

White Grass Heritage Project “Sharing the Legacy”

INTERVIEWEE: Hal Vinson, former wrangler

INTERVIEWER: Roger Butterbaugh, Caretaker of White Grass Ranch in Moose, Wyoming;
Coordinator, White Grass Heritage Project

LOCATION: White Grass Ranch, Moose, Wyoming

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Transcribed by Julie Greene in 2021

Note: This transcript has undergone minor edits, e.g., false starts and some text were removed to make it more “reader friendly”. Hal’s complete interview transcript is below:

R: (0:40) The focus of our interview is to talk about some of the things that you were involved in here at the ranch in 1973 and 1974. Hal, welcome and thank you for coming. I should note that you are at the ranch participating in the reunion with former dudes and wranglers. Today is day 2 and tomorrow will be the conclusion. So welcome back to the ranch. Please start with information about your background; where you were born, family structure and education.

H: I was born in Phoenix, Arizona and raised in Tuscon, Arizona. My father was an attorney, and my mother was a housewife. I have 3 younger sisters and 2 girl cousins that lived with us growing up, so it was like a having 5 sisters and me.

I went to the University of Arizona and ended up with a Masters Degree in Agricultural Biochemistry. I became an animal nutritionist for about 3 years in Kansas and Colorado. I didn’t like that business very well, so I moved back to Tuscon and started an electrical contracting company because I had been an electrician in college - to help pay my way. I had it for about 5 years and ended up in business finance and have been in the investment banking business for the last 27 years. I have worked for GE Capital for the past 15 years.

I have been around horses since I was 9 years old. I grew up shoeing, packing, riding, working cattle and doing all the cowboy stuff.

(3:04) R: What attracted you to that and why did you enjoy it?

H: There was no background there but all I ever wanted since I was a little kid was a horse. At 10 years old, I hung out with my buddies, Scott and Mark Butler and Benny Garcia, at a stable; we worked around the stable. The owner, Rex, let us rent a horse for a buck for 30 minutes. We would run the blazes out of them. One day Benny showed up with his own horse. His older brother helped him buy it. I was about 11 years old and thought if Benny can have a horse, so can I. I went home and told my dad that I wanted to buy a horse. He said, if I could get the money, I could buy a horse. I delivered morning papers and saved enough to buy a horse.

R: How long did it take you?

H: Not very long. When you are an 11 year old kid, you don’t have any bills so it took about 6 months and you could buy a horse for about one hundred bucks in those days. I told my dad that I had the money to buy a horse and he said alright, let’s go look for a horse.

R: You were how old?

H: (4:34) Probably 11 or 12 years old.

R: What amazes me is that a person that age could be so focused to work for 6 months and have the same goal of buying a horse and you did it.

H: I got it done.

R: Do you have any idea what attracted you to horses?

H: I don't remember but my first memory was that I liked horses and had to have a horse. The same guy, Rex Morris, who owned Del Ray stables, also made us a deal. We could keep our horses there for 10 bucks a month. The only catch was, if he needed to rent them out, he could rent them out. That was a heck of a deal. I got the better deal because the horse I bought was nothing but a runaway and he (Rex) would never rent that horse out to a dude. It would kill him (a rider). So, half the time they would go over there and (Benny and his brother's) horse would be rented out and mine was never rented out. That was a good deal.

Once you have a horse, cowboys will teach you how to break them, how to ride them, how to shoe them, how to pack them out; so, you just learn what you have to.

R: That continued up through your college years?

H: Yea, I had a horse all through high school and rode bareback and saddle broncs in rodeos. I rode a lot of bunking horses. My mom sold my horse when I was in college and wasn't around anymore. That is how I ended up coming to Wyoming.

R: Please explain that.

H: If you are rodeoing, the Cody (WY) Night Show was a famous deal that you always heard about and so was Jackson Hole. I was working in a feed lot in southern Arizona. It was 1972 and a lot of cowboys, including me, were laid off. I decided to go to Wyoming and rodeo. I drove to Tuscon and picked up my old buddy, Steve Manning, and we drove up to Jackson. We met a couple of girls from Texas that we liked. We saw some guys that had Arizona license plates on their pickup and we told them we were from Arizona too. We got to talking and ended up partying with them that night. They worked for George Clover, who was an old partner of Frank. George's business was just a pack outfit.

R: You said earlier that George and Frank were partners in a packing business.

H: (8:20) Yea, I think they had a hunting camp at one time. These guys (I met) were working for George (1972). He wasn't a dude ranch but a pack outfitter. He used his house as a bunkhouse on Fish Creek, outside of Jackson, where the old A&W was and now is a Dairy Queen. You weren't there very much because you ran a 12-day trip in the Teton wilderness and the Yellowstone back country. We were in the mountains for 12 days; out for 2 days; in for 12 days. They were huge pack trips with 30 dudes and 30 pack mules; 5 packers so we each had 6 horses. You can't do that anymore; you can only have 35 head of animals and we had 60 or 70 mules and horses all summer.

(9:07) Steve and I left Jackson and went to Cody and got in the Cody rodeo a couple of nights but we liked Jackson better. We came back and we also liked the Texas girls we had met. We came back here.

We hung around rodeoing and we ran into the guys from Arizona. Steve Raftor, one of the guys from Arizona, asked if we wanted a job. I said yes but Steve had to go back to Tuscon. I wanted a job; I don't know how to pack but I will take a job. I went and talked to George Clover and he said the same thing "can you shoe horses?" I said, "Yea" and he said, "You are hired." He said he would teach me how to pack and not to worry about that. Apparently, Wyoming was short on horseshoers. That is how I ended up going to work for George in the summer of 1972 and Steve went back to Arizona.

(10:02) All everybody talked about when you were in town was that White Grass was the best place to work and that was where you wanted to be.

R: Explain what you heard about White Grass that made it the best place to work.

H: It wasn't specific but if you are going to cowboy, the best place to work is the White Grass. I thought that sounded good and I went back to college in the fall and, in the summer of 1973, I decided I wanted to work here. A guy named Curly Temple, who was the 2nd guy in charge at a dude ranch in Tuscon called the Curly U; so, I knew Curly. I told him I was going to come up here and look for a job.

Curly was a noncommittal guy (a little strange) but he said I could probably get a job up there and to let him know when I did. I drove up there with Steve Manning and one of my buddy's girlfriend, Shelly. She wanted to get a job here for the summer too. We drove up and I dropped Steve off at Big Piney, where he was spending the summer. I was supposed to meet Frank and Curly in the Wort Hotel/bar.

I parked the truck and told Shelly to stay in the truck because I need to go in and get myself a job. Once I get one, I will see about getting you one but don't distract me. I go in and there is Frank (Galey) and Curly sitting there having cocktails. I introduce myself and tell Frank I am looking for a job. He said we had a full crew but can you shoe horses. I told him I could shoe horses and he said I was hired. I got this girl traveling with me who is my buddy's girlfriend, but she wants a job too. (And this girl is very attractive.) Frank said Nona takes care of that; I don't have anything to do with the girls; but we have a full crew so we can't use her. About that time, Shelly got tired of sitting in the truck and she comes walking into the bar and Frank takes one look at her and said she was hired. Very attractive girl. Frank had an eye for the attractive girls! That is how I ended up working at White Grass that summer.

(12:51) R: And your duties here?

H: One of the reasons I wanted to work here was not to spend the whole summer in the mountains. I shod all the horses and broke some 6 or 7-year horses that needed to be broke. I didn't do too many of the 2-hour dude rides because I was usually working on a horse. He had a guy here to run the wilderness pack trips and think Frank didn't start packing in those days until after the Fourth of July because it was too wet back there. I think Frank went on the first pack trip with the guy he hired to be a packer and he didn't know anything; he was terrible. Frank fired him and guess who became a packer. So, I got to spend the rest of the summer in the mountains because he has a lot of packers. We were doing 7-10 day trips in the Teton wilderness and Yellowstone backcountry. So, it was almost the same deal; I would be in the mountains for 7-10 days and back for 3 days, etc.

R: Would you be on duty on those 3 or 4 days and have other responsibilities?

H: (14:16) Hauling horses but I wouldn't be taking out guided dude rides but I would still be shoeing horses or training horses, hauling gear back and forth from the ranch. So, I got to be a packer again and didn't get to lay around in a nice soft bed all summer.

I worked for Frank again the next year. At the end of 1973, I went back to college and Dave and Debbie McKenzie bought the Red Rock Ranch. He moved out to the Red Rock in 1974 and I was thinking about going to work out there but I liked the White Grass Ranch. Curly was still there.

R: After working here for a year, did you have an opinion about where was the best place to work and what was your impression?

H: It was the best place to work; it is hard to explain why. Part of it has to do with it was 1973 and I was 20 years old and there was another guy named Jerry Harris (who was 20 yrs old); and Ken McPheron, the manager (who was 33 yrs old); and another guy named Hugh; and Vance (who were 26 and 28). I just got into a group that I got along very well with. We had some fun and we were all young guys. The cowboys ruled the ranch, and you were on a high pedestal. It was great. It was like the summer of 1973 and Frank was a heck of a guy and loved the cowboys.

R: Did he see himself as a cowboy?

H: He was a cowboy in his younger days. In 1974, I took the Dellenback family on a 17-day horseback trip into the Teton Wilderness and Yellowstone backcountry. We went everywhere. Frank actually resupplied us driving his truck within 10 miles of Heart Lake. He packed horses in on a trail and resupplied us. He had a big yellow horse that he rode now and again.

R: Somebody told us that he was probably the finest horseman in the valley.

H: Yea, he was a cowboy. He used to ride a big palomino horse called Custard.

R: About the story you tell, he came out to supply you but had forgotten several things in the pack?

(18:58) H: I had forgotten that. Bob Dellenback pointed out to me last night that Frank did come in to resupply us but forgot to bring fresh meat, eggs, bacon, etc. I had forgotten that story until Bob started telling it (here at the reunion). Bob got a couple of sticks that looked like bacon and put it into a frying pan and put some marshmallows and mustard and made them look like fried eggs.

R: According to Bob Dellenback, he (Frank) didn't do anything about it. He didn't send you anything or make any effort to ride the 10 miles back. Did that surprise you about Frank?

H: I guess that was Frank...I had just forgotten the whole thing. Once he was gone, he's gone; you can't make a phone call in the wilderness. I still take a group into the Teton wilderness the second week of July. I lease some horses and have all the pack outfit here and we go to the mountains for 7 days. We have been doing it for 30 years and now we take a satellite phone.

R: Was Frank an organized kind of guy or just loose and let it roll?

(21:12) H: Frank was a laidback kind of guy. He got things done but not organized.

R: Many people talk about Frank drinking alcohol. Did you see that and was it every day?

H: Oh yea, Frank liked his cocktails.

R: Did you see him to the point of being drunk, incapacitated or high?

H: I don't ever remember seeing Frank drunk or incapacitated. I think he could drink and didn't get drunk. I never saw him trip or falling down drunk but he definitely liked his cocktails and he liked having the cowboys down to the house. Every morning, I would go sit on the back porch (with Frank) and have a gin and tonic.

R: It probably made for good relations between Frank and the staff.

H: Yea, everybody loved Frank. I never heard anyone say a bad word about Frank Galey in my life...not a one. Nona was another story.

R: You must have enjoyed the outdoors.

H: Yea, I always wanted to be outdoors since I was a little kid; horses and outdoors. This is the perfect place for it. And another reason this is the perfect place to work is to look where you are living! I think Frank had about 110 head of horses here. He went to Lander (WY) to bring them here for the summer. We turned them all loose every night at the ranch, right out the back gate at the slopes of the Tetons. We would keep 1 horse in the barn and put 5 or 6 horses out in the fenced pasture. Whoever drew the short straw had to get up at 4 am and get the horse out of the barn. The other guys got up at 4:30 am and saddled up their horses. Then, we would all take an area back here (from the cabin where he was being interviewed) and go wrangle the horses. That was the best time ever.

One area went straight up to Stewart Canyon, one went south to Death Canyon, Big Meadow ran up the Tetons, and what we called the Ridge (which is the timbered ridge that runs up top on Phelps Lake). Then there was the Draw and it comes to the ranch by Death Canyon Road. I was having to get up at 4:00 am every morning and by 5:30 was sitting up on my horse as far up the Tetons you could get without having to climb. Looking out over the valley, so if that wasn't the best place to work, I don't know where it was.

That was pretty solitude because you had your own area so it was you looking for horses and watching mist on the mountains. It was fun because we would hit the draw each day about the same time. All the horses knew that they were going back to the ranch. They'd just start running fast as they could and we would be right behind them. We would be coming down that draw like it was a stampede. Then, they would come right back into the corral. It was a game to them and a game to us. There were a lot of reasons that it was the best place to work.

R: (26:23) The staff was included in cocktail hours at the ranch. Were the staff good close friends? Was it typical that staff were good people and fun to be with?

H: Yea, the 2 summers I was there, everybody was fun to be with; not just the cowboys but the cabin girls, maintenance man, waitresses, cooks, etc. I didn't know how Frank got all those good people. Everybody almost got to be life-long friends.

R: Did you have days off?

H: We had Sunday afternoons off.

R: What did you do with that time off?

H: Sometimes we just sit around or go to the Cowboy Bar at night and drink and dance with the girls. We would come back and that afternoon, we would just sit around or go to Wilson and go to the Stagecoach Bar, where the locals would go.

R: Was the band playing on Sunday night?

H: Yea, but it was a smaller place then.

R: The Stagecoach (in Wilson) was a historic smaller bar and lots of things happened there. There is a documentary film about the Stagecoach that details the history (which is available at the Jackson Hole Historical Society and Museum). It is quite informative and well done.

H: It was wild back in the 70s and is still wild now. Jackson was a lot different place in the 70s than it is now.

R: You say wild, what does that mean?

H: (28:55) Everywhere there were fist fights and it was a lot wilder. It was mostly cowboys here. It was a cowboy town before the billionaires showed up.

R: Was there gambling at that time?

H: Not gambling...just a rowdy town. Just about everybody was a cowboy. There were tourists but not like it is now.

R: You said you lived for a while in one of the canvas tents at White Grass.

H: In 1973, I lived in one of the wrangler cabins by the Death Canyon Road. In 1974, I don't remember why, I stayed in one of the tent platforms.

R: Did you have a roommate?

H: (30:53) Yea, Mike Dyer, he was another cowboy. We weren't in it much because as soon as July 4th hit, we were in the mountains.

R: Were you ever involved in the kiddie wrangler program?

H: No.

R: You said coming to White Grass met a lot of goals and dreams of being with horses, being outdoors and being with a good group of people. Is all that true?

H: All that is true.

R: How did that impact your life? Did your time here change your direction, influence choices in your life?

H: I don't know about that. It did impact your life and the summer of 1973 was the best summer of my life and the summer of 1974 was the next. For a few more years, I was over at the Red Rock Ranch. Yes, Wyoming, Jackson Hole is a magical place. Yes, it is an impact. Don't know if it influenced career choices later on.

R: It seemed to influence vacation choices that you make.

R: Yea, for the last 30 years I have been doing the pack trips the second week of July. Cowboying and working on ranches teaches a guy how to work too. I have been working on ranches since I was 14 years old. I would recommend it to any kid; it will teach you how to work.

R: As I understand it, the pack trips that you have been taking for the past 30 years have been with former employees that you worked with.

H: (33:08) Steve Manning, the guy I grew up with in Tuscon, Arizona now lives in Pinedale, Wyoming; Jerry Harris (wrangler); and Laurent Roux (assistant cook). I met them all at the White Grass in the summer of the of 1973.

R: Roux was a cook?

H: Roux came to work as an assistant cook and there was a guy named Bob who managed to get himself fired early in the season. Roux talks Frank in letting him be the head cook. He didn't know how to cook a thing. Now he is the head cook and he is in the kitchen and has cookbooks piled everywhere trying to learn how to make something other than a hamburger. This is a high-end dude ranch and people expect to get fed. I don't know how he pulled that off but he was the head cook for all year.

3 or 4 years later he was visiting me in Tuscon and we were at my mother's house having dinner. He asked my mother how she liked White Grass Ranch and she said it was a beautiful place, horses were great, people were great, but the food was terrible!

There are also guys from Cincinnati, California and all over the country that go on our pack trip. There is a core group of 6-8 guys and a floating group of 12 guys.

R: Did you mature while you were at White Grass? You mentioned it taught people how to work hard and work together?

H: If you had not grown up being a cowboy and working hard, it would definitely teach you to work hard. You have 110 head of horses so that is a lot of work from 4am until dark. You are responsible for people on your pack trip.

R: Were you a good cook?

H: I was a campfire cook.

R: Favorite stories of White Grass?

H: There are hundreds of them. Frank was such a character. Frank had 2 golden retrievers that he loved. They ran loose and they tortured everything they could torture. One day those golden retrievers came

back and one had been ripped up by a bear. Frank said he was done with that bear. There was a garbage dump that wasn't suppose to be there (on the ranch/in the park) but Frank said he was done with that bear. Frank handed guns and rifles to staff and said they were going to hunt the bear. I thought this was not a good idea for 2 reasons: (1) we were in the park and (2) I was given a pistol. If I am going to hunt a bear, I want more than a pistol. We are looking for the bear and the bear comes running out of the trees into the meadow. He runs up a tree, about 30 feet up a tree and Frank shoots the bear out of the tree. We couldn't have been 100 yards from the White Grass ranger station.

We went back in the evening and got the bear in the pickup truck. We brought it back to the house and put it in the basement of the house. Frank wanted it skinned. By this time, Frank had been cocktailing it heavy and was beyond the ability of skinning the bear. So, I ended up skinning the bear with a pocket knife. He wanted the claws and everything. It was like we were moonshiners, every time you heard something, we would turn off the lights. I got the bear skinned and it hung in the rec lodge forever. To top it off, Frank cooked that bear and served it all summer long.

I was here the day Frank died in 1985. It was the first year I did this private pack trip. I leased some horses and pack outfit from him. About 10 of us were going into the mountains. All of those guys but me were staying at the ranch the day before the trip. I was staying in town because I didn't want to be around Nona.

Day before we were to go into the mountains, I had all the guys here getting used to their horses. Frank and I were standing in front of the barn and the guys are getting on the horses. My friend, Dave, had all his cowboy gear on but he wasn't a cowboy. He could ride but he wasn't a cowboy. He has spurs and chaps on and has 2 or 3 cameras hanging around his neck. He gets on his horse and when he swings his leg over, he spurs the horse with his right foot. The horse goes back and forth and Dave falls off.

Frank looked at me and said, "Hal, I think we better get him another horse". He had a dry sense of humor. We just took the spurs away and we went on the ride. We came back the next day and turned the horses out. While I was sitting in front of the barn with John Willis, some kid comes running out of the house and says Frank was dead. We ran down to the house and he was sitting at his desk in the great room and had a gin and tonic on the desk. He was sitting there with his legs crossed. He was writing a grocery list for my pack trip. It was a pretty good way to go.

R: (44:27) Was that a hard experience to know he was dead or be a part of discovering him?

H: It was horrible. Frank Galey is dead; there is no more Frank Galey! Frank was a big influence on your life and when you find him dead, that is a devastating blow. He was one of a kind. It was a terrible day.

R: Did you look at him as a mentor or a teacher, father figure?

H: Yea, all the above. Frank was an accomplished guy, fighter pilot. He wasn't just a guy who hung around dude ranches and had cocktails. He did a lot in his life.

R: I heard he was a big reader; do you know anything about that?

H: I wouldn't doubt it but it don't know anything specifically about it. I know he was a big collector. He had original Navajo rugs, saddles and you saw collector items all over that house. But Nona burned them up when she burned the house down.

R: Do you know the circumstances of that fire?

H: Nona. Frank died somewhere around the 4th of July and I took Little John with us. We came back 7 days later and the park service had already showed up at the house and told her that she could operate until Labor Day and then it was over. He had a life-time lease and when he died, it was all over. They were going to tear it down and turn it back to nature.

What I understood, they worked it out that she could continue to live in that house until she died but the ranch would have to go. She could keep the house on 5 acres. She went nuts and lit it on fire and burned everything in it. I did know when we got off the pack trip, the guys called me (I was staying in town) and said to come out because Nona was mad because she thought I wasn't going to pay her. I had a deal with Frank for \$1,200 bucks and I was going to pay her.

I came out with my buddy, Steve Chandler from Tuscon. We went into the house and there was a girl sitting behind the desk. She said I owed \$1,200 buck unless I wanted to add a 20% tip and I said no. I had already tipped Little John cash money. The girl said I had to and said no I don't have to. I had a deal with Frank and I am giving you \$1,200 bucks. She said I had to talk to Nona. There was a door behind the desk, She goes out that door.

About 5 minutes later, Nona comes in slamming the door open. At that point she was a big, old crazy woman pushing 250 pounds. She starts yelling at me, telling me she never liked me and I was a SOB and that I was going to give the ranch a tip.

I told her I had a deal with Frank and that was what I was paying. She said she would show me what Frank would have done and went running back through the door. Steve asked where she went, and I said she went to get a gun. I go out the door of the office and there was a big pine tree about 20 feet away and I get behind it. Then Steve runs out saying she has a gun. He gets behind the tree. The tree is not big enough for both of us.

Nona comes out with a 357 and she is yelling at me and she is trying to get a shot at me. I told Steve there was no way I was letting her shoot me without me shooting her. I told him to run to my truck about 20 yards away. He couldn't find the gun and runs back so now we are both behind this tree again.

I finally talked Nona down and told her that I was putting the check on the ground and she needed to put the gun down at the same time. We got out there so fast. The check was for \$1,200 by the way. We got to the truck and we were rattled. So, we went to the Moose bar to have a drink and somebody asked where we had been. We said we had been up at White Grass and Nona tried to shoot us. They said that is nothing. Ever since Frank died, she had been sitting on the back porch shooting at cars on Death Canyon Road all week long.

R: (51:2) Did she shoot anyone that you were aware of.

H: I never heard her hitting anybody but I know for sure the part about me and Steve is true.

R: Did the police ever get called on her?

H: I don't know.

R: Mental health get called?

H: She definitely had mental health issues and was on lithium.

R: Any other stories?

H: Everything Frank did was a story. He was quite the guy.

R: Somebody told me what separates a successful dude ranch from one that is not, is that you have to have a leader, the kind of guy that people enjoy and want to come back and have more time with.

H: And that was Frank. He was the entertainment every evening at cocktail hour. He could tell a story. He was soft spoken but he entertained those dudes. People came back because of the view but because of Frank. He was a story in himself.

R: Did he repeat stories or did he have so many he didn't have to?

H: I don't think he had to repeat very many. He loved stories. One day, George Clover had a bunch of mules being pastured here. They were constantly going through the barb wire fences so we were constantly having to chase these mules down. We would go find them and bring them back. Some guys that were working for George did something that aggravated somebody and we got mad at Clover's guys. We said we were going to fight those guys. Frank was told we wanted to fight and he said fine. Frank said he would call George and have them at the Cowboy bar at 9 pm and they can fight.

McPheron called the cops and told them there was going to be a fight and not to worry about it. It was between White Grass and Clover guys and no need to arrest anybody. We go down to the Cowboy bar and McPheron gets ahold of Clover's foreman, Steve Rafter, and we decided to watch them fight. We then got in the fight and beat on each other for a while and then sat at the bar and had drinks. Frank had set the whole thing up.

R: I am curious as to why you were just here for 2 seasons?

H: Some of the dudes that were on the ranch in 1973 were from Lake Forrest, Illinois and McPheron got to talking to them. He ran into David W. McKenzie, who wanted to buy a ranch in Wyoming. He ended up buying the Red Rock Ranch in Kelly and hired him to run it. He wanted me to work there in 1974 but I worked here instead. In 1975, I went to work at the Red Rock Ranch, which was a cattle ranch as well as a dude ranch. They needed help with the cattle, so I went to work with the cattle. After that I was in graduate school and I didn't have the whole summer to spend here. We also moved all those log cabins from the Alpine Hotel in Jackson to the ranch so it could be a dude ranch also.

R: You are at White Grass in 2014 and restoration has been going on for 7 or 8 years. Do you have any impressions or thoughts?

H: It is great. I have come to the ranch during the past 30 years, and it was a sad thing.

R: Is it okay with you that this has become a training center?

H: I am glad. It was horrible when I came out here. It looks great now.

R: Why come back for the reunion?

H: I wouldn't miss it. I didn't know about the other one. A friend sent me an email.

R: Are you enjoying yourself?

H: Oh, it's great.

R: Anything else?

H: I could go on forever. Is McPherson next? He told me not to go on forever because he wants to get this over with.

R: Thanks so much.

H: Thanks