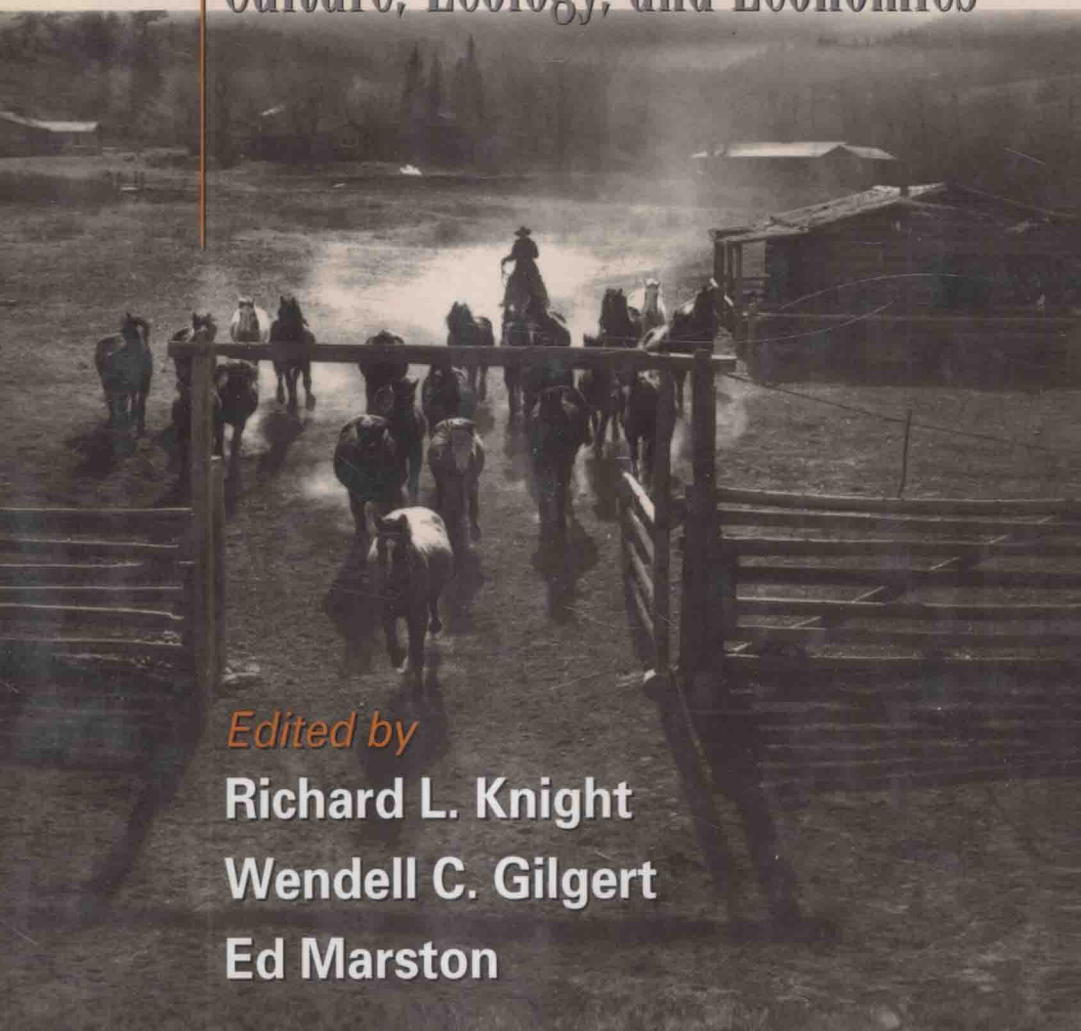


Ranching West of the 100th Meridian

Culture, Ecology, and Economics



Edited by

Richard L. Knight

Wendell C. Gilgert

Ed Marston

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| Preface

Our book has three parents. It has an academic parent who cares about the West's principal plant communities—grasses and shrubs—and the fact that their main use is livestock grazing. It has a land-use parent who cares about the increasing economic value of the grasslands and associated water and the fact that ranches are being converted to subdivisions and commercial use at an alarming rate—in Colorado alone we see the equivalent acreage of Rocky Mountain National Park go out of farm and ranching each year and reappear as prairie castles, seasonally occupied condos, and a vast array of commercial developments. And it has a moral parent who values ranching as one of the few western economies that approaches sustainability and has multigenerational ties to the land. Ranching has persevered for the last four hundred years, going back to Juan de Oñate and his *entrada* of *pobladores* who settled at the confluence of the Rio Chama and the Rio Grande in 1598. Beaver trappers, buffalo hunters, loggers, miners, water developers, and recreationists cannot make that claim. Indeed, the length of time that husbanding livestock has been practiced in the West makes it one of our most intact cultures and allows it to stake out the terrain covered under the rubric of sustainable land use. Ranching—except for the halcyon days of the late 1800s—has always existed on the economic margins. Sustainability acknowledges both intergenerational use of land and modest economic returns. Therefore, ranchers may have something to teach us regarding how the West can be used in a sustainable fashion.

This book is also intended to repay part of the debt we owe the many

ranch families who have enriched and educated our lives. Whether trailing cows in summer to distant mountain ranges, sitting in their kitchens and hearing the retelling of stories that stitch together lives that span up to nine generations, or simply being impressed with their understanding of animals, grass, water, terrain, and tools, we have seldom encountered Americans who have such a strong sense of family and of belonging to a place. We wonder what our region would be like if other westerners accepted ranchers into their lives as readily as ranch families welcomed us into theirs . . .

On another level, this book joins the ever-widening effort to promote conversations over the role of ranching in the West. Because our contributors believe that ranching can be more ecologically sustainable, more economically viable, and more culturally robust, we share a hope that they the essayists and you the reader may help speed the transition to a ranching tradition that is better than before. We did not invite writers who have no room for livestock in their New West. Nor did we invite those who have no room for public lands because of their private-property rights hysteria. Our contributors are from the radical center—they prize a mix of people with long-term tenure on the land, healthy grasslands and streams, and a public/private blend of lands. The goal of this book is to examine family operations whose thinking and working are linked to the land through husbandry and stewardship. We hope that these poems and essays help to revive a conservation attitude that has been withering for fifty years or more. Environmentalists have been attacking ranching from a perspective detached from the land; conservatives have been striking out in anger at anything that hints of cooperation and collectivism. In response, ranchers have been wondering why no one seems to see that they not only produce food that we need but also guard open space that we covet.

If the conversations offered here are reasonable and address our ecological commitment to the land, our cultural commitment to American society, and the economic role ranching plays in sustainable food production and land conservation, then perhaps this book will contribute usefully to the ongoing debate on the future of the New West. These essayists explore how the ranching culture can do these

things better. We should not shrink from the fact that ranching, done wrong, has the capacity to hurt the land. But if done right, it has the power to restore ecological integrity to western lands that have been neglected too long.

| Acknowledgments

This book was possible due to the support of many individuals and organizations. We most heartily thank Dave Armstrong, John Baden, Tom Bartlett, Ben Brown, James Brown, Fred Bryant, Indy Burke, Stephanie Gripne, Rod Heitschmidt, Glenda Humiston, William Lauenroth, Jeremy Maestas, Bill McDonald, Curt Meine, John Mitchell, Eric Odell, Pat and Sharon O'Toole, Bernard Rollin, Bruce Runnels, Andrew Rush, Lynne Sherrod, Larry Van Tassell, Jack Ward Thomas, and Allen Torell. Through their actions and intellectual energy they are ensuring that the theory and practice of ranching will be more culturally robust, ecologically sustainable, and economically viable in the New West.

Many organizations and agencies have supported our work: the Wildlife Habitat Management Institute of the Natural Resources Conservation Service; the Grazing Lands Technology Institute of the Natural Resources Conservation Service; the Gallatin Writers of Bozeman, Montana; the American Farmland Trust; the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; the Agricultural Research Service; the Animas Foundation; the Colorado State University Agricultural Experiment Station; the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute; the Western Center for Integrated Resource Management at Colorado State University; *High Country News*; the Central Colorado Educational Endowment; and the Department of Fishery and Wildlife Biology at Colorado State University. The American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie and Jack and Lili Turnell graciously made available the remarkable photographs of the late Charles Belden of the Pitchfork Ranch, Wyoming.

It is a privilege to acknowledge our long-term relationship with Barbara Dean and Barbara Youngblood of the Covelo, California, office of Island Press. By their loyalty, good cheer, and distinguished scholarship they deserve more than our friendship. If ever two angels touched the ground, Barbara and Barbara are they! Don Yoder as copyeditor and Jennifer Alt and J. Randall Baldini as production editors are sincerely thanked for their attention to detail and loving diligence.

RLK owes a debt to Stan and Junior (Ernest) Berg, ranchers from the Okanogan Highlands of Washington who befriended him when he first came West. They shared with him their lives of living simply, with love enough for the land and for their neighbors. It was then that he began to see how ranching blended human and natural communities, a working recipe for long-term sustainability. Catherine and Evan Roberts, neighbors in Livermore, Colorado, are also remembered as confidants and heroes. They believe people fit into one of two categories: “takers” or “caretakers.” Through their commitment to land health, they clearly belong to the latter. Special thanks also to George and Nancy Wallace, Ted and Cheryl Swanson, and Al and Virginia Johnson, neighbors in the Livermore Valley and Buckeye country north of Fort Collins, for days “ahorseback” moving cows and evenings around campfires talking about land and community health. WG thanks ranchers in the Upper Stony Creek watershed in northern California for teaching him that long-term and reasoned change is incremental. A debt of gratitude also to Wayne Elmore, John Buckhouse, Doc and Connie Hatfield, and the rest of the Oregon Traveling Riparian Show, for bringing a message of hope to those same ranchers, and to Jack and Jeff Somerville of the 4-J Ranch for hearing the message and applying it on the ground. EM thanks Doc and Connie Hatfield, for showing him that the West is composed of people and families who care for its human and natural communities, and Sid Goodloe for spending many hours explaining how he brought his New Mexico ranch back to life. And, finally, EM thanks the readers of *High Country News* for supporting his work for going on twenty years.

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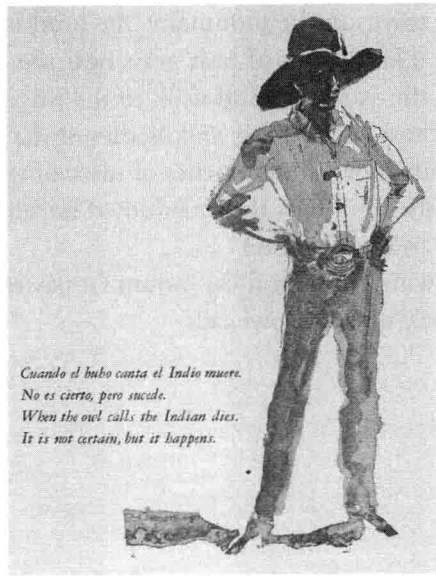
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Rafael Quijada Sierra Madre Sonora Mexico

DRUMMOND HADLEY

I go now to see my cuñada la que me repechó
She who gave me her breast when my father was killed
When my mother went to live with another man
Now my cuñada is dying she is not sick but only old
When she goes we will place her body in a sack
To bury her in the ground
A sack or the mountain wind waits for me as well
Even as I climb the steep cedar breaks
I feel calambres in my legs
Calambres are the pains when one walks
When the nerves in the legs tighten
I grow down and old like the tail of the cow
Someday I will not be able to go to find work
From the borderline as far as Pueblo Colorado
When that time comes I will need a patron
A boss who will not try only to ganar
To win all he is able from my back and my hands

I do not like the towns in the mountains the head is clear
If I could stay in a jacal a hut of bear grass near the canyon spring
I would wake in the mornings and walk to the ridgeline
To look toward those blue valleys and cradles of the Sierra Madre
There I would remember those touches of my women
The long circles the roundups the rock footed horses I'd ridden
There I would wait to drift again
With the spring wind through these mountain passes
There I would wait until the owl calls

Chapter 1

Ranching: An Old Way of Life in the New West

PAUL F. STARRS

For decades proposals have been floated to arrest grazing on federal lands. And today, in our interesting times, arguments are actively being made—consider one published quotation—to “remove livestock from public lands to conserve native biodiversity.”¹ Although this statement invokes an epic ecological simple-mindedness that only a law professor could muster, the spirit is as undeniably and quixotically valiant as the conservation biology is primitive. In fact there is a distinguished tradition of ganging up on the livestock industry (as a structural entity), on cattle and sheep (as agents of change), on grazing (as a practice), and on livestock ranchers (as convenient and visible foils). All bear examining.

The theme isn't close to new. The bumper sticker campaigns of the 1990s exhorted “Cattle Free by '93,” “Out the Door by '94,” “Boycott Public Lands Beef.” An entire catalog would take up column-feet of text. Still easily available are volumes with titles as carefully charged with inflammatory power as habanero chile bins at a Tucson farmer's market: *Sacred Cows at the Public Trough*, *Waste of the West*, *Beyond Beef*. None of them (surprise!) is by an ecologist. In Elko, Nevada, a couple of years ago—a stronghold of ranching and wildlife and diverse federal lands if ever there was one—a billboard was installed at the southern end of town where it loomed, unsubtly, over every citizen's entry and exit. “Our public lands, ground into hamburger,” it read. Studiously (and unchar-

acteristically), the Shovel Brigade and the Wise Users ignored it. There is nonetheless a great deal of heat generated on the theme of public lands grazing—an anger and skepticism that extends to ranching generally in the American West, whether it involves public lands or not. Vast eddies of hot rhetoric swirl about this topic, which insists on the removal of livestock, and so, tacitly, livestock ranchers, from the use of western public lands. Opening up on the subject can get you into at least a shouting match in any bar in the New West. Certainly it merits discussion.

Even more insidious today is the percolation of that benevolent pro-wilderness, antihuman sensibility steeped into those of us who grew up in the 1970s, started college in the 1980s, and graduated to become observers and students of the public domain in the 1990s. We watched, agape and eventually aghast, as the sides spread wide apart, ever intransigent, often absurd in their militancy (or militant in their absurdity?). To use or not to use: This was the polarization betwixt proponents and opponents of grazing. There are voices in between, but few. The debate, Manichean in philosophical terms, is polarized black versus white and lodged against the detents of reason. The splits are extreme: full use or none, wild or domestic, city slickers or rural rubes, federal or private, small or big, endangered species or livestock. In these terms, the hand dealt is typically all-cows or no-cows. But this doesn't need to be so—as a number of entirely reasonable conservation and biodiversity groups have made clear by meeting ranchers and other western interest groups more than halfway. Innovations are happening in support of not just biodiversity but also working landscapes and a central terrain of shared use and purpose. The question is: How are these innovations being recorded, acknowledged, tested for results, and, if good, passed forward?

There are intriguing programs designed to use the stewardship practices of ranchers—and the actions of grazing animals, and the habitat they use, for part or all of the year—for larger aims. These aims may be personal goals, open-space goals, ecological goals, watershed goals, fuel-hazard-reduction goals, economic goals, community goals, government goals. But they flow in an atmosphere that still includes a proportion of cow haters. And change is occurring with sufficient speed on the ground—let a thousand ranchettes blossom from one historic ranch property—that this is no time to dither.

Ranching's very practice, formation, and history make for an

extraordinarily multicultural and diverse way of life that is rife with harsh compromises and yields sometimes opulent, sometimes disappointing, results. In moving away, we break clear to a suitable viewpoint; fog lifts. Gaining a sight line is, in no small degree, what this essay is about.

RANCH FITS AND STARTS

Ranching in the United States is a singular mix of the resolutely practical and time-honored as well as features that are dreamlike and elusive, feats of imagery and the fantastic and the romantic. The product is a distinctive landscape, extensive in its territory, yet often subtle, or at least remote, in its humanized features. The ranching landscape is a subject of almost infinite complexity about which much has already been written.² But the essence of twenty-first-century ranching—and the cowboy, and the ranch economy, and the landscape of the ranch—is complicated adaptation. And that is nothing new. It's been so for a century and a half, maybe even five hundred years, since cattle and the elements of ranching practice were brought to the New World in Columbus' second expedition in 1493. That's a long tradition, in which change is about the only expected and standard rule, with challenge a close second to change as agent and force. It's odd that a lifeway whose supporters are so given to espousing tradition is, in fact, completely dependent on tacking before countervailing political, ecological, and economic winds. Ranchers tend, pretty much of necessity, to be ultimate pragmatists. It is their supporters who wear the big hats, never having choused a cow, and it is often rancher-wannabes who prove notoriously inflexible, hidebound, and doctrinaire. Because ranching requires access to so much land and because its incomes are at best small, ranching has rarely had a strong built-in economic constituency in places of power. Instead ranchers have through the years had to make cultural converts. And they continue having to do so, with surprising and ongoing success.

The roots of ranching in the American West are stunningly ancient, extending back to practice in the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, and the Mediterranean realm. But ranching is also the most swiftly adapting and changing land use in the West—largely because it has to be (Figure 1.1). There is little alternative. Ranch land and public lands are under unceasing pressure—in the past from farmers and homesteaders and dis-

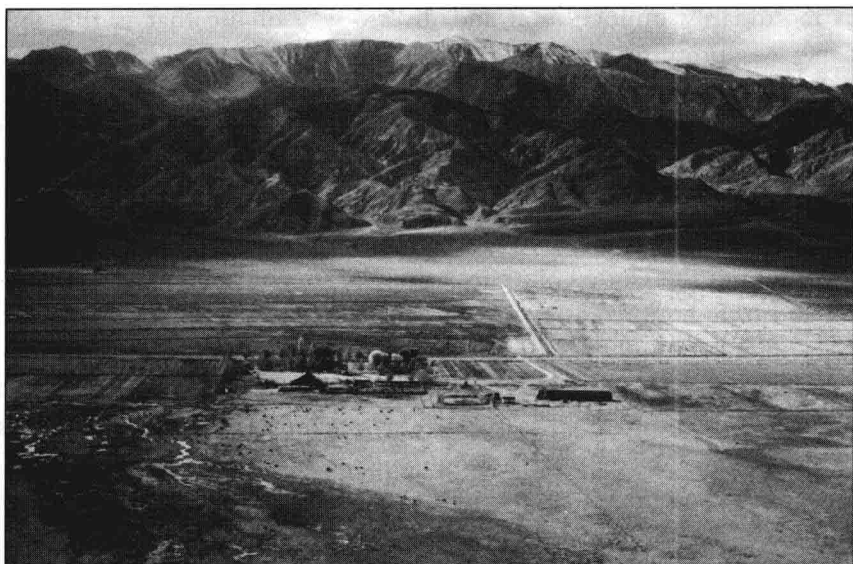


FIGURE 1.1. The ranch in the American West routinely embodies complex foreground/background relationships, evident in this 1950s view of the Bar 99 Ranch in Fish Lake Valley, Nevada. The ranch fields are in the foreground: the irrigated pastures surrounding the ranch buildings. In the middle distance are dry fields and a considerable reach of BLM land grazed as a lease. And in the distance are the White Mountains (including White Mountain Peak, 14,242 feet), where ranch cattle would graze in the early summer and nearly into the fall on Forest Service (USDA) land. The ranch is dependent on many parts, therefore, none easily controlled—“a piece of the continent, a part of the whole,” as John Donne put it. (Photograph from Bar 99 Ranch, Nevada, by Paul F. Starrs)

tant elected representatives, today from environmentalists, real estate developers, politicians and planners, and sundry others. And ranchers respond to these challenges, continuing a practice of improvisation and circumstantial change that keeps ranching, in all its variations, very much among the contending forces of the New West.³

It does not hurt that almost everyone is in some way enchanted by the lifestyle (though there are violent contrarians). Ranching has forever involved people of varied ethnicity, race, income, and gender. To each one's own: The newly rich flock to trophy ranches in Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, and slap down conservation easements and land trusts and buffalo herds that are profoundly of