

PEOPLE

Buffalo barons of Menlo Park



BATTLING BRONZE BUFFALO BULLS occupy a focal point in the living room of Armando and Lena Flocchini in Menlo Park. They are on their Wyoming buffalo ranch this week to preside at a stampede for a new TV serial starring Richard Chamberlain. Photo by Marion Softky.

*Buffaloes, buffaloes; thousands abreast,
A scourge and amazement, they swept to the west.
With black bobbing noses, with red rolling tongues,
Coughing forth steam from their leather-wrapped lungs,
Cows with their calves, bulls big and vain,
Goring the laggards, shaking the mane,
Stamping flint feet, flashing moon eyes.
Pompous and owlish, shaggy and wise.*

— From Vachel Lindsay
"The Ghost of the Buffaloes"

BY MARION SOFTKY

"For ten grand you can buy one stampede," says Armando Flocchini, Menlo Park's own buffalo baron.

Actually, stampedes are a minor part of the activities on the Bar D Durham Ranch, a 52,000 acre spread near Gillette, Wyoming, where Armando and Lena Flocchini manage a herd of 2,800 buffalo primarily for meat and for breeding stock. The meat is sold through the Durham Meat Company in San Jose, which Mr. Flocchini has owned and operated for more than 40 years.

Although the sight of thousands of buffalo charging shoulder to shoulder may thrill the romantic, Mr. and Mrs. Flocchini aren't eager to rent their buffalo herd often for stampedes. "It ruins the land," he says.

Nevertheless, more than 2,000 of Mr. Flocchini's buffalo will stampede for an up-coming TV serial called "The Fremont Story," starring Richard Chamberlain. Armando and Lena Flocchini are in Wyoming now to greet Mr. Chamberlain, star of such popular films as "Dr. Kildare," "Shogun" and "The Thornbirds." They flew to Wyoming right after a big family reunion Sept. 28 to be on hand for Mr. Chamberlain, the filming and stampede.

To stampede the buffalo, the ranch hands chase them with airplanes and four-wheel drive ranch trucks—heavily armored to withstand charges. "There'll be a lot of noise and a lot of dust flying," says Mr. Flocchini, who will be out in one of the vehicles helping manage the stampede. He adds matter of factly, "You kind of get used to it after 20 years. It just becomes a job."

Horses are not used except occasionally for sport. "Horses and buffalo don't mix," says Mr. Flocchini. Buffalo "will turn around and charge a horse. Besides,

horses fag out, but buffalo run for ever."

Back in the 1960s the Bar D Durham buffalo also charged in the film, "The Three Stooges Go West." For that stampede a hole was dug so cameras could film the pounding of hooves from below. The Flocchins still treasure pictures taken at the time with star Mo Howard.

Mr. and Mrs. Flocchini are better known locally as solid members of the Menlo Park community for 30 years. Semi-retired, Mr. Flocchini is still president of the meat company, one of the few independent meat companies still operating. Two sons continue the tradition. Armando Flocchini Jr. is vice president and general manager; Richard Flocchini is plant manager and secretary-treasurer.

Mr. Flocchini also presides with genial style over the local chapter of the American Society of Retired Persons and runs its monthly meetings (the third Thursday of every month at 1:30 p.m. at the Menlo Park Recreation Center).

Both Mr. and Mrs. Flocchini are active at St. Raymonds where Mrs. Flocchini is chairman of the Altar Ministry. Somehow she also manages to keep track of birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas for three children, 15 grandchildren and five great grandchildren.

Almost 60 family members gathered in the back yard of the Flocchini's west Menlo home on a recent Saturday for the annual family reunion—an all-day celebration with buffet lunch and sit-down barbecue dinner.

A SELF-MADE MAN

"I've been in the meat business and the cattle business all my life," says Mr. Flocchini.

He grew up on a dairy ranch in Humboldt County and skipped high school to study accounting at a local business college at age 14. A job with the Bank of Italy showed him he didn't like "working indoors with a necktie on," and he tired of milking cows twice a day seven days a week.

In 1926 at age 18, he started at the old Grant Market in San Francisco as an apprentice butcher. Because he worked long hours and got raises above the union pay scale, he ran afoul of the unions and was fined several times. "I had an ambition to learn and didn't care how much time I put in," he recalls proudly.

Later Mr. Flocchini, nicknamed "Cowboy," went to work for the competition as a calf skinner, who went to the retail markets, skinned calves and sold the hides. In

1931, with a loan from his boss, he bought a quarter share in the Durham Meat Company. In 1947 he finished buying the whole company.

In 1929 Armando Flocchini was milking cows in Brisbane when he met a young visitor, Lena Tevini. He took her for a motorcycle ride, and in 1931 they were married.

The meat business peaked during the Korean War, when Durham furnished millions of pounds of meat to the Armed Forces. Mr. Flocchini is particularly proud of receiving an award of excellence from the procurement agency of the armed forces. "I'm the only meat company in the U.S. that's got it," he says.

Now the meat business has shrunk, Mr. Flocchini observes. There are no more slaughterhouses in California, so meat must be shipped from suppliers in the Midwest at major costs in transportation. And people are eating less meat. Nevertheless, Durham Meat Company still supplies meat to veterans hospitals, prisons, state hospitals and some of the best restaurants in San Francisco.

Its sideline of buffalo meat is on the menu at Dal Baffo's in Menlo Park and Tommy's Joynt in San Francisco.

Buffalo meat has more protein and less fat than beef, says Mr. Flocchini enthusiastically. "We eat buffalo meat most of the time," he adds.

How did he get into the buffalo business? "By accident," Mr. Flocchini replies. He lent some money to one of his employees who went into the buffalo business in Wyoming, and ended up owning the ranch in 1964.

HOME ON THE RANGE

"We feel we're part of a heritage. We're bringing back history," explains Mr. Flocchini. "At the same time, we're operating as a business, not as a hobby. We're trying to make a profit."

This attitude has played a major part in the resurgence of the buffalo population from near extinction. Thanks to careful management, the magnificent symbol of the wild frontier has staged a spectacular comeback from the thousand or so animals left after the massacres of the last century.

Twenty-five years ago, there were about 2,000 buffalo; now there are 70,000 in both public and private herds, he says.

Mr. Flocchini's herd is managed in a businesslike way. During the big roundup in August the calves are branded, the herd is culled, and the heifer calves have their horns removed. Why? Cows with horns fight and gore each other, particularly when crowded in pens and railroad cars. "That spoils a lot of meat and meat means money to us," says Mr. Flocchini. "We have a complete herd with no horns on the cows."

The bulls are also culled with about 100 of the younger bulls under six years kept for breeding stock. They breed more and fight less, explains Mr. Flocchini. Some of the bigger old bulls are turned into an area of the ranch where hunters bag their trophy buffalo head.

Then in a November roundup the calves are collected and weaned.

Buffalo are very large and very nervous and not at all docile, Mr. Flocchini says. "You can't get near them. You can't trust them," he repeats. "We have a lot of vehicles that have signs of herding buffalo. They turn around and butt you, Mr. Flocchini comments.

Buffalo are also very "springy;" they can jump six or seven feet high. They survive winters superbly, Mr. Flocchini says. Unlike sheep and cattle, they face into storms. They will pick a spot at the lee end of a rise and huddle together with their massive fronts facing into the blizzard.

Every year at round-up time, there are a few adventures, Mr. Flocchini admits. The most memorable one almost killed Mrs. Flocchini. She was helping operate the gates of some of the pens, and a latch broke, allowing a buffalo to charge down the narrow runway where she was standing. She froze tight against the fence, and the horn barely grazed her stomach. "I was panicked, dumbfounded," she recalls. "The good Lord gave me the sense to stand still."

Afterwards she felt "kind of shaky," but started working again.

Now thanks to the generosity of Mayor Dianne Feinstein, her husband and the Flocchins, Bay Area residents and tourists can view a peaceful herd of 14 of the Flocchins' buffalo grazing quietly at the San Francisco Zoo.