Dry Willow Ranch or the Rosenkrans Ranch

Joseph Rosenkrans, the youngest of four children, was born December 22, 1855 in the Onondaga Valley, New York to Reverend Joseph and Eliza Thomson Rosenkrans. He worked in a general store but loved the outdoors, particularly enjoying hunting and fishing.

In 1883 J. H. Rosenkrans and a life-long friend of his, Irving L. Barker, started for Colorado. While in Denver, Joseph met the Young Brothers who owned a sheep ranch they were looking to sell near the Nebraska line. He traveled with them by train to Haigler, NE where they then traversed 12 miles across the hills to the Dry Willow Ranch, a mile from the Arickaree River. It was located next to a tributary of the Arickaree, the Dry Willow Creek—the creek was not actually dry but instead had a plentiful supply of water.

After looking over the property, Rosenkrans decided to buy the ranch. The only experience he had with animals was taking care of his driving horse in New York, but the Young Brothers promised to stay with him while he learned the business. An interesting note: the Young Brothers built the first frame building in the whole of Yuma County on the ranch in 1882. The lumber was purchased from the Young Brothers Lumber Company in Ft. Lupton.

He worked at improving the place, diverting the creek with dams and ditches to water the garden, yard and meadows, where he soon had alfalfa growing, which became a major crop. The Dry Willow Ranch originally had 2,000 acres of deeded land but more was added as it became available.

When Rosenkrans settled in this area, it was a free-range cattle country. The ranch was situated at the junction of Willow Creek and the middle fork of the Republican River and was mostly bottomland. Willow Creek, a never-failing spring creek, ran for ten miles through the ranch and meadowlands. The bottoms were covered with a heavy growth of cottonwood and willow timber and furnished shelter for stocks of wood and timber for domestic uses.

Rosenkrans planted trees and built, first, a sod bunkhouse for the help and then a three-room sod house with a pole and sod roof for his new bride to be, Miriam Robinson. The first barn and corral on the ranch were also sod.

Joseph married Miss Miriam D. Robinson of Middleport, New York on Feb. 21, 1887. She was born on Aug. 24, 1865. Together they lived on this ranch and made it their ranching headquarters, raising a family of three children, daughter Margaret and sons, William T. “Billy” and Robert.
In 1898 they added a second story to part of their home. The home was an outstanding Spanish-Mission type home in a setting of lawn and trees fronting the rugged sandhills covered with sage and redtop grass. The ranch house had a 66-foot front with two wings projecting, and a court in the center. There were ten large rooms with a bathroom, two pantries and modern conveniences. It also featured five outside screened porches, eight outside doors and over 40 windows. In addition, it had two fireplaces and three cisterns of 200 barrels each, giving an ample supply of good drinking and washing water.

Surrounding the buildings was a fine grove of forest trees- elm, ash, maple, basswood, box elder, etc. and a small orchard of 35 apple trees and about 20 plum and cherry trees, Besides these trees there were five acres of planted timber.

Sheep were a major source of income for the Rosenkrans Ranch. The enclosed sheep barn, 32 x 192 feet, featured a skylight and was piped with running water. There was also a sheep shed 28 x 200 feet. Corrals with wood from New York were fitted for feeding 5,000 sheep for market, piped with frost proof pipe and hydrants and watered by aid of three windmills and large tanks.
As previously mentioned, Mr. Barker met up with Rosenkrans in Denver and came to his ranch in north-eastern Colorado. For nine months, Irving Barker worked on the ranch but he decided that he would go into the mountains again. He went to Denver and studied mining in the School of Mines at Golden getting a civil engineering degree. Thereafter he traveled around the mountains until 1893.

In 1894 Barker was appointed foreman of the Rosenkrans ranch, due to the fact that Mr. Rosenkrans' children were old enough to start school and he wanted them to be educated in the east. For over 20 years, Barker practically took charge and ran the ranch as he desired since Rosenkrans was there only half the time.

The Rosenkrans aided by Barker made many improvements to their ranch over the years. Three dams and a large reservoir were constructed about a mile west of the Ranch headquarters on the Dry Willow. These dams had a canal system as well as a pipeline to the house and barns with three cisterns. The canals supplied a steady source of irrigation for the hay fields and other crops grown on the ranch.

Three hundred acres of the ranch were covered by alfalfa meadows. During the season of 1910, 100 acres of this alfalfa yielded $5,600 worth of seed besides several tons of hay per acre. Hay yielded around four to seven tons and three to ten bushels of seed per acre were worth $9.00 per bushel at that time. Alfalfa hay sold for $8 to $10 per ton. The land was also good for raising corn, potatoes and sugar beets.

They hired around 20 ranch hands and used the old frame building for a bunkhouse. Most of the men worked during the week, staying at the ranch and went home on weekends.

There was a large building for a feed mill, blacksmith shop, tool house, cow house, etc. There was also a stable and granary 32 x 64 feet. The stable had room for 24 horses and also a box stall and a large cattle shed.
Joseph and Miriam Rosenkrans continued for many years building an outstanding ranch and the home they built there became a cultural and social center for much of the community. It was common for them to host dances on the upstairs floor. Those attending stayed the night and enjoyed breakfast with the Rosenkrans.

In the early 1920s they moved to San Antonio to be near their daughter. Their son William took over the ranch. William, or Billy as he was called, was born to Joseph and Miriam Rosenkrans at the ranch on May 25, 1890. He was their second child, a daughter Margaret having been born April 13, 1889. He spent the early years of his life on the ranch near where Dry Willow Creek and the Arickaree River meet.

About 1903 he did move back to New York with his parents for a time to take care of his grandmother Eliza, his father's mother. While in New York, the children attended the Onondaga Academy where his father had gone to school. They returned to Wray around 1910.

One fall, William and his sister Margaret were invited to the annual Teachers' Reception where he met a lovely teacher named Violet. William married Violetta “Violet” Marie Ridler in 1915 and they lived on the ranch for several years. Violet was born September 27, 1883 in Indiana and came to Colorado with her parents in 1908. She taught school in the country and in Wray and served one term as County Superintendent in 1913 and 1914. William and Violet had one son, Robert and one daughter, Dorothy. Life on the ranch continued to be both rewarding and challenging at the same time.

In 1928 a torrential flood broke the dams. The valley was cut in many places by deep arroyos which, when it rained, did not soak up the water and let it run down into the canyon. Unfortunately, the dams were improperly constructed in that they did not have adequate flood control and when a large rain poured water into the valley, it put too much pressure on the embankment. With the loss of property caused by the floodwaters and the depression of farm price during the Great Depression, the ranch was foreclosed upon and sold in 1937.

William and Violet moved into Wray where the children attended high school. Violet taught in Laird and Wray and wherever a substitute was needed, until her retirement. William worked for the State Employment Service, the State Road Department and the Conrad Lumber Company. Later he was County Treasurer for 16 years. The William Rosenkrans were long standing members of the First United Presbyterian Church in Wray. Violet was one of the charter members of PEO, Chapter AA organized on January 20, 1915.

Sources: Sutton's Southwest Nebraska & Republican River Tributaries by E. S. Sutton; The Frontier Legion by L. Ray Hersey; Wray, Colorado Centennial Book; East Yuma County History Book; information and pictures from Mark Jones including three sale flyers advertising the ranch-"J. H. Rosenkrans' Willow Creek Ranches, Description of J. H. Rosenkrans' Willow Creek Ranch, approximately 1918, Post office Laird, Colorado and J. H. Rosenkrans' Willow Creek Ranches, the Outlying Lands; from the Wray Gazette, 1916.