

Chapter Four

The Colorado Rancher

“You hook ’em, we cook ’em!”



WE RENAMED THE RANCH Fun Valley, and while life was different, it was never dull. The first summer we built a cement miniature golf course. The locals were very confused by the strange foundations and forms we were pouring. We had a lot of fun telling them it was a brand new type of motel. After working on the cement crew, I knew right then and there that I would NEVER again be in construction, or any other business that involved manual labor!

Daddy realized early on that if he was going to own a successful fishing lodge and resort, he had to offer his customers good fishing. Tourists did not need a Colorado state fishing license to fish in our Class B Permit commercial fish pond and the Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife stocked the rivers and non-commercial lakes on both the National Forest and on private land without charge. Daddy quickly became buddies with the local game warden and Fun Valley soon had the best fishing around.

The Colorado natives were avid fly-fishermen and looked down on bait fishing. But I didn't care. All I wanted to do was catch fish. Being an

old hand at bait fishing back in Texas, I quickly adjusted my bait fishing skills to trout. I went off to my favorite fishing hole whenever I wanted and usually came back with a mess of fish in a short period of time. As far as I know, I was the only one who used trot lines for catching trout. That might have been because it was *illegal* to use trot lines in Colorado, but I never told anyone about my secret, and lucky for me, no one found out.

SOMEHOW I CAME TO BELIEVE that in Colorado you only had to go to school for eleven years. I was disappointed when I started ninth grade at Del Norte High School and got the official word: Colorado was just like Texas. Students had to go to school for twelve years.

Even though I never was much for school, in all honesty, I liked the Del Norte small school atmosphere. I was quite a novelty with my thick Texas accent and drew eager listeners to hear my tall tales. I played football that year and noticed that my teammates were scruffier than the athletes back home, and they all smoked. Serious athletes in Texas didn't do that, but what the hell, this wasn't Texas, so I lit up too. The coaches always tried to avoid seeing anyone smoke, so they wouldn't have to kick us off the team. That year we tied one game and lost all the rest.

THE WINTER OF 1959-60 was a doozie—lots of snow! We rode the school bus twenty-two miles to school every day, and every day I prayed that the school would be snowed out and closed, but it didn't happen very often. We cut holes in the ice and fished, and at night we listened to KOMA, a high powered radio station from Oklahoma City. That winter, Daddy was elected president of the South Fork Chamber of Commerce. He reorganized the Chamber and put together the first World Championship Raft Races down the Rio Grande from Creede to South Fork. The race was held the following June, when the water was highest. It became an annual event and is still held to this day.

IT MADE A BIG IMPRESSION on me just how poor the local people were. School closed for a while every year so that the students could go out and pick potatoes. Whole families of locals, Navajo Indians from the reservation in Arizona, just about everyone picked potatoes. Hunting season was an important time for everyone too. Folks didn't hunt for fun, they hunted for food. The game warden brought in fresh deer and elk road kill for the school cafeteria. The school lunches were twenty-two cents. Still, many kids were months behind in paying for their lunches, and the teachers refused to release their report cards until they paid up.

Even in our relatively affluent home, we were told to be more careful with money. We had spent a lot during the previous summer and needed every dime for construction of the planned motel and restaurant. This new financial conservatism was something I had never experienced before.

I had sensed in Abilene that a lot of people weren't as well off as we were, and I also knew that there were some people on the Southside who were rich beyond anything I could imagine. In fact, my cousin Andy and I often fantasized about making more money than we could spend, but as a child the difference hadn't been all that important to me. I never spent a whole lot of time thinking about status. My motivation for making money then had been mostly to be popular. I had tried to compensate for the fact that I wasn't particularly good at sports, or school, by being the one who always had money and could buy stuff for the other kids.

While it was an adventure to go to Colorado, it was also a time of personal turmoil for me. I was a young teenager and not exactly immune to the uncertainties and insecurities that went along with that, plus I was a long way from Texas and the safety of my friends and family. Now I was seeing, and understanding for the first time, what hard-core, grinding poverty was all about. I could see its effects all around me. I also realized, for the first time, that financial independence wasn't a given. I don't mind admitting that it scared me to realize that it was a whole lot easier to end up poor than rich!

I guess what happened to me was a "reality check" and it had a profound effect on me. My attitude toward money changed completely. Now I understood that money wasn't something to be taken for granted and

that you needed it for more than popularity. Yeah, I still wanted to be a high roller, because I loved the feeling, but now my real, bottom line reason for making money became survival; not just “gettin’-by” survival, but survival on my terms: independent and comfortable. I was determined that someday I would have a successful business of my own.

IN THE SPRING OF 1960, we built a motel and a large restaurant at Fun Valley. That year I had made a deal with Daddy to let me run the new fishpond concession, or as we called it, the “pay pond.” I couldn’t wait. I was ready to make some M-O-N-E-Y!

My younger brother Bennie took care of the horse rides, while I took care of the fishing. My commercial fish pond was directly behind the restaurant. The fish truck from the commercial hatchery delivered fish anytime we ordered. Our cost was \$1 per pound delivered live. The ideal length to buy was about ten inches. Trout that length weighed about a half a pound or less. We sold the fish to customers for ten cents an inch. We bought a lot of fish early in the season because by feeding them a lot (they loved Purina Trout Chow) we could grow them a couple of inches before they were caught.

I always hung around the back of the restaurant, where we had a nice patio and a bridge over the water. When people looked out the window or came out onto the patio, I’d throw some feed out. The water would turn black with fish, and they’d splash all over the place. I kept a small paper sack of fish food (always almost empty) and would give some feed to people and especially to little kids to throw out for themselves. Then I’d suggest they buy another sack of fish feed from the bartender. I had a pre-arranged hand signal with the bartender as to how much to charge for the sack—ten to fifty cents depending on what I judged they could pay. Sometimes I would get a bigger bag and offer it for \$1. If they hesitated to buy the big bag, I always offered them the smaller bag. Feed was cheap, and the more you fed the fish the longer they grew. And all the time I tried to sell visitors on my “NO License Required, Guaranteed Catch Super Deal.” I told folks that the fishing was good and cheap and

that we'd cook the fish right in the restaurant. My slogan was, "You hook 'em, we cook 'em."

IN MY DEAL, I kept all the money we charged for cleaning (ten cents) and half of the money for the worms I dug and sold for bait, *plus tips!* As anyone in the hospitality business will tell you, getting tips is an art. At age fifteen, I became a hard-core hustler, part-time con artist, and master tip generator!

One of the things I did to get good tips was to check out the license plates of the cars that pulled into the ranch and pick my targets. The best tipppers were from California, Oklahoma, Arizona, Texas and the Northeast. The worst were from Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin. And forget about the Coloradoans. I also ignored the folks we called "Two twos" (two kids with two cents) and looked for older people who were with grandkids. Grandparents with grandkids would pay almost anything you asked.

We fished with cane poles baited with worms or salmon eggs. I threw in the fish food. As soon as the trout hit the line, I popped the pole and set the hook. Then I let the customer bring in the fish. If they caught a lot of fish and didn't keep a close count, I always had some "add on" fish to add on to their catch.

I truly believe that everybody on earth has something they can do better than anyone else. Most people never ever know what their talent is, right? Well, my claim to fame then, and now, is cleaning trout. Yep. I can clean a trout in seven seconds flat! This is not a misprint. Our charge for cleaning fish was ten cents, but if the customer looked good, and caught six or seven fish, I would say in my sweetest voice, "I enjoyed helping you so much that I really don't want to charge you for cleaning your fish." This usually led to me getting a dollar or more as a tip!

Once in a while I miscalculated and some cheapo just said "Thank you" with no tip. In that case, I forgot all about Daddy's rules on how to treat your customers and went for revenge. I normally killed the fish by banging their heads on the side of the bucket. When you banged their

heads, you could open up their gills with your thumb and with some practice, shoot a stream of blood wherever you aimed it. Sometimes, if I'd worked extra hard and gotten stiffed, my target was the face of the cheapo customer, or their white shirt or blouse. "Oh, excuse me," I'd apologize. "I'm sooooo sorry." Other times, I'd just skim off one or two of their fish for the next "add on" and let it go at that.

IN ADDITION to my fish cleaning and worm business, I dug up and sold small pine trees, wild roses and wild raspberry plants. I also found that folks would buy pieces of wood that had been gnawed by beavers. I even sold a live chipmunk or two. If someone wanted to buy something, I did my best to find it and sell it to them. Not only did I love having a roll of walking-around money, I loved to make a good trade. And I still love it to this day.