North Dakota's Range Youth Camp
Past to Present

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The first annual Range Youth Camp in North Dakota began in June of 1975. Sixteen youths from southwest North Dakota gathered together to call Dickinson State College campus their camp headquarters for the next 4 days.

The goal was to unite the state's finest educators to teach young people from an array of backgrounds the importance of proper range management...but how did it all start and who were the pioneers that shaped the foundation for such a successful program?

Jim Kramer, former Range Conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service and Bill Johnson, a Slope County rancher, saw the success Montana was achieving with their own range youth program and felt it too would work in North Dakota. Jim and Bill brought their ideas before a local meeting of the North Dakota Chapter of the Society for Range Management (SRM). J.C. Shaver, former Grassland Management agent with the North Dakota State University Extension Service, soon became involved and would go on to play a major role in the establishment of North Dakota's Range Youth Camp.

In Casper, Wyoming, December 1974, a group of people with a common goal conceived what was called "The Old West Regional Range Program" (OWRRP). The ultimate goal of the program was to bring about improved management and productivity of rangelands through educational efforts in Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The Old West Regional Range Program was very timely. It provided a source of funding, and helped to structure and standardize the youth camp's format. Information about the North Dakota Range Youth Camp began to spread. A committee of North Dakota Chapter SRM members began to organize the camp details. Since funding from the Old West Regional Range Program was not available for the first youth camp, individual students were sponsored by 7 Soil Conservation Districts in southwestern North Dakota and the Horse Creek and Little Missouri Grazing Associations. Travel, rooms, and meal accommodations had to be accounted for. Instructors from North Dakota State University, Dickinson Experiment Station, Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, Extension Service, National Park Service, and individuals from the ranching industry were all called upon to provide help in the areas of teaching, organizing and supervising the event.

The first annual Range Management Youth Camp was an overwhelming success! In 1976, the camp was held at the Badlands Bible Camp near Medora, N.D., June 2-5 and a second camp was held at the Sheyenne 4H Camp near McLeod, N.D., on July 14-17. Over the years, the camp has found its way back to western North Dakota. The last 2 years have been headquartered out of the beautiful Logging Camp Ranch facilities owned by Bob, John and Jennifer Hanson near Amidon, N.D.

The Range Youth Camp of today is run much as in the early years. Boys and girls from the ages of 13 to 18 are eligible to attend. During camp registration emotions run high. Suitcases and sleeping bags with feet scramble to the bunk house rooms.

Right before the opening introduction anxiety soars. Many of the students are waiting, wondering, and watching. Several voices are heard above the others. At this point most all are strangers. Before the day ends all will be friends.

With the camp rules laid out and the agenda reviewed, it's on to the
principles of range management-classroom style. One-half hour later the students have been divided into four groups and are out the classroom door. Range sites with common soils and plants have been identified by the counselors. Students listen and learn about geology, range sites and identifying range plants common to the individual sites. Soils become a “hands on” experience.

Watershed values are discussed and the importance of managing woody draws for wildlife habitat is emphasized. After a hearty supper, the campers are free to relax or enjoy a vigorous volleyball game. The day ends. Lights out at 10:00.

Breakfast on the prairie tastes so good! Pancakes, eggs and bacon, milk and orange juice in the morning bring campers and counselors to life. Range condition, stocking rates, and range improvements are introduced to the class. Student attention at this point is high. The morning is filled with interesting topics. Situation maps are passed out and the campers are given an opportunity to determine animal unit month (AUM’s), stocking rates, and the best range improvement options.

After lunch, a trip to historic Medora, N.D., is underway. A nature hike through the scenic Theodore Roosevelt National Park captures everyone’s attention. The beauty of North Dakotas’ badlands is breath taking. Buffalo roam the plains and prairie dog towns come to life. Free time is best utilized studying the plants along the flood plains and steep side slopes of the Little Missouri River. At last the horn blast signals it’s picnic time. Sandwiches, brownies, and watermelon have never tasted so good.

After supper the campers are free to tour the city of Medora. Some shop, others enjoy old fashion ice cream, and miniature golf seems to satisfy some while frustrating others. The long day ends with a trip to the Medora outdoor musical. An enchanting evening with guest performers, lots of drama, action and history of days gone by when Teddy Roosevelt roamed the North Dakota badlands.

Breakfast at 7:30 sharp! All campers gather outside to review the North Dakota range judging card which will be scored at the end of the course. They will need to identify the correct range site, range condition, degree of utilization, stocking rate, range improvement options and identify all marked plants including life span, season of growth and grazing response of each plant on each specific site. The practice sites are tough and time passes quickly. Campers get face-to-face with grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

The lunch bell rings. Once again the cook house is the most popular place in camp. While appetites are being satisfied, several counselors are busy arranging the classroom. A guest speaker prepares a display which will show how less desirable plants replace more desirable plants as range condition declines. The demonstration is simple but very effective. Students observe in a few minutes what can happen in years when rangeland is misused. After the demonstration, time is given to the camp-

ers to study the material which will be on the written test tomorrow.

Outside, several groups of counselors and students are doing some last minute plant identification as the sun begins to set behind the pine trees.

Tonight a special event takes place in the classroom. A local rancher talks to the students. He has everyone’s attention. His words have a way of touching the heart. The land is the life line of his ranch. How it is managed determines his profit or loss. A deep respect and appreciation for man and land become real.

The final day has come. With breakfast out of the way, the campers complete a short written quiz on the material which was learned in class. The range judging contests begin. With hearts pounding and palms sweating each camper puts their very best performance on the line.

The last card is in, the contests are over. While camp is being cleaned, the supervisors are busy totaling scores to see which individuals have earned this year’s camp awards.

The scores are in! The “top hand” award, second, third, fourth, and fifth place plaques are given. The “most improved” plaque goes to the one special person who accepted the most change during the week and never gave up.

The time has come to leave. Dust from the dirt trail hangs thick in the air. As the last vehicle pulls away and disappears behind the hill a quietness settles around the few supervisors who remain. The last 4 days have been intense. The camp help is tired, but it is a good tired. Plans begin for next year.

A special thanks to the leaders who helped coordinate the camp activities over the last 18 years. Those people are: Bill Johnson, J.C. Shaver, Jim Kramer, Paul Bultsma, Michele Doyle, and Kevin Sedivec.

To all of the Range Camp Speakers, Counselors, Organizers, Hosts and Cooks, a warm and sincere thank you for all you’ve done. Without your assistance and interest, the camp would not exist.

To the contributing agencies and organizations who have provided the necessary funding it takes to keep the camp alive: the North Dakota Soil Conservation Districts, Grazing Associations, Stockmen Association, 4-H and the North Dakota State University; a very special heart felt thanks to each of you.

The North Dakota Range Youth Camp continues to improve each year. Over 600 North Dakota youth have attended the camp since 1975. Many North Dakota Range Youth Camp graduates have taken the knowledge back home to the family farm or ranch. Some have pursued college and other career callings. All have left camp with a different attitude and a better understanding of range management principles. These youngsters will have a positive effect on the future of North Dakota’s rangelands for generations to come.