HENRY C. HITCH AND HIS TIMES

By Roy P. Stewart *

The high plains country has a life all its own. Nature has been both kind and cruel to it, at times even capricious, while the soil into which its people are anchored has nurtured folk just a little bit different in some ways than their fellow Oklahomans.

The Panhandle country is changed in many ways since it was called "No Man's Land," for it has benefitted from rapid advances in agricultural and livestock technology, some industry, and all the comforts of personal living that offset periodic blasts of winter winds and the searing, listless days of late summer.

Into the legally unclaimed country in 1884, a mother with her infant son returned to a ranch holding along Coldwater Creek, twelve miles southeast of where Guymon, in Texas County, now stands as the middle of three counties created at statehood, twenty-three years later. There were no doctors there then. She had been driven 140 miles by buckboard to Dodge City, Kansas, to take a train to Springfield, Missouri, to be with her mother at the time of her third child's birth.

The child, Henry Charles Hitch, Senior, grew up on the Plains, his character built by hard working, religious parents, James Kerrick Hitch and Mary Westmoreland Hitch. His ranching knowledge and business acumen developed from age nine, and status of a full hand on the range at fourteen. His love for the land and a feeling of responsibility for its care was so nurtured that he could pass it on to two more generations. He

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was a product of his family background and of his era in time. Henry Hitch was very close to his father and later he was the same with his own son. Henry left much of the family history for James Hitch's descendants through many pencilled or dictated notes.

In Henry Hitch's eighty years before his death in 1967, his life covered only a short period in Time, yet his life spanned much of what was crude in pioneer life over until today when computers decide cattle feeding rations and pump water from the shallow subsurface. This water is the most precious gift of the Permian basin for it turns the semi-arid high Plains to living green.

Drouth and depressed markets, aided by near financial panics in the eastern money marts, broke Henry Hitch twice. Once he bought yearling steers for $100 a head and held them three years, waiting for a market, only to sell them for $65. "And I was glad to get that too," he said later.

Henry was a man of the Plains, a term that became a title of respect given by early residents of this region. The country developed him and he aided much in the Panhandle's development just as his father and others of the two parental families had done on the frontier. From his quiet, reserved nature, outsiders would never have known the depth of his feeling for the land that has passed so easily to his children and grandchildren.

His formal education was high school with a short time at a business school. But his cultural attainment came from reading that rated him at post-college level. He had a book collector's zeal for Lincoln stories, for Western Americana, for history and economics. He acquired a fine library over the years and read every volume studiously. From reading of the Far North, he had dreams of visiting there and in the later part of his life, he traveled in Alaska several times. He was drawn to the works of imaginative people, illustrated by a verse that has the simplicity of ancient Chinese style, from which he liked to quote:

Beyond the butternut, beyond the maple;
Beyond the white pine and the red —
Beyond even the white and yellow birches
There lies a land, and in that land
The shadows fall crimson across the snow.

His biblical knowledge and religious nature found somewhere a companion passage to Panhandle range life as he knew it, which he sent to the writer in 1966:

Since the days when Lot and Abram
Split the Jordan range in halves,
Just to fix it so their punchers wouldn't fight,
There has been a test of battle
'Mongst the men who handle cattle,
And the warmth of Laban's words
When he missed his speckled herds,
Still are useful as a language on the range.

The story of the Hitch family is the story of a most interesting period in America and certainly of our region. Overall it is a success story, with elements that are a bit different from that of some families, although in the High Plains there are others who came through difficult years when only the hardy and determined survived.

The ancesters of the Hitch family came to America in the 18th Century, settling in Maryland and Virginia. The Panhandle Hitches descend from Elias Hitch, who was born in Blount County, Tennessee, in 1783. He married Nancy Kerrick in 1812. James K. Hitch, Henry's father, was born in Tennessee in 1856. By 1875, following the strenuous times of post-war reconstruction, affairs of the family were in the hard scrabble stage.

James, at 19, felt the lure of moving west like so many others in his day. An aunt, who had friends in Missouri, advised him to go west to find work. From the family savings in an earthen pot, James took $10 in coins. Using some of the money for transportation and some for food, James went as far as he could toward Missouri. When his money ran out he worked at anything available for a few days. He reached Springfield and got a job as a helper in a wagon factory.

When Henry Westmoreland, a prosperous farmer, came around looking for a willing worker, James' employer

(Photo from Hitch Family Collection)

MR. AND MRS. JAMES K. HITCH

Early photograph of the parents of Henry Hitch, with two of their children.

recommended him and Westmoreland hired the young man. Perhaps he was not surprised four years later, in early 1879, when his daughter, Mary, and James were married, because by then the young man was accepted and was more than a hired hand.

A year later with his own savings and with a loan from Westmoreland, James was made a partner in an enterprise typical of the times. With his father-in-law and his son, William Westmoreland, James entered a partnership to trail some 1,000 cows, mostly Durham, to open range in Western Kansas to begin a new life. Kansas in 1879 was slowly becoming settled but its herd laws were not yet perfected as they later were. Barbed wire was still little more than a target of more than 100 patent infringement suits back east. The trio with some help trailed the herd of cattle west and stopped for a time near Medicine Lodge. Later, they moved the cattle on west to Meade County on Crooked Creek, then still later to Seward County on the Dry Cimarron some miles northwest of Liberal. That became the initial rangeland.

In 1884, five years later, James Hitch moved on down to the Coldwater in what is now Texas County, Oklahoma, in whose broad expanse of 1,309,680 acres there are even in 1972 less than eight persons per square mile. There was no private ownership. There was no law. The first man took what land he found without squatters along streams, not only for the water and wood, but because on the benches of streams there was lush grass. There was an unwritten law that you could claim grass half-way to the next water. Sparser grass on uplands was almost ignored. To discourage others, James built a few one-room soddies in the areas, using strips of native grass sod, 12 inches thick, 12 inches wide and 1-1/2 feet long, for the walls. Planks were bent over a low ridge pole, with just enough fall to drain with 2 by 4 inch scantling at the edge to hold back more layers of sod for the roof. A paste of gypsum, pounded out from that mineral easily available in the hills, was used to rough plaster the inside of the house. There was no problem of framing windows. There were not any. There was a 60-foot well, dug by hand. The two-room soddy was thus built as a home for the family, James and Mary with the children, Della, Josephine and the baby, Henry (George to come along a bit later).

"In 1888, my mother wrote to the Methodist Mission Board," Henry observed years later, holding a copy of her letter." She asked for help in getting a minister, writing that we lived 140 miles from the railroad and needed some spiritual help. The next year a young man answered that call and became a circuit rider. The first service for the area was in our house. We were the first children baptized. The preacher lived with us."

James Hitch cut hackberry trees along the creek to make cattle pens,.tying the rails with thongs of wet rawhide, which became steel tight as they dried. Until he became one of the first to raise alfalfa along creek bottoms, the cattle had nothing but grass and, in winter, native hay, which the young Henry got five cents a day for stomping down on the wagon's hay rack, and atop the stack where it was piled near a corral.

When the railroad pushed on and Liberal became the end of the track about fifty miles away, James traded there for foodstuffs and other supplies. He did not arrive with an empty wagon. There were piles of buffalo bones on the prairie where hundreds had been slaughtered for their hides. The bones had a value of $5.00 to $6.00 a ton back east where they were made into fertilizer. James Hitch stocked his No Man's Land range primarily with Texas and Mexican cattle, typical Longhorns, at $7 each for steers and $15 each for yearling heifers in times of drouth. He bred up the cow progeny by using purebred Hereford bulls.

The country was becoming more "civilized." A school was started on the Hitch ranch, which soon covered about seven square miles, halfway to the Beaver from Coldwater Creek. An abandoned sod claim shack was used first, then a 12 by 14 foot shack that Harry Reese had left, as a subscription school. Watts Adams' claim shack was the next one, more nearly equal distance for the few families that used it for several years until 1895. Two winters later, Mrs. Hitch took her children to Liberal for school

A few "towns" were started, usually a general store and post office, in the region. One was Lavrock, north of the Beaver.

Another, some three miles below Hitch ranch headquarters on the Coldwater, was Eubank, the second of the two places. C. A. Booth took over the Eubank buildings and served as postmaster here until Guymon was established. Mail for the area went from Liberal to Hardesty three times a week, first carried by a man named Finch in a two-wheeled cart and later by an old cowboy, Allen Walker. From Hardesty the mail was taken to Eubank. Later, the mail was taken to Roy, three miles upstream from the Hitch home. Roy was a station operated by T. J. Creel until 1896. Mrs. Charles Westmoreland afterward ran this post office for a spell and so did Mrs. James Hitch.

Since they had driven their herds of three-year-old steers first to Dodge City and then the shorter distance to Liberal, Kansas, for several years, James Hitch and his neighbors were glad to see the Rock Island extend rails seven miles from Liberal to Old Tyrone, on the south side of the Kansas line. Kansans were fretful about "tick fever." Only cattle were shipped over this branch railway line.

With no place to hold cattle at Tyrone, the railroad had a 70-foot well dug at Shade's Well, about eight miles farther on southwest in the Panhandle. A new-fangled windmill was erected here to pump water into wooden troughs for the separate herds held here feeding on grass while waiting for shipment. Later a steam pump — wood fired by hustling Zack Cain — was put up at the well and some wood storage tanks were built to supply enough water for waiting herds, some of them numbering at times more than 3,000 head of cattle.

There was no communication with Liberal north in Kansas, so a horseman would ride out to Shade's Well to give an approximate time of arrival at Tyrone for a 12 to 15 stock train of cars.

The next shipment in line by order of arrival would water in the evening and head for Tyrone, reaching there about dawn. The cattle were shoved into loading chutes through a large inverted "V" fence to cars that the puffing engine dragged up opposite to the chute.

People drove out from Liberal to see the fun. The herds had been held quiet so most of the cattle were easy to work. Some of them had other ideas, and it took good men and good horses to load them without the use of crowding pens. An occasional need for roping and a few pitching horses added to the spectator show.

No matter how hard it was, Henry enjoyed working every moment with the cattle during the shipment, standing his turn on night guard — rain soaked or not. When a young man, Henry rode bucking broncos and entered roping contests at rodeos, although he said his brother, George, excelled him at roping. Henry never lost his interest and pleasure in watching rodeos, and never missed one at Guymon, especially on Pioneer Day. Because of his interest in that event and financial support for the rodeo grounds, a committee suggested the location be named the Henry Hitch Pioneer Stadium.

James Hitch, the father, like many others, was almost wiped out in the bad winter of 1886-87. An April blizzard — a common time for such disasters in the High Plains — nipped his buildup in 1895. Both times the only thing that saved the ranchers was skinning the cattle for hides. Hides had a far greater proportion of value contrasted to the live beast, than they do now; it was hard, stinking work, but the alternative was giving up.

Attracted by opportunities in the new country, Charles Hitch, a brother of James, had come out from Tennessee. He and James got land across the line in Texas, near where Hitchland is now, and started a large spread, using windmills to get stock water. With the Westmorelands, James also was still active in Kansas.

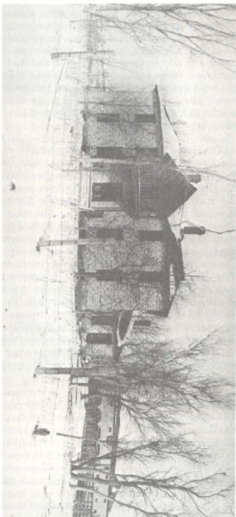
In early winter of 1898, James, with his wife's people and a son-in-law, Brice Keating, and Brice's brother, Burt, fenced about fifty sections of land in Kansas, northwest, west, and southwest of Liberal. On it they could run about 2,500 head. This was in addition to James' herds in the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma. A spring blizzard cut these inventories.

Some of this land had been proven up as claims. Much of it

was abandoned. Some of the claims were available by tax titles or from mortgage foreclosures. By 1901, James Hitch and his associates divided up according to their investment — large enough for those times at $25 a quarter section — a pittance in cost today. Brice took some 11 sections on the southwest, James about 25 sections in the center, and Burt the rest on the northeast. James built a dugout on his land. He soon bought an old hotel building at Farwell, Texas, the last building there; tore it down and moved the material to the Coldwater ranch to build a 40 by 98 foot barn, with a hip roof and hay mow. This barn was used for 40 years.

James also bought an old office building at Hugoton, across the Kansas line, for $75, tore it down with the help of Jim Byerly, moved the findings down to the Coldwater, and built the first school, other than the old claim shacks. He also built the first permanent parsonage for a Methodist minister, Reverend D. J. M. Jones, a four-room stone house on the Coldwater. James Hitch earlier had built a rock house with walls two feet thick. Bachelor Louis Williamson mixed mud mortar — literally mud — to hold together the stones that Bill George (a cousin from Tennessee) cut out of slopes on nearby hills. The house nestled against a protective bluff that ran westward from the creek. The lumber used for framing, studding, beams, rafters and floor cost $600. The total cost was $1,800 for the original 20 by 40 foot, two-story dwelling, as James Hitch was careful to note in his ledger. It was later sheltered by cottonwoods, grown from seedlings taken along the creek. The trees survived only because Mary Hitch watered them in dry seasons with water she had drawn by windlass from the well.

The coming of territorial days in 1890 caused changes in land ownership. At this time, the Panhandle region belonged to the U.S. government. Under law one could now claim 160 acres in Oklahoma Territory (as James Hitch did around his headquarters), put up $14.75 and bet five years of your life against the government's land that you could stay there against all the whims of nature, or man-madedisasters. Or, one could live the claim eighteen months, then buy it for $1.25 per acre. Money was scarce so most folks found it easier to prove up



(Photo from Hitch Family Collection)

HOME BUILT BY JAMES K. HITCH
ON THE COLDWATER

Later this was the home of Henry Hitch. It is now the home of Paul Hitch, son of Henry C. Hitch, Jr.

a claim if they could stick it out. If cash could be raised elsewhere, one could buy claim relinquishments, or acquire deserted land by paying the taxes due on it.

Kansas had a different situation where a person would get three quarter sections. One was a "tree claim," on which a claimant had to set out a specified number of trees on the treeless plain, and make them survive a certain time. Another was a "preemption claim" on 160 acres still unclaimed. The third was acquired by living on the claim, and proving it up in a period of five years.

Texas had still a different plan. Since Texas had come into the Union as a sovereign state, the U.S. government did not own any of that vast region. At this time in Texas history, a person could file on four sections (2,560 acres) of school land, live on it for three years, then buy it for $1.25 an acre on a 40 year note for 3% interest. James and Charles Hitch took advantage of this and bought some relinquishments in Texas too. They wound up at one time with about 40 sections of Texas land. In the early 1900's, cattle were so cheap, and money so scarce, that James Hitch and his associates sold some land for from $1 to $2 per acre, then used that money to fence and cross-fence the rest. It was in Texas that James Hitch started farming wheat with up to 1,000 acres under cultivation.

Henry Hitch enlarged his wheat-growing operation many times over, one year planting 10,000 acres from which harvested wheat had to be piled on the ground in a pile one-quarter of a mile long and six feet high. Cattle ranching and wheat farming occupied his major attention until middle life when he began making investments in stocks. His son, H. C., Jr., finished college and joined the ranch operations, taking over a great part of the active supervision, and Henry now had more time to devote to study and trading in the stock market. He built up a large portfolio in which there was never any stock in liquor or tobacco companies.

When the railroad came to Guymon in 1901, a wave of settlers came in through the lure of a homestead, although the most tillable lands along creeks were already owned in spots or

held as claims. Most of these people were farmers — "grangers" not cattlemen — and the moldboard plows with which they broke the thin sod in time caused siltation of the streams as well as loose soil which contributed some thirty years later to the "dirty thirties" of dust bowl memory.

Many of the settlers in 1901 did not have work stock and James Hitch loaned them unbroken mules. After one or two years, the mule teams were returned to him, and were saleable work stock. He did lose a few spans of mules sometimes when the dispirited, discouraged families loaded up a rickety wagon and headed back east in double darkness.

It was around 1902 that James Hitch started raising more winter feed for his Coldwater and Kansas ranching operations. Basically still a cattleman, he did not raise wheat until several years after that crop became fairly common, but went to "bundle crops," such as maize, kafir corn and feterita. The heads atop the high stalk were cut off by hand with a corn knife, to be fed whole or ground later as protein feed. The stalks were cut and bundled for winter forage which was hay that saved many cattle from death in the winter.

With his grains, forage, alfalfa and native hay, Hitch reduced the former three-year growth period for steers to two years before shipment to Kansas City, an innovation for the time that became the pattern for family operations over the next two generations. This, then, was the sort of operational atmosphere in which young Henry Hitch grew up. Consider the tender age in which a boy became a man in those days. At seven, Henry tramped hay during cutting time. At age eight, using a tarp for a saddle with rope stirrups, he helped drive 500 steers some 20 miles up Coldwater Creek, and returned home so tired he had to be lifted off his horse. At eleven, he helped his Uncle Charles trail cattle for three days — this time he had a saddle — at a wage of 10 cents a day. His father had said: "If he can make a hand, it's alright."

In 1898, at age fourteen, after James Hitch bought about 1,200 steers near Dodge City, Henry went along as a full cowboy, while George, then eleven, was wrangler for the

remuda. Roy Reser drove the mule team of the Chuck wagon. Herb Wilson and Jake Burton were two other riders from the home ranch. Two temporary cowboys were hired. "It took two days to get to Liberal, where we stayed all night in a wagon yard," Henry said a few years ago. "My brother-in-law, Brice Keating, who married Della, lived there and was going on with us to Cimarron Station near Dodge where the cattle were. Brice had a double interest — Father had promised him and Della a wedding present of 100 steers from this herd."

The trip took two days more before they reached the cattle and another day before they could get possession of them since a Fourth of July holiday intervened. "I saw my first rodeo then," Henry recalled, "although there were only three bucking horses used and one of them didn't pitch as much as some of our working stock did early in the mornings." Later he rode pitching horses, and roped steers in competition himself. The cattle were trailed home. Work of the two boys must have pleased James Hitch because that fall he gave them 30 heifers, then worth $15 each, with which to start their own herds under their own brands.

The next four years were a mixture of some schooling and a lot of work for Henry who said a few years ago:

I never made a full school term. We shipped cattle in October and November. I was a regular hand by then. It took about a week to gather them. We'd have our own crew, and there were some outside "reps" along to cut out cattle under other brands that had drifted in, just like we did when others had a roundup.

Then we'd need about three days to get them to Tyrone. The first day we'd go about halfway to the Beaver, and bed down. The next day we'd noon at the river. The second day we'd make it about halfway to Shade's Well, and bed down. The next noon, we would water at the well troughs, then pull out a ways to wait for our call to go on to Tyrone, making it at night after giving the cattle a fill of water, and load early in the morning.

We all used from three to four horses a day when trailing cattle, two at least during the day, changing at noon. We might have a circle horse, one that could cover a lot of ground if that was necessary in the daytime, but he didn't have to be too smart. A night horse had to be the most gentle and sure-footed. You didn't want one to fall, and you didn't want one that would fret and cause extra noise.

Most of the time the cattle would be pretty easy to handle, after a day or so on the move, but they could get spooked pretty easy, and then you'd have trouble. That's one reason you tied your night horse to the chuck wagon on the side opposite from where the cattle were bedded down for the night. Any odd noise might get them stirred up.

Mostly there were just our own people but sometimes we had to have some extra hands, including maybe some drifters who were riding the chuck line, because mostly you needed eight riders for anything over 500 head, two riding point up front on each side, then two siding at swing, flank and drag.

That drag was the worst place because you had all the dust they stirred up and most times some weak ones to prod along. That's why even your movie cowboys wear a bandana around their necks — that's to put up over your nose to help breathe on the drag.

The worst times were trying to hold them in a storm. A thunderstorm is bad enough but a blizzard is worse because you can't see and they naturally drift with the wind. That's why we had drift fences — neither end tied to any other fence.

When cattle bunch up, and stay on their feet, they generate some heat that helps all of them, but when they lie down in a storm they may never get up.

You might find a moral in that, somewhere. They don't bunch up to keep each other warm but to keep themselves warm. But I heard that — I'll admit I didn't think it up. I believe it, though. People might learn something from it.

In 1902, James Hitch considered that a "man" coming eighteen years old in December, and particularly Henry, should have some responsibility. So in autumn, James sent Henry and four cowhands to the Kansas ranch to take charge of the 2,500 cattle there.

The pay was $16 a month and, as was the custom those days, you provided your own bedding and saddle. The foreman also seemed to be selected for cook — at least the way James Hitch figured it — because no other cook eas employed. So Henry did that, too, for the five of them, which meant that his day began about 3:30 a.m., and lasted until dark — plus getting supper. He said later he never got tired but did regret not being able to complete each day's allotted work. He read by lamplight for one sort of entertainment pursued all his life.

"We had about a dozen hens and got an average of six eggs a day," Henry remembered. "That didn't always divide equally. The other fellows sometimes would play poker for

eggs. One might have several of them and others none, but we tried to divide them right."

There was no wood available near the dugout so the main fuel was one common to all the High Plains in those days — dry cow chips. There was a bin nearby which James Hitch had built earlier, about 20 feet square and 6 feet high, that would be filled with chips in autumn for winter use.

The first year on the Kansas ranch Henry Hitch put some cattle back on the pasture burned out two years before. The next year, 1903 — in February — there was a 72-hour snow — not a blizzard — that left more than 3 feet of snow on the ground in freezing temperature. Fortunately some 1,200 head had been moved south earlier to winter so those remaining had a death loss of only around 100, Henry recalled. That meant skinning to save the hides.

They had been feeding some hay and corn chops but getting it to cattle was a problem. By putting four mules on a wagon, that could flounder out a trail, and enticing the lead cattle with some feed, they were able to move them about four miles to where a neighbor had some bundle feed to sell.

For six years, time was something the young ranch manager had little of, when one considers hours needed to handle the cattle through winter, through calving and later working the calves, fence riding and some feed raising.

Years later Henry recalled that coyote songs at night on the Kansas place seemed to have a more lonesome pitch than those around the home place down on the Coldwater. "Maybe it was because I was more lonesome," he said. "I could talk with the other fellows but I didn't want to gamble, and there was little else to do but play some sort of games a spell at night. So I just read things — and was a little homesick.

"It didn't exactly apply," he said, "but something I read stuck with me about wolves. We didn't see many of them but there were many coyotes around. I sort of liked this verse though . . .

(Photo from Hitch Family Collection)
CHRISTINE AND HENRY C. HITCH

Photo taken in 1910, the year of their marriage (July 6).

Born to be a cattle killer, thief and
general all around pest.
Still I hate to kill you, partner,
cause you're a part of our old west.

You and me are sort of brothers with our back
against the wall.
In an act that's almost over with the
curtain 'bout to fall.

Despite all the work on the ranch there were odd times when a fellow could do something besides handle cattle. Henry acquired a couple of grey hounds and chased coyotes, horseback of course, and finally had nine of them represented by pelts stretched out to dry with the flesh scraped off. He softened the tawny, hair-covered leather, then had it tanned and made into a laprobe, a popular thing in those days where buggies were the main mode of transportation, replacing buffalo robes that were gradually disappearing.

This was a pretty good thing, too, because about that time he met Christine Walker at a "literary," a combination school-community gathering where debates were held, pieces spoken and songs sung. Christine was teaching at Pleasant valley, near Liberal, where her mother had a claim. She was born in Sun City, near Medicine Lodge (Kansas), in 1890. Her father, Thomas Walker, had come out of Kentucky with his parents, like so many others in years after the Civil War, looking for a better chance, although he was but fifteen at the time. From Texas, he went up the Chisholm Trail through Red River Station twice. In Kansas, he hunted buffalo for the hides and tongues (Christine still has the gun he used), and then went to farming and horse raising.

In her youth Christine, with her mother and relatives, lived in Colorado where she made the highest county-grade average before securing a teacher's certificate after high school graduation. It has been a family joke that Christine, when Henry met her, was teaching in a "chicken house." Actually that was true but not quite as it sounds.

Pleasant Valley was fourteen miles northwest of Liberal. Provision was made for some buildings but not enough for the

students who came in. So, a new 14 by 28 foot structure, intended as a chicken house, was used to house from 16 to 18 kids, all grades, whom Christine taught for a salary of $45 a month. Henry went a-courting, driving Ginger Pop and Gooseneck to a buggy with the coyote laprobe to keep off chill winds in winter. This went on for two years. Meanwhile, Christine went that summer to the Emporia Normal School to advance her education, and teaching certificate. She took a job at Isabel, northwest of Medicine Lodge, for two years. She was engaged to Henry all the time, and earning slightly more money than at Pleasant Valley.

Henry had not been idle about building up his own fortunes. His father raised his salary to $25 a month because the ranch was doing well. Henry filed on a quarter-section and proved it easily enough during his six years in Kansas, before returning to the Coldwater, in 1908, where he assumed most of the managership. James Hitch then was living in Guymon but still active.

In 1910, Henry and Christine were married. Henry rode "Old Dewey," a bay horse named after the Admiral, into Guymon to take the train to Liberal. He went to his sister Della's home, then next day rented a surrey from the livery stable and went after Christine, her mother and sister, Irma, for the wedding. The young couple went to Colorado for a honeymoon, visiting relatives, but not enjoying a side trip to Marble, very much, since Henry had invested a $3,000 loan in a quarry outfit there and lost it.

It was a working life into which the new bride came. There were the ranch hands to feed, normally 5 in the winter and 12 to 15 in the summer — more during wheat harvest. There were odd mealtimes in the winter because the cattle came first.

There was a wood-burning stove. In winter beef halves or quarters were sheet wrapped and hung outside to freeze because there was no refrigeration. In summer the meat was chicken, or side bacon and ham put down into barrels in a salt cure. Sometimes there was fish taken from the creek (not yet silted) by cork line fishing or seining which was a Sunday afternoon sport.

The dry stores came in large sizes, usually 100 pounds, such as beans and potatoes and flour that had to be hung in the storm cellar on a wire-suspended shelf to keep rodents away. Honey was bought in 60-pound cans but in season there were wild sand plums and grapes to be picked, cooked and canned. Stirring a 20-gallon kettle of plum butter could get tiresome. But that was part of life for a woman.

"There was no bridge on the Coldwater, where the main freight road from Guymon to Spearman, Texas, went, and six and eight head teams on the wagons," Mrs. Hitch recalled. "When there was high water, people would have to wait to cross, and they came to the house. It was always open to them, for food and shelter. The women, if there were any, would stay in the house, on pallets if necessary, while men would bed down in the barn."

There was a way that salt cured bacon could be made more appetizing, Mrs. Hitch remembers. "You would soak it in soda water, then dip it in egg batter, roll it in cracker crumbs, and fry it," she said. "We had an apple orchard at the ranch, which helped, because the fruit, except plums and grapes in summer, was dried, but we had a problem of keeping the trees alive some years. That was true also of cedars, which we had to keep going, just like Henry's mother did the cottonwoods before."

The winters were hard on people, just as they were on livestock. Cattle came first. They had to be gotten up on their feet, if downed because of weakness, and early spring calves had to be especially cared for. Use of cottonseed cake in winter, started several years before, helped to keep the cows in good shape. There were times when it was difficult to get to the cattle because of storms. Hunting strays was necessary not only for the humane reasons but for the economics involved.

"I'll never forget some of those winters," Christine Hitch said. "That of 1911-12 was very bad, when we were relatively new, starting out with the responsibilities. Many cattle died and they had to be skinned to save the hides. It was bad — some of them got pretty rank — but an old method was used to lessen that. Wild sage was crushed and rubbed under one's nose to help diminish the smell."

She had pleasure in looking at the native flowers, and related:

> There was a type of gallardia, a bronze plant with a yellow and black center that looks like a cultivated plant. (Whole slopes were covered with them between the Henry and George Hitch homes — six miles apart.)
>
> There were clumps of white marguerites and that prolific gray-green sage. There were sunflowers that seemed to be different by years. There seemed to be a giant type every two years. Yucca cactus has a beautiful flowering bloom — the soapweek bell-like flower — and winecups on a creeping vine that also was called Indian root. These roots tasted like parsnips.
>
> Even the Russian thistle — the tumbleweed — had its good points. It has a nice bloom. In drouth years cattle would eat it early in its growth. When it dries out and blows around it can cause much trouble, piling up in fence rows to catch drifting soil, or snow, but it does have uses.
>
> For that matter, the loco weed had a purple fuchsia flower, as if to correct some of the trouble it could cause in very dry years, which were the only times horses would eat it, with bad results. There were yellow flowers that made carpets on the slopes whose botanical name I never knew, but they were pretty, in what could have been a bleak landscape.

Seeing beauty in nature around her, in contrast to overtones of ugliness that people disappointed in the land saw, was no casual trait of Christine Hitch. She was rather artistic herself. Soon after establishing her home on the Coldwater, she wanted to buy Henry a Christmas present — a special one — a tie stickpin with a small sapphire in it. That was his birthstone.

So she made some velvet cushion covers to sell for $2.50. This took about all the free time she could find amid day and evening household chores. But the decorated covers paid for the stickpin — which remains in the family.

Oil painting became quite the thing around Guymon in the decade after 1910. Mrs. Hitch would drive the twelve miles into Guymon in a buggy to take art lessons from a Mrs. Moore. Marjorie was born May 22, 1911, and afterward accompanied her mother to town.

Neighbors were from 5 to 7 miles away, including Henry's brother, George, and his Uncle Charles Hitch, and the families were close in spirit and affection if not in distance. Mrs. Hitch continued her reminiscences:

It is a bit odd that we enjoyed "camping out" together when we could. By today's standards, we were "camping out" at home. We had wood-burning stoves, water to carry if you needed it because gravity flow off the hill from a windmill tank was only a trickle. There was an outdoor toilet. We used kerosene lamps before the first windchargers were developed to provide electricity through storage batteries.

We would get together and go down by Hitchland and live in the open a few days. I remember setting some sourdough for biscuits to rise in a crock and have it bubble over and cause quite a mess on one trip.

In winter we'd play games and go to socials. There would be some square dancing and a few people — who might know an Irish jig or something — would perform, but some of the older people rather frowned on such goings on.

Mrs. Hitch soon found there was a profit potential in her oil painting. She used terrain with which she was so familiar for background with animals in the foreground. A cattle painting was sold to a Kansas banker in 1912 for $250 — which was more cash than some of the ranch operations produced — long enough for anyone to hold — at times.

In 1912, Henry went to Colorado and bought 300 steers at $41 a head, with an additional $1 each for delivery. There was a time, also, that he went to El Paso, looking for cheap Mexican cattle. There a friend told him there were some good buys at Phoenix, Arizona, so he took the train to Phoenix.

"Those cattle are at Winslow," he was told on arrival after checking the reported source. To get to Winslow he had to ride back to El Paso, then go north to Albuquerque, then west to Winslow. He did buy 300 yearlings for $33 a head. Since they had to be shipped, he ordered some stock cars and loaded them by himself. Perhaps he was trying to save expense of an extra car for it seems that he overloaded a part of the cars. As a result, when steers got down they could not get up and were in danger of being crippled or killed. So Henry, who had started out riding in the caboose according to custom, had to check the steers and spent the night climbing in and out of cars from the top tailing up the downed cattle. From Texhoma, the herds were trailed about thirty miles to the ranch and there were no losses.

"In those days," Henry said once, "you bought 'irons' of

horses or cattle, meaning brands that had been put on with a running iron or stamp iron, but that description has almost been lost. You could rent a horse for $1 a day most anywhere you went and needed one to check out some cattle, but you had to furnish your own saddle and blanket at that price."

Joyce Hitch was born October 12, 1915, and Henry C. Junior, on April 5, 1918. The son was originally called "Lad" by his father and today is generally known by the name of "Ladd."

When Marjorie was about seven, the Hitches and their neighbors saw the need for more school space than the old claim shack. Henry and George Hitch and Tom Stratton helped get a larger building located a few miles from each and Christine Hitch's sister, Irma, was the first teacher. Marjorie even took her first year of high school work at the one-room country school, going into Guymon periodically for examinations for county credit certification. Later, when districts were made up, the children were taken to town in a hired car, then eventually by bus.

Mrs. Henry Hitch says:

> Until World War I, most of the hired men on the ranch were single. Then of course there were few able-bodied single men available, so we had to get married men. To obtain them we had to provide housing. This was automatically turned over to me because Henry had plenty of other things to look after.
>
> We provided housing, basic furniture, curtains and that sort of thing. The employees also received som meat and other items. We had a common garden. There were some fruit trees and wild fruit that could be gathered. Everyone put up a large amount of food in those days.
>
> Most of the employees planted flowers by their houses and in other ways responded by keeping their premises neat and attractive. For a few of them, this might have been better living than they had at the time they were looking for a job. It has been a great pleasure for us to know that most of our key people have been with us from 20 to 30 years.

The three-family activities now for ranch operations, farm operations and cattle feedlots, include 25 houses or mobile homes in 3 locations for employees. The original 8 homes near the ranch headquarters give the cluster of housing the appearance of a small community.

After James Hitch died in 1921, family heirship matters were adjusted so that the Kansas land was taken by other heirs and Henry acquired the Oklahoma property. The Texas land had been sold previously.

With 20,000 acres of grass the ranch was a cow and calf operation until the computer age. There were thousands of acres of farmland that really came to full use later when irrigation became the salvation of the Plains country. There are now 45 deep wells watering 9,000 acres for grain and feedstuffs, some leased but most of it owned.

The Hitch feedlots were the first to use vapor lights at night because cattle, as Henry well knew from his youthful trailing days, like to get up to eat at night — and they are in those lots to eat much and move little.

The Hitch Ranch enterprise is perhaps the largest operation of its type in the Plains region; it is one of the oldest, if not the oldest one-family business operation in modern cattle feeding. The family is financially interested in two other Guymon feedlots with joint capacities in excess of 60,000 head, "Master Feeders" and Texas County Feedlots."

They have other activities, too. The most recent is the creation of Master Commodity, Inc., which has a seat on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, can trade in live cattle futures for their own account as a hedge against falling fed cattle prices, or for other accounts. Also to buy cash grain and other commodities needed in volume for their own or other feedlots. They use *Cattle Fax* and other timely market information on a ticker service.

There are three separate family corporations. None of them own land — the family personally and collectively owns the land — due to Oklahoma's populist oriented state constitution. The operating corporations can lease land, however, so the farm land is leased for raising cash grain and feedstuffs to be sold the feedlots; the ranch corporation leases grass to run young steers and heifers on and to sell to the feedlots. The feedlots buy cattle from the ranch, feed them out 105 to 120 days, and sell them.

The Hitch feedlots handle only family owned cattle. The other two feedlot operations do custom feeding.

All this is a far point in operational method, although little in the passage of time, since James Hitch first drew up his horse on the knoll along the Coldwater and looked into that beautiful valley. Or when the young Henry, who was to manage the operation through its largest growth and through some of its most trying years, proudly mounted his first personally owned saddle at age 14, pointed his horse north toward the Beaver and must have felt: "Today I am a *Man!*"

And from one who knew him for many years and saw him under varied conditions, including a tour of the Soviet Union and Europe when Henry was 72, one can take it that he was indeed a man.

Henry loved people and they in turn respected and loved him. After his passing hardly a day went by but some friend, or perhaps only an acquaintance, would stop a member of the family to recount something he had said to them, or had done for them, that had been a help.

In his optimistic approach to life he was a living example to his children and other loved ones of all that is best in this world. There was never a time so dark, or a business loss so great, in which he could not find something of a positive nature. His faith, tenacity, steadfastness to a cause and innate business ability, carried him through depressions and disastrous reversals that would have caused a man of less stature to give up. Inventory value is little less than fantastic in terms of today — much less James Hitch's mule power days.