A Story of People and Landscapes in Transition
The Uncompahgre Plateau
1880 to the Present
A Story of People and Landscapes in Transition

The Uncompahgre Plateau 1880 to the Present
This is a story of a relatively small place in western Colorado, a plateau about seventy miles long by thirty miles wide, a distant horizon of trees, punctuated by rock canyons, and an occasional gravel road — the Uncompahgre. Its importance, however, should not be measured merely by its physical size alone, but by the knowledge and memories people have to share about how they made a place for themselves and their way of life on the Uncompahgre Plateau. Theirs is a history that truly lives today.

The memories held in the places on the Uncompahgre Plateau can be traced back in time for over two centuries, at least to 1776 in recorded time, and well prior to then in the native Ute landscape. The meanings of these memories, running from social, historical, and cultural to economic, all revolve around the land in some way. For it is the land around which numerous communities have grown that is the center of this story.

From the valleys to the east, south, and west, pioneers, freighters, timber men, ranchers, dam builders, along with modern day community members, have been drawn to the Uncompahgre Plateau. They have come to this landscape because of its resources, fertility, and beauty. From Whitewater on the northeast side to Delta, Montrose and Ridgeway along the Uncompahgre and Gunnison rivers framing its eastern edge, and from the Dallas Divide skirting past the southwest corner back northward through Norwood, Nucla, Naturita, Uravan, and Gateway, people have established connections to the Uncompahgre. These people have made a life hauling supplies, building roads and
cow camps, moving cattle to railheads, cutting timber, growing apples, and raising their families.

Imagine a central, oval-shaped mountain around which a dozen or more communities have been arranged. As history moves from exploration to settlement and to building schools and railroads, people move back and forth from school in town in the fall and winter, following older paths, making new roads, turning with the cycles of the seasons, year upon year.

Imagine small neighborhoods of ranchers gathering in spots — on Roubideau Creek, in Horsefly Valley, on the top of Columbine Pass — to cook, hunt, roundup the cattle, or to build a sawmill, or look across the surrounding valleys to the Grand Mesa.

After a sometimes-brief reconnaissance, family roots have been put down where water, wood, and pasture are available. At first, folks come by foot or horseback, but then wagon roads are made, eventually the railroad arrives, and better roads and highways are constructed. Couples get married, children are born, schools are built, and businesses are opened to support the pioneers. At the center of the gatherings is the Plateau, like a campfire on a fall evening around which we might huddle for heat.

The communities grow and change over the decades along with the families. Growing or sometimes declining, they are alternately tied to the tenuous availability of water, discoveries of precious metals, the location of modern road building, and economic ups and downs, but are almost always connected to the fragility, beauty, and cycles of the natural landscape.

The record of this turning of the wheel of history and nature can be traced to 1776 when the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition traversed the region, touching the Plateau on its southern tip. (A short account of the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition is available in an unpublished history of the Horsefly Valley, Bill Hofmann, circa 1993.) But surely it has preceded that date by many hundreds of years by much earlier inhabitants, whom we have come to know as the Utes or Nuutsiyu (The Ute People). (See Burns and Dees, 2004, “The Ute Relationships to the Lands of West Central Colorado” prepared for the GMUG).

Besides the land, with its many surrounding and encompassing socio-economic and cultural relationships, the other dominant theme of this story is change, especially what we might think of as societal change. To a degree, the land, the mountains, the trees and the grasses and animals have changed. Although one can see and understand that the trees might be denser, the water might follow along a somewhat different course, and there are more elk, the most dramatic change has occurred in the ways people live and in how they arrange themselves on the landscape. As we look back over the past 125 years of history, it is this process of social change that draws us most deeply into the story.

As we attend carefully to these stories of change, we might want them to give us answers about the future. In reality, they may really give us more questions.

The process of change may ask us to think about why this place, the Uncompahgre Plateau, was so important in 1776, 1878, or 1942 that people would travel from England, Nova Scotia or Illinois to make a home. Why were pioneers drawn here, and how did they figure out ways to inhabit these valleys and plateaus, settle, and stay when they were not really prepared or not prospering all that much? In what ways did they spread themselves out over the landscape, interact among themselves to form partnerships and communities? What are the important legacies of the past 125 years? How are they to be retained? Perhaps most important, what might occur if these legacies would somehow be further lost?

When you talk to people around and on the Plateau about their place and memories, what most often comes across is their own personal sense of loss. There is a feeling that something critical about the place and the people has already been lost or is slipping away. For most, this sense of losing something important has created a deepened feeling of concern, In being concerned, people share a mixture of anxiety about their losses, tempered with pride about their traditions, accomplishments, and their rich heritage of engagement with the land, with the Uncompahgre. Throughout the story of each family and of the Uncompahgre as a whole, there is this precarious balance of concern over losses, and abiding pride in one’s sorely won heritage.

One can also get the sense that local folks believe that their families, the cowboys, and the ranching way of life are not valued as they were before. Some believe that the basic or core values of work, attachment to the land, direct talk, and action are being ignored or overwhelmed by change. We can ask why? How could this happen to a hard working, enterprising group of folks?

We sometimes search for answers in strange places. We look
for answers in science, in education, and even build visions of the future we desire. But in the final analysis, it is perhaps the worthiness of the questions that the Uncompahgre enables us to ask that will best inform and strengthen individual and communal thoughts and hopes for the next 100 years. The way we choose to communally embrace this wide array of age-old ties to the land may be the best predictor of our future.

In the first decade of the new millennium, growth is occurring rapidly around the edges of the Uncompahgre Plateau, along the San Miguel, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison river valleys, from Grand Junction south to Telluride. The citizens of these communities are planning their futures: how they subdivide the land, build new schools and hospitals, remain safe on the highways, and retain a sense of the rural life that underpins the authentic quality of this region. Much of the value, beauty, and health of this landscape can be traced back to the essential hopes and dreams of the early settlers who came by wagon, brought their families from very different cultures, and carved a productive way of life out of the rich natural environment of the Uncompahgre country.

Today, the legacies of the past century of ranching life are still visible, especially in the green pasture lands in the valleys surrounding the Uncompahgre Plateau. In recent decades though, the quantity of the base ranch property, which is tied directly to the public land allotments for grazing on the UP, has declined by approximate 30%. (American Farmland Trust study, 2003.)

In 2004, the public land managers of the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests, now under a unified management system operated out of Delta, Colorado, are preparing a revision to their forest management plan. These plans give guidance to the uses of over three million acres of public lands and are expected to be revised approximately every fifteen years. This process offers a unique opportunity to relate these future forest land uses to the traditions and valleys of the community. In this case, many of them are intertwined with approximately 125 years of ranching and related agricultural practices.

The stories in this account can perhaps enable us to better examine the relationships and interactions of the surrounding national forest lands with a portion of the community that still is an important part of the living history of this region. While we may believe, on a common sense basis, that we more or less understand the relevance of the public lands to the growing population and communities of the region, this is an opportunity to look a bit deeper at the living character of the ranching heritage of the Uncompahgre Plateau.

Stories are another way of knowing, at once more real and revealing, grounded in the true lives of people from pioneer days to the present. Their fundamental and ordinary ability to reveal “the lived experience and the ordinary life” makes them invaluable as portals to understanding, to lessons learned about a land-based culture formed for over a century by a uniquely western landscape. Stories provide a connectedness from “back then” to the “here and now.” They are a bridge to an important way of knowing, which should be seamlessly considered along with all the forms of rational or scientific knowledge, if we are to have a sound and more complete sense of the human and natural environments around us.

True, the people’s stories tell of a sense of loss. They definitely see the large changes that surround their lives, especially the ones that have begun to alter the age-old landscapes. Yes, there is a feeling of “being undervalued”. But these themes do not tell the whole story, perhaps not even the main story. At the deep center remains an abiding sense of hope, a belief that it is not too late to see and understand important values. It is not too late to recognize who has lived here, to witness the marks they have made, and to understand what the land has meant, in ways that will protect a century of social investment in this place. This cannot happen unless we, along with those who have told these stories, see that a living history is still available to us. And furthermore, that it deserves protection and care as do the trees, the rivers and the mountains, so intertwined is their health and existence in an interdependent, social, and physical world.

As this history is revealed, a number of reflections and considerations will be presented. These are intended as a means of raising a question, or drawing our attention to values that remain alive in the present ways of life, although they may have been unnoticed as the wheel of history pulls us ever rapidly forward. This is a chance to pause and reflect on how and where that wheel is turning and what of our living history we might choose to protect and preserve. Through the reflections we will emphasize the messages that the stories inherently reveal. Through the considerations we will un-
derscore some principles to be mindful of as we approach what lies before us.

The UP area encompasses 2,290 square miles. Approximately 75% of the project area is public land. The USFS manages 545,907 acres (37%), BLM manages 545,280 acres (37%), and the State of Colorado manages 8,689 acres (<1%) (Appendix 1, Map B). Federal land administration on the Plateau is shared among three USFS Ranger Districts and two BLM field offices. State lands are administered by the Colorado State Land Board and Colorado Division of Wildlife. Private lands account for 365,547 acres (25%) and are located primarily in or near the Uncompahgre Valley. The UP area is divided among five counties (Delta, Mesa, Montrose, Ouray, San Miguel).

When looking at a satellite image of the Colorado Plateau Geographic Province, the Uncompahgre Plateau is one of the major geologic uplift formations in the region. The Plateau rises from 4600' at Gateway to over 10,300' at the top of Horsefly Peak. The summit is relatively flat with an average elevation of 9,500' that runs southeast to northwest. The summit drops off quickly on the west side and more gradually slopes downward on the east side. The Plateau is incised by many deep canyons separated by relatively flat mesas that generally run perpendicular to the summit. Large canyons such as Big Red, Tabeguache, Spring Creek, Roubideau, Escalante, Big Dominquez, and Unaweep expose numerous geologic layers of Precambrian granite, Morrison and Dakota sandstones, and Mancos shale. The Plateau watersheds include four major drainages of the Colorado River (Dolores, Gunnison, San Miguel and Uncompahgre Rivers) The project area is divided into 20 principal watersheds. .
The story starts in a place, an unusual geological and geographic plateau. This uniqueness lies at the foundation of the sort of human endeavors and communities that have formed around a mountainous crest, which is “so long it looks low,” and so “straight it looks smooth.”

Actually the Uncompahgre is more than a mountain, it is a mountain range — a great sky-long roller-wave crest, is strata bending up from under the Colorado River near Grand Junction, towering into the cliffs of the Colorado National Monument; running up in a long slant for ninety crow-flight miles southeastward, butting against the San Juan Range where it spurts up in snowy peaks like a surf wave straddling a rock…

The Uncompahgre Plateau rims out almost two miles above sea level and one mile above the wide valleys that parallel it on either side. Big as it is, the plateau is only the stump of a much longer, higher, older range. What geologists call the Uncompahgre Uplift extended heaven-high from somewhere around Vernal, Utah down to Farmington, New Mexico, several hundred miles to the southeast…

The Uncompahgre is so long it looks low….The Uncompahgre is so straight along the top it looks smooth, but that blue chalk line across the sky is no indication of the rough terrain on either side…

The mountain slants eastward from the crest like the back of a surf wave, streaked with a riptide of canyons running one way as if a giant comb had been raked down the slope, deep, and crooked…. (Muriel Marshall, Uncompahgre, pp.15,17.)
And the plateau....in some ways when you look at the Plateau from here in the valley, it’s not too imposing. It’s just kind of a big long skyline. It’s a big ridgeline. It doesn’t have any dramatic jagged peaks or anything like that. But the thing that’s impressive about that plateau is in many places it’s almost as high in elevation as the Grand Mesa. It just takes a long time to get there. There are so many unique features about that plateau. It’s one of the few places in the national forest system that has a road right down the top of it It’s one of the few places I know where there are springs almost at the top of the ridge. And it’s like that all the way down the plateau. Unaweep Canyon is the only canyon in the world that has two outlets, only one in the world. That’s where it got its name. It’s where the water flows both ways, or something like that. There are a number of different translations. It’s extremely unique.

The plateau looks kind of monochromatic down here in the valley until your get up on it. It’s a big swell with numerous steep roughed canyons intersecting it. It has a lot of variety. The south end is dominated by ponderosa pine flats; the central area you get more into your mixed conifer at the higher elevations, the ponderosa pine on at the lower elevations; and you go to the north end and it tends to be more open country. And so it’s almost like there’s three distinct land areas on the Uncompahgre. That’s the way I view it. Three distinct land areas. Lot’s of history up there. Floyd Reed, Retired Range Conservation Officer, GMUG Forests

**Reflection**

Simply as a natural topographic and geological feature within western Colorado, the Uncompahgre Plateau is an unusual place, standing near by the San Juan and Rocky Mountains.

**Consideration**

When assessing the importance of specific landscapes, simply in terms of their unique topographic and geological attributes and contributions, would not the Uncompahgre Plateau stand out as a central and unique place, worthy of special attention and careful stewardship? Do not its special features within the public lands of Colorado deserve special attention?
Human Settlement Events

• 9000 — 7000 BC Paleo—Indian occupation.
• 5500 BC — 500 AD Archaic Indian occupation period.
• 1200 AD — 1881 Ute Indian (Yutas) occupation. Utes used the Plateau for hunting and the river bottoms for winter camp sites.
• 1680’s — Introduction of horses on Plateau.
• Late 1600’s — 1720’s Utes hired as slavers by New Mexico Spanish, trading buckskins, hides, dried meat and slaves for horses, mules, firearms and iron products.
• 1750 — Spanish and Indian Treaty, led to first direct European—Aboriginal contact on the Uncompahgre Plateau.
• 1761-1765 — Don Juan Rivera crossed Plateau possibly three times.
• 1776 — Dominguez and Escalante Expedition. First ‘recorded’ trade between Indian and European in western Colorado. Utes called the Uncompahgre River “Anacapagri”.
• Early 1800’s — European trappers and traders entered area.
• 1828 — Ft. Uncompahgre Trading Post established by Antoine Robidoux just north of Uncompahgre/Gunnison Rivers confluence.
• After 1848 — Utes Indians moved to reservations by US government.
• 1869 — Uncompahgre Tribe described the Colorado Utes as a “whole” by Colorado Ute Reservation Indian Agent.
• 1870’s — Gold and silver mining in the San Juans.
• 1876 — Colorado becomes a State
• 1877 — Paradox was established (on Ute Reservation Lands).
• 1880 — Utes entered into treaty to be relocated to western Utah.
• 1881 — First settlers in Naturita
• 1881 — Delta is founded — originally named Uncompahgre.
• 1882 — Montrose is founded (originally called Pamona),
• 1882 — D&RG reaches Montrose, then Delta.
• 1882 — Colorow Way Station and Brown’s Post Office established at present day Olathe; in 1891 this settlement changed its name to Olathe.
• 1882 — Dave Wood Road built.
• 1882 — Trail (which is now Highway 90) is used to move cattle over the Uncompahgre railhead.
• 1885 — Town of Norwood is established
• 1893 — Cattle prices fall; some go out of business or change ownership. More sheep grazing on south part of Plateau.
• 1896 — Ridgeway is founded.
• 1899 — Bedrock is founded (based on copper mining)
• 1904 — Town of Nucla officially established.
• 1909 — Opening of Gunnison Tunnel; provides extensive irrigation for the area.
• Civilian Conservation Corps established on Plateau; worked on roads, trails and insect control.
• 1938 — Town of Uravan established.
• 1930’s - 1970’s — Uranium and Vanadium mining on the west side of the Plateau.
• 1970’s — Skiing and recreation growth in Telluride creates amenity-related growth and development near south end of the Plateau.
• 1980’s — Recreation expansion on the Plateau, ATV’s mountain bikes, hiking, etc.
When people today speak of the early days on the Uncompahgre Plateau, they often talk about their ancestors and their families, particularly great grandparents who were drawn by some objective to the area. Often as not, this objective was to undertake a certain kind of work or economic enterprise. If it was not to bring or buy cattle, it might have been to haul freight, open a store or butcher shop, or many other activities that would be needed to support the community life of the early settlements. In being drawn to the Plateau, family roots were set down, which in time built an inherent and lasting social fabric.

Jo Gore’s grandfather, Elias Beach, came to the area via Gunnison. He was a freighter with a government contract. Her father was Floyd Beach, who grew up on the Horsefly area of the Uncompahgre. After he married, he ran cattle near what was called the Smith and Harrington Camp. In the late 20’s he moved over and got a permit on the 7N area, south of Columbine Pass. There he had a one-room cabin. This cabin is gone now, replaced by two others. One is quite modern, and currently owned by Wanda Boyd.

The original cabin had a stove and a table, and beds all around
Refl ection:
Even as late as 2004, after 125 years of settlement on the Uncompahgre Plateau, the connection between healthy living landscapes, getting necessary work accomplished on the land, and family ranching remains strong. A living history can still be traced back to the 1880’s among many ranching families.

Consideration:
As we look toward the future and our need to continued sustainable stewardship of the valuable natural resources and values of the Uncompahgre Plateau, what roles can traditional ranching families play? How can their contributions be insured? Although ranching as a way of life is challenged by many social and economic pressures, is not the value that ranching brings to the region worthy of considerable public support?
When early settlement began in the vicinity of the Uncompaghre plateau, the native people known as the Ute or Nuche (in their own language) still lived there. In spite of the cultural and historical tragedies that followed from the Utes being removed from western Colorado in 1881, there remains a feeling among contemporary ranchers that the Utes were good caretakers of the land. For many centuries, they had moved about the landscape in a sort of grand circuit, creating little if any noticeable impacts upon the land. They lived off what the land produced, migrated on a seasonal basis, and left stone shards around hunting camps. Their use of fire promoted or enhanced the natural cycles of disturbance and rejuvenation.

From a social perspective, it seems that many early settlers had good relationships with the Utes. Although there were exceptions to this theme, and certainly there were very poor military and governmental relationships, among many individuals and families, there was mutual support, good working relationships, and honest interaction. Positive memories still remain of the early family relationships with the Ute.

Dr. James Goss describes a mountain-centered circuit followed by the Utes as being tied through social and spiritual ceremonies to various vegetation-types and elevations throughout the seasons of the years.

Movement was a basic value. That is, you could say they had a sacred mandate, passed on to them by tradition from deity that they were supposed to do this. They were supposed to have these ceremonies at different times of the year in different environments: That is, their Bear Dance in the pinion (sic.), and juniper, and oak woodlands. Their summer ceremonies, which evolved into the Sun Dance, in the high mountain meadows, where they hunted. And that would have been at the summer solstice, at the first of summer. And then in the fall, they were supposed to be down out of the mountains by the beginning of fall, the 21st or so of September. And then they had their fall pinion harvest, and they weren’t supposed to go up in the mountains again until spring. But after the pinion harvest, they were supposed to be in their winter camp. And that was a pattern that wasn’t just economic, but it was sacred. They had a sacred mandate to do it. (Goss, 2003.)

This model of movement, which incorporates both ecological, subsistence, and spiritual themes, has considerable explanatory value for how the Ute or Nuche related to the land. As a
Reflection
While there are many cultural differences between the traditional Utes and present day ranching families, their fundamental attachment to the land is similar. Both are centered on a mountain, involve seasonal movement, and utilization of the mountain’s resources, and both have unifying social gatherings throughout the year.

Consideration
Could there be a point in time when there might be greater common ground between the Utes and modern day ranchers? Both groups share a unique tie to land and might find in their common stewardship an opportunity for healing and reconciliation?
Sometimes Life was Unpredictable, Sometimes a Challenge

Today’s modern conveniences may disguise the fact that settling a rural landscape, working on the land, as well as ranching today create a life filled with unpredictable weather, snow and drought, and long days of physical labor and potential danger. Nature filled days on and around the Uncompahgre Plateau have created a people of the land, molded by the seasonal processes of nature, who mirror the canyons, mesas, and forests they have worked in.

Snowfall was unpredictable; sometimes cattle were snowed in, and it was necessary to go in on skis to locate them and take horses to break trails. Cattle were snowed in during 1902, 1908, 1912, and 1919. October 16, 1908 there was five feet of snow, and horses and cattle had to be rescued on skis. Then, later the range was covered by 30 inches of snow. That winter “broke” a good many stockmen, as cattle had to be put on feed immediately. (An account given by Oscar Huffington, as compiled in Musser, 1986, p.63.)

The Barclay family came early into Escalante Canyon. They started the XVX Ranch, one of the most scenic in the canyon, where a fine spring produced a lovely green dell against the dramatic red cliffs...Besides the ranch, Barclay homesteaded a cow camp upon
the Uncompahgre Plateau. In time he felt the need for a wagon at camp. In order to get it there, he took the wagon apart in Delta, packed the various parts onto six mules, brought his mule train down the “Big Hill” and all the way through the canyon onto his ranch where he reassembled the wagon. Next, he hitched four horses to pull it onto the Plateau by way of Brushy Ridge, which at that time had no road at all; it was just an Indian Trail. That was quite a feat. At least he was the first one to ever take a wagon up that route. Musser, 1986, p. 91.

It was the custom in the Chicago area where I [Edna Baker Musser] grew up for the woman of the house to tend to the grocery ordering. She either ordered by telephone, or she went to the market herself. Therefore, imagine my complete surprise when my new husband suggested “we” go to the store to buy supplies to take along on my first trip to the ranch. When we reached the store [“Ike” Conklin’s on Delta’s Main Street] my husband-of-one-week was not the least bit reticent. Before I could collect my thoughts and give my voice to my mental list, Kel was reeling off an order that left me flabbergasted! Hearing him reiterate: 200 pounds of flour, 200 pounds of sugar, 75 pounds of coffee, 50 pounds of lard, and on through a long list of beans, and ham and bacon and soda crackers and chocolate, vanilla extract, etc., ending with a tin of marshmallows, a bag of chocolate creams, and a bag of horehound candy.

On hearing all of this, I did not know if I was going to faint or burst into tears. It certainly entered my mind that we were not most likely coming back to town for a year. Little did I know how these groceries could “vanish”.

They packed the groceries in a “spring wagon” for the long trip to Escalante Canyon in 1916. They passed the ruins of the old Antoine Robidoux Trading Post where Kelso ‘Kel” Musser had proposed to her at the age of eighteen several years previously. Upon arrival at the Musser Ranch, Edna concludes her story this way.

We got down from the wagon very thankfully, because the ride had taken nine hours. I entered the same log house Kel’s father had constructed in 1887. I went into the kitchen and was looking it over when Kel came in. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “It’s a challenge.” Oh, it certainly was!

Looking about the room the first thing I noticed was the interesting small iron stove over in one corner. It had been brought from Leadville and packed to the LMJ (the Musser Ranch) on a mule, they said. Near the stove was a table on which was an aluminum pail full of water and a dipper, (the water system). It was here at this table that the meals were prepared; a kerosene lamp was fastened on the wall over the table…. (Musser, 1986 pp 295 and 300.)

Men got hurt. They were thrown from horses; Oscar [Huffington] survived a broken rib that punctured his lung — and survived the trip to the hospital from off the mountain. They were thrown under wagon wheels; Henry Holland lost a leg that way. With little power equipment except their own muscles they lifted too much; some died of strangulated hernia. There weren’t enough men to do all the work, especially during World War II when men went to war or defense plants. Oscar wrote ruefully, “Worked the first female hay crew of my life.” Muriel Marshall, Uncompahgre, p.89.

**Reflection**
The demands of making a living and raising a family within the landscapes of the Uncompahgre Plateau — being outside much of the year, riding horses, chasing cattle, hauling supplies, and moving camps — created a people, created a type of person, strengthened by difficult times, and capable of a way of life deeply attached to the land.

**Consideration**
How can the value of over one hundred years of forming a land—adapted society be assessed? How could a community replace the honing and smoothing of a culture constructed from a century of working through hardships and challenges on the land?
Our Families Worked Together

Many people speak of ranching with members of other families. Not only was it fun and sociable, it was often a necessity. Round-ups required the assistance of many cowboys who came from neighboring allotments or were friends and family members who came up to the Plateau for such occasions. The family groups stayed at summer camps and rode and cooked together. Then as now, work on the ranches and in the mountains required sharing and cooperation among an extended, multi-generational network.

The camps, which everyone had, would add up to an area of all your friends and neighbors, usually the only people you would see and visit with or talk to, and worked together with and shared work together in your round-up, and branding and movement of cattle, and so on and so forth. You developed some very deep relationships.

They all worked together all the time. Beach, Bettis, Byers were the three B’s. Mr. Bettis was killed by lightning, and my Dad bought out his permit. Then it was my dad and Eddie Byers. They were wonderful, wonderful people. Very good to work with…. and the families worked together. They gathered the cows together, placed the cattle on the forest. Dad would run mostly on TN and the Byers’s mostly on Monitor Mesa and in that area. Jo Gore, Rancher

Later, after 1906, Hezekeal Burch and his family joined a Pool Herd on this Roubideau Range with Daniel Roatcap, Johnny March, Summer Woodruff and the Wilkeys. By 1916, Elias Beach and his son, Floyd, joined the group. In the 1930’s, the Beaches were still there. The people they were now sharing the range with were: Sam, Joe
and Johnny Boyden, Maurice Standish, Shirley and Leonard Burch, plus Will and Jess Sanders. (Trails and Trials, Edna Baker Musser, 1986, p.44.)

From the beginning of ranching on the Uncompahgre, families worked together to make ranching a viable enterprise. Over time, there has been some decline in the social and economic fabric that binds families together on the plateau. At times families sold their ranches when they retired. Occasionally there was no one in the family who wanted to continue ranching. In recent years, with increased economic pressures, ranch land has been sold for residential development.

The loss of family interaction and support poses a threat to range stewardship on the Uncompahgre Plateau. One question this potentially raises is the degree to which land stewardship goals on public lands can be sustained with the gradual loss of traditional family support systems that existed on the Uncompahgre for over a century.

*There was the Boyden Camp, and Byers had the 41 Camp. At Columbine, there was the Blackburn Camp. They were from the Nucla side over into the Basin. And there was the Mill’s camp where we have our cabin now.*

Davis’ did not have a camp up that high. They were down lower. Grays were further east, but they worked with us also. Over this way there was the Hocker Range, Davis Range, the Lockhart’s and the Musser’s. There was also the Smith’s. One or two round-ups would go as far west as Lockhart’s, but not as far as Calhoun’s. Jo Gore, Rancher.

*I’m not sure when ranges were divided by fences. Each permit holder had their own range. It was controversial because there was concern over the division of ranges by the Forest Service being fair. They had to put up fences, and this wasn’t in the life of a cowboy to have to put up fences. During the round-up there would be 20-30 cowboys who gathered the cattle from all the ranges. Started their fire and did the branding. Not a lot of vaccinations were done back then. Each bunch of riders would take the cattle back to their own range. By fall they had the cows in their own ranges.* Jo Gore, Rancher

**Reflection**

*The presence of family ranching on and around the Uncompahgre Plateau is often described as a valuable management resource. Their presence is viewed as an important community asset, which if not available would diminish the tradition of caring for the land. The continued presence of family ranching maintains a critical balance between social, economic, and stewardship resources and capacities.*

**Consideration**

*Are the assets of traditional family ranching critical enough to the sustainability of active and beneficial resource management of the UP that public land managers should include them in the formulation of future resource management goals and strategies? What would be the impact of not including ranching as part of the long term strategy for public lands of the Uncompahgre Plateau?*
Often beginning with a 160-acre homestead, families built up their home ranches over time. This gradual expansion of the economic units strengthened family ranching. In many cases adjacent pieces of property were acquired through family networks and arrangements.

When Tad Paxton came into the Uncompahgre country, he says he was “kinda green.” But his Dad put him to work, and they gradually amassed a large ranching operation on the southern end of the plateau in the Horsefly area:

_Dad was running it. He sent me to the desert (in Utah). We had a herd down there. My dad was an “empire builder”. He was never satisfied in one place, moved somewhere else and started something else. He had about 15,000 acres here at one point; had land that joined the Hofmann’s; bought a place on Dry Creek._ Tad Paxton, Retired Sheep Rancher

_After our family increased and they all wanted to come back, son number one was in the service, son number two went to Ft. Collins, but he decided he better come home and help because we were very short handed at that time. And then he had a family. So every time a person was added to the ranch, income was low so we had to find some way to expand. Consequently, this is an accumulation of what we have today ... from 1960 on._

_We did expand about 51 years ago. When Jody was 5, we bought the place up on [Highway] 90 and the permit up there, and the cows to fill that permit was what we had.... _[Then in ‘41 you bought some more property up on Sanborn, and that you used for_
summer pasture, is that right? [Carol answers: Right]. So by expanding a little here and a little there, we’ve gathered what we have today.

[It looks like a pretty good size operation?] 1500 head. And we started with 12 or 13. A neighbor in ‘44, and he and his dad who were partners at that time, went to Utah with about 25 head of cattle. [How much were they?] About $125/head at that time. The man who hauled them in kept the extra one, as I recall. And that is what we started with, was that many cows. So that would have been in ‘44 that we bought these cows. Carol and May Weimer, Ranchers

But the folks came here and bought a ranch. It’s hard to believe, but they bought a 640-acre ranch called the ole Perry place, for $10,000 bucks. But it was a foreclosure right after the dust bowl days. They paid for it with teams of horses and going behind a walkin’ plow…

I can remember my dad when he came here. All the people who were ranching here said he could never pay for that place. I’ll never forget when ... I was probably 17 or 18 years old then ... when he finally got it paid/or. He took me down town showed all the business people down there the abstract; to let ‘em know that he finally got his place paid for. They did. They worked hard. And every kid he had worked hard too; I’ll guarantee you that. Raymond Snyder, Rancher

The amount of trading and selling of ranch properties is sometimes amazing.

The 160 that Zatterstrom’s had belonged to the Club outfit. They brought it from Kermit Raid. The 160 up on the mountain ... that was called the Club Camp and the Templeton Camp; Sam Jim Richards had them and traded 160 acres over at Round Mountain for them. He got that from Lawhead someway or other and then he traded for that 160 on the mountain that Kermit Redd had. Later he traded both those 160’s for land over in the Basin that was around their land. Then the land he had over by the Meadows went back to the Forest Service. Evelyn Garvey, from a transcription provided by Marie Templeton.

The moment he acquired property in 1896, he [Oscar Huffington] began improvements and planting fruit trees, some of which are alive today. He worked very long and hard, continually improving his property. It was always a beautiful ranch.

Oscar was a true pioneer. He kept improving and expanding and acquiring until he owned a sizable amount of the whole canyon [Escalante]. It was a long way from one end of his property to the other. He owned a homestead at Picket Corral, and grazing land at Negro Gulch; he’d bought the Cap Smith place, the Bill Shreeves homestead, the Moss place by the river, and the Dillard place at Roubideau plus the Dillard cattle and grazing rights. In addition, he had a summer cow camp.

Oscar Huffington kept working on all his property for more than fifty years. He survived some frightful accidents: he broke bones several times and lost one eye as a result of a dynamite
Reflection
The living history of the UP shows that there was a gradual building up of family ranching. Land has not only been passed down through multiple generations, but within these families there has been a steady process of adding acreages to the original ranch property.

Consideration
There is evidence of significant social and economic transition within contemporary ranching. The stability offered by a century of experience, commitment, intimate knowledge of ranching and solidifying the present-day economic units is certainly worth close public evaluation. This gradual sifting and human bonding to the land has produced unique management resources that are not replaceable at an acceptable social cost.
In addition to the base properties or home ranches, the ability of ranchers to utilize pastures on public lands is vital to their businesses. The Uncompahgre Plateau, consisting of lands managed by both the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, creates a seasonal pattern of grazing, where cattle are summered on public lands in the higher elevations, and wintered on the family ranches in the surrounding valleys.

Almost from the beginning, people have worked to build and sustain a satisfactory relationship between the ranchers and public land managers. In November of 1908, Henry Spencer, U.S. Forest Service Acting Supervisor, writes in a “Policy Report” on the Uncompahgre National Forest:

*The Secretary of Agriculture authorized the grazing of 42,000 head of cattle and horses and 90,000 head of sheep on the Uncompahgre, Ouray and Fruita Forests, now included in the Uncompahgre Forest for the season of 1908. Permits were approved for 31,402 cattle and horses, and 86,351 head of sheep.*

*The stockmen, especially the cattle and horse growers have been in sympathy with the policy of the Forest Service since the establishment of this Forest. The livestock associations have cooper-
ated with Dr. Porter [the Forest Supervisor] fully in an effort to secure the best results for both the stock growers and the Forest Service. The result is that the stockman of this region are beginning to realize better returns from their herds than they did before the National Forest was established, and the Forest Service is enjoying the support and commendation of the stock growers. (Uncompahgre National Forest, 1908. p. 7.)

Spencer goes on to say:

*The sheep men of this region are not as thoroughly in sympathy with Forest policy as the cattle and horse growers ... The opposition on the part of sheep men is, in my opinion, due to the fact that the sheep range of the Uncompahgre Forest was badly crowded when the Forest was established, and the realization of some of the large owners that they would be forced to give away to the man with 500 or 1,000 head. When the Ouray Forest was established the sheep range was occupied by large owners entirely, some of whom were non-residents of the state... However, I believe the justice of the policy in providing for the home builder first of all, appeals to these larger owners to a certain extent.*

In a 1910 Annual Report by the Uncompahgre National Forest Supervisor, mention is made of a drought, with the result being an early shipment of cattle:

*There was a good hay crop this year but it is held at a high figure. In addition, there is practically no winter range because of the extremely dry summer. As a result, the majority of owners are shipping as close as possible, taking everything that will do.* (p. 6)

A table that followed the above paragraph, showed some ranchers with the numbers of all classes of stock head that were shipped.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utah / Colorado</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C. &amp; I. Co.</td>
<td>452 Steers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Blumberg</td>
<td>63 Steers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA Ward</td>
<td>30 Steers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. D. Blumberg</td>
<td>87 Steers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack Casto</td>
<td>20 Cows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alden Leonard</td>
<td>45 Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maupin &amp; Sons</td>
<td>55 Cows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. S. Kelso</td>
<td>74 3&amp;4 yr. Steers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. S. Kelso</td>
<td>52 Cows</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cattle sold on the range in District 7 brought $25 per head for yearling steers, $35 for 2 year old, $40 for 3 year old, fat cows $35, bulls $30.

Today, some of the old challenges remain. Not only are there droughts, but grazing on public lands is beset by a myriad of rules and regulations. While intended as appropriate stewardship guides for grazing, when inflexibly implemented these rules can become onerous to the rancher, as described by Robbie Le Valley, an extension agent with Colorado State University (CSU), based in Delta, Colorado.

*There are so many things, things meaning people and rules, that are against a cow out there grazing. There are land managers that see that as a negative, and do everything they can to minimize the impact of grazing out there, whether it be endangered species, or weeds, or grass. Maybe the grass is not even known to be on the plateau, but it is on a list. The biologist puts that in. If it is not there [on the land], the automatic assumption is that it’s because the cows are there, instead of trying to determine why it is not there.*

*This continually squeezing of the cows that are out there, and the continually negative pressure downward, we call it the “hassle*
factor;” has a lot to do with it. For some reason there is the perception, if the cow grazes the grass, it has an herbicide in it. But if an elk grazes the same grass, it has fertilizer in it.... If there are cows out there, it’s automatically bad.

We see that throughout all the federal agency literature. We see some of that tide turning, somewhat. But talk about Gunnison Sage Grouse. Livestock grazing is listed in the same breath as power lines, and pinion encroachment, and predators. Well livestock grazing is not bad in itself.

Mismanaged livestock grazing is not appropriate. But livestock grazing is always viewed as a negative. It is never viewed as a positive. So I believe that hassle factor continues to be something that wears away at people. Robbie Levalley, CSU Extension Agent

Reflection

However well intentioned the grazing regulations and biological science for the public lands might be, the message that cows are not desired on public lands is nevertheless conveyed through in many forms, regulatory, relationally, research, and through public opinion. Over the past thirty-plus years, this has resulted in a continuous “wearing down” of the ranching culture.

Consideration

How could a common ground be constructed between the ranching community and the rest of society based on an appropriate set of assumptions?

• Ranching practices on public lands need to be guided by sensible and science based principles.
• Ranching makes a contribution to local economies and public land management, and therefore is a positive, not a negative
• And all parties, ranchers, public land managers, ecologists, scientist need to come to the table and work out partnership solutions to insure balanced economic, social and ecosystem sustainability.
Many ranchers experience the “hassle factor,” which Extension Agent Robbie LeValley describes. However, the one reality that provides a bit of a buffer against the “wearing away of people” is the understanding of a range conservation officer on the public lands, who tries to work with ranchers with regard to the management of their cattle or sheep allotment. This is epitomized by the “range con” [Range Conservation Officer] who seeks to understand the active work of the rancher and develops a relationship over an extended period of time, often by riding the range with the cowboys.

Now there are very few rangers who get out and ride the allotments. We have a good ranger who does get out and ride, and he is one of the last rangers doing that. Marlin Jensen is out of the Montrose office. He gets out and rides. He is on these ranges, and he knows what is going on these ranges. He is really trying to develop a good working relationship. If he sees something wrong, he lets you know about it.

Also I think it’s because down in New Mexico the Forest Service is getting sued about certain things ... and national policy and people are kinda setting themselves up against one another. People
have agendas. And one of the agendas is “get cattle off the forest.” “We’d have more wildlife. We’d have more this. It would be better. And so there’s a constituency that has that agenda, and they have funds and they put pressure on policy makers. So these guys want to keep their jobs in the Forest Service. They don’t want their record to show that they did somethin’ bad and so they’ll error on the side of caution, which they think they are doing a good job for the resource. But it’s come out that the wildlife and the cattle ... the cattle help the land for the wildlife. A lot of things get published ... but there’s an awful lot of information that takes place over the hood of the pick-up that never is published, that these guys know in the country. We have a revenue stream off of elk and deer hunting on our private ground. We’re not doing anything that would cut that. That’s part of our income, too. We do that with cattle ... with grazing. It’s all integrated.

Now people look after the wildlife on the forest and they look after the trees and they look after the picnic tables and the in stream flows and riparian areas and everybody has their specialty. But gosh you got to think of it as more “smushed” together ... integrated and collaborative. We see all of that... and we see some giant has got an agenda, and they push that too far. Linda Ingo, Rancher

Especially if you get into these more intensive systems (intensive meaning instead of just turning them out and gathering them, you are moving them), it may be at that lower elevation, there is enough growth there. So you adapt and you move them quicker early on, and then you slow it down later. So there is a tremendous amount of variation. Or you may have species like larkspur. You are not going to go into that pasture even though it’s what you agreed upon in January,

... There needs to be that flexibility both in the agencies and permittees. So, if it says June third, you have to be over there. But, if its fill of larkspur... then that’s where that relationship comes in. I know that Hank Davis [rancher] feels comfortable with Marlin Jensen [range con’] saying, “I can’t make that move right now.” And Marlin is okay to say, “Do it when you can.” Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent.

What seems to have potential for improving land stewardship, while enabling ranchers to make a living by increasing their production is some form of partnership. But such a partnership cannot evolve when the hassle factor dominates the conversations.

You just don’t write a letter. That’s not how you do business. Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent.

Reflection
Within the existing regulatory and management framework of public land grazing, what makes the system implementable in real life terms? It is the set of relationships formed between representatives of the public land agencies, often the range conservation officer, who establishes a practical, working relationship with the individual ranchers. Through open and direct communication, an honest understanding is reached about how best to achieve both improved range conditions and production with the herd. Without this on—the—ground relationship, formal rules and guidelines, even if well intentioned, become inflexible and resented strictures.

Consideration
What would it take to establish a sustainable set of partnership relationships between the public land managers and the ranching community? Could this partnership be built from some of the best practices of recent range conservation officers, who have exhibited a willingness to ride with the permittees, help learn along side the rancher about how to improve range practices, and seek practical solutions as conditions on the ground change and adapt over time.
Adaption and Resilience

Keep Us in Ranching

Around the Uncompahgre Plateau, many ranchers believe they are making some changes to improve both their land stewardship and their profits. There was once a time when large herds of cattle, operated by huge outfits, moved cattle across open rangeland. Today, under the grazing allotment and permitting system, many improvements are being made. Ranchers are a part of these changes.

They believe that if they adapt, they can become more resilient economically, as well as improve their grazing practices and meet the standards of public land managers.

They are definitely adaptive. Just paying attention to the first and second calf-animals and making sure they stay in the herd is a huge cost savings. Just that one factor alone starts to add up as far as not having to go out and buy an animal or bring up an animal to replace those. So, that change can save $500. Now that’s not much. But $500 over 300 cows starts to add up. 300 cows usually means 30-60 replacement heifers a year. That’s where it starts to add up.... Some of them are being very innovative in financing. It’s cheaper to get an equity loan on a house than it is to get an operating loan.... So those kinds of small things start to add up as far as still being
able to run cattle.

They have been very willing to make these changes because they’re seeing the difference in the animals. ...Once you see that production change, then it’s fairly easy to convey the message that it’s not just the Forest Service redoing everything. Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent

Even though we run the same livestock operation in the same area, a lot of things have changed through the years. You can’t just stay the same. You change the kind of cattle you run. We were mostly Hereford. Some disasters. Run mostly Beefmaster cattle. Got our bulls from Lasiters. You can’t do the same thing in the same place and make it. So even though you have some history that goes back, it’s a constant looking at things and adapting things

Nature is simple. You have to deal with nature, and nature goes in arches not just a straight line. And so you have to approach decisions in life like that, not just beeline to somethin’. Lots of people get in trouble because they change things a lot. They’re switching around. You kinda arch to a different thing, instead of just go direct.

Linda Ingo, Rancher

There’s also the factor of how people go about doing things. I know people that have a family unit with fewer numbers, and it’s because they have become more efficient and they have avoided a lot of technological upgrades. By that I mean, they don’t have a $100,000 tractor, or a $20,000 baler. Instead of doing that, they do things like graze the first cutting of hay with their cows. And so they harvest that first cutting with their animals and then take them out on the federal lands. Perhaps they share crop the second cutting of hay with a neighbor that has the machinery. And then they irrigate up the third cutting and then they come back in the fall and they take that third cutting off  with their animals again. So they’ve reduced their operating expense by not having that high priced equipment. Some folks are going back to being more horseback rather than having a lot of pickups and this kind of stuff. Floyd Reed, Range Conservation Officer, GMUG National Forests.

It was a really big step to not sell our calves at the livestock auction and read out name in the paper of how much we got compared to other people. That was your validation for the year. You had the La Junta Livestock Market Report and it showed you did well. And so when you’re going to pass up income and you have nothing in the checking account that year; with a gamble that if you add more money... pay more out... you’re going to be ahead And so you go to the end of the year and you have more money borrowed and you don’t have an income that year, it’s a really big step... and you have no validation you did good and well because they weighed this much and everybody saw your calves... and the camaraderie. So we took that step. Linda Ingo, Rancher

While adaptation to better herd management and grazing practices has been a hopeful step, there also appears to be a limit in both economic and social terms.
Most of them that survived the 80s, and now have survived this drought, and are not selling out, have made very significant adaptive changes. Whether it be a breed probably is not the most critical one. It’s probably finding away to get the most out of that acre. Because the margin is so low. Whether that’s hunting or an outside job or decreasing their labor that they hire. That’s been all part of it. The drought has taken a significant toll on the numbers in this area. We’ve probably lost thirty percent of the numbers.... Those that are still here are adaptive.

But it is hard to be innovative when your fuel bill doubles. Innovation covers some of it But when your fuel bill doubles, you can’t just say be a better manager, because they are already pretty good managers. Now is there still room? Sure. Do the little changes add up? Yea. But with ever increasing costs puts significant pressure on these guys. Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent

Working collaboratively to obtain resource improvements also requires a sense of equity.

The thing that I keep stressing to the agencies is, you cannot just keep asking them to do more and more and more without others pitching in, like the Division of Wildlife, with their animals that graze out there. Or recreationists that utilize an area. If it’s always the person out there with the livestock that is supposed to be collaborating, or supposed to be negotiating, then that’s where you start to get that whole, you know, wait a minute, haven’t we given enough. Too often that’s the case. Everyone else basically gets a free ride, except for the guy that’s out there, that can tell you exactly where that particular water hole is. And even the range con’ can’t tell you that. Collaboration is great, but it should not be just one segment that’s asked to come to the table to give something up all the time. Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent

**Reflection**

The capacity of ranchers as a community and as individuals to adapt to economic and regulatory changes provides some optimism for sustainability. Being willing and able to improve grazing practices, cut operating costs, and comply with additional standards has resulted in ranching enterprises that are more productive, even while improving ecological conditions on the land. These are hard earned improvements, which reflect the resilience and cooperation of the ranching community.

**Consideration**

What is an appropriate public response to the adaptiveness and resilience of the rancher? Can we see this as an asset, an important capacity, upon which greater common ground can be built? Should this asset not be met with an equal sense of cooperation on everyone’s part in order to increase the sustainability of an important economic and land stewardship activity?
The Heritage of Knowing the Land

Part of it is understanding what the capabilities of the land that you work with is ... making your expectations of the land be realistic. It’s like the guy that runs too many cattle year in and year out; and every October he says, “Well damn, I’m out of feed again.” Ed Ingo, Rancher

I have seen people come into the country and purchase a ranch and obtain a permit and attempt to run in this country and not be successful. This goes back to what I said about Frank Calhoun and Bud Maupin ... I think there’s certainly a value to inheriting a sense of place on the Uncompaghre Plateau from a family structure. Because if you do, number one you know your way around, and number two, you understand how to operate better than someone who comes from someplace else. ‘Cause I’ve known people who were very successful livestock operators in other parts of the country, and they came here and they didn’t last. It seems like there is a great deal of value to having people who have a family knowledge. They seem to do better, particularly in the rougher country.

A lot of our success in this country goes back to the range schools, but also goes back to the fact that you recognize that some of these people have been here for a hundred years and have something important to tell you. And their approach to management is based on success according to what works here. You got to give people credit for that and capitalize on it. This goes back to when I started hanging around with Bud Maupin and Frank Calhoun. We all joke about it. I tell stories and say they were the laziest men in western Colorado because they never break a sweat on them-
selves or their horses. But what they really were is they were smart. They were in business to produce pounds of beef and not to rodeo animals around, and they showed me how to manage livestock in rough country. And you just don’t come into a place like the plateau with heavy brush and these deep canyons and stuff you think you are going to chase cattle like you do on the Great Plains. You have to learn to outsmart them. I have had the good fortune to learn that from those ole timers, and I try to communicate that to some of the modern people that maybe didn't have an opportunity to know somebody like that. Floyd Reed, Range Conservation Officer, GMUG

Jefferson Duckett Dillard was a well-known cowboy, famous for his ability to handle thousands of cattle on the Chisholm Trail. (Musser, 1986, p.126.) He came into the Uncompahgre country in 1888 from Llano on the Texas Panhandle to work with the San Miguel Cattle Company, or what became known as the Club Ranch. Dillard came by train from Pueblo, through Salida to the Roubideau with a herd of Texas Longhorns. He tells the story of how he had to learn new ways of cattle management when he came into the Uncompahgre country.

After visiting for a while with some who had come to see the cattle—as it was quite a sight to see that big herd of longhorns that had walked and stampeded all the way from Texas and had ridden a train over the Continental Divide—I got my horse and joined the herd. We drifted the herd out of the creek bottom and onto the flat where our big corral is now and gathered them up to a tight herd. After we had ridden around them a few times, they were bedded down and ready to rest as it had been a hard trip in those narrow gauge cars. We rode over to the shack which had a cook stove, a rawhide buck, cupboard, table, some dishes. Two of the boys were cooking supper... All the fellows but two on herd saddled their night horses as did I. I got a plate and filled it up and started to eat, but had both ears open to catch all the conversation. There was talk about summer camp, summer range and winter range which was all Greek to me.

I soon learned that they had to put the cattle upon Uncompahgre Plateau for the summer months to protect the winter grass on the foothills below. I was saying nothing and taking orders. (Musser, 1986, pp. 128-29)

It’s not just the cows or just the sheep or just the permittee. The timing of the moisture, it’s the rodent population, it’s the insect population, it’s the people pressure. How was that soil capped early on? And everything else couldn’t infiltrate. All those things: big game, small game. It’s not just one particular thing. But too often that’s the easy thing to look at within the agency. There’s a mind set there. So, that’s what I continue to have to work on. Just because a manual says there should be cotton grass out there, and there isn’t, the automatic assumption is that it’s because of the cows. Well perhaps it wasn’t there to begin with, and that was a misnomer by somebody.

...There’s more and more of that, especially as the agencies have
more and more pressure just to comply with NEPA. When you just comply with NEPA, that means more and more paperwork, not just looking at the land, getting out on the land. Not to criticize them. They have to rely on what the literature says, or what a manual says ....You got to be out there, understanding that you don't just say “move,” and the cows move. You don’t just say clean the pasture, and in two days it’s cleaned (the cows removed). Or if something is there a week later, it doesn’t mean they weren’t trying their hardest to get them out there.

You got understand that riding through oak brush is not easy. Somebody in the office doesn’t understand that. Or somebody that just hikes up a trail that’s already been cleared for them, doesn’t understand that. So it’s very critical, that relationship. It’s important that the permit people see you out there, understanding. That’s where we are fortunate here. We have very good range con’s. For the most part, they are very good at getting out and riding with those guys, and understanding why it is we are not seeing particular willow this year. Well it’s because there was a late freeze. It has nothing to do with anything on the grazing side. But if you aren’t out there, you won’t see it. Robbie LeValley, CSU Extension Agent

Reflection
One of the most significant aspects of the “living” history of the Uncompahgre Plateau, is the knowledge of the land that has been built up over the last century. This knowledge has been acquired through the continual interaction of individual and family ranchers with the physical landscape, its specific features and characteristics, it continual process of adaptative cyclical conditions. “If you aren’t out there, you won’t see it.”

Consideration
How could a partnership be formed that appropriately integrated the more or less scientific knowledge of public land agencies with the land—based knowledge of the ranching community? Even though there is a tendency to place a higher value on the “objective knowledge” of the scientist, what would it take to recognize the merits of those understandings gained by many years and decades of being present and working on the land? Put simply, what is the ecological value of a knowledge gained from making ones living on the land, a special form of understanding that can be acquired in no other manner?
Key events occur in the life of all communities and places. Sometimes an event will move the wheel of progress forward, sometimes backward. If the happening is central, special, or important in our lives, the wheel rarely remains still.

People are strongly affected by the arrival of the railroad, the building of a school, a new water delivery or storage system. While we are personally affected by a marriage, a birth, a death, the whole community is altered, at time redirected, by new roads, a reservoir, even a fence. These are all punctuation points by which we measure and remember our lives.

You have to go back at least fifty years to get more towards the more open range days on the Uncompaghe. That was when you would have these big pools that might have a geographic area, rather than a discreet allotment like we have today. At one time they had ... everybody out of Nucla would run cows up and they mostly ran from Horsefly Creek over to Tabaguache Creek. And I think it was in about 1932 they put in the first management fence in that country, and it’s called the San Miguel drift fence. It started on the rim of Horsefly Canyon and ran clear to the rim of Tabaguache Canyon. And that’s what kept the cows from falling the snow. It held them down in the low country until the upper grasses had a chance to grow.

I’m pretty certain that Frank Calhoun told me that he was on the last roundup on the plateau, and that was in 1948. And they took the wagon from Sheep Creek allotment, which is down on Horsefly Creek; and... it was an old time roundup with a roundup
wagon and a cook and all that kinda stuff. They had two rides every year. They’d have what they called the calf ridding in the spring, and they’d brand all the calves.

Then they’d have the beef ride in the fall. That’s where they would go through and gather all the two and three year old steers and trail ’em down to Whitewater and ship ’em on the railroad. And I think that’s another unique thing. I think that’s one of the last wagon round-ups that I know of on the National Forest. I mean where it was big community roundup. Floyd Reed, Range Con.

Reflections
Critical events have moved the pendulum of progress in various directions since the 1880’s on the Uncompahgre Plateau. The living history is punctuated with happenings that supported human settlement, made economies flourish, and brought about many social changes. These changes range from significant advancement in the infrastructure of roads, railroads, and water systems to an ever—increasing presence of community and governmental structures that under gird and influence the present way of life.

Consideration
While the cumulative progress of the Uncompahgre Plateau emerging from the critical events of history can be generally recognized, it is nevertheless worth noticing that these same events have an ability to move the land and the communities in significantly new directions. Will the past and current events add to the general sense of progress, or to the weight of factors that portend decline or instability with regard to the overall public good?
[The oldest son] was gone to Viet Nam for 4 or 5 years, I don’t know. He had two deployments in Viet Nam. … Then he decided to come back to the ranch, so we had to figure out some other way to make a little more money to support another family, meagerly. His wife went to work, as did the younger son’s wife. When the older son came back on the ranch, I went to work for the Post office, because it seemed like it just took everyone’s work and ability and money to keep going because as everyone knows, ranching isn’t very profitable when you have to buy and pay high interest. And we struggled along…., May Weimer, Rancher

Jon Wilson preempted property at Escalante Forks, and was issued a water decree in 1888. Sometime later he used his Stone and Timber right to homestead 160 acres on Long Point where he built a summer camp.

Musser seemed to be plagued with ill fortune. His son Albert was run over by a horse on the school ground in Delta and was killed. His daughter, Edith, died of brights disease while still in college in 1902, and the next year, his wife took ill and died. This left two girls, Hazel and June, barely in their teens, and Shaw Kealso, a little 9 year old boy and 17 year old Don. Though little
more than a boy, Don took over many of the duties: looking after the cattle on the open range, and helping with the ranch work in the canyon. When he became of age, he homesteaded a 160 acre pasture on Long Point. So the Musser holdings were growing. Later they bought another 160 acre pasture on Long Point and on Sort Point, and the later became the location of the Mussers Cow Camp.

Kelso Musser married Eda May Baker in 1916. This city girl from the East, moved to the remote ranch in Escalante Canyon, and while some of the cowboys had a wager as to how long that marriage would last, it lasted for 60 years before her beloved “Kel” died.

The Musser’s first sizable acquisition was the purchase of the Ben Lowe cattle property from Ben Lowe’s widow in 1917, after Ben Lowe’s horrible death in the shootout with Cash Sampson. John Wilson Senior died in 1929, and the property and cattle, along with the work, was now entirely in the hands of the 2nd generation of Mussers, Kelso and Don. Kelso and Eda had 3 children, Alice, John Kelso (also known as Jack) and Thomas Baker. As sons Jack and Tom grew, they shared the work and management of the ever growing ranch with their father and uncle.

Eda inherited a ranch on Cedar Mesa. This really didn’t fit in with a ranch in the Escalante, 45 miles away. The McHugh family at Cedaredge had a ranch on the Gunnison River, three miles down from its confluence with the Escalante Creek, so a trade was agreed on and Mussers then had a ranch along the Gunnison River. Kelso had never used his homestead right and he homesteaded a piece of land near the property still called the McHugh.

After a time, other people who had property along the river, decided it was not what they wanted. It was nearly impossible to make a living on small pieces of property. Most had little or no water rights, and transportation of produce was very poor. As these pieces, which varied in size from 40 acres to 165 acres became available, Mussers acquired them and it made an ideal winter country for their cattle. It was interspersed with BLM lands on which they had winter grazing rights, and cattle could walk to market.

Eda and Kelso’s children grew up on the ranch, and while they lived in Delta in the winter to attend school, they spent summer vacations and many weekends working on the ranch. Their daughter Alice went away to college and married Harold Hove. They settled in Alameda, California where they raised a family.

As Jack and Tom grew up, they entered the family business becoming partners with their father and uncle. During the 1940’s, Mussers bought two ranches up the North Fork above “The Forks”. These were called the “Sawtell”, and the “Blumberg” (from whom they bought the ranches). The later has the first two water decrees on the Escalante Creek.

In 1944, Jack married Bernice Hendrickson who had moved to the Musser ranch in 1930 when her father and brother started working for Mussers. Thus, the ranch life was nothing new to her. They had 2 children, Margaret and John, and like the generations before, they went to school in Delta, but spent most weekends and vacations on the ranch. Margaret married Ray Veatch, and they have the American Family Insurance agency in Delta.

Tom married Patsy Harrington Henwood, who had two boys, Michael and Kenneth. Tom and Patsy had two girls, Melinda and Christie. Tom worked and generally stayed on the ranch, but the family lived in Delta.

While John Attended Western State College in Gunnison, he spent summer vacations and many weekends on the ranch, especially when there was fall or spring work to be done. After graduation, he opted to be a partner in the Musser Ranches with his father and uncle. He married Vicki Justin and they had two children, Cara and Justin.

By 1960 Don had to retire because of health problems, but Kelso was still active, and stayed on the ranch, helping with some of the ranch work and he and Eda did the bookkeeping and attended meetings with government agencies, and farm organizations.

In 1964, the Bridgeport ranch came up for sale. This added 372 acres, which proved to be an excellent winter and spring pasture. Eda and Kelso moved down there, and, with some help, tended to most of the irrigation at that ranch, until he retired in 1975.

In 1965 the Shreeves family decided they would sell their ranch. This included ranches at the confluence of the Escalante Creek and the Gunnison River along the Escalante Creek as far as the Lower Huffington ranch, the XVX ranch above the Forks in the North Fork of the Escalante and three quarter sections on the
Plateau—a total of 1403 acres. This made an ideal ranch with grazing allotments in the Forest Reserve and the BLM. The total number of cattle permitted by the Forest Service was 1490 head.

During the 1970’s there were two more pieces of property which became available. The Ward Place adjacent to the original Musser Ranch at the Forks contained 251 acres, and a quarter section on the Plateau. Another 160 acre pasture, which had originally belonged to the Blumbers was within the Musser allotment, and it was added to the Musser Ranch.

By the mid-1980’s Tom and Jack Musser were getting to the age of retirement. The ranch was supporting three Musser families, plus several hired men — some with families. While John had taken over his part of the physical labor and management and did most of the dealing with the Federal agencies, in order to replace Tom and Jack, at least two more families would have to be hired, plus a living wage would have to be paid to the retiring families. With the expansion of the ranch, one piece of property would barely get paid off before another was added, and with interest rates at an all time high, there never seemed to be a surplus of money. With the budget barely being balanced, it was decided in the mid-1980’s to sell the ranch, and the ranch was sold in 1988. The total acreage of the ranch, approximately 100,000 acres, included 5,000 acres of deeded land. The rest was in allotments on the National Forest and the BLM.
We often hear today of people having attachments to places. In a highly mobile society, it is not surprising that we pay more attention to such attachments.

Place attachments run the gamut from ethnic neighborhoods, to mountains and seacoasts, to home places, birthplaces, and even empty spaces. We become attached to particular places because they hold our memories — memories of childhood, going to school, going to work, and other chapters in our lives.

You know the Uncompaghre is broken up into a number of major drainages. And that’s probably how we refer to a lot of it. You got the Tabaguache County on the west side. Tabaguache Basin is a fairly major feature. I suppose maybe Mesa Creek over on the North-west side. And then on the northwest side, you start up with the Dominguez, the Dominguez Country, which is the major drainage north. The central drainage is Escalante Drainage. And then as you come south, you hit the Roubideau. Then south of that you get into Spring Creek. It’s most definitely broken up into easily recognizable, distinct areas. Floyd Reed, Range Con, GMUG Forests

Carol and his dad and our son Jody would have been great pioneers because there was no water in the house. There was no electricity, the ladies powder room was down a little path, and you had to have kerosene lights. You carried the water up about a 20 foot little pitch. Our running water was run with a bucket and get a bucket of water. And finally, in 1961 or so, we did get electricity, which we thought was wonderful. Oh yes, we put all our food in the...
spring, or else in the window in a cooler box. And the cooler box was lined with burlap. And you put a pan of water on top of the cooler box with a few holes punched in the bottom, and every time that pan was empty you go out and fill it up. And that was our cooler. The spring was down over the hill..." May Weimer, Rancher, speaking about their cabin on 640 acres of deeded land 17 miles from Nucla.

Ellen Garvey, from a transcript received from Marie Templeton:

She had come in the day before Christmas, that snow did. It rained for a day or two, and then it started snowing. There was a bunch of us [coming from] town [on] Twenty-Five Mesa, trying to find us a camp. ...We had our cattle headed... we was up there where Polar is now. That was our summer camp... we had quite a bunch in there. We had the two kids with me... The next morning it was just putting it down; snow was about to our knees. So we took off and went to our summer camp, went in right by Dillard’s camp. He had a camp, pasture, corrals there. Got up to Jack’s, and he had a bunch of weaners in the pasture. I told them where I was going and what I was going to do. He said, “You’re just scared. Wait until morning and I will throw the weaners in with you, and we will take them all to the valley.” No, I had my mind made up. I was going to Fall Camp that night. So we went over Twenty-Five. We had some cattle there. Just shut them in the corral and left them. Got them, went down the trail across what we called Cottonwood Basin. That’s there on Cottonwood where them ranches are...[an] outfit by the name of Whites come in there and settled. ... We went out across there. It was way after [mid] night. It had quit snowing and it was a moonlit night, and I could see a quarter a mile away.

So we went on over to Fall Camp, corralled, and stayed overnight... I said, “You kids take these cattle on down the valley and put them in summer camp pasture, and I’ll go back and get our horses.” They was put in summer camp pasture, just above Dillard’s outfit.

I pulled back up to camp and the snow just got deeper and deeper. Got up to our horse pasture; could just see the top of the fences; there was [snow] built up there five poles high. Ernest “Bud” Maupin, interview with Jean Zatterstrom, March 1980.
Living in a particular landscape or community creates a historical record. There is evidence all around that a certain way of life took place here. Anthropologists call them artifacts—marks left behind that reflect a community’s labor, skills, commitments, and values. To the extent that the old marks are valued, an authentic historical continuity can be preserved and become a part of the living history to which members can turn for solace, guidance, and caution.

Sometimes the marks are quite small, almost invisible, but evidence none the less of past successes and challenges.

On the road, we stopped at Edith Davis’ log house, which was built near a spring. It was the Davis’ mid-camp when they were moving cattle up. She lived here year-round until the kids were old enough to go to school. Around the house there were lilacs and yellow roses. The gate into the yard was made out of very stiff wire that had been fashioned onto a series of hearts. That day, Jo and Bernice commented that the reason that this could be crafted so skillfully was that the person had a lot of time to spend on it. (Sam Burns, during a visit to the Uncompahgre with Bernice Musser and Jo Gore, 2002.)

At other times the marks are more visible, a road connecting us to somewhere, an irrigation flume bringing water to a community, or a series of stone columns beside a bridge, depicting a decade of conservation. Among the aspen trees can be seen the carvings of shepherders and cowboys. On the gravestones of rural cemeteries are written the memories of past generations.

We Have Left Our Marks on the Land
As the living history of ranching is told relative to the Uncompahgre Plateau, we must also take note of changes that are occurring. People are growing older. Surrounding towns are growing larger. Economic costs are rising. Ranch land is not as easy to come by as it once was.

While some amount of change is to be expected, the actual and potential impacts on ranching deserve some very careful attention. What concerns might we have as ranching continues to decline?

I sold out in 1962. We still ran sheep. Leased back land. It got worse and worse and worse after that. After we made that mistake, got out in about 1980.

Lots of folks went broke. You think how can you go broke? You're making money and you got lots of property. How can you go broke? But I found out. We had three outfits when I went broke. That's what broke us. Tad Paxton, Retired Sheep Rancher

We are seeing cases where newer people are coming in and replacing some of the old families. Hendrix is the guy that owns the Discovery Channel and he moved into Gateway and purchased a couple of ranches and one of them was one of the Casto Ranches.
Reflection
Some amount of loss can be expected to occur over time among individual family ranches due to the normal changes and challenges of life. There are deaths, debts, and droughts that besiege even the best of us. It is the more general losses that come from larger changes in the economy, land use, or public sentiment that are more ominous. Even at a time when ranching is moderately well off, in that the last multi—year drought has eased to a degree, and cattle prices are up, the large scale social and economic barriers to ranching are eminent.

Consideration
When assessing the importance of specific landscapes simply in terms of their unique topographic and geologic attributes and contributions, would not the Uncompahgre Plateau stand out as a central and unique place, worthy of special attention and careful stewardship? Do not it’s special features within the public lands of Colorado deserve special attention?
Ranching is one of those businesses or professions that is also a calling. From one perspective it might be just a hard way to make a living, but for most people who have been in it for a time it has become “a way of life.” That sense, “a way of life,” speaks about some things that get in your blood, or almost in your genes. It might be that you are the happiest when riding a horse, or that the open places gives a sense of independence, perhaps the pattern of returning to cow camps each Spring and Fall, or making sure that the irrigation water covers the field. However, what comes along with these images are deep connections with a type of work, a set of outdoor skills, and a sense of well being that seems to be a part of the landscape itself.

The UP has always been a place that I have dearly loved. I hate to see the growth in the timber and the dead trees that we have in the forest. At one time we had a big beetle kill. On the way down here there were those big logs on the side of the road. They burned those. It is an area that I would like to see well taken care of. I would like to see the timber harvested that is, the trees that are topped out. It would make more feed for the elk and the deer if the areas were cleaned up. And the only way we are going to be able to do that is to allow some timber harvest in. The devastating fires we are having in a few years it is going to be one of the best things that could have happened. Jo Gore, Rancher

But, it was just a plain ole life up there, year around here and there and there. It wasn’t too pleasant I would have to say. Pretty rugged life. It felt good. A little like they lived years ago. Followed
Reflection

Ranching in the open spaces of the West has made possible a way of life for many families. That way of life has become historical in the sense that it has built a continuous heritage, filled with values, and capacities that are alive as in few other places. Within this way of life, there are the visible features, the cows, horses, grass, trees, and trails, but also the deeper and less visible craftsmanship of the cowboy who can move a herd at night, the commitment of the aging grandfather who return year after year to the mountain pastures, and the sense of satisfaction that comes from completing another Fall round—up.

Consideration

What public or civic values are there in any way of life? What assets does the ranching way of life hold for the future? Are there cultural values, like commitments to nature, or capacities to live in and thereby take care of a landscape? Is there an enduring character, a heritage, and an appreciation for the productivity of the land that we ought to protect or conserve, lest we need it for the tasks of stewardship that lie ahead?
The story of the Uncompahgre Plateau has many components, in particular the mountain itself, the long tradition of family ranching, a wealth of knowledge, and a capacity to adapt to a changing land management situation, and yet maintain a commitment to a way of life on the land. These are all good things, which contribute to the public good in direct and indirect ways.

But, whether we like it or not, ranching has to make sense economically, too. Sometimes, there is a tendency to appreciate the open fields, the snow drifted against fences, or the smell of wet leather in the loafing shed. To focus on these amenities alone is far too narrow a perspective.

*Ranching in this area is still part of the economy. It’s not just a warm and fuzzy feeling. It’s hard dollars that goes to Wells Fargo. It’s hard dollars that go to John Deere. It’s not just warm and fuzzy. Too often in a lot of literature it just talks about the open space and the wildlife and all that. But it is a hard economic reality here too, still.*

To me it’s an economic factor and it’s real dollars. It’s not just retirement dollars. It’s real dollars that are put back into this economy, that make that piece of ground return something. Without those individuals up there that piece of ground would not return as much as it does now. Would it still be the Plateau? Sure. Would water still run down? Yea. Would the wildlife still like the area? Yea. But you are adding because those animals are able to go up there, and harvest, and you’re adding a significant amount of dollars to this economy, plus those other amenities. So you are just building on what you currently have, like interest. You’re just adding interest. That interest.
Reflection
As the economies of the Uncompahgre and San Miguel River Valleys have gradually diversified from agriculture towards small town growth, recreation, and tourism, the real economic contributions of ranching may be increasingly overlooked. However, the evidence is clear. Ranching makes a real contribution to the local economy, without which the many other heritage, cultural, and social values of this way would have no sustainable basis.

Consideration
If we merely value the open space, scenic landscape, and western heritage of ranching without the economic benefits that undergird it, a critical outcome is overlooked. Can we continue to value the open space and scenery in the valleys and mountains around our communities as critical outcomes of ranching, without also taking into account that this activity contributes economically as well? Is there not a critical integration necessary between economic and ecological sustainability within the ranching community?

starts to return. It’s using those resources wisely. Now, can you overdue it. Sure. But the answer isn’t taking the animals off. The answer is managing better. Too often the simple answer is not the right answer. Robbie Le Valley, CSU Extension
As we have noted, the Uncompahgre Plateau is a special place topographically, and because of the families who chose to settle around it, and to establish a way of life in ranching. Because this way of life has endured, many values and outcomes can be accounted for, such as family based ranching, knowledge of the land, lasting marks of a western heritage, and ongoing economic benefits to the ranching and broader community.

Because we are viewing ranching in the larger context of landscapes, and within the scope of public land management, it is essential to examine the stewardship role of ranching with regard to forests and rangeland. Ultimately, the contribution of ranching to long-term stewardship on both private and public lands deserves our consideration.

As these guys have moved into these better rotations, the diversity of species has increased. In some permits it’s significant. In others, it’s been a smaller, gradual change. But there are more forbs, and there are more species of grass, and those all contribute to better nutrition, not just for the cows, but for the wildlife and the rodents and the insects and all that. So when you have more diversity of species out there, then that builds more resilience. So if we get a late freeze, and the needle grass is froze off, and then comes the brome. And in fact will be able to express it because it’s been able to build its root mass because the management has been better. So that helps the wildlife, which helps the livestock, which helps the water quality. It’s not just running off. It’s being filtered.

All those amenities that the forest has, a properly managed
grazing system can help. Everybody can have their wildflowers. Even when they are grazing, it doesn’t mean the wildflower photo opportunity has to go away. …The fisheries people want certain things. Well, you know, when things are grazed right, there is clear water, there is overhanging banks. That’s what we have been able to document, especially on the north end of the plateau as those creeks have healed over and there is better habitat there, even with the cows. So it doesn’t have to be mutually exclusive. But you just got to continually be out there to document it so you do have the photos to show people.

Well to me it still goes back to they are utilizing a resource to make a resource. It’s not just an extractive resource only. They extract, but they also add. …So when you think about sustainable, I laugh sometime that the word sustainable automatically assumes that nothing has been added. But there is so much that is added when somebody is out there on the landscape putting their effort into making that piece of ground respond and those animals respond, and give them an income, but also all sorts of other amenities that too often are just taken for granted. And that’s sustainable. When a family, no matter what their management, has been there for three or four generations, that’s sustainable. It’s not whether you ever use a pesticide. That’s not sustainable. It’s much bigger than that.

It’s very complex. And people that don’t walk that land don’t understand that complexity. Don’t understand what a late freeze does to everything. We got to have that understanding. You got to have people willing to say that. Robbie Le Valley, CSU Extension Agent

Since ranching is occurring with in the context of U.S. Forest Service lands, it is relevant to recognize what the Chief Dale Bosworth has stated are the four major threats to the health of the Nation’s Forests and Grasslands: The four threats are:

(a) fire and fuels, (b) invasive species, (c) loss of open space, and (d) unmanaged recreation.

As we examine the future of ranching in Western Colorado, and on the Uncompahgre Plateau specifically, it is reasonable to ask whether one hundred years of ranching can contribute to solutions to these four threats.

Reflection

Some people see ranching has merely utilizing public land resources without making a stewardship contribution in return. While this belief has been held for many decades, when grazing is undertaken utilizing good management techniques, it appears to provide benefits back to the land. To understand and further document this evidence requires that the range scientist, ranchers, and community members spend time together on the land making careful and objective observations.

Consideration:

Could the stewardship contributions of ranching on the Uncompahgre Plateau be better understood through a partnership of ecological, economic, and community interests? Could such a partnership be established that would recognize the knowledge and practices of family oriented ranching and that would value the understandings that have been gained from actually living and working on the land?