



Mysterious People With Rough Hands

Jim Wood was an ordinary man with extraordinary gumption.

By Stephen L. Wilmeth

An overflowing crowd at a Deming, N.M., mortuary in November was a reminder that our way of life is not always sunsets and tuned guitars. It is a life that has had many words written in the attempt to describe it. Most descriptions have come from outside looking in. Myth and truth have been inexorably linked, but there is an honest fascination. As time passes, the general public's understanding has increasingly been couched in unqualified opinions more than fact, but ranch history of the West is deserving of honest assessment. Who are these people of the American West who have made ranching their lives? If they are the folks described by former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords (D-AZ) one night in Apache, Ariz., they are those "almost mysterious people with the rough hands."

Reading from the diary of one of those rough-hands people that spanned the years from Jan. 1, 1949, until Dec. 31, 1962, the first point is revealed—there was not a single mention of a sunset.

Jim

Jim Wood was an ordinary man with extraordinary gumption. His roots were in the Sacramento Mountains of south-central New Mexico, but his life and talents spread westward. Mayhill is where he was

laid to rest after the Deming service. It became the eastern bookend of lands that spread westward through Otero, Dona Ana, and Luna counties.

Jim always used to say his dad celebrated when he finally got him raised. Memories and stories about him are laced with high adventure.

“The blessed work of helping the world forward happily does not wait to be done by perfect men.”

*George Eliot aka Mary Ann Evans
(1819-1880), English writer*

Sitting around with friends embellishing stories he would come up with something that would make everybody take notice only to realize there was an undertone of truth in it. The high school midnight adventure with dynamite and a trash container was one of those. Another was when he was contracting electrical services at White Sands Missile Range and witnessed the rocket sled ride with some character who volunteered and was strapped to the contraption. Jim said when they got to

him both eyes were dangling out on their sockets. After a short pause of absolute quiet somebody responded. Now wait a minute, the acceleration should have pushed his eyes back into his head, not out the front onto his cheeks.

Jim knew then he had set the group up. With an appropriate pause and a smirk, the punchline was revealed. “It wasn’t the acceleration that caused it. It was the sudden stop!”

There were broken bones playing football at the bottom of the



PHOTOS COURTESY WOOD FAMILY

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Wood Cattle Company started home growing cowboys in earnest after Jim bought his first ranch. Two of his grandsons attempted to stand tall amidst the crew. ▶ Shade in New Mexico at lunch often comes at a premium, this one during cow work in 2015. ▶ Jim and grandson Rance, work the chute during a recent branding. ▶ Jim and Susan Wood were in a good spot for some time, until November 2023. ▶ Jim told grandson Ryndon he could only shoot a 10-point buck for his first deer kill. Ryndon thought nine points was enough. ▶ In a picture many years ago, Jim and Susan are shown with their two children, Jedidiah and Jodie. The couple lost Jedidiah at a young age. ▶ Jim was always proud of his five grandsons. Here he sits horseback with Rance and Ryndon.



piles, there was some cock-and-bull story of a borrowed fire truck at a bar in Oregon, there was the attempt to satisfy his dad that took him on a short-lived adventure to the University of New Mexico, where (among other things) he came home without the high school graduation gift of an expensive watch, and on and on. Through it all was an innate humor that endeared him to everybody. Everybody who mattered, that is.

Susan, his wife of 45 years, occupied the top spot in that regard. She was his girl, and he was her guy. They made things happen, and the journey of their success began in earnest in 1978 when they married.

Jim was a visual student and a perfectionist of logic. He was also a tireless worker. Higher education was transformed into the form and function of his hands and his physical talents. He excelled and so did his company. Wood Electric became a primary civilian contracting force at nearby White Sands Missile Range, which was no easy task. There the classified tasks of creating missile systems for our nation's defense take place. It is where rocket science is needed and practiced, and Jim filled that niche. It reached the point that when a dilemma of certain circuitry was encountered, a call to Jim Wood was made. He filled a special role

for our national defense as well as for many individuals.

One of those individuals was a rancher who was offered the opportunity of electrifying his ranch headquarters if he would provide the labor to get the system built. Having no experience in such matters he contacted Jim, who offered to be general contractor on the project in order to satisfy all permitting and construction requirements. When the electrical service checked Jim out for licensing, they made it known they had never dealt with a contractor with so many varied and specialized certifications. With mules, pulleys, winches, saddle axes, and muscle, the job was completed after 122 years of having no electricity and after 70 years since the Gila Valley, near where the ranch is located, was electrified through the Rural Electrification Act of 1936.

Jim was always drawn to ranchers.

By the '90s, he was ready to do something about that too. The company had made him a wealthy man. It put him in a position to do any number of things, but the one thing that always drew him was ranching. Many young men have been similarly attracted, but the barriers of entry are so difficult the vast majority are precluded. The few who do prevail with a total emphasis of what the ranch can produce

on its own merit are rare, but that is what Jim had always been.

Jim and Susan also had several things going for them in addition to their successful business and age was one. At 40, Jim was on the threshold of what a respected Texas lady once said about ranchers specifically and all men generally. "Men aren't worth a damn until they are 43!"

In 1996, they made their move buying their first ranch in Luna County. It would become the foundation of the Wood Cattle Company. The /77 (the Slash 77 branded on the left hip) was born. Jim was in near heaven.

When Darkness Is Near

The 13-year span of diary mentioned above is a hugely important chronicle of cultural history. It transforms the ranch life the Woods entered from all forms of fiction to the grassroots of what makes this business what it is. It is hard. His words are a collage of repetition as witnessed in the following brief and often misspelled entries.

- *We punch cows at big mill*
- *Get bull up for bull man to look*
- *Fix bay for horses*
- *Fix fence where car busted Tuesday*
- *Cattle sure fallen apart in this heat*
- *Pack salt out on top. dr cow for worms.*
- *Brand 18 CN calves*
- *Went to dr he think I will live a while longer*
- *Worked on roan cow till 10. Baby ded.*

That old cowman shared basic truths. To make a ranch successful, it is an everyday demand. It is a continuum of varied and difficult tasks and seldom are there kudos. Glory is rarer yet, but, invariably, a deep spirituality emerges. Most will say you can't live a ranch life without becoming deeply spiritual. Death, life, and the onslaught of repeated natural disasters impact your senses and your soul. At once, there is an immensity of magnificence and grandeur of belonging to something much larger. Creation emerges separate and subordinate to the Creator.

Without qualification, Jim Wood became that kind of rancher. It was akin to a memory of that old cowman standing in the open door of the barn as a storm hit. Horses had just been unsaddled and the bottom dropped out when the sky opened up and it poured. Standing unfazed as lightning struck, followed immediately by an immense clap of thunder that shook everything as it rumbled out across the valley, he simply lifted his head and smelled that monsoonal gift. Edging closer to stand by him there was surprise seeing a tear running down his cheek. It took years to understand that.

Like his peers, Jim didn't need to describe sunsets. They became a more intimate part of his daily being just like sunrises, wind, and the rare, sweet smell of New Mexico rain. He increasingly sought ways to defend his ranch and private property against the progressive war on the West. His stance on the enforcement of property rights, contracts, and free enterprise was that citizenry didn't need the constant interference of government. He grew to question agency authority to trample on ranchers through varying interpretation of laws. He believed rules applied antagonistically to private property should also apply and be enforced against the agencies.

Jim and Susan's life was in a good place. Their daughter and son-in-law, Jodie and John Bookout, and their five boys, Riley, Reuben, Ryder, Ryndon, and Rance, were an ever-increasing blessing. They too loved the ranch and had long been the best of permanent help.

Then on Sunday, Nov. 12, 2023, the world came crashing down on the family. Working cattle at their Torres pens, Jim was killed. They were weaning calves. Jim was standing in the alley observing the sort

when a horned cow targeted him and ran over him, hooking his right shoulder with a horn and severing the artery going down his arm.

Without immediate medical help all attention was in vain. Everybody was shell shocked trying to grasp what had just happened. By later that night and early the next morning the entire local ranching community was similarly impacted. Within the week, the funeral services started with an overflowing crowd in Deming and concluded later that afternoon at Mayhill, N.M., at a special family plot. Tears of grief were mixed with somber expressions of disbelief.



A more fitting picture illustrating Jim's life comes from one evening sitting on the hillside above his headquarters with his dog. It was without a doubt that the precious sense of awe was on his mind.

Wood Cattle Company

With the /77 brand, the ranch is now at a juncture of great importance. Every indicator suggests that what has been done under Jim's stewardship will be continued. Jim would have wanted that beyond everything. The community needs it as well. There is a responsibility and there are consequences. Too much of the West is being transformed into ranching operations that are void of family connectiveness. There is a need to bridge the generations with the ethos of the culture, the roots, and the aspirations that partnerships with the land create. It is not just the West, but the bond there has always been more unique. Many cultures share a similar proverb. The best fertilizer is the steward's shadow on the ground.

The reference of the Gifford comment offers greater clarity. Those almost mysterious people with the rough hands offer a glimpse into what may be a more closely aligned truth. Ranching isn't just a lifestyle. It is an arbiter of souls. Become vested in it and it comes closest to the veil of life and death. It claims allegiance, and its grasp is enduring.

Jim Wood sought, found that role, and entered that realm...always with the promise of heaven. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. He says: "Jim Wood is missed. His ethic of originality and work, his energy, and his humor made those around him better. In seeking correct words of his memory, it would have been interesting to ask Jim about the incident that took his life. With another appropriate pause and a growing smirk on his face, we could just imagine him saying something like, 'Well, fellows, it was sure enough western!'"