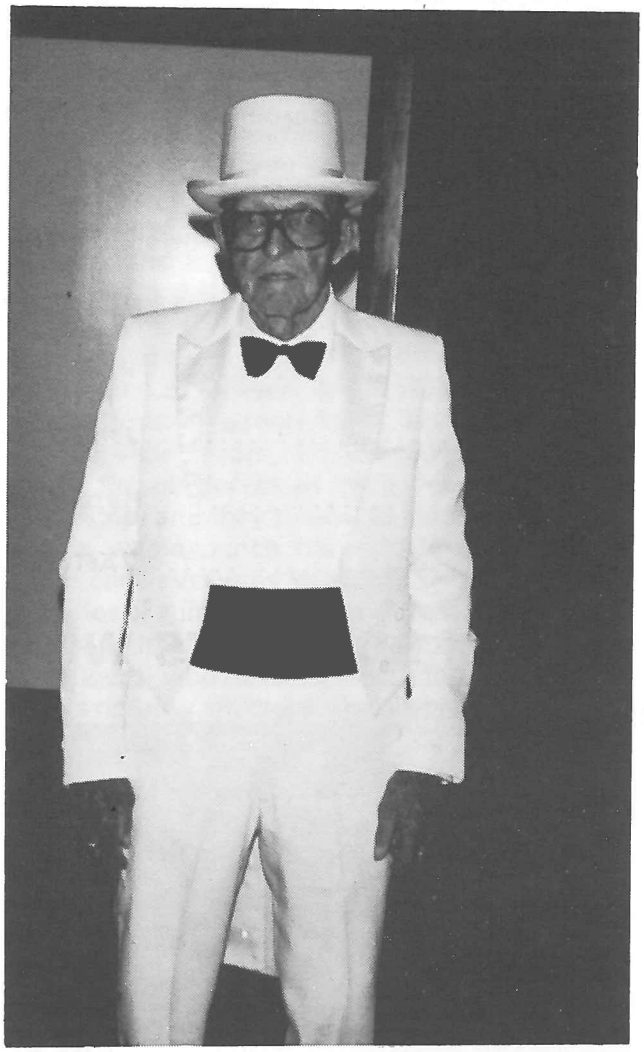
"Well, look at this damn old dirt farmer." Albert Hitchens

by Cole Martin, Jr.



Back in September when I started in the Three Wire Winter class, I wanted to do a story on old log cabins in the area. The first person I called was Errold Hitchens to get the information on Pool, Colorado. As soon as I told Errold that I was a student in the Three Wire Winter class and wanted information on that location, he said, "Why don't you come out here this afternoon because my Dad, Albert, is here and he was born in Pool back in 1892." Mr. McKelvie, our teacher, and I got out there, and started talking, and my story quickly changed to a story on the Hitchens' family.

The Hitchens' ranch house is located right on U.S. 40 just this side of Milner. The interview deals with four people relating their experiences — Albert, the father, and his three children. Melvin was born January 12, 1923; Wilma was born February 22, 1929; and the youngest, Errold, was born June 7, 1931. We started the interview with Albert.

"My dad James, came out here from England and he was a coal miner. He came out to Central City and lived there for a while because of the mines there. His hearing was getting bad and he thought he had to get out of the mine. Then he heard that Steamboat was the promised land. He came and homesteaded here. When he homesteaded, he could get 160 acres at a time.

"My Dad went over in the hills and tapped a natural reservoir, Lake Windemere, and got water and brought it clear around the mountain by trenches two to three miles long. The water he was getting was seeping away too fast, so he built a pond with a scraper and team behind his cabin. Then he brought the water around and ran it into this pond so he would have more water to irrigate and cover more ground. If you let it out easy, it would soak in, and cover more ground. If you let it out easy, it would soak in, and cover less ground leaving an overabundance of water. Pool, Colorado, got its name because of this water supply. To resupply Lake Windemere which now is getting low, he went up to Farnsworth Creek, and dug trenches to Lake Windemere. A lot of the trenches can still be seen today."

Albert told us about the cabin he was born in.

"My dad built a two-room log house for us to live in. This house had a dirt roof because there was no lumber to buy. What he did was take logs about eight inches through and split them. Of course, the log going across the top was there. Then about halfway up, there would be another log going across. Then he would take the logs that he had split and lay them on these logs going across, flat side down. Then he gathered grass to lay on this roof so the dirt would not fall through. We did not get cold. We stayed very warm. We had all that stuff on the roof, but if it rained a lot it would leak. So my dad would put more grass and dirt on the roof.

"I was born on the 28th of November, 1892, right up there in that old house in Pool. It was a sod-roof cabin by the pool. There were no doctors in the country back then. The midwives had enough knowledge to know what to do. Later he added onto the house, but that's where he made his house.

"The freighters stopped at the house and my dad took care of the horses plus having the post office there. Before that they needed distribution of mail closer than Steamboat to Hayden." So his father started up the post office at Pool. "The stage stop was down the road further because it was moved halfway between Steamboat to Hayden. They called it the halfway house, but the freighters stopped at Pool because of the water, and my mom was a good cook."

Errold added a little more about the Hitchens getting started here in Routt County at Pool.

"James moved up to Steamboat some time before 1884 because that was when the water rights were submitted. He got a patent on the land in 1898. He was in Central City in 1878. When he first came he built a cabin below Lake Windemere in the area that Florence Trull now lives. He got burned out of that place. When he rebuilt, he decided to rebuild around here. The three brothers, Bill, James and Joe Hitchens, were the first to come here. Grandpa (James) squatted on his land from 1884 to 1898, but he did get his land under the Homestead Act. The three brothers were the first to start farming the Yampa Valley. I think they started out with oats. They didn't know there were three kinds of wheat back then."

Albert added, "The house was close to the river. We didn't fish too much, but every now and then we would fish. We had a string and a hook. For bait we would use grasshoppers and worms. Back then the Yampa was called the Bear River.

"We did go to school if there was any. The first school I went to was Fairplay School. It was two miles from here. It was a little school and I did not like it. It had one or two rooms. I went through eighth grade.

"We had a lot of chores to do. We milked cows, separated the milk, made butter and did a lot of work. We had to make a living somehow. Mother made butter for a long time. We got to the point where we took the butter to town stores and traded it for things. To start butter you take the milk and put it in pans and let it sit. Then you skim the cream and make butter. The butter we traded for the groceries.

"Back then it was farmer helping farmer in every way they could. I was a shoe cobbler. We had shoes but they were all resoled. I mainly did it for the family, but now and then I would do it for someone free of charge. I still own the first pair of cowboy boots I ever had. The kids never had any; we just could not afford it."

Errold told us about Albert getting started with his own homestead.

"Later on they moved the post office to Milner, because Milner started up and there were more people there. That was about the time my granddad retired and moved to Milner and built this house that I live in now. In this house he had

AN ACCIDENT AT CURTIS GULCH

the post office; they had a pool table and dad had a barber shop because dad went to barber school and became a barber. In 1918 dad homesteaded next to granddad and lived up the draw from Pool. Dad still lived on the homestead and he would go to Milner and cut hair at the post office and he was the assistant postmaster.

"When the county seat was at Hahn's Peak, dad took the ballot box to Hahn's Peak with a team of horses and a sled. Everybody voted back in those days. He would go up in one day and back the next. He got paid so much to take it; anyone who wanted to take it, took it, and he always did it. He was also on the school board for years down here in Milner, District No. 41.

"When he homesteaded, all the good land was gone. When all the good land was gone the homesteads went from 160 to 240 to 320 acres, then 480 and he got 240 acres.

"Dad had a hernia rupture and in those days they didn't know how to repair them. The doctor told him he would never work on a farm again. So he went to Kansas City and got a paraffin treatment on the rupture. The doctor told him he would not do another day's hard work. So he went to barber's school.

"At this time Winney, my mother, was teaching in Denver where daddy went to barber school. They had to be crossing each other's paths on 16th Street. When he came back as a barber, mother started to teach school at Fairplay. Daddy went to work at the mine driving a team. During this time he had gotten married and was getting better. Before you knew it he had homesteaded and went back to farming. He worked for Elk Creek Mining Company at Curtis Gulch."

Albert told us a little story about this.

"One time, well, we had a Bulgarian for a pit boss. He came out of the mine one day and we had a train track up top, on this car we had a drum on it. The pit boss got on a pit car and something happened to the brake. Well, when the train went over this bump, and the cars jumped about 20 feet, the pit boss was screaming, "I

nearly got killed." But he never got hurt. I got paid $5.00 a day for a ten hour day. I stopped working in the mine to go back to farming.

When I was a grown adult I would go to a dance until 2 or 3 a.m. and sometimes when the sun came up I'd still be dancing. I love to dance."

Wilma told about one time that Albert sat on a log until morning trying to get a girl to kiss him.

I asked him, "Did she kiss you?"

"You bet she did or I wouldn't have taken her home then. James, my dad, was an old Methodist and he didn't approve of dancing or kissing. But if the kids wanted to, he wouldn't stop them.

"I met Winnie again at a country dance. She was a school teacher at Fairplay School. Before she taught at Fairplay, I went to school there. I didn't like school, but I liked to take out the school teacher. I had to sneak into the teachery through the back window to see her. We were married in 1925. I think we were married at Pool. We had a shivaree. They came with cowbells and sleighbells, but I don't remember if they stole my wife."

Albert and Winnie's three children got the "home treatment" whenever they got sick. Wilma started to tell us how it was.

"Cough syrup! Dad made cough syrup out of rock candy, lemon and whiskey. Oh, it was God awful tasting stuff. I think it worked because it was so bad you were afraid to cough. Then there was the mustard plaster. Whenever we got a little chest cold we got the mustard plaster. They'd make a paste out of mustard, then they'd put it on a piece of flannel cloth, and then they'd slap it on your chest with a hot water bottle on that. I'll tell you, that would drive most anything away. The smell would do it. Oh! It had garlic in it! I don't know what was worse, the cough syrup or the mustard plaster.

"When people would get sick back in those days there were few doctors around Steamboat that would come all the way out here to where we lived. If you got sick, you just had home medicines. We never got so sick we had to go to the hospital, did we?

"Dad had one sister that died about 1918 with the flu epidemic. About 1912, an older sister died of pneumonia. She is buried right up the hill. They didn't even have a cemetery back then.

"The only time I saw a doctor come was when we had scarlet fever. In those days you were put under quarantine. They could not take us to the hospital. Mother, I don't believe, ever had a doctor when she had a child. She just had mid-wives. I was the only one born in a hospital. I was born in February and my brother was born in January. There was a reason, that was the year daddy moved this house from Milner. They had the foundation built and they moved the house here. Mother was in the hospital for me. The house was moved from Milner in 1929."

Albert told us that, "When I moved this house I had 26 head of horses on it and I had it on 4 bobsleds. You had to jack the house up and pull the sleds under it. It took them eight hours to move the house up here. James built it and Albert bought it from James' heirs. This house was built in 1918."

"I HAD 26 HEAD OF HORSES TO MOVE THIS HOUSE IN 1929."

Melvin talks about how long it took to set the house down. "Well, it sat for a year before we did anything about it. It took about a week to set it. They dug the basement after they set the house. They put the dirt around the house.

"For years after we moved the house, the ranchers came here to get their hair cut and dad never charged them a dime. It was on Friday nights the people came. He would do up to ten people a night."

Wilma told us how hard it was to farm back then. "It was a lot harder with a horse. Mom was a reader and when she ran the team she recited Shakespeare. We always said the horses knew more Shakespeare than the normal person."

Errold: "Dad was too young to make the drive all the way to Denver to sell his cattle. When the railroad came to Wolcott, he made that drive. Granddad, James, only kept 100 head of cattle so he made the trip every two years. After dad saw the train and made the trip to Wolcott, the railroad made it to Milner. Then all we had to do was take them to Milner. It took about three days to drive the cattle to Wolcott. His first visit to the railroad, they had to drive their cattle from here to Wolcott. At Wolcott they met the train. His first trip to Wolcott, they camped next to the tracks. They had a big campfire going. When that first train came around the bend with his lights on, he thought the darn thing was going to get him. So he ran through the fire yelling 'it's going to get us' and that was his first sight of the train.

"We had storage bins for our grain. A lot of our own grain was sold right here and a lot of it went to Steamboat. All the cattle went to Denver by railroad. Milner had a stockyard and we went there. Then we rode the caboose to Denver. For every car of cattle you were allowed one passenger. (50 head went in one car.) Everybody that went had some liquor and there was a card game all the way. The caboose was not the warmest and it was very slow, but it was a lot of fun. Us kids used to fight to see who would go. That ended when the truck came along because the train was slow. The cattle rode better and they were loaded faster too. The train took 16 hours to get to Denver and the truck took a few hours. D.&R.G. didn't like to haul cattle too much and it got to a point where they would not accommodate you anymore. In fact, the last time we shipped cattle by train, we got to Denver at 8:00 a.m. and the cattle sat there until 4:30 in the afternoon before they were unloaded. Then the only reason they got unloaded was because dad raised so much heck. That was the end of it and we all went to trucks. That was around 1948."

Errold started talking about when they got electricity. "It first came to the ranch in 1936. The power plant was over in McGreror and the

FOUR GENERATIONS OF THE HITCHENS' FAMILY

line came right by here so we were one of the first to have electricity. Most ranches didn't get it until 1940 or later. We got rid of the oil and gaslights. The first thing we got was a radio. I still have it. It was an old Philco radio. My favorite show was Bill Armstrong, The All American Boy, and the fights. We put up an antenna in between the barn and the house and we had a lot of antenna."

Wilma and Errold told us about some of their experiences on the farm. Wilma started, "During war time, we were excused from school to work on the farm. We still had to do our homework. I drove a grain truck to Hayden; I was 14 years old when the war started. Daddy had built the brake and clutch up. I drove grain to Hayden. We did not have a license to drive. We had a farm permit. We had to pass a driving test which was no problem because we drove on the farm all the time. We were big shots to have the privilege to drive. Then at SSHS we could sign up to pick potatoes. The rows were a half mile long and we got a dollar a row. We got excused to go pick these potatoes. The potatoes were real big, about 10 inches long. The whole high school went."

Errold said, "Dad got his first tractor when I was five year a old. It was a McCormick. It was in 1936. He farmed with that tractor and team. The heavy work went to the tractor. He got the other tractor about 1947 and it was so much bigger and compared to today, it's a toy."

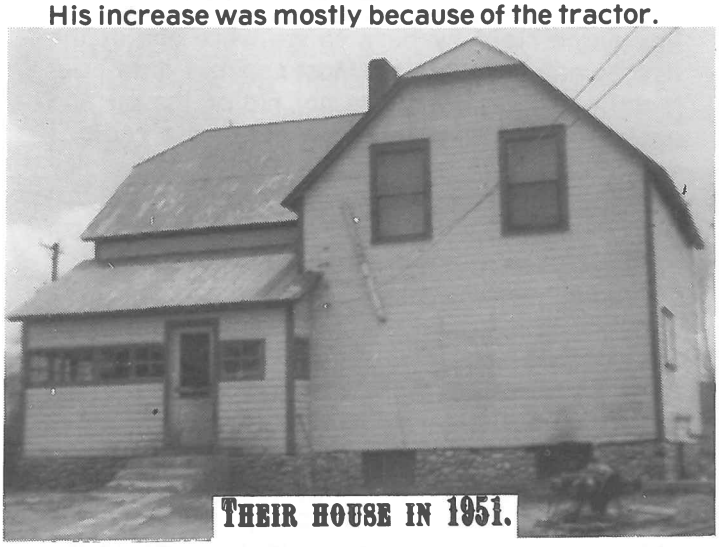
Wilma describes his first experiences with the tractor. "When dad first got his tractor he brought it home. He was showing all the farmers. He was driving the tractor through the field and when he got to the end by the fence he yelled, 'Whoa damn-it whoa!' He couldn't find the brakes. He got it stopped just in time. Everybody was laughing."

Errold tells us, "During the war, he could not get help. Well, this tractor had a damn hand

brake and the clutch was so stiff and I was so small. I had to push the clutch with both feet. That fall he could not get any help, so I was running the tractor. He was running the binder. We were across the river on a steep hill when the binder stopped tying. Dad yelled, 'Whoa' and I would stop. We were going down the hill and dad yelled, 'Whoa' so I pushed the clutch in and knocked it out of gear, but I could not get it stopped. I gave him one hell of a ride down the hill. From there on out we decided that if we were on a hill we would wait and stop at the bottom."

"When the tractors broke down dad did not do much on his tractor, but Errold did a lot," Wilma added.

Errold said, "Dad increased production some. But there was a fight over tractors and horses. His increase was mostly because of the tractor.



THEIR HOUSE IN 1951.

"Dad felt the depression. He went into the depression out of debt, so he came out okay. They made him kill all his pigs. That was a big loss. I was very small, but I do remember him trading meat for other things. I think he did the best he could. Dad made most of his money during World War II."

Albert smiled and told us about his early cars. "The first one I had was a 1918 Maxwell. I used it to grind grain. In 1922, we went to California when Dorothy-Jean was a baby. When we went over Strawberry Pass between Vernal and Salt Lake the rear-end broke. We had to leave the car and go get parts for the rear-end. The roads were always in rough shape. It took guts to go to California in those old outfits. They were muddy; very few roads had gravel. We got stuck all the time and had to dig out. There was always a way out. The Maxwell didn't have a heater; we used a cow hide to keep warm."

Errold also remembered a story about cars for us. "In 1939 we went to the World's Fair in San Francisco and I bought a new Ford sedan. It was brand new and was the fanciest car I ever owned." Errold laughed, "My brother Melvin wrecked it. In 1941 we got a new one in Detroit. We went to the factory to get that one. We rode the train to Detroit and drove it back. Saving on freight paid for the gas. That's when I learned to roller skate on that trip."

Albert told us how he made his own skis for himself and his family. "We did not know anything about skiing, it was snowshoeing. We would take a one by four and we hewed the front out to one-half inch thick. Then we stuck that tip in water; I don't know for how long. When it had soaked up enough water we would get ready to make this bend. We got a hot log and bent the tip around the log to make the curve. There was enough fire there to dry the wood. I don't remember having any type of wax. We used one long pole to guide us. We would get up on the hill after we got the skis slick enough. We'd tie our boots to the skis. They didn't go so fast back then. If you got going too fast you sat on the pole to hold yourself back. Yes, we got going too fast and fell down once in a while."

Errold continued with stories about skiing and early Steamboat. "We didn't ski too much as a family. My mom and dad didn't ski except out of necessity. Wilma and I skied a lot. We would go every chance we could. I would ski to Milner and catch the train to Steamboat. Ski all day and catch the 4:00 o'clock train home, then ski back from Milner. That was always a big thing because they had lifts. All they had was old boat tows. (People would get in the wooden boats which were like a sled and the rope tow would drag you up the hill.) A day in town cost $2.00 or maybe less. The train ticket cost $1.25 and the lift ticket cost 50 cents and then lunch in town.

"I never was around Steamboat that much. I remember the riot at the carnival. On the Fourth of July, they had a big carnival. One of the Wagner boys went down with a $20 bill and he was supposed to bring the change back. He came back crying because they took his money and he was only gone a few minutes. So his big brother went down there to see what was going on. They

ALBERT AND WINNIE

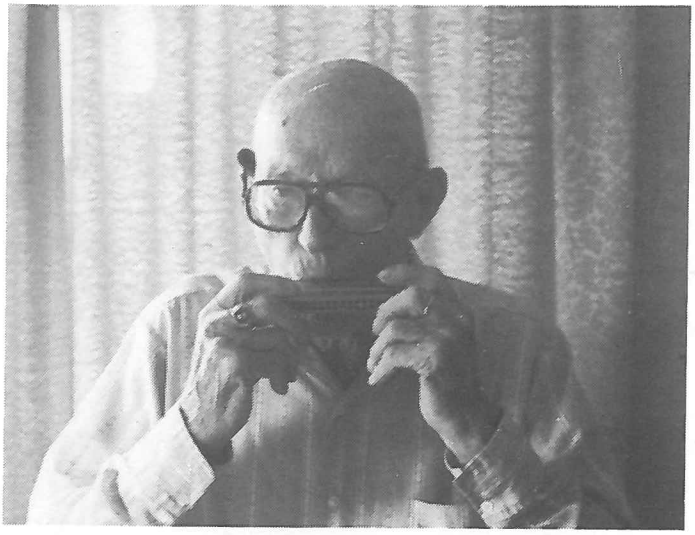
got in a big fight. It put Russ (big brother) in the hospital. The Wagners were well known in town and that got the town pretty hot. Before the night was over the town destroyed the whole carnival. Nobody got killed — that was luck — but they destroyed the trucks, then they stoned everything they had. The police could not keep up. It was a number of years before a carnival ever came back. That was around 1945."

Today the Hitchens ranch has very good big game hunting. We asked Melvin what was hunting like back then. "Elk is a new thing on this ranch. The first elk that was ever killed was over on my place. A kid killed an elk and no one could believe it.

"We ate a lot of sage chicken in the summer. One time mother was fixing sage chicken and the game warden stopped by. Back then if anyone stopped by during dinner it was unheard of not to ask him to eat. So mother said, 'Mr. Campbell, what would you do if you cut the legs off of a bunch of sage chickens with a thrashing machine?' Mr. Campbell answered, 'Well, I would eat them.' Then mother said, 'Well let's eat dinner.' Mr. Campbell sat there and picked buckshot out of his teeth.

"In 1956, Jr. Ford shot the first elk in this valley. Nobody believed it until he showed everybody his antlers. Now there are elk all over the place. We never ate game because all the coal miners ate them all before we got to them. I never saw a deer until I was 15 years old."

It was time to stop the interview and Albert went to get his harmonica to sing us a couple of songs. We asked Errold what Albert has been doing since he retired.



COME ON YOU ROUNDERS IF YOU WANT TO FLIRT,
HERE COME THE LADY IN THE HOBBLE SKIRT,
YOU CAN HUG HER AND SQUEESE HER ALL YOU PLEASE,
BUT YOU CAN'T GET THE HOBBLES ABOVE HER KNEES.

WILMA AND ALBERT JUST BEFORE THE OLDTIMER'S DANCE.

"Well, my mother died in 1950. He remarried to Ms. Frisbee and she died in December of 1983. Dad can't live alone so he has been staying with Wilma in Lacey Spring, Virginia. Dad and Wilma come out once a year and they are going back tomorrow. In 1958, Dad semi-retired and his second wife had a house in Meeker, but every winter they went to Mesa, Arizona. When Dad was young he played guitar and harmonica at dances and that's one reason he has been going to Arizona since 1960. They still have a lot of dances down there."

Albert closed his interview with this remark. "Well, I ain't retired from farming. I ride better than I walk. I came out here and they put me to work."

Wilma: "In Virginia we went to an old timer's dance. It started at 9:00 and dad danced every dance. Then at 12:00 when everyone started home he was going, 'Where is everyone going? The night has just started.' He wore a white tux. He got all dressed up and looked in the mirror and said, 'Well, look at this damn old dirt farmer.

"A lot of our friends were very poor and the depression hurt them a lot. We were never poor and survived the depression. We made just enough money to get by. A lot of people lost their ranches; the ones that were in debt. If you were not on the bank's 'good' list you did not make it. That is if you were not in debt. Agriculture today is at a very depressed state. There is no money to be made and about all you can do is hang on.

"It is very close to what it was like in the 1930s. You see people foreclosing every day. It seems to me, from history, that agriculture gets hit first.

Then the rest of the economy falls. It makes it very scary to me because we are depressed. Are we going into a depression or not? I don't think you can depress a business as big as agriculture and not hurt the rest of the United States. Agriculture is today the biggest single business in the United States.

"Today nobody is buying tractors and it hurts the steel companies, the factories and the freight companies. And if agriculture is depressed it hurts everybody. If we go into a depression today the United States will be hurting more than back then. Back then the ones who made out okay were the farmers. And then 40 percent of the people were farmers but today 10 percent of the people are farmers."

In December I went back to the Hitchens Ranch for a second interview and to look at their old photo album. I started the interview by asking Errold about farming during the Great Depression and farming today.

"I'm against the 35 acre developments because land is measured in 40 acre plots. They are taking 40 acres out of production. It's not feasible for them to farm it at this time. Twenty years from now it might be. We'll go back to a small farm where they grow a lot. In a way I'm against it, but in the long run it will be okay. They are coming through with a deal now where you will have 10 developments to every 250 acres and you put the 10 developments in 2½ acre plots and cluster it in a corner somewhere. Then you have 225 acres that could be used. That's a lot more feasible to me than to take 30 or 40 acres out of production. For 25 acres you take care of 10 families who want to live in the country, but with 40 acre lots you just lose land. I believe this is a far better concept. It is going to be very interesting to see what is going to happen."

To end the story I asked Errold what was his fondest memory of his Dad. "Gosh, there are so many, I don't know. I think one is he had a pinto horse at one time; it was a great cattle horse. It was a very small horse and I can remember him wearing bib overalls. And a great big hat. But I think the fondest memory is him riding that pinto with that big hat flopping around. One day someone asked him what he was going to do when that horse died. He answered, "Well, I guess I'm going to give up raising cattle." But he could take that little horse and go back up in the hills and bring back one yearling. To drive a bunch of cattle was pretty easy but to drive one yearling away from a herd is a big problem. Many times I have seen dad and that horse bring back one cow or yearling all by themselves. At that time there were seven gates and he would bring that yearling through all seven gates without using a rope, and open and close every gate."

When I took this story to Errold to read over he started to read it with a smile. Soon his grin turned into laughter as he remembered the fun parts of his family's history here in Routt County. He looked at me and said, "Cole, do you know that the Hitchens are the longest continuous ranch family in Routt County! It all got started back in 1884."