove down to Florida all the way from here. It was right at Christmas time and we got over there and it was 50 or 55 below over there through Glennallen. It was real cold. We had all kinds of problems. Anyway, I got off down there and Omar Stratman, my next door neighbor over there at Kalsin Bay, he gave me a call about a fellow that was working for him

named Don Becker, that eventually owned the ranch at Middle bay. He had fallen and ruptured himself and he was working for Omar. So he asked if I could come up and work for him for a short period of time till he got somebody. I said yeah, so I came on up. I wrote my brother and told him about these places so he came down too. I got through working for him (Stratman) and then worked in town in construction for awhile.

Joe Beaty came and talked to us. He said, "Would you guys like to buy my place?" He made us a good deal. At least we thought it was a good deal. It was more than either one of us could chop off the bit. But we pooled our resources and our wife's families' resources, our families' resources and came up with enough money for a down payment and made a loan to the state of Alaska and bought the place. It was 1967 when we bought it. Jim moved onto the place; Jim and Toni Burk. Toni had a daughter that same year; Andrea Burk. And they stayed out there for about three years and then we swapped. Then they worked on slope. I was working construction on the slope or wherever and I fished. (reference to people who work the slope for extra money as well as other business ventures)

Well, there's a fellow that way over in Soldotna that we sold buffalo to, Dave Gardner. He's got a job on the slope with an oil company up there. He works two weeks on and two weeks off and he makes enough money that he's got 160 acres there. Beautiful place. All types of equipment and he's got his buffalo and a greenhouse there. Just does it all through the money he makes on the slope. I sold him buffalo. He's just dabbling in it. I sold some buffalo to a fellow in Homer too and he has some buffalo and the Russian wild horse.

I've only got about 80 head of cattle. We're down to about zilch on the cattle and we're building up on the buffalo. We've got about 180 head of buffalo..

(What made you chose buffalo?) Well, we fought the bear problem since we bought it, 1967 to 1980. Course, Jim and I ... I bought Jim out about that time. Probably 1979 or 1978 and he could see the handwriting on the wall. He wasn't going to make any money so he got out. Then I bought the buffalo about that time. Now we had a friend of ours that used to come over every year and go deer hunting and whatever and come out to the place, Steve Lewis. He is real good friends with Frank Bishop here in town. Course Frank is a tremendous hunter and they came out here and went fishing back in Sacramento. He'd been coming over for two or three years and one year he brought us some buffalo roast and steaks that he killed a buffalo in Delta. He said "You know, you ought to get into buffalo. You wouldn't have any problem with bears if you had buffalo".

( Will the buffalo stand up to them?) I think mainly it's that they're more of a herd animal. They're still a wild animal, more like horses. Every now and then someone will lose a horse on the island to bears, but not very often. They're faster and more alert and given the chance there'll be half a dozen horses together. Even a horse by itself is a super alert animal and they're just more alert. Now cattle are pretty dumb. 'Bout the only thing dumber than cattle are maybe sheep and the people who raise the cattle. Only took me 20 years to find that out.

( Have you seen buffalo stand off a bear?) No. I've seen a cow chased by a bear, but only once. Most the time that stuff happens at night or when you're not around. Now we've taken some tremendous cattle loses to bears over the years. We were taking about an average of at least 25 per year for a long period of time and one

year we lost over a hundred head of stock. You can't stay in business taking those kind of loses. Plus you've got some other loses. You'll take some winter loses at times too.. The cattle and buffalo do real well. You're going to have to feed the cattle some usually. You got to feed all of your young stock. Same with horses, you got to feed them up to about two or so but after that a horse you don't have to feed at all. A cow you don't either unless they're heavy with a big calf on them all summer long then they go into winter a little poorer. There's plenty of grass, but again the problem is the bear doesn't allow you to utilize it efficiently. If we could utilize it like they do in the south 48. We have preditation like they don't have down there. Then you could utilize the ranches as a real good cattle ranch and you wouldn't have to feed very much. 'Cause we've got a lot of pasture land up in these mountains and valleys that doesn't get utilized very much because of the bears. Now we have utilized it in the past and we took those loses. Some big loses in cattle, so whichever way you do it you either take loses in the bear killing them while you have them up there saving your winter range or you keep them on your winter range and have to feed. So one way or another you're losing. With buffalo we haven't quite had that problem because buffalo migrate wherever they want to. They don't pay any attention to our fences for the cattle. The buffalo will go right over the fence. Now, the electric fence, they abide by that. That's why we're going all electric eventually, but it'll take us a while. I've got 30 miles of fence or better and only a couple of electric fences.

The Marin (?) mountain range pretty much forms one boundary. The Gulf of Alaska forms another boundary. The only place where we have any problems are on the two ends of the ranch, one where the road comes through; they will walk back and forth there. We do have fences there but we got to get some good electric fences there and some better cattle guards. On the other end is Chiniak area and it's pretty much... it's got some real deep canyons and a lot of timber. The buffalo so far, outside of one animal went over there this year, have not gone over there.

I do feed them a little bit during the winter. I feed them regular range pellets or cattle pellets to help move them around. We do move them on horse back. You can move them where they don't want to go. It's just when they don't want to go you can't move them. It's when you push them in close into a corral, on horse back, you can't get them in the corral. You can get them up to the corral and then lead them in with feed, if possible, or like they do in some of the bison ranges. They lead them into some feed and then once they get them going into the feed, then they come in with vehicles and push them in there. You get them in a corral or a close area you got to be careful when you are on a horse. You can't put a horse in anything like that, but in a pasture the buffalo will chase you. You can get away. You get them in a close area they will kill a horse. They are not such a wild animal that we can't manipulate them somewhat. They still have their wild senses. That's why they have done real well with the bear.

The Indians were real correct I think in talking about the white man's cattle as inferior. Definitely they are superior to the beef animal because the beef animal had all the smarts bred out. Plus the fact that the buffalo is really superior meat. By far, it doesn't have the fat in it. It's lower in cholesterol than any other red meat including most of your other game animals, including fish and chicken. So health wise it's a lot healthier food than beef. Now don't get me wrong; I was raised as a cattleman and went through school in animal husbandry. I know what cattlemen and feed lot

operators are having to put up with. They have to rely on antibiotics. Anytime you have a whole bunch of animals in an enclosed area you got to do something to prevent disease and the only way to do that is with low level antibiotics. Then you also have to be able to make a profit on them so you have to go with different hormones to get them fat 'cause once you steer an animal you do away with the hormones to actually cause him to grow. So you use these hormones to cause them to fat and this produces fat meat. Not necessarily US choice, but what they're shooting for is a meat that has a lot of marble. That marble is nothing but fat interspersed in the meat so you still have a fat meat. Buffalo don't have any marble. They might get some outside covering on a young animal especially a young heifer, but then we haven't killed any young cows so I couldn't tell you about that.

(How many do you have?) Roughly about 180 right now. We're a little short of that. We've had some hunts and that's how we've been selling our buffalo for the last three or four years. Just buffalo hunts. I have about 16 or 18 poller bulls left. Bulls that would make a hunt. Then we got a whole bunch of young ones. We take people out and have trophy hunts and we have meat hunts. A trophy hunt will be anywhere from an 8 to a 10 or 11, 12 year old bull 'cause they're looking for the head. People who are looking for a trophy are looking for a nice head so we have at least 16 or so of those around. We hunted 4 this year and about three or four last year and a couple the year before. They get the meat with it unless they don't want it then we... Now we're charging \$3500 for a trophy hunt, \$2500 for a meat hunt. Now this one doctor he got a bull this year that weighed right at about a thousand pounds hanging weight and at three dollars a pound that's \$3000, so this hunt didn't cost him much.

(Do you know where to find them?) We were lucky this year. They were fairly close. But I don't know for sure where the bulls are. Sometimes they're in Sacramento, sometimes in any one of the valleys or over toward Pasagshak, out on the cape or the valleys in between. We usually just take them out on horseback and go find some bulls and kind of look at them. We try to do it as a regular hunt because they will go for them now. But a buffalo even in the wild, although I think those in Delta probably move in herds,... I was reading this buffalo book and it said those old time hunters would get down wind, get in a stand and might kill 60 head of buffalo.

I think buffalo are probably.. well you go back to the Indians and frontiersmen and they preferred it way over beef. I think once you eat a little bit of buffalo compared to beef. I prefer it way over beef, fact is that's all we eat is buffalo. Generally like I say we kill three or four year old bulls and there nice and tender. We do have eight and nine, ten year old trophy bulls that we hang for about two weeks in the cooler and thoughts come out nice and tender. Now you take a eight and nine year beef bull out on the range and that's going to be tougher then hell. That's why people don't eat bull. Now that's not entirely true either because over in Europe they do eat bull-ox, bull, but they eat a young bull; a one or two year old bull. They also keep it away from bulling. They raise the bulls together. And there is nothing wrong with bull meat, its not fat. You see people in the United States have been educated to eat fat meat. The fatter it is the more tender it is and the more favorable. There is a little correlation to flavor to fat. Fat carries a flavor in it . Buffalo without the fat is, I guarantee, is just as favorable as any beef.

I know of one buffalo that I've lost to a bear for sure and two or three others.

They were the ones that were brought over from Delta; Hollandback from Delta, he brought some buffalo, brought them down here. He didn't have a place ready at the time up there, so he brought them down here. That one year he brought five yearlings and we lost all of them. One to bear I know and three by "two-legged bear". We do have "two-legged bears" (men) that kill cattle. They boned them out, I mean they just did a beautiful job boning or whatever. I don't know, whoever did it knew what they were doing. We might of lost a few head of buffalo possibly, I know we have lost some cattle. So has Omar Stratman and all the other ranchers on the road system. The closer you get to town or where the main road goes through they have lost a lot of cattle.

No, they never found out who it was. There was one time that we had an animal that was boned out over there by Bear Paw as you come up the road. There is a bunch of timber and small canyon. Well, he shot it and it went into the canyon. Boned it out and walk back and forth in the snow to his car. I just happen to be riding and found his tracks. Found out what he did and the vehicles tracks and called the troopers. The troopers came out. They had a pretty good idea, but they wouldn't tell who it was. I don't think that he ever got caught. We did have someone that was caught stealing a goat. There was a thousand dollar reward, and the guy that turned him in that got the thousand dollar reward, we found out later, was in cahoots. The judge didn't, I mean hell, gave him something like five or ten days of time that he could serve at his leisure between his jobs. He got a place to stay with a free meal. I'm sure we still lose some. Omar Stratman still loses some on the road system. People may come out, not necessarily to kill beef, but come out spot lighting. We have a lot of that spot lighting deer or what ever on the road system. If there is a calf or deer or cow possibly a buffalo I think that their not adverse to killing anything.

I haven't solved the bear problem, but they haven't been as bad to the buffalo. Still it limits my pushing into certain ranges. The buffalo just won't go up into those high ranges. The buffalo that we have are plains buffalo. I think that they are more at home in open areas. I would like to get some wood buffalo. They have some in Canada (wood buffalo). There's one fellow that I know in D.C., Danny Nolan, that raises wood buffalo and get some from him. I don't think we can artificially breed these buffalo, but maybe we can get a bull one day. I wanted a heifer too and keep them separate from my crosses. The wood buffalo are bigger animals. They stand a little taller, probably six to eight inches taller. The wood buffalo are just bigger all the way around. They do go to the mountains more, in fact the woods buffalo and the mountain buffalo were essentially the same buffalo. The buffalo in Yellowstone Park were mountain buffalo and then the few that were saved managed not to get killed off. But they brought in plains buffalo and essentially are plains buffalo now. But the woods buffalo in northern Canada had a pretty good size herd and managed to bring in, or did bring in and diluted it down. But there are still some wood buffalo in the northern Canada.

(Do you enjoy living this remote?) I kind of like it, being away from the town. In fact we're getting too many people moving in closer. Joe Zitner sold his place, subdivided it over there at Pasagshak. A lot of people are moving in. It was nice when it was just Joe. Going into town you have to be prepared because of the weather and roads. There has only been a couple of time that we couldn't get in because of the snow or something. One time it was about ten degrees, about six to eight inches of

snow on the ground, about a hundred mile an hour winds , that built up a snow drift against our shed out there. You could walk to the top of the shed because of the snow drift. Both of my loaders, at that time, were in the shed. This gate out here, the big one there, was a snow drift from there to that house (pointing to the bunk house). We couldn't get out of the yard with a piece of equipment period. I didn't have any equipment to clean it out so I was completely filled up. For a couple of weeks we were down except for horse back.

The advantage of buffalo during the winter time is that they utilize the forage a lot more efficiently then beef cattle. Of course beef cattle utilize grain a lot more efficiently. We are essentially a forage operation. One of the advantages of buffalo is that big beard they have to sweep down through the snow. They will dig down through the snow, even if it's crusted over, even look like a bunch of hogs in a wallow all over out in the snow. The cattle will follow the buffalo to eat the grass below. Horses will dig down in the snow, but cattle won't dig down at all. The cow will sit there and starve to death. That is one big advantage and we need something to get along with the bear instead of eliminate the bear. First of all, we would not be very efficient to eliminate the bear. In the second place, I don't want to eliminate the bear.

(Ecological groups?) There are some groups who would like to get ride of the cattle off the western ranges. Cow Free in '93 is one and there is groups who don't want to see any cattle on any of the forest service lands or any of the parks or any BLM land. Any federal land or state lands and stuff, historically we have been there. When they organized these parks and preserves the cattleman had the advantage of already being there. So when they organized these parks and preserves they went ahead and let the cattleman keep their lease. But now all these groups are trying to get the cattle off. You have the Friends of the Earth and all these interest groups. And they have some truth; a.... some good ideas on some of it. Some have been over grazed and a lot of these different parks were set apart to save the wildlife and yet you have cattle up there eating down the grass. What's bad is that the cattle will eat down the grass around creeks and things which causes the creeks to lose whatever cover it has and makes the creeks to warm up and you don't have any trout to fish. We need to try to accommodate all the people including the ranchers. If you lose them you lost a complete way of life. But you have to fit in the ecology. I think that's one of the reasons why we went to buffalo. Because it would possibly be able to accommodate along with the bear were we would not have to eliminate the bear. And to try to make a living at it or make a profit. On the other side of the coin is trying to compete with the lower forty-eight . You have to put in the high cost of feed in your animals up here and you're getting a low cost product. Whereas buffalo and elk... Talking about goals, professionally I would like to make this a wildlife ranch. I would like to raise buffalo and elk.

We had to get permits to bring the buffalo up to Alaska. Yes, and the elk you have to abide by their fence in order to raise them. You can't let the elk off your property. There has been more of those animals (buffalo) up here. The animals that we brought up here had to be clean. They had to be, to bring them into Alaska, so that there would not be a problem with the other animals up here. We tried to go through Canada, it was kind of a deal. Again the Lewises , Steve Lewis, kind of got me interested in it . Earl Lewis said, "who owns a roofing outfit in Anchorage?" If I wanted

to do it he would be willing to put in with us and buy some. (A silent partner or absentee owner) Kathy was a secretary and they were paying her way to fly, so I went too. And while we were down there we would look for buffalo in Washington. On the way down there I was on the same plane as C.R. Lewis, who I'd met before. He had come out to one of our rodeos. He was a state senator at the time. He owned the C.R. Lewis and Company which is a big construction company in Anchorage. He asked me what I was doing and I told him that I was going down to look for some buffalo. I had told him that Earl Lewis, he knew of Earl and was not related, about being an absentee owner. C.R. Lewis said, "Well, count me in too". I didn't ask him or whatever, but he just said that he would do it. I went down there and met a broker down there. He said that he would get us some buffalo. We looked at a ranch in Brie, Oregon. There was about five hundred head there. This broker said he was going to get us some, so we put down a downpayment. We put down some of C.R.'s money, Earl's money and my money (equal amount of money).

At the end of the year or Spring we weren't hearing anything from the guy we bought the buffalo from. I kept writing. I wasn't getting any answer back, so I called him, but I wasn't getting anything. Finally, I flew down there and met the guy and he gave me some buffalo. The day that we bought them in Isla Island Alterverdy feed lot. Which is one of the biggest ones in the area. They had some buffalo that came from Brie, Oregon; the ones that we were looking at. They were trying to sell them to somebody in Canada. And they were trying to ship them through Montana at Glacier National Park and got stopped at the border. They, the buffalo, had blue tongue. Which is an endemic type disease they carry which doesn't hurt them. But it's also a sheep disease and sheep it does hurt. So they wouldn't allow them in Canada. So they put them at the Alterverdy feed lot there in Oregon. So they were going to keep them there until they got them completely; I guess they have a treatment for them. But every time they have them all do one of them would pop up with it. So anyway I bought 40 head there.

The day that we bought them I was close to North Missoula. There's a buffalo range up there, but anyway I meet a fellow that hauled buffalo. He said that he would haul them for us, so I called him and he came down. The day that he came to pick them up was the same day that Mount Saint Helen erupted. We got ash that morning. And they closed everything in Montana. We went to Bozeman, Galveston Gateway, where I had ranched before and spent the night there. The rancher there loaned me some money. Kathy was supposed to send me money and had sent me money, but it hadn't reached me by the time I left. Bob was going to give me the money, but he only had a couple of hundred on hand. The banks were closed because of ash fall. So at least the guy (who had the buffalo) said, "Ok, we trust you". So we started to head on out, but they had closed the roads, so we had to go down through Idaho. But I met a gal in north of Missoula and looked at an Arabian horse, a stud that I was going to pickup. I called her up and told her that I couldn't get there. She said, "Could you make it as far as Butte". I said that we were already going to Butte and then turn south. She said that she would try to contact a highway patrolman and see if they will let me take the horse down to there. I said that I don't have any money, the money hadn't come. She said, "Well, I'll trust you". She brought the horse down.

Well, we ended up just below Portland there where the Totem Alaska comes out

of. We got on board Tope and they took them up. We took them to Anchorage and then to Palmer. Then we spent the night in Palmer. Then we came on down to Kodiak. We lost two on the way down. They (buffalo) were in that thing for about a week.

I want to fight to keep into the animals that we already have here. I have become a guide in the mean time and take in hunters for bear and deer and, of course, we take in hunters for buffalo. I would like to raise elk too, for the horn production, for the meat and for hunt too. What I want to do is make this the cleanest operation that I can, try to clean up in any areas that we have fouled up in the past. Make it a place where someone would like to come here in the summertime, do some riding or whatever. I'm going to have to take advantage of the tourist trade until we can build up to about 400 head in buffalo. By that time the buffalo will take care of it. Hopefully there will be some elk too. To make this a family corporation.. well, it is a family corporation. At least a family can make a descent living of it.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

For an index of other recordings in this collection see the index:

96-49-01\_I01.pdf