

59. GARY 'SLIM' SPURLING (1938-2007)



Ranches tend to attract characters. Our place was no exception, and Slim topped our list.

My first memory of Slim is of him changing his little boy's diaper on the ground next to his truck. This was the mid-1960s. He had two little boys, a wife in the CSU vet school and a job as

an on-again-off-again roustabout in the Wellington oilfield.

His wife, Judy, the story went, was one of the few women accepted into the CSU School of Veterinary Medicine program, and such was the prejudice against women at the time that she missed only one day of classes for labor and birth of their second son – to deny the vet school any excuse to drop her.

Slim, Judy and their two boys lived in a rundown old farmhouse known as the “Boar's Nest,” one of several such places leased out to interesting misfits by Josephine Lamb.¹ Slim had fixed up the kitchen with cupboards made of local pine, with doors swinging on his home-tanned elk hide hinges. He gardened, canned and hunted (poached). He was also an accomplished blacksmith and made Jeanne some beautiful handforged knives with antler handles.

Slim was steel-spring strong and, hands down, the most energetic guy I have ever known. Although he was not a big guy, his presence made him seem so. Balding in his late twenties, he sported a large wavy beard and a twinkle (demonic gleam) in his eye.

After Judy graduated from vet school, they moved down to his parents' poultry ranch on Turkey Creek just east of Morrison. It was a picturesque hollow with big cottonwoods and several ‘log’ barns made of telephone poles. Slim bought out his parents when they moved to Australia.

Slim shut the egg business down and turned the barns into blacksmith shops and artist's studios. Hired by Sam Arnold (1926-2006), founder of ‘The Fort’ restaurant (famous Bent's Fort replica on US 285 east of Morrison), Slim made its hand-forged rustic hardware and light fixtures. Rumor was, before the job was done, he had taken up with Sam's wife – Slim was a serial ladies' man.

Over the next several years, I would see Slim occasionally. Late one evening he showed up at our place, asking if I wanted to go with him pick up some alabaster. We climbed in his truck and drove way up north somewhere back in the foothills. We finally came to a locked chain link gate with a “*Danger Explosives*” sign. I assumed Slim had a key, but instead he grabbed an eight-pound short-handled sledge hammer and in a flurry of blows bent the hinge pins back until the gate fell off, left hanging loosely by the chain and padlock at the other end. I was stunned by the violence of Slim's lock picking. He drove right over the fallen gate into the mine pretty as you please, and loaded up a couple of tons of alabaster chunks by the light of the headlamps. He didn't bother to put the gate back up as we left – it would have taken a welding crew a day to repair it, anyway.

Another time, Slim showed up and wanted my help to pick up a wood stove. He said it was at “*the Hermitage*”, one of Josephine Lamb's old places. Being a little leery after the last experience, I requested assurance that this wouldn't be another hit and run. “*No, it's my stove alright, I just loaned it to 'em. No problem.*”

When we got there, Slim said to the meek little hippie girl who answered the door “*I'm Slim and this*

here's Carl Judson, and that's my stove.” She looked on in mute shock and awe as Slim yanked the stove pipe out of the ceiling, pulled the stove apart and carted everything out the door. We were in and out in five minutes, leaving a gaping hole in the living room and a lot of soot. I don't know why he thought he needed me – scapegoat, maybe?

Years later my son, Arthur, was invited to a Sadie Hawkins Day dance. The night of the dance he went to pick the girl up at her house, introductions were made and the mother asked, rather unpleasantly, “*Are you related to Carl Judson?... He just walked right in to our house and took the stove!*”

I think the last time I saw Slim (before I hired him) was on the Denver news. Slim's place on Turkey Creek was key to some government water project. Slim had refused to cooperate, so the government had commenced condemnation proceedings. Slim, holding a rifle, was looking mean as a rattlesnake as he told the TV reporter that anyone who tried to take his property “*is going to have to get past my 30-30.*” (Slim's brother had done time for shooting a guy in a parking lot dispute, so it might have run in the family.)

Well, the government won, nobody got shot and sometime later Slim turned up at the ranch looking for a job. I hired him along with his pickup, a small bulldozer and a truck with a grapple boom. Whatever possessed me? I guess I couldn't pass up the chance to try to harness all that energy.

We put him and his wife d'jour in the main house at the Ferree place. During the time they were moving in, I got a taste of things to come...

At the time we were cooperating with the Animal Reproduction Lab at CSU (Chapter 55), whereby they were using our cow herd to conduct large-scale trials of embryo splitting and freezing regimes. As part of those trials, a bunch of CSU staff and graduate students were pregnancy checking² several hundred cows in the corals at the Ferree Place.

George Seidel called me one evening and asked if I wanted to hear something amusing. Apparently that afternoon, Slim had moseyed down to the corrals to inquire what they were up to, and upon receiving the explanation said “*Hey, my wife is psychic. She can just come out here and tell you what you need to know about each cow. You don’t need to do all that work. I’ll just run up to the house and get her.*” Ever the diplomat, I’m sure George managed to decline Slim’s generous offer without giving offence.

Slim became the ranch shop man. He was a good mechanic and a dynamite welder. A problem was that he would go to town and charge a bunch of shop stuff – more than we needed. I had to introduce a purchase order system with our supply vendors, requiring my signature, to keep him in check.

We had a hay field just south of the Ferree buildings, maybe 25 acres, which needed to be worked up and reseeded. I had Slim plow it. He wanted to use our *mulcher* aka *culti-packer* after plowing, which was common in seedbed preparation then, but I instructed him specifically to use a disc instead. A mulcher’s teeth will pull up the big roots and grass clumps of an old hay stand to the surface, making it nearly impossible to make a good seedbed. A disc, on the other hand, with its rotating blades will push the roots and grass clumps down under the surface, leaving better conditions to make a seedbed for the small alfalfa seeds.

Well, I had to leave for a couple of weeks. When I came back, there were roots all over the field – Slim had used the mulcher. No matter what we did, the surface remained trashy and clumpy, so we got a crummy stand of alfalfa.

I was out there one day with Slim viewing the occasional, scraggly little alfalfa plants and feeling very out of sorts. I said something like “*G-----t, Slim, look at this. I told you, but you wouldn’t listen...*” etc. etc. Slim had a hang dog look of contrition (not a typical Slim look, but then he did feel pretty bad about it). He said demurely “*Don’t worry, I’ll make it OK.*” Glowering at him, I said “*Yeah, how you gonna do that?*” He replied “*I’ll reverse the earth’s polarity over the field and that’ll fix it.*” Well, what can you say...?

In January of 1983 we experienced a terrible cold spell. Jeanne and I were at the Stock Show in Denver, so I missed the following “Slim event” relayed to me some 15 years later by Alan Morris who had worked at the ranch then. Typically, the coldest spot on the ranch, our home place right on the confluence of the North Fork and Stonewall Creek routinely registered 30° or more below zero in those days. Alan (an extraordinarily competent stockman, not given to exaggeration) said that the thermometer had dropped to -50° at our place one morning and the propane tank that supplied the main shop (then at our place) wasn’t working, so Slim built a wood fire under the tank to get things going. It’s a good thing I didn’t know.

In his mid-forties, he had energy to burn. He would work like a maniac for 12-16 hours, then go home and can green beans until 3 am. At one point he was raising twenty turkeys in his front yard. They had gotten really big and it was a quite a deal to get through the clamoring horde to his back door. One night he butchered the whole bunch and spent the next two nights canning them.

The steel gates that became a trademark of Phantom Canyon Ranch were made by Slim from scrap pipe, log chain and scrap steel plates. I remember him heaving the heavy gates across the shop floor as he finished one and moved to the next.

After a couple of years Slim and I came to a parting of the ways. When he and his wife were packed up and ready to leave, he presented me with a bill for \$3,500 for “machine work” with his little bulldozer. When I protested that I had never authorized the work, he snapped back that “*it had needed doing.*” I said that wasn’t the point and I wasn’t going to pay it. He turned on his heels and stomped off saying “*Well I’m not leaving here with holes in my pockets!*” I spent an uncomfortable hour, half expecting Slim to return with a gun, but I didn’t see him again for a long time. But I did hear about him now and again...

When Slim left the ranch, he hooked up with Leo Miller, a septuagenarian logger (and something of a scoundrel – Chapter 20) to do some work for a man who had timber up west of Laramie. I heard all about

this from Leo some months later at the ‘old’ Forks. I had stopped in for a bowl of chili and Leo, in a dirty tee shirt and red suspenders, was hunched over a nearly empty pitcher of beer. After guarded pleasant-ries, he said he wanted to apologize, and started to tell me how he had thought that Slim had got a pretty raw deal from me, but after spending a month in the woods with Slim and his wife, Leo’s sympathies, he said, were now entirely with me.

Apparently, Leo and Slim and Slim’s wife and two other guys had all bunked in a one room cabin with no plumbing. Leo had a shopping list of complaints about Slim, but the primary one had to do with Slim and his wife and their nightly exclamations of mutual carnal knowledge (Leo’s choice of language was more extensive and considerably saltier). “*And then they’d get up in the morning and fix breakfast. Just think about it!*” he said, “*Just think about it! Besides, the guy’s plum crazy.*”

A couple years before he died, I ran into Slim in a Mexican restaurant down in Fort Lupton. He was unmistakably Slim, as full of energy as ever and going on about geobiological energizer beams, or something.

By the way, Slim was fond of threatening deadly force, but I’m not sure he ever laid a hand on anybody. He did, however, leave behind some pissed off women. I saw Judy in 2010 and she seethed with anger at the mention of his name after 40 years. His second wife flipped out and took after him in an enclosed space with guns blazing...literally. Didn’t hit him though.

A Google search will be rewarded by a treasure trove of Slim stuff.

¹ Livermore rancher and schoolteacher. See *Rabbit Creek Country: Three Lives in the Heart of the Mountain West*. Jon Theim, 2008.

² “Preg checking” is an artful undertaking, done by inserting one’s arm (covered in a long plastic glove) into the cow’s rectum to palpate the condition of her ovaries through the intestinal wall.

³ Slim was an ardent paranoid conspiratorist, sure that it was just a question of time before the government came after him. For that eventuality, he had stockpiled a large arsenal including a .458 Winchester Magnum elephant gun with armor piercing ammunition.