



Up Front

Ode to my hero.
By C.J. Hadley

It was about 1992, at a wool-growers meeting in Douglas, Wyo. I was to speak during lunch. What I didn't know was that the room would be the lobby of a '70s-style Holiday Inn with a swimming pool smelling slightly of urine and chlorine as a centerpiece.

My podium was on one side of the water. The wool growers dined on the opposite side. The sound from the mike roared across the water and, I thought, must have spoiled everyone's lunch.

Wyoming sheep rancher Chet Mercer was in the room. At the time he was 78. A spry, bright man who owned Mercer Land & Livestock in Hyattville, he listened carefully to my message—that *RANGE's* purpose was to spread good news about cowboys and sheepherders.

Within a few days of returning to Carson City, Nev., I received a double white envelope from Chet. The inside package contained a wad of \$50 bills to help *RANGE*. I could put gas in my truck! Get supplies! Buy stamps! Find some help!

I wrote and thanked him for his generosity. The following month, another double envelope arrived. *RANGE* and I felt enormously wealthy. I thanked Chet profusely, but asked him not to do it again.

He called and said, "I like to give money to conservative causes. I like *RANGE*. It doesn't matter that you claim to be a liberal Democrat from New York City. I sold the ranch and invested it well, my family is fine, so you are sharing my social security check!"

For 16 years, every month, *RANGE* and I blossomed with Chet's overwhelming and tender support. He would write notes with the cash: "Thank you for helping our western ranchers" or "We appreciate all you are trying to do."

Many years ago Eric Grant interviewed Chet for *RANGE*, but Chet asked me not to run the story. He didn't want applause or accolades. He said, "I just want to help."

Chet was idolized by his teachers. He was the brightest kid in kindergarten and has for-

ever remained in front of the pack. When he joined the Navy he served well, but he was called home in 1935 after his father died. His mother requested a special early release because he was needed to take over the ranch.

He made a success of that, too, and worked hard for all sheep ranchers. He was a world-class trapper and hunter. In his later years, well into his 80s, he would hire a plane, pay for it and the pilot, and hunt coyotes that were killing lambs. He sent me a gorgeous pelt that hangs in my office—always in view.

A few weeks ago, Chet suffered a stroke. I tried to call and visit with him but a nurse said he couldn't talk. I am persistent so I asked if she would put the phone by his pillow so that I could at least share some words. When I said, "Chet, this is CJ from *RANGE*," he



answered in a strong voice that amazed the nurse, "CJ, this place is a torture chamber!"

On the following day, I took a truck, two planes and a rental car to get to

Basin, Wyo., and the Bonnie Bluejacket Nursing Home. When I arrived, Chet was asleep on a Lazy Boy in the lobby, wearing a bright blue *RANGE* T-shirt that I had sent him as a joke. "Sheepherders don't wear T-shirts!" he insisted.

His left side was paralyzed. He could barely move, but his strong right hand grabbed mine. He hugged me and said, "How good of you to come." We shared dinner, breakfast and lunch—pureed stuff without a name—and then I came home.

My hero Chet was born on Nov. 27, 1913; he died on September 23 at the age of 94. His daughters Shirley and Carolyn buried the *RANGE* T-shirt on a hill overlooking his ranch next to some wildflowers. Shirley said, "Our father didn't want to take it off."

Chet, my loving friend, without you there would be no *RANGE*. You carried us through some hard times and got us to the good place we are today. How good of you to care. ■