"Range War" on Hobble Creek Allotment

Stan Tixier and Don Nebeker

"There was a time when there was no grass up here and it looked like hell," the old cowboy told the crowd. Thirty years later, the meadow was covered with lush forage "and no one could be prouder than I am of Hobble Creek." Reed Christmas, long-time president of Springville Livestock Association, was among about 75 stockmen, Forest Service employees, retirees, and other range professionals who had gathered July 17, 1987 to re-tell the story and celebrate the success of Hobble Creek Allotment.

The allotment, 95 square miles of creek bottom, steep oakbrush hills, and high pastured rangeland on the Uinta National Forest in Utah, was the scene of great controversy in the early 1960s. At that time, the Forest Service imposed severe reductions in stock numbers on the allotment, provoking a battle with the livestock association, Congressmen, newspaper editorialists, and other local residents. That "battle" actually ended in victory for all. And the winners—stockmen, sportsmen, officials, and range professionals—that gathered on the Hobble Creek site to celebrate the victory and tell the tale of scientific cooperative range management.

The day-long "Hobble Creek Revisited" event included tours of allotment areas re-seeded, "before and after" displays of devastated and rejuvenated rangelands, and talks on multiple use management. Regional Forester Stan Tixier noted that Hobble Creek gained nationwide notoriety, but few people knew about the successful ending to the story. "Much of the general public is not knowledgeable about improved range management."

Hobble Creek was one of many sites in a much larger "range war." Since the pioneers had settled the West, overcutting of timber and overgrazing by livestock had removed much vegetative cover on many of the dry, marginal mountain highlands of Nevada, Utah, Idaho, and other Western states. Towns in the valleys below were plagued by annual devastating floods, caused by violent, summer thunderstorms on the bare, eroded mountain watersheds. The Forest Service, charged to manage these lands, was trying to rehabilitate the watersheds. Reducing livestock use was one key part.

In the late 1950s, Forest Service range and analysis showed 65 percent of Hobble Creek suitable range in very poor condition and 30 percent in poor condition. Riparian areas were trampled and compacted; tarweed, hounds-tongue, sagebrush, Canada thistle, and other weeds replaced desirable forage. In 1959, the Forest Service announced to the livestock association its plan to restore Hobble Creek.

Starting in 1960, the permits would be reduced 20 percent each year for four consecutive years and certain areas would be closed to grazing on the Hobble Creek Allotment. Stock-
pastures, requiring the association to regularly move cattle from pasture to pasture. The Forest Service also built erosion-control terraces, planted trees, stabilized stream channels, and reseeded more than 3,000 acres of suitable range.

"Hobble Creek became a benchmark case," noted Reed Christiansen, Forest Service retiree who oversaw much of the Hobble Creek restoration work. "There were lots of places in Utah with similar reductions but this was the case everyone looked at." Christiansen, a Utah native, walked into the Spanish Fork District Ranger job—his first Ranger position—with the unhappy task of enforcing the reductions at Hobble Creek. "That first year every person who walked through my office door was madder than hell—even if they were there to get a map." But the embattled ranger once told the stockmen that "the day would come when the Forest Service and livestock people stood shoulder to shoulder to defend livestock grazing on public lands." Today, looking out over the lush forage of Pumphouse Corral pasture, Christiansen told the group, "we can defend good management." Sonny Crandall, current Springdale association president, agreed. "It’s working," he said. "There's a resource here that, the only way you can harvest, is with livestock."

Under a grazing agreement, the livestock association actually manages the allotment with some Forest Service consultation. The original five-pasture system has been adjusted to a simpler three-pasture system. With this system, cattle first graze one pasture, then move into a second pasture while the third rests for the season, explained Norm Huntsman, Range Staff Officer for the Uinta National Forest. "The first pasture holds the cattle until the second pasture sets seed" he said. "We attempt to let plants on the second pasture compete the growth cycle," Huntsman said. "Then we turn the cattle in to knock the seed off and get it back into the soil. At that point they can graze heavily."

Original goal for Hobble Creek was to restore 65 percent cover on suitable range; studies today show 95 percent cover. The increased productivity has allowed a stocking increase, from 677 cattle in 1964 to 944 today. The season
has also been extended another five weeks. “If we can graze
livestock on this steep, fragile range, successfully, that dem-
onstrates livestock is a viable use anywhere,” noted Don
Nebecker, Uinta Forest Supervisor. “This range has made a
dramatic recovery.” “Some of it is due to structural readjust-
ment,” Nebecker added, “but most of it is due to management
by the livestock permittees.” “The real story here today is the
cooperation, courage and vision of the people working
here,” agreed Utah Lt. Gov. Val Oveson.

“War is hell—particularly a civil war fought between
neighbors,” noted Fee Busby, former president of the Society
for Range Management and former University of Wyoming
professor. “The peace we've experienced today is because we
have worked together to improve this allotment.” Hobble
Creek became a success story when people on both sides of
the fence started talking to each other. “Sometimes we in
range management are accused of talking only to our-

selves,” said Busby. Talking to the group at a picnic ground
in Hobble Creek Canyon, as a Dutch oven supper cooked,
Busby noted that other people besides cattlemen use the
area: picnickers, campers, fishermen, horse riders, and hik-
ners. “If we can talk to the recreationists, listen to and respect
other people, maybe we can solve some problems before
they become problems.”

The Forest Service won the Hobble Creek appeal. The
livestock association also won through cooperative range
management, restored permit numbers, and improved range.
Utah sportsmen won with improved wildlife habitat, and
downstream irrigators won a healthy, restored watershed.
And the public was the biggest winner of all because the
cooperative efforts of many made Hobble Creek into a model
of good multiple use on the National Forest. It was time to
celebrate!

Broadening the Base for Range Management

Peter C. Myers

I want to thank your President, Bill Laycock, and your
Executive Vice President, Peter Jackson, for the invitation to
speak here today. This International Society and its members
play a vital role in being the “conscience” of the world for
the conservation of range resources. You are to be commended
for that job, your past performance, and your strong support
in the continuation of this resource endeavor.

Using Our Talents

It is extremely important that we each patiently practice
those talents that we were blessed with in this range vegeta-
tion management, especially during such trying times as we
have been confronted with in the current drought situation in
the United States.

Drought and dry conditions are words that range man-
gers are more accustomed to than other agriculturalists, and it
is your understanding of these conditions and basic plant
and soil interrelationships that will continue to make this
nation's range and pasture lands a productive type for present
and future land uses.

Twenty-First Century agriculture in this country will rec-
ognize the vast resource benefits produced from America’s
rangelands. From my vantage point, the resource benefits
produced from America’s rangelands are just now beginning
to be recognized by the public. May I be bold as to offer this
membership, the heartbeat within the Society, suggestions
to hasten the public's understanding and support.

Building Understanding in an Urban Public

The benefits derived from range and pasture resources are
not fully understood or appreciated by our urban neighbors.

Changing life styles of the past twenty years have brought
our nation's population from a rural environment to the cit-
ties. Today we have a young generation that knows little of
the traditional uses of range and pasture resources, but are
more in tune with using rangelands for their recreation
values, and riparian areas for their fish, wildlife, and other
noncommodity values.

The Society must act aggressively to educate and broaden
the knowledge of our urban population on the values and
benefits of all range resources. USDA agencies are aware
of this need and are looking at opportunities to broaden the
understanding and partnership in managing rangeland and
pasture resources for the present and future needs of people.
The agencies in USDA also work closely with agencies of the
Department of Interior (BLM, FIA, FWS) which are key play-
ers. We maintain this contact through the Range Issues
Working Group of the Department's Natural Resources and
Environment Committee.

Promoting the Benefits of Livestock Grazing

A stronger case must be made to seek public understand-
ing of the opportunity and benefits that can be derived from
using proper livestock grazing as a tool to achieve desired
vegetation objectives for multiple resource values. There are
many ways to do this. For example, the Mark Twain National
Forest in Missouri identified four specific wildlife species
that are dependent upon the edge effect in managed range
and pasture land.

With the help of local and interested publics, range man-
gers on the Mark Twain identified specific habitat and vege-
tation objectives. In addition, they identified plant diversity
as an important component to obtain and maintain high
quality wildlife habitats for eastern cottontail rabbit, eastern
bluebird, orchard oriole, bobwhite quail, eastern wild turkey,
and white-tailed deer.

Speech by Peter C. Myers, Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department
of Agriculture at the summer meeting of the Society for Range