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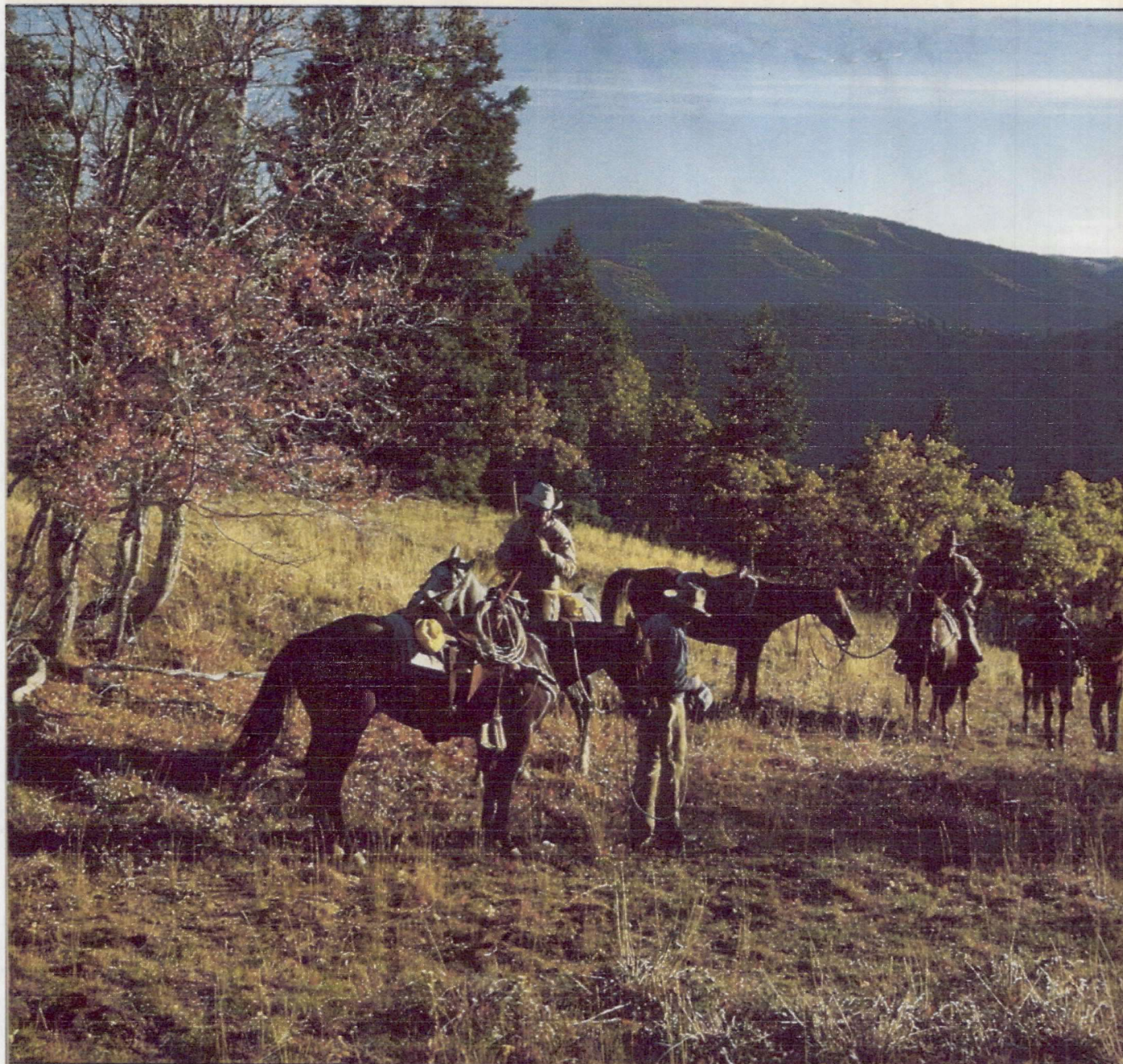
April 1991
\$2.25 U.S.
\$2.75 Canada



56TH YEAR



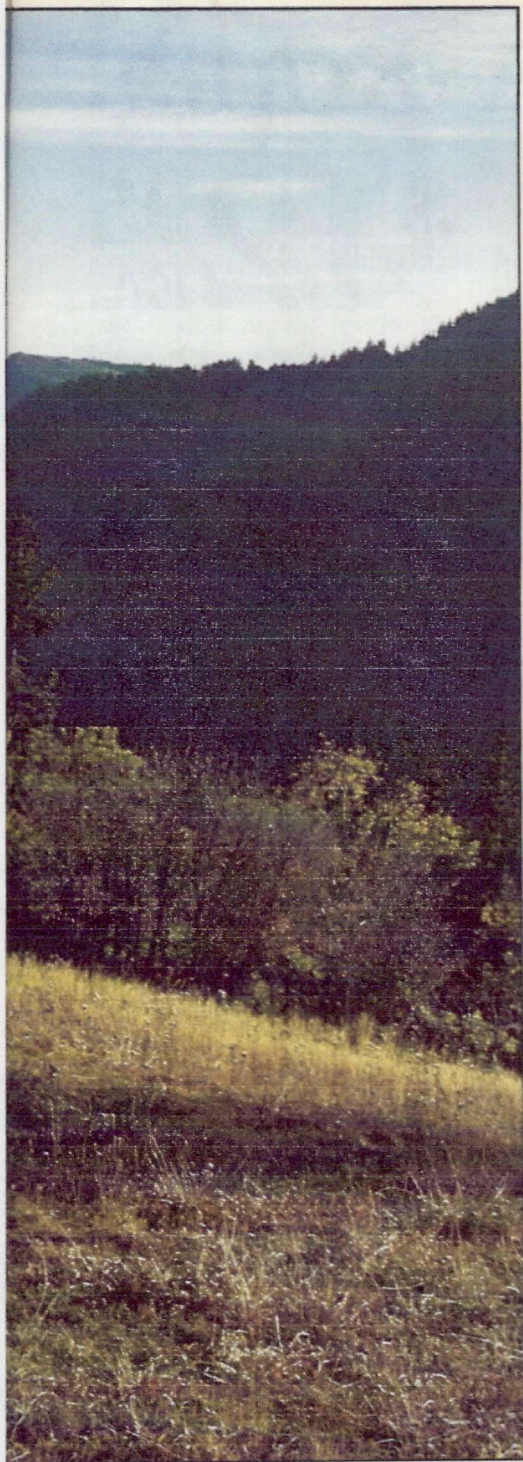
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STRETCHIN' DAYLIGHT

on the Double Dollar

Article and Photographs by Gary Vorhes



Left: Ben Quinters, Paul Marchant, Bill Jackson, and Greg Kesler in the Fishlake National Forest. Above: Greg rides through some of his cattle near Heber City. Below: Kesler looks over some of the winter's supply of hay near Meadow, Utah.



A GRIZZLED tradition of the cattle business is the ugly custom of getting up in the middle of the night, saddling horses, then sitting around for 3 hours waiting for it to get light enough to do something. You're ready, you see, when it does get light.

Utah rancher Greg Kesler has done something about this tradition. He's made it worse by doing the sitting around in the truck hauling the saddled horses to where you're ready to do something when it gets light.

There we were in the pitch-dark horse trap, groping inde-

cently on horses lured in by the smell and sound of oats in a pail. A goodly number of cowboys have undoubtedly been maimed doing this over the years, but eventually we all hung a halter on one end of something and blundered through the gate.

After saddling, we committed the horses to the black maw of a trailer, loaded ourselves, and rumbled onto the highways of Utah, headed only Greg's list knew where.

The list—it's a good indicator of how Greg Kesler looks at ranching, and on another level, at the business of life. The

Visiting this ranch in Utah is like entering the freeway—first, get up some speed.

first thing you have to know about the list is that it is, by nature, bottomless. It is not even faintly likely that any given day will be long enough or successful enough to accomplish the jobs on the list for that day. But, by Kesler rules, that does not make the day a failure; it makes the list a success.

The list is unavoidably hard on equipment, unforeseen delays, slow cattle, slow horses, traffic, civilian ideas of mealtimes, and things that need daylight for doing. The list, however, doesn't care a whole lot.

The list has built a ranching operation from a few roping heifers to a complex network of enterprises that are linked by computer chips, cellular phones, paved and unpaved highways, good horses, a hurry-home kind of family, and lists for today through infinity.

"I WAS RAISED in southern Utah in a little town called Kanosh. My family, on both sides, have been ranchers for four generations. Being a rancher is all I ever wanted. I was one of those little kids that dragged a rope around everywhere, and couldn't wait to get home from school to saddle my horse.

"My father had cattle, too, but my grandparents on both sides were the traditional kind of ranchers. My grandpa on my mother's side had Hereford cattle, the big ol' 1,500-pound cows that you used to see. He'd start calving them the first of January in calving hutches and stayed there with them on a cot in the hutches. He had about 150 head, just a good little operation where he grew enough feed for all of them and had a range permit adjacent to his place. It was well-managed; small, but he made a good living at it.

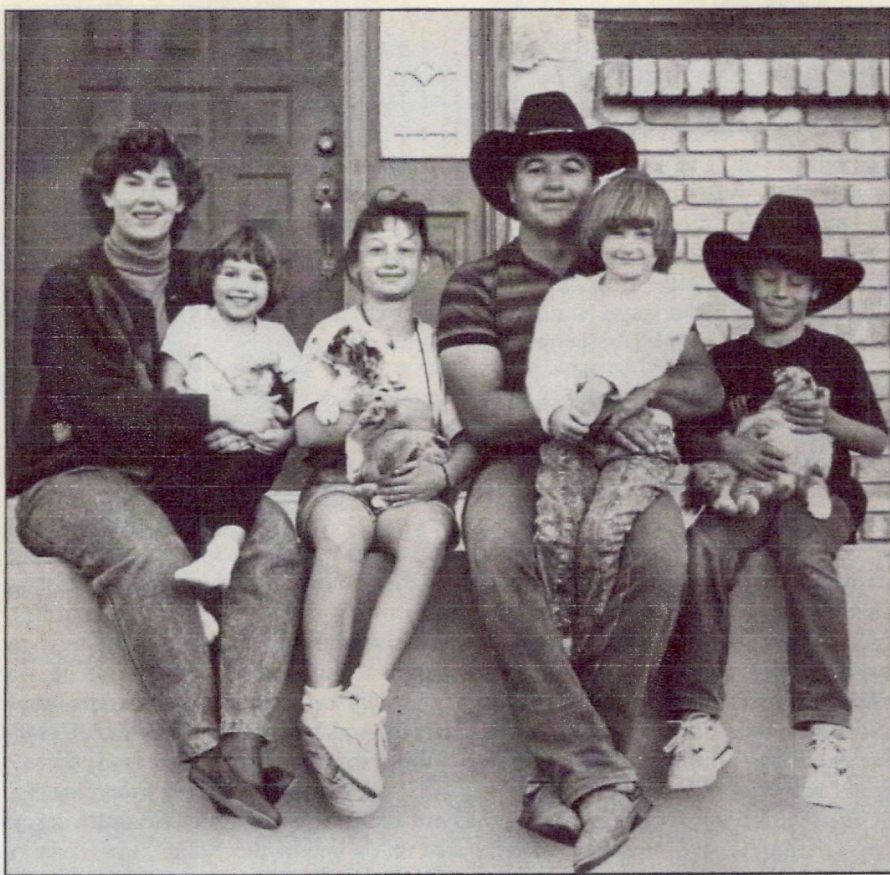
"Even though he had a tractor, he still did a lot with a team of horses. He was one of those guys who was out early in the spring irrigating on top of the snow. When I was a kid, I used to wonder why he was doing all those things, but I think he had a lot to do with the way I do things now.

"My grandpa on my other side broke his back and both of his hips when he was just a young man. He had won national medals in track before that, and they told him he would never walk again. He built up a ranch that ran between 400 and 600 head of cows, and paid for it, on crutches, he and his kids.

"I hadn't realized it until the last few years, but both of my grandpas were quite good businessmen. As a kid, I didn't perceive that in them. I've seen some books that one of my grandpas kept, and he kept good records and had even put money in the bank during the Depression.

"So, looking back, my grandfathers were doing, basically, about what I'm doing. They had some businesses on the side—snow clearing and other road work, a little gas station, etc.—that helped with the cattle.

"But I grew up thinking that ranching was all I was going to do. I worked for a large ranch called Paxton's, I think I was



The Keslers at home: Allyson holds Lindsay, 3; Camille, 11, holds one of the pups she raises and sells; Greg holds Nicole, 5; and Landon, 8, holds another pup.

11 years old, and then later I herded sheep for Brant George. The summer I was 13 I stayed the entire summer on a mountain herding sheep."

All this would lead you to expect Greg to stay where he was, but that's not the way it worked. He wasn't planning to be a cowboy; he wanted to be a rancher.

"When I was a kid, I really paid attention and took notes as to why people did things the way they did, how they handled and managed. As I got old enough to go to college and start thinking about what I was going to do, I could see that there wasn't a way to just start being a rancher.

"I went to California after high school and carpentered and shod horses and put money away. I somewhat forgot about the ranching, but I was still involved with horses. Then I went on a mission for the Mormon Church for 2 years in Canada.

"Without going into a lot of detail, the mission put my feet on the ground and taught me to use my head. I came back and went to college, and really looked at ranching again. But my wife helped me be realistic, too."

Here's where Greg's business education began, and the oil boom of the early '80s gave him a career's worth of experience in a short time.

"I ended up in Evanston, Wyo., just as the oil boom was about to start (1979). I had put the cattle idea out of the way. We got there at the right time, at the right place, did the right things, grew with the boom. When we got there, we had a car and we had spent all the money we had on a truck. I slept in the truck. We sold chemicals that are used in drilling wells. But we got real big, fast, mostly because the oil business

"I was one of those little kids that dragged a rope around everywhere . . ."

demanded it.

"When the boom ended (about 1982), we were like a lot of other people who had borrowed big to get big. But we decided not to take bankruptcy, and just kept hammering away at the debt. We were able to hang on to just enough equipment to get started with our chemical business (DustChem), which is primarily dust control for roads and construction sites."

The Double Dollar is as much a product of that oil-field experience as it is of Greg's family tradition of ranching.

He says that if folks want to ranch out of fondness for the lifestyle, they better have some other means of support. If they want to be in the ranching business, they need to operate as a business.

"There's four words that control business: debit, credit, pros, and cons. Anything you want to talk about fits in one of those categories. I list pros on one side of a sheet and cons on the other. Usually, by the time you're done making the list, there's no question left."

When the Keslers were in the oil business, they usually had a few head of cows. After they finally sold the end of the oil field equipment in 1984, they moved to Heber City.

"That year I bought 53 head of Brangus heifer calves and we had jackpot ropings every Wednesday night and on Saturdays. A lot of times I wasn't even there, and Allyson would get the ropings started and run the stopwatch. And I hauled the heifers to all the rodeos. By the end of the summer, we paid for that batch of heifers.

"But things were still tight. We had a hard time getting the cows through the winter. But it seems like that's one of the tricks of this business is to keep yourself tight. If you have money, you spend it. If you put it in a deal, it puts a challenge in front of you. After 2 years, we calved those heifers out.

"We sold the calves, and we added a little bit of money from the chemical business. At all of these stages, I went through page after page of estimates, figuring every option through a 3- to 5-year scenario. The thing that worked for me on paper, and then worked when I did it, was going out and buying gummer (old) cows that only had a couple of calves left in them.

"I bought hay—it was cheap that year—and we kept the cows right here in Heber. I was able to buy those old cows for meat prices, but they were a good kind of cows. Most of the time, cows don't live that long by being bad cows. We kept the heifer calves. I think we bought 57 head of those cows,



High in the Pahvant Range of the Fishlake National Forest, Greg talks about permit boundaries with two Forest Service rangers.

and their calves sold for pretty close to the same amount that we had paid for the cows."

Today, the operation might be described as a no-land and plenty-cattle company. Greg says that at one time, he thought that you couldn't be a rancher if you didn't own land. But, just as he now realizes that he wouldn't be content to be a rancher if he wasn't also in the chemical business, he's changed his mind about the necessity of owning land.

"A lot of ranchers have made 10 times more money on their land, through inflation, than they have with cattle. But that's developing, or speculation. If you want to take just the cattle ranching, in our day and age, I've got my doubts that there are many ranches that you can have the profit margin per head on owned land that you can on leased land.

So, he splits his time between the Double Dollar and Dust-Chem, with the chemical business occupying most of his summer months while his cattle are on pasture. Greg described the physical setup he uses in his 400-cow operation:

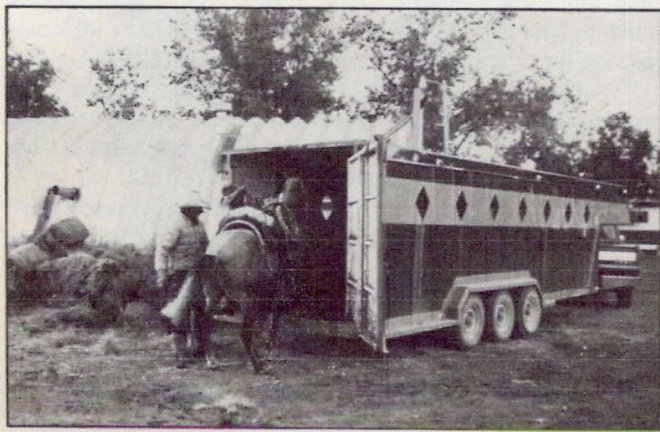
"Cattle are wintered down in Millard County, near Fillmore. We have a ranch down there that we lease and it's a base of operations. Up here (Heber City is 100 miles north of Fillmore), the barn and pasture on the edge of Heber is our base of operations. We've got all kinds of portable facilities, including enough panels and chutes to set up for artificial insemination."

Which brings up another of the many aspects of the ranch. One of Greg's long-term goals is to become a producer of purebred Limousin and club calves. He's bought a few top-bloodline heifers, artificially inseminated them to premier bulls, flushed the heifers, and implanted embryos into commercial cows.

Kesler is a big believer in artificial insemination. Here again, record-keeping plays a key part. He'll handle 60 cows at a time, and he uses an ear implant that stops their breeding cycle, then the whole batch is bred after 9 days. His calving percentages have never been lower than 55 percent, and are averaging between 70 and 80 percent.

Cows are also watched and culled closely. Greg grades them on a scale of 1 to 10 in several categories. This evaluation relies on records and looking at the calves. A thin cow will still have a home if she's raised a nice fat calf.

Like many ranchers, Greg has tried several crosses on his commercial cattle, and is still refining the type of cow that works best in his country. He's aiming for a black, polled cow with Angus, Limousin, and Simmental in her. (Continued)



Ben Quinters, a horse trainer in Heber City who helps Greg sometimes, jumps his horse into Greg's extra-long trailer.

A thin cow will still have a home if she's raised a nice fat calf.

Kesler explains, "What we've tried to implement with these cows is a fixed-cost operation: no variables. The market, we can't do anything about, on our commercial cows. We can't totally control it on our purebreds, but to a great extent we can."

I have one whole field full of dairy heifers—I don't know that they're going to keep going up (in value). The one thing I do know is that a dairy cow is like a machine: Her worth is according to what she can make. So with the dairy calves, I've diversified my livestock operation into another area."

The summer grazing is partly leased land—roughly 9,000 acres in several chunks—and Greg pays between \$6 and \$11 a month per cow. He maintains the fences, and he likes to make long-term deals for his lease grazing. He is always willing to improve the fencing if the owner buys the materials, and he likes to do business with people who take the long view. He also has some grazing permits.

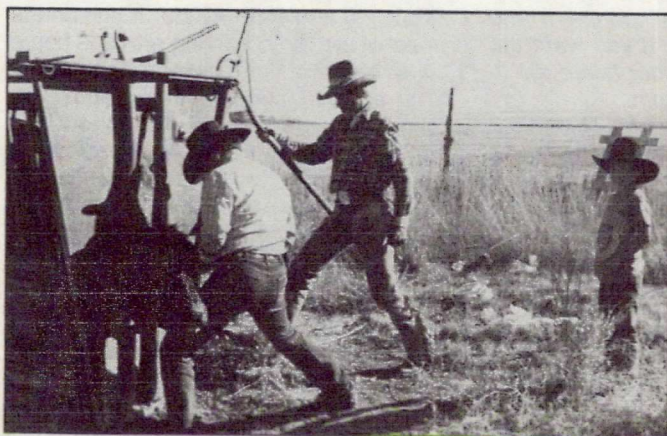
"This last summer (1990), I bought a range permit in Fishlake National Forest that I could trail cows to. And we ran a farm down there (Millard County) and raised corn and alfalfa. We'll look hard at those two operations to see if we're going to keep doing them."

In Millard County, the farming and much of the wintertime care of the cattle are the responsibility of Paul Marchant. He and his wife, Michelle, and their children, Tyrel and Elise, live on the farm.

Part of the arrangement Greg made with Paul and Michelle is to run some of their own cattle along with Double Dollar cattle. That's typical of the way Greg works.

The logic of moving the cattle south in the winter is that it's cheaper to move the cows than the feed. The Pahvant Valley is a rich farming region, with a milder winter. Greg figures for a 90-day winter, and he had planned carefully to have enough feed on hand for the winter of 1990-'91. When possible, the cows are grazed on crop land. Much of the straw is purchased in zig-zag stacks, which are ringed in solar-powered electric fence until needed close to calving time. Then the fence is removed and the cows move into the stacks for shelter. The resulting mounds make good calving grounds, too.

The way that this all fits together is no accident. Greg is always thinking several steps ahead. And he's good about finding ways to do two things at once. The good, young horses on the place are an example.



Greg puts an implant in a cow's ear while Paul Marchant mans the headgate and Landon supervises.



Weaning calves near Heber City. Most of the cow work is done with portable panels.

Greg was quite a calf roper at one time, and he still enjoys roping. So instead of using just any dependable kind of horse on the ranch, he likes to buy a young horse without much training, or one that's giving a backyard owner problems.

His training program is pretty simple—he puts them to work. Lots of long days saddled, in and out of a trailer, covering lots of miles, trailing cattle, and going through lots of gates gives young horses something to do and teaches them not to waste energy on silliness.

Along with that, Greg often carries two ropes, one with a nylon device that keeps a loop from completely closing on a calf's neck. With that rope, he can snag a calf, step off and make the horse back, but the calf will pop out of the loop once he faces toward the horse. Greg can use most horses on the ranch for a couple of years and then sell them as roping horses ready to go.

As you might expect, the Double Dollar is computerized. Allyson keeps track of finances and records, and with the computer system they have now, she can take a status reading on most things within a few minutes.

"I have a software system that keeps track of everything just like a checkbook," Allyson says. "But you have to put the information in to make the system work."

That meshes with Greg's habit of carrying a personal organizer notebook with him. He's good about taking notes, which he relays to Allyson to be stored in the computer.

Allyson also is the coordinator for the mobile phones and radios in the vehicles, so that Greg is always in touch with all the data she has available in the computer system. The whole operation, chemicals and ranching, would come unwrapped without the communication.

Allyson says, "I do the groundwork here. I take messages here for the chemical business, and I tell the callers what I can. We haven't really started marketing the cows yet, but when we do, I'm sure I'll do it the same way we do with the chemicals—help the callers as much as I can, but refer them to Greg for further action."

After spending a few days with him, I can guarantee you that they'll get further action.

Greg Kesler wears a good hat and a pair of elephant-hide ropers. That leather is one of the toughest there is, and I imagine it had lasted the elephant a good long lifetime before it was made into boots. I'll give it 2 years, tops, chasing the end of the Kesler list. 🐾

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