

## Ray Hunkins

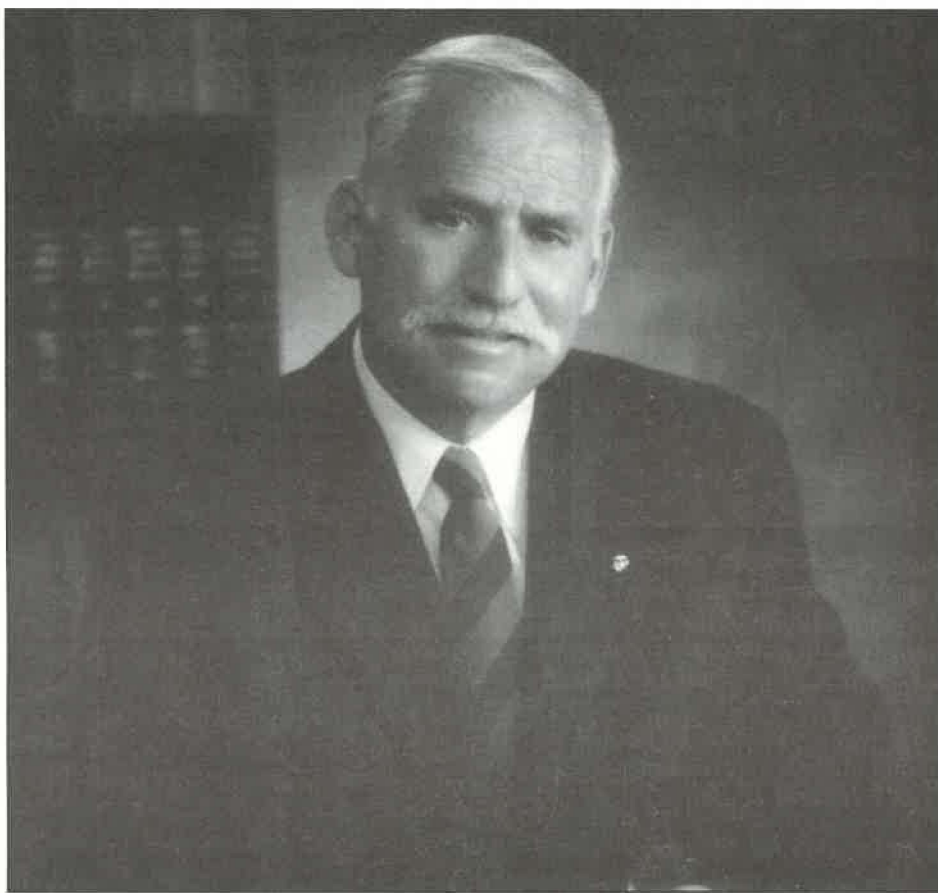
by Suzanne B. Bopp  
Alumnews editor

**E**very now and then, you might see Ray Hunkins' byline on an essay in a newspaper. He spends a lot of time thinking about things that have an effect on our society, and, when he has time, he likes to write down his thoughts. He submitted his first essay to the Casper Star during his gubernatorial campaign, and was surprised to find they ran it. Though he enjoys doing this, lately he hasn't had much opportunity. Other things tug at his time; there are always cows to be moved and lawsuits to be tried.

In the early years of his life, Hunkins was raised by his grandparents. His father was in the Army, living either overseas or on an Army base; his grandparents owned ranches around the Southwest - more accommodating places for a boy to grow up. Those circumstances taught him early on what he wanted his future to look like. "I wanted to be part of the ranch. That was my overwhelming desire from the time I was a little kid," he says. "Unfortunately, the family ranch wasn't big enough to support more than one family. My mother convinced me I'd be better off to make a decent living and buy my own ranch."

When his grandparents moved to Montana in 1952 to ranch there, Hunkins moved with them. He graduated from high school in Billings. On his 17th birthday, he enlisted in the Marine reserves and went on active duty. He served four years in the reserves, doing "nothing spectacular," a little bit late for the Korean War, a little early for the Vietnam War. With the promise of a football scholarship at the University of Montana, that's where he headed to start college. It was about that time that the Skyline Conference broke up, and Montana dropped down a notch in the level of play (at the same time that UW rose a level). Hunkins played there for a couple of years before the big change happened, while he studied political science and economics.

Still, he wasn't quite sure where those majors were taking him. "I was interested in having a good time. I was going from Saturday to Saturday," he says. He started to change his



Ray Hunkins (BSL '67, JD '68)

thinking partway through his degree. "I got interested in education at Montana. I can remember an English literature professor that touched my intellect and gave me a lot of incentive. There was a vast difference in my grades before and after that class - what a profound effect a good teacher can have on a youngster."

He spent four years at Montana but hadn't completed a degree when he took a job as the national field secretary for Phi Delta Theta, of which he'd been the president. They needed someone to advise chapters on their performance and help with their problems. "They thought an ex-Marine could straighten them out," he says.

Around this time, Hunkins struck upon the idea of law school. "I knew I had to find something to do," he says. "There's not a great demand for political scientists, and if you wanted to make use of economics, you pretty much had to be in an academic setting. I wanted to get on with acquiring my ranch." One of the law schools that offered him a scholarship was UW. "I had developed respect for Wyoming when we played them every fall in Billings. I wanted to be a part of that."

Once in Laramie, Hunkins buckled down. He finished his undergraduate degree and completed a law degree. He worked for Lloyd Eaton as counselor for the football team and advisor and academic counselor to Phi Delta Theta. Summers he worked

as deputy sheriff for Albany County and for the National Park Service.

After graduation, he had to make a choice. "With the goal of getting back into the livestock business, I picked the smallest town that had a job opening where I could work for myself," he says. That was Wheatland, and today he has been at the firm he chose for 35 years. It's been exactly what he hoped for. "I wanted to be a small town lawyer, and I did what small town lawyers do - close real estate transactions, go to court once in a while. I always had a talent for the courtroom. I like the competitive nature of it." He successfully defended some first-degree murder cases early on. "Then Wyoming went through a big bust; wealthy folks quit shooting each other, so I had to find something else. A construction company asked me to represent them in a small claim. Within a year, I was doing all their claim work, heading up a team of lawyers that prosecuted claims." His special emphasis became construction contract consultation and commercial litigation.

Hunkins has remained active with UW, where he had met his future wife, a Tri Delt and a cheerleader, Debbie McBride (BA '77, Education). He met her through his ties with the football team, though he associated with cheerleaders "by choice," he says. One year he took up a collection to fly the cheerleaders to El Paso for a game when they didn't have enough money to go. "We won that game,

and that was the season we ended up at the Sugar Bowl." Hunkins himself didn't have any money to go to the Sugar Bowl. This was in the day when women wore gold chrysanthemums to football games, so he contracted with a flower shop at the Connor Hotel and ordered thousands of mums. Hunkins took his mums to New Orleans to sell them at the big game. "But the day of the game it was raining. I was on the brink of financial disaster," he recalls. "I saw my financial security was winging away across the Gulf of Mexico." He managed to sell enough flowers to pay for his trip.

Similar perseverance allowed him to obtain his own ranch, as his mother suggested. He started with a small place and kept trading up until he was able to buy the ranch he lives on today, 27 miles west of Wheatland, where he runs a commercial cattle operation. It's a family operation, and his children help when they can. His oldest daughter, Amanda, practices law with him. His son, Blake, is the principal of Snowy Range Academy; Ashley works for a pharmaceutical company in Casper. All graduated from UW. He says being their father is his greatest achievement.

He is also proud of his efforts, and grateful for his opportunities, in the Republican gubernatorial primary in 2002. "I always had an interest in public policy matters, how we make our society better so more people have more opportunities," he says. "I wanted to have a positive effect, so I thought I'd run. It was a very positive experience. I saw a lot of the state and learned a lot about problems and got to think about solutions. We ended up finishing second in the Republican primary in a field of five, so I wasn't successful, but I have no regrets that I tried."

Hunkins says he's not thinking about another run. "If God wants me to do it, he'll give me a signal," he says. As part of Jones, Jones, Vines and Hunkins Law Firm, he says, "I think, in some respects, what I do is service of another form. That fact that I am an attorney gives me a license to help people; I can pick and choose between the causes and organizations I want to support."

That remains the foundation of his plans for the future, he says. "I'm just doing what I've been doing for a long time: punching cows, trying lawsuits, looking for opportunities to help Wyoming and my community." ❧

*The UW Distinguished Alumni Award recognizes people who have distinguished themselves in their profession or career.*