

Sheep, Cattle And Family Make Raftopoulos Brothers' Success

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CRAIG, Colo. — “Dream big, plan well, work hard, smile always, and good things will happen.”

That’s the motto that John Raftopoulos lives by. Those words scrawled in barbed wire are proudly and prominently displayed on the family’s summer ranch home just outside the door.

“Isn’t that cool? It’s true,” remarks Raftopoulos.

This easygoing, down-to-earth man is one of the largest ranching operators in all of Colorado. He is an innovator, risk taker, entrepreneur, land developer, cowman, and a steward of the land, but the description he most closely associates with, the one he is most proud of, is father and husband. It is his family that he cherishes the most.

John and his brother, Steve, operate Raftopoulos Ranches partnership, an operation that encompasses some 65,000 acres of deeded land and another 400,000 to 500,000 acres of BLM, Forest lands and state and private leases, making them one of the largest holders of grazing rights on public lands. All together they run 12,000 Rambouillet ewes and 3000 head of Angus and Angus cross cattle, of which 550 or so are registered.

It doesn’t stop there. The family is also extensively involved in the lamb feeding and lamb processing business, and until this past year they were also part owners in two feedlots in Nebraska. John has since bought the family out.

The brothers are admittedly typical Greeks — stubborn and hardheaded — and yes, John says there is a lot of truth in that old saying, “Two Greeks, three opinions.” Yet the brothers have always had a strong bond and a good working relationship.

Though they are equal partners, Steve is in charge of the sheep operation and John handles the cattle operation. It’s what suits each of them the best, and it’s worked out ideally.

“We talk every day, but we each handle the respective businesses in the way we feel is best. Steve trusts what I do, and I trust what he does.”

One does not grow an operation as large as theirs without having a lot of inner drive. It’s something, John says, which they largely inherited from their mother.

“Mom didn’t miss much. She was a tough woman, hard-working and aggressive.”

The brothers grew up on a sheep operation. Their parents, Georgia and George Raftopoulos, immigrated to the U.S. from Kaloskopie, Greece, a small mountain village in north central Greece. Georgia came to the U.S. as a young bride. Her first husband, Steve Simos, also from Koloskopie, came to the U.S. in the early 1920s. A large Greek community had immigrated to Price, Utah, to work in the coal mines, and it is here that Simos first came. The Greeks, however, were largely sheep people, and like many, Simos worked in the mines only until he had the financial wherewithal to buy a little band of sheep.

Like many of the early Greeks, Simos was particularly attracted to the country in and around Steamboat Springs, primarily because this steep, rugged mountain terrain reminded him of his beloved homeland. And in so far as sheep country it is, as John says, “the best there is.” It is here, at Milner, just east of Craig and west of Steamboat Springs, that Simos eventually homesteaded. He also established a winter range at Brown’s Park northwest of Craig, and his lambing range was just south of Craig.

In 1934 Simos went back to Kaloskopie to find a bride. He married Georgia Vlahos. Simos was 26 years her senior, though that was common for the time. The newlyweds came back to the U.S. and Simos continued with his sheep operation until his death in 1948. They had two children, Connie Jouflas, who lives at Grand Junction, and Jim Simos, who lives in Craig.

After her husband's death, Georgia tried mightily to hold the outfit together, but after a couple of years she leased it out and went back to Greece. She became reacquainted with a childhood friend, George Raftopoulos, and they married in December 1950. George had served as a second lieutenant during World War II, and following the war he obtained a law degree. When he met Georgia, he was working in customs. George, however, grew up helping his father with the sheep and horses. His father traveled from village to village with his string of horses shocking wheat. They used the milk from the sheep, which were all milked by hand, to make cheese that they sold.

"Dad said that when the women were spinning the yarn, my grandfather could recognize which wool came off which sheep.

"My dad was a lot like that," Raftopoulos says. "He was a meticulous sheepman."

George and Georgia came back to the U.S. in 1951 and took over again the sheep outfit that Georgia and her first husband had established. Together they expanded the operation. When John, born in 1952, and Steve, born in 1953, were growing up they had 3000 sheep and 15 or so cows.

Their parents stressed the importance of education, so John went to the Colorado School of Mines and then to the University of Colorado, where he got a degree in molecular cellular developmental biology. He went on to Colorado State University for a veterinary degree, which he completed in 1978. Younger brother Steve graduated with an accounting degree from Colorado University.

Steve came immediately back to the family operation in 1975, and John came back in 1978 after completing a three-month stint in a private practice in Vernal, Utah.

At that point the family made the decision to begin expanding in earnest. They had an opportunity to sell property in the Craig area for a good price, and they used that money to make a down payment on a much larger piece of property, the former John R. Winder Ranch, north of Craig. That was in 1978, but it was to be only the beginning of several more years of extensive expansion. Most of their growth came in the 1980s when land prices were depressed.

"I put the deals together and then Steve had to find a way to pay for them," John quips.

They were able to find some reasonably priced land that needed a lot of work and improvements. Getting the various parcels adequately watered has been one of their biggest accomplishments. It's no small feat and not cheap, either, but they lightened the load by taking advantage of various cost-share programs. They've also remodeled and restored dilapidated outbuildings and homes and built miles of fencing and much-improved working facilities.

Today the sheep operation is centralized in Moffat and Routt counties. The old Winder Ranch, which they refer to as the 2-Bar, serves as the summer headquarters for the sheep, and their winter range is just south of Rock Springs, Wyoming on the Rock Springs Grazing Association lands.

The cattle operation is largely to the west of Craig in Moffat County, though the northwestern corner extends over into Wyoming and Utah.

The Buckley place, also referred to as Diamond Peak, which they purchased in 1985, serves as the summer headquarters, and the ranch at Brown's Park is their winter headquarters.

If he had to choose, John says the Buckley place is his favorite. They restored the old barn that was built in 1897 a couple of years ago, and in 1991 they remodeled the house, which was originally built in 1911. It is here that he and his family spend much of their summer. The upstairs balcony which serves as a sitting porch looks out over a magnificent mountain meadow, and just beyond is Diamond Peak.

Between the sheep range and the cattle range, it's about a 200-mile circle. Annual rainfall varies from 16 to 18 inches in the high country during the summer to 12 inches around Craig to seven to 10 inches on most of their winter range.

"When you're born and raised in a country, you don't really know what you have till you go somewhere else," John remarks. "We still have a lot of open space here. Two of our cattle units are approximately 25 miles long and 10 miles wide."

The cattle operation, Raftopoulos says, just sort of evolved.

"It all started when Dad purchased a milk cow left behind by one of the employees," he quips.

And in truth, it sort of did. Their dad kept a 15-head herd around mainly to eat some of the slew grass hay that the sheep would not eat, and they expanded that to a couple of hundred head and then another couple of hundred, and so on and so forth. Each time they took on more country, they took on more cows.

In 2001 John bought 500 commercial Angus replacement heifers from the N Bar Ranch in Montana. He decided that the quickest way to make genetic improvement was through an AI program. Getting on board with such an intensive and time-consuming program, Raftopoulos admits, was one of those mind things.

"I'd always thought that we were too big and too scattered to do it," he says.

It was an effort, but with good facilities, which Raftopoulos designed, and good men at his side, they've made it work. The facilities are Temple Grandin style with some major adjustments.

Estrus synchronization is a major part of their AI program. As many as 350 cows are synchronized and bred each day. In the early years of the program as many as 2200 cows and heifers were AI bred through the facilities.

"At one point we were bringing in 1000 cows every day, gathering them in the morning for heat detection and turning them back out. We did that for 21 days in a row."

Intensive it was, but it has indeed paid off.

"The philosophy is to get consistency, and you get that consistency through replication, replication, replication," remarks Raftopoulos.

He uses only high accuracy sires that are moderate framed and positive for carcass traits, though he doesn't dwell extensively on carcass merit. Milk, and of course fertility, disposition, and the ability to travel are all critically important.

"We want the whole package, but we really focus on muscling and capacity," he remarks.

They're also building a niche market for bulls suited to high altitude. During the second phase of the selection and sorting process, bulls get a Pulmonary Arterial Pressure reading.

"Not all cattle can perform at altitude, especially Angus cattle," he notes. "There are some that just won't cut it."

The low PAP bulls are offered in the spring at their annual sale at Loma near Grand Junction. Other bulls sell private treaty. Just as with building numbers, building a reputation takes time, but Raftopoulos has been pleased with the progress thus far.

Today their registered cow herd stands at 500 head and Raftopoulos' goal is to grow that program to about 800 head over the next several years. Only AI-sired heifers are kept for replacements. The replacement heifers are developed on cornstalks in Nebraska and summered at Walden, Colorado at an elevation of 8500 feet.

Their commercial cows calve unassisted on the range beginning about the first of April over about a 60-day period, though the majority of the calves come in the first 30 days. The calf crop averages 90 to 93 percent. Branding takes a good month or so. He has one cowboy crew that moves from one cattle unit to the next, tending to all the fencing, rotation and branding. They set up panels and rope and drag rather than use a calf table.

"It's actually faster than using the table, and it's better, too, because they mother back up right away," Raftopoulos says. "Plus, the cowboys have more fun."

"I have a really good crew," he continues. "I have enough trust in my guys that I just let them do what they think is best, and it's usually better. When you get as big as we are, you have to have a good crew. I can't be worried about the day to day because I need time to focus on the bigger picture and strategize on where it is that I want to go next."

Not surprisingly, one of the toughest challenges, Raftopoulos says, is the weather.

“The spring is what makes this country. If we get a good spring and it stays warm, then we’ll generally have a good calf crop. Plus, the cows will milk better.”

They’re fortunate in that they have good winter range, which helps keep their feed costs down. Typically their cows stay out on the range until mid-December. After that they’re brought in to meadows and fed hay.

They have three different cow units, and within each unit is a calving, summer and winter range. The cows in the Browns Park unit are the first to go back out on the range, usually by the first of March; another typically follows by mid-month and the last shortly thereafter. Within one unit the cattle may trail some 25 miles between the different ranges over the course of a year.

The country is stocked light to moderate, and though the cattle are not herded like the sheep, they are rotated on a regular basis throughout the unit, sometimes as often as every week.

“The better cattleman all started out as sheepmen because they learned the importance of rotating and herding of livestock,” John insists.

Their BLM and Forest permits are closely monitored by the respective agencies. Rangeland reform, which occurred during the Clinton administration, was a stressful time, but Raftopoulos says a better understanding of range management made them better managers and better stewards of the land. It also led to better communication with the agency personnel.

“We’ve always had a good relationship with the agency people,” he remarks. “We get along fine with them, mainly because we do what we say we’re going to do. You could spend your entire time fighting these guys or you can do what’s right for the range, and in so doing gain their confidence and establish some credibility with them.”

They’ll start gathering cattle for shipping around the 10th of October, and the first load of those calves, which come straight off the cow, typically ships about the 20th of October. They’ll have them all gone by the 10th of November.

The calves get a preconditioning shot at least two weeks before shipping. They’re all source and age verified and marked with EID tags, thus they qualify for the all-natural market. This year he’s trying the hormone-free program.

Last fall the steers averaged 540 pounds. He sells them private treaty through an order buyer, and for the last several years the steers have gone to wheat in Oklahoma and the heifers to a Nebraska feedyard.

As for the sheep, Raftopoulos says they get the better deal when it comes to the range. At one point the sheep and cattle shared some of the summer range.

It is a diverse terrain with a diverse array of ideal forbs and browse plants such as saltbush, which the sheep do exceptionally well on. They summer 10 to 12 bands on Bear’s Ears north of Craig. The majority of the sheep trail from the lambing grounds up to the summer country, which at the peak is 8000 to 10,000 feet in elevation.

Shearing takes place at the lower 2-Bar, located near Maybell, sometime around the 20th of April. They produce a high quality finewool clip.

“Steve has been working on improving the wool all his life,” John says.

Lambing begins shortly thereafter with the earliest bunch starting about May 5 and the majority following around the 10th of May through to the end of the month. The ewes lamb on the range but with herders and guard dogs, which is a tremendous help because they’re able to minimize predator loss.

They begin trailing the sheep to the summer country sometime around the first part of June. They deal with the usual predator problems — coyotes, mountain lions and bear — but no wolves yet, though Raftopoulos figures they’re on the way.

The bear have become particularly troublesome. Years ago there wasn't a defined hunting season on bear and the population was held in check, but since the state implemented a hunting season, the population has exploded. During the summer, John says, the bear have become as much or more of a problem than the coyotes. It's not uncommon to lose 300 to a thousand lambs in a season to predators.

The lambs begin their descent back down the mountain beginning about the 10th of September and they'll ship sometime between the 15th and 25th of September. Lambs typically average 92 pounds.

"In the old days we always sorted off the fats from the feeders, but now everything goes to the feedlot," Raftopoulos says.

The family owns five percent interest in Iowa Lamb. To meet their obligation, in addition to their own lambs, Steve buys another 10,000 lambs off the Western Slope during the fall run. They own interest in Mountain View feedlot east of Denver, and it is here that all of their lambs are finished before going on to be processed at Iowa Lamb.

The ewes spend most of the fall on the trail at the Lower 2 Bar and then about the 10th of December are trailed to their winter range on the Rock Springs Grazing Association.

The brothers are longtime members of the association, which encompasses some half a million acres of deeded and public lands. The association was formally organized in 1907. The original bylaws provided that each share of stock issued enabled the owner to graze 3500 head of sheep during the winter season, mid-December to May. However, the bylaws were amended in the early 1970s to allow cattle as well. During the association's heyday some 200,000 to 300,000 head of sheep grazed these lands. Today the numbers are far fewer. Now only about 50,000 to 70,000 head of sheep and about 5000 cattle utilize this range during the winter months.

The Raftopoulos ewes come back to the lower 2-Bar in April for shearing, and in that way the whole process begins anew.

Wildlife has become an important part of their operations mix.

"We have some of the best wildlife habitat in the state," Raftopoulos says.

Their sheep country is in the Ranching for Wildlife Program, which affords them a bit more flexibility with the length of the hunting season. They sell about 50 elk permits a year on this country.

On the cattle country to the west they sell about four to six trophy elk permits a year and four trophy mule deer permits. Hunters have to apply for 20 years before they are able to draw one of the highly sought-after tags.

The hunting operation is a relatively stable business, but their livestock enterprises are cyclical in nature.

"We've gone from chicken s**t to chicken salad about three different times," says Raftopoulos.

Their toughest year, bar none, was two years ago when corn and fuel got so high. On top of that they had a really rough winter.

"It looks like this year is going to be a really good year," he adds.

Cash flow has never been more important.

"These days, bankers want performance. If they don't get it, they saw you off," he insists. "We've been there two or three times. Fortunately, there were people ahead of us, and by the time they got down to us on the list, the market improved."

Bankers are also viewing risk more critically. Feeding cattle, for example, is one risk that their banker doesn't care too much for, Raftopoulos says.

"We're always running right on the cusp," he continues, "so we're constantly reevaluating just to stay ahead of the finance thing."

Land has gotten incredibly pricy compared to when they first began expanding, and so now they're mostly focused on paying off what they have. They've sold a couple of conservation easements and used

that money to pay down debt. One is with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and another is with the NRCS Grasslands reserves program, but both are for sage grouse habitat.

They've largely given up their development rights in perpetuity, though they've been able to structure the easement so that on one they were able to maintain five home sites. Oil and gas and even water development, he says, is all dependent upon how the easements are structured. None of the easements affect hunting or livestock grazing.

Their kids for the most part are grown now, and some of them are beginning to come back to the family operation. Adding more family members, Raftopoulos says, can be a tricky thing, and it is for that reason the brothers are now considering splitting the operation.

Both have three children, two sons and a daughter apiece, and from the beginning it's been their goal to have enough country put together so that if all of their children wanted to come back there would be an opportunity for each of them. It appears now that will most likely be the case.

"My wife was really wise on stuff like that," John says. "She always told me that if I wanted the kids to come back that I had to make this experience pleasurable, that I couldn't always be pointing out the negatives.

"It's a tough business, but there are lots of opportunities," he continues. "I love the independence that this business affords me, but it also challenges me and I like to be challenged; my kids are the same way."

Perhaps the single best reason for being in the ranch business, though, Raftopoulos says, is that it is a great place to raise a family. Having the ability to raise their children in this kind of setting was of utmost importance to John and Marianna, his wife of 26 years who he lost in April after an 11-year battle with leukemia.

Marianna was a ranch girl as well. She spent her summers on her father's sheep operation at Meeker. She, too, had a lot of inner drive. In addition to raising three active children she was involved in local politics. She was a county commissioner, was on the wildlife commission, and worked also as an oil and gas consultant.

"Our biggest and best asset is our kids," John says. "They are what I'm most proud of."

John's oldest son, George, has been back at the ranch full time for a year, and is now in charge of the cowboy crew. He completed his degree at Colorado State University.

"When I got back to the ranch, that's when school really began," remarks George. "I'm just now starting to get the hang of things. When you're back every day, you begin to see how the place moves."

George is learning about the daily challenges and the ups and downs of the ranching business, but like his father, he's optimistic about the future. This year he was nominated to attend NCBA's Young Cattlemen's Conference.

"I saw for the first time how big the industry really is," he comments.

"There's a lot of bad knowledge out there, and there are so many who are working against us. Washington is all about money; those with the most money win the battles. That's the scary thing."

Angelo, known as "Hodge" to family and friends, is a senior in high school, but like his brother he spends as much of his free time as possible working at the ranch. Most likely he, too, will return to the family business at some point.

Mari Katherine, 22, graduated in May from the University of San Diego with a degree in communications and broadcasting. And though she has chosen to have a career away from the ranch for the time being, she still has a deep attachment to the land and to the ranching way of life.

"I remember dressing up in my tutu and sunglasses and hanging out at the corrals. George would be roping and Hodge would be in a little crib right outside the corrals," Mari Katherine recalls.

"Growing up on a ranch you learn to be innovative, to create your own fun," she continues. "Out here there's so much open space to make your own fun. Kids these days are losing their desire to dream,

to use their imagination, and I think it's because so few of them get to appreciate and experience this kind of life."

Writing is one of Mari Katherine's passions. She writes a weekly column for the local *Craig Daily Press*, and after three years at it she's developed a loyal following. She writes from the heart, so she often finds herself putting into words her other passion, her love for the ranching way of life.

While John and his wife clearly made their children, not their professional careers, the center of their lives, it's also clear that these young adults have a deep and abiding respect and appreciation for their parents in the lessons they've shared with them thus far.

"Dad and Uncle Steve built this whole deal, so they can teach me a thing or two," George comments.

Mari Katherine agrees. From her dad she's learned about the importance of hard work and to always give 110 percent.

"Dad's really good at maintaining relationships with people. He never burns a bridge. He taught us to be respectful of others and that every person counts."

Mari Katherine describes her mother as the happiest person she's ever known.

"Mom was so powerful. She taught me so much. I had her for almost 22 years, and I don't know what else she could have taught me.

"From her I learned the importance of constantly surrounding yourself with good people — hospitality. This house is an extension of her.

"She also taught us to enjoy what we have. When you're building such a big outfit, it's hard to sit on the front porch and just enjoy it. Life is about balancing," Mari Katherine says.

They've all been doing a bit of rebalancing of late, but one would never know from their upbeat attitude about life that a huge piece is missing from their lives.

Look for the positives in everything. That's the Raftopoulos way.