

## CHAPTER ONE

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# WE DECIDE TO MOVE

For the first thirteen years of our marriage, Connie and I ranched in Colorado at the base of the Sangre de Cristos mountains.



**Colorado ranch headquarters**

The place had been in the Hook family since 1864. In the early days of ranching in south central Colorado, cattle were actually very secondary to the operation of a ranch. The main income center was the production and sale of horse hay. From some old records I can see that hay sold for as much as \$100 per ton, about what it is today. (Think of

the difference in the profit picture with today's cost of production versus that of 120 years ago!)

Hay was put up in the customary way, with horses, and stacked all around the meadows. In the winter, the stacked hay was loaded on sleds and hauled to a stationary baler. Sometimes the baler was towed out to the hay, but often the baler was kept in a barn and the hay hauled to it. The balers were powered by a steam-engine tractor for years. Later, a gas-driven tractor with a belt drive replaced the steam engine.

At least one all-wooden, water-powered baler was used in a hay barn along the road just south of Leadville, Colorado. The upper Arkansas River was diverted through a canal into the barn and turned a kind of water or Pelton wheel. The plunger ran very slowly but it was also cheap and steady.

Leadville is just under 9,000 feet in elevation, which translates to ten months of winter and two months of poor sledding.

Right across the road from this baler was a railroad that shipped the hay to large cities like Denver and Kansas City. It was always shipped in boxcars to diminish the danger of fire started by the sparks from the engine smoke. It is hard to imagine today, but back then, hay was the petroleum that powered the country. Most of the hay was purchased by Wells Fargo to feed the horses that drew their mail and other delivery wagons around the cities. Much of it also fed the animals that powered the mines.

It normally took one load of hay to deliver one load by horse. This cut the income by half, but \$50 per ton but was still enough to operate with a profit. All this meant that the early-day ranchers (more accurately "hay farmers") enjoyed two profit centers: hay and cattle. Even on those high mountain ranches, the cattle were almost never fed hay. Our cattle ranged through the hills to the east, where the snow was shallower, and down onto the prairie just west of Pueblo. In the spring there would be a branding and roundup and the cattle would be drifted back to the mountains for the summer. Thus, they were never fed but grazed out 365 days per year, so their input cost was nil. A bad winter could wipe out most of the herd, and did sometimes, but that was considered a cost of doing business. Hay profits just kept coming.

Later much of this range was homesteaded, curtailing the available range. Then, about 1916, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) was

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formed, which meant the end of the ranging and drifting. If a rancher wanted to stay in the cattle business, he had to start feeding hay to his cows instead of selling it. Also at this time the gas engine appeared and hay was replaced by petroleum as the primary fuel. Now there was only one profit center. The cost of raising cattle shot up.

In 1960, I turned 20, and the responsibility for the ranch pretty much came to me. I soon recognized we had a problem. The cost of putting up hay was on the rise but the cattle price was not, and the squeeze began. This forced changes in management to get back to a year-round grazing program. For our ranch—at 7,500 feet, collecting up to three feet of snow on the ground—year-round grazing was a fantasy. Years later, the trucks got big enough to haul the cattle to winter pasture. In those days, however, the trucks were too small to make that feasible. The fact that cows, unaccustomed as they were to the stress of trucking, suffered lower fertility rates as a result, made trucking less attractive.

We often got in excess of 100 inches of snow in the winter, and in the early 1970s, now in my thirties, I got the urge to look for greener pastures.

I went northwest to British Columbia, Canada, several times looking at ranches. The area we liked best was west of Clinton along the Fraser River. That area was famous for its grass: lush enough to finish three- or four-year-old steers! It also was noted for its ability to winter cattle out, and that really intrigued me after the winters we had lived through in Colorado.

The ranch we landed on was the Canoe Creek Ranch, belonging to Jack Koster and his family. The original ranch saddled the Fraser, but when Jack's father died in the '50s, Jack and his brother, Henry, decided to split the property. Jack owned and operated the east half. The half lying on the west side of the river later belonged to a fellow Coloradoan named Bob J.R. Maytag (of the appliance company). In 1974, Bob sold his half, now called Empire Valley, to a German baroness by the name of Sophie Stegeman.

On one of these trips, I was flying to Kamloops and saw Bob Maytag on the same flight. We each talked about what we were doing up there. This was before he had sold to Sophie. After Sophie purchased the ranch, Bob held a fairly large mortgage on it, to be paid in one year from the proceeds of all the cattle sales. Sophie refused to pay him, so

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he was forced to take the ranch back. He started that process and, just before he got possession, approached us and suggested we trade. He did not want to try to start his business there again, as his crew had moved back to the States. We said, “No, but call us when the ranch is in your possession.” After he took possession he called us, and we met and made the trade. We got the land, some of the machinery, but no cows.

I had visited Empire two times before this. Sophie had wanted me to come on as a partner and bail her out. Of course I wasn’t interested. All that to say this: Our exposure to the ranch was so limited that, even at the purchase point, we didn’t realize just what we had. We met in Kamloops as arranged by Henry Koster, Jack’s brother, a realtor at the time. After the papers were signed, Bob’s attorney turned to me and asked, “Just what are you going to do with a 325,000-acre ranch?” With his question, the impact of the decision hit me. I remembered a prayer I had said a few days after Bob came to propose the trade. I had asked the Lord what he wanted me to do, and had sensed his response in a verse from the book of Acts: “Go down and go with them. All is well; I have sent them.” Now, and at times since, I wondered about those directions!

The next day I went out to my new ranch and home and was able to hire back some of Maytag’s crew to babysit the ranch while I went back to Colorado to pack the family and arrange for the shipping of the purebred cows and our machinery.

Without my fantastic wife, Connie, a childhood sweetheart, this would never have been possible. In all our moves, she has insisted that she not go and see the house but just move



**Tom and Connie on motorbikes**

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into whatever it was and make a home. She got the ultimate test at Empire: the ranch headquarters was 80 miles from the nearest paved road, with no electricity, intermittent phone service, no school, and only the local First Nations people for employees and neighbors.

Connie had been a city girl but loved the mountains and wanted any new place to be very mountainous. When we were looking to buy another ranch, that was one of the requirements she put on the deal. And we both wanted to be at the end of the road.

Another requirement that was important to Connie especially was no rattlesnakes. I'll have more to say about that in a later chapter.

My history with Mrs. Hook goes back to the fourth or fifth grade, when she used to throw rocks at me. I spent my formative years around cows and keenly observed their characteristics. Ever notice how much a heifer is like her mother when she matures?

With this knowledge in hand, I set out to find the perfect girl so I could check out her mother and see whether I could still be married to the daughter when she was the mother's age. When I got into high school, I began to notice this little neighbor girl who looked as if she might be of interest someday. She was in junior high at the time. And her mother sure fit the mold. In my senior year—her freshman year—I decided to approach her and see about the possibilities. She rejected these approaches strongly until, out of frustration, I went back up to the ranch to try to get my mind off the rejection. School was out and I was waiting for graduation. At this time she had a change of heart and, through my brother, sent a nice blue shirt to me with a note to give her a call. Within seconds, I was on the phone with her and we set up our first date.

We wouldn't marry for seven years. We both completed college, and I also did a stint in the Air Force. All this time my folks were against the relationship, as they thought she was too silly and too pretty for me. (Connie sometimes didn't help, like the time she asked my dad, "Mr. Hook, do horses give milk?") I knew she would grow out of the silliness, and the other was no problem for me. Finally, the day came when my mother called me in and said they would give their approval to our marriage.

We were married June 6, 1964. Ever since that day, she has been right there under my arm, where she belongs.



**Tom and Connie Hook**

Her perspective on this move is an important part of the story. You need to hear what she has to say.

### **His Calling**

I awoke early and looked around. Then I remembered: we were in the guest room of our dear friends and neighbors, Jim and Connie. Everything came back to me: “Well, this is it! A new beginning for my husband, our two small sons, and myself.” As I rolled over, I looked at my husband, who was lying awake staring at the ceiling, deep in thought about the future ahead. I wanted to just snuggle into his arms and have him reassure me that we were doing the right thing, but I felt he needed this time alone with his thoughts to plan our next few hours.

I closed my eyes and pictured my own home, just three miles down the road. Tom’s family had lived there for 100 years. Now the rooms were empty, the walls and cupboards bare, and the curtains that make a home cozy gone. Could I go back to that house this morning and say goodbye to the home that had given us so many happy memories?

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Our son's first steps, the kitchen where so many birthday cakes had been baked and decorated, the warm fireplace where we spent our cold winter evenings, discussing the day's activities or making new plans.

My stomach had an empty feeling I was sure my breakfast could not fill. As I felt Tom turn over, I knew this day would be even harder for him. That empty house had been his home since he was a newborn, when his father and mother brought him home from the hospital. Tom's parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had ranched in this beautiful high mountain valley of Colorado. He was the fourth generation on that ranch. Today, that heritage would end.

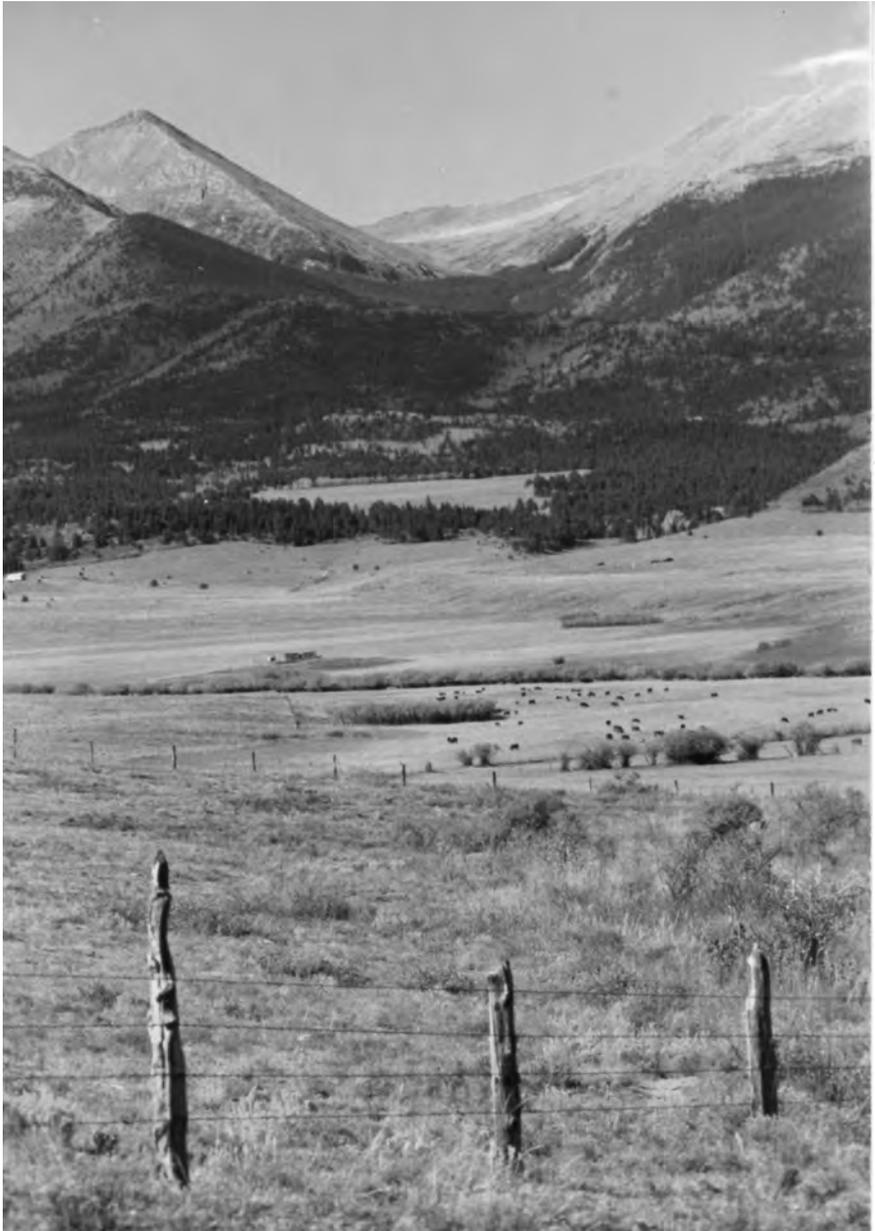
The smell of fresh-perked coffee began to filter into our room from Connie's kitchen. It was time to get up and face the day. As Tom and I knelt in prayer, all we could ask our Lord for was courage. Only then could we face the day with a new strength.

After a good breakfast and a hard goodbye to our friends, who had opened their home for our last night in this beautiful valley, we headed down the road to our final drive into the lane we had entered so many years. The semi-truck faced the road, loaded with all our furniture and personal belongings. The corrals looked quiet without the animals we had fed each morning in our routine chores. As I entered the house, the emptiness seemed to close in on me, and I felt a chill go down my back. Our boys ran through the house, their squeals echoing off the bare walls. They were so small. I wondered if they fully understood that this was no longer their home.

I sat down on the rug in the middle of our living room floor and they came running to me with outstretched arms, happy that I was sitting down to play. As I held them in my arms, God reminded me that as these boys fully put their trust in Tom and me, so I must also trust God with the dependent faith of a small child. No questions asked, just trust.

I made one last pass through the house to make sure we hadn't left anything. I heard a car pull into the driveway and looked out to see Tom's parents and my own parents getting out. They had come to say goodbye and help with any last-minute packing. My heart went out to Tom's parents as I saw them look at the mountains with their snow-capped peaks, the valley floor, and the land they had worked for so many years. I knew this was a very hard day for them. They had retired, yet they also were saying goodbye to a way of life they had always known.

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**Colorado ranch**