

A Portrait of Ranching by a Rancher

Jack Southworth

Ranching is an art of applying many diverse sciences toward the goal of producing meat. There are years when the rewards increase and years when they diminish, but the challenge to convert grass into red meat, efficiently, while conserving the land resource, remains the same. We, as ranchers, look ahead each spring and see the potential of the land itself. We look behind us at the years that have passed and see our successes, and our mistakes. And we see the promise laid open—of our ability to both use and improve the range resource.

The Land

Our ranch is in Bear Valley, 25 miles south of John Day, in eastern Oregon. It is comprised of 13,000 acres of deeded land, 2,000 AUM permit on the Malheur National Forest, and a 1,300 AUM membership in a nearby cooperative grazing association. The ranch was started in 1885 as a hay ranch and cattle came on it in 1886. My great-grandfather owned a sawmill near John Day and needed hay to winter his draft oxen. He took up a 160-acre preemption claim, a homestead that could be purchased for a dollar and a quarter per acre after it had been lived on for 6 months.

Bear Valley is a high, mountain valley where summers are pleasant. It is probable that the claim was taken up in May, that the hay was cut in July and August, and that those early Southworths were gone to lower, milder country by late October, fulfilling their obligation to live there 6 months. I am certain that if my great-grandfather and his family had to spend the winter in Bear Valley and endure the -40-50° F temperatures they would have considered the homestead uninhabitable and therefore a senseless investment. Instead, they spent the winter remembering the wonderful summer and acquired the beginnings of a cattle ranch, establishing a lifestyle for their descendants in a location where shivering is as natural a body action as breathing. I suppose that if we hated it we could leave, but like musk oxen we stay there, acclimated to our environment and probably unable to exist in a pleasanter one.

The Herd

We maintain a 500-head herd of Angus-Shorthorn brood cows. Calves are born in March and April and weaned in November. These calves average about 475 pounds at weaning. We hold them over the winter and graze them the first summer as yearlings. In addition to the steer calves we wean from our cow herd we purchase another 450 steer calves that are wintered and run as yearlings. The steers are sold in September or October weighing 800-900 pounds. The heifer



Calves from Angus-Hereford cows and Shorthorn bulls in corral just before being branded.

calves are also held over to run as yearlings. In October they are weighed individually and those that weigh over 750 pounds are kept as cow herd replacements and will have their first calf the following March as two-year-olds.

Although a description of this ranch may provide an insight into my own perspective, our operation is not the important thing. What is important is grass, the land it grows on, and how it is managed.

Each year Bear Valley does a nice thing for us. It takes a 550-pound steer, one year old, and over the course of the summer puts 350 pounds of gain on that animal. My grandfather would have called me a liar. He used to sell his steers at 30 months of age and on good years they'd hit 800 pounds. Though they've been improved through performance testing over the years, cattle now are not radically different from what they were in his time. The really marked difference is in the land.

We run our steers on our deeded land while the cows spend the summer on the National Forest. The deeded land varies in elevation from 4,600 to 5,000 feet. We say we have about a thousand acres of irrigable land and we harvest hay from it. Another 1,800 acres has some timber on it but its basic use is for grazing. The remaining 10,200 acres is rangeland. It's land that you see all the time in the western United States. The lowlands are meadows, naturally flooded in the springtime by the runoff of winter snow. Against these are sagebrush hills that lie between the meadows and the forests at the higher elevations. Running cattle on land such as this is a natural. The meadows provide the winter feed source

Jack and wife, Teresa, graduated from Oregon State University in 1977, married in 1978 and have been running the ranch ever since. There are no children yet, but when they come along they will be the fifth generation of Southworths to ranch the same land.

with the hay they produce. The surrounding sagebrush foothills and crested wheatgrass seedings provide spring grazing, and the forests provide summer grazing later on. In the fall when the cattle come off the forests they graze the stubble in the meadows until time to start feeding hay. The ranch being at 4,600 feet elevation is both a curse and a blessing. It means that we have to feed hay a longer time, which is more expensive than grazing. The snow comes earlier and stays longer. We plan to feed hay for five months, from November 20 to April 20. Usually we don't start feeding until after Thanksgiving and we're usually turned out onto grass by late April. But it's by no means uncommon to have either an early snow in November or a cold, late spring, when it seems to take forever for the grass to start growing. But the grass eventually grows and the blessing is that a grass that can't mature as quickly due to a colder climate stays palatable longer. A yearling steer tends to eat more grass with more enthusiasm longer than he would at a lower elevation where the cattle are turned out in early March and the grass is already yellow by the first of July. Given a late, short growing season, a clay-loam soil of volcanic origin, and 12 to 16 inches of annual rainfall, we have the ingredients that make for potentially good grazing. Making the most of that potential depends on the grass and the way that it's managed.



Foreground, crested wheatgrass seeding producing 1,200 pounds forage per acre per year. Background, native sagebrush range producing 400 pounds forage per acre per year.

The Grass

In the early thirties, County Extension agents started saying something about sagebrush not being a necessary evil on rangeland—that if it were plowed up and seeded to some drought-hardy grass, the pounds of grass per acre could be dramatically improved. Annual rye was generally the recommended thing then. My grandfather tried it, and sure enough it worked, but somehow his heart wasn't in it. There was something about working a piece of land every year that didn't ring true with his idea of ranching. On good years it was sensational, but on a poor year there wasn't anything at all and he couldn't put an old cow and her calf onto a rye seeding any sooner than he could bunchgrass. So he stopped doing what he called farming and he died convinced that he lost money every time he put a plow in the ground. Then in the late thirties extension agents stopped muttering and started getting excited about a new sort of grass called crested wheatgrass. They said it came early and could be

grazed close year after year. It was hard to come by and in any one place only a little was seeded, usually poorly, and though some did come up it was grazed as if it were a weed to be eradicated and didn't last long. Then World War II came along and miracle seeds were quickly forgotten. When the war was over the extension agents started talking once again. Only this time they were armed with more seed and were more specific in their instructions. Crested wheatgrass worked wonderfully. And in Bear Valley crested wheatgrass helps us to realize the potential of the land.

There is a simple recipe for wonderful grass. It requires a field of sagebrush, preferably one with a rather poor stand of grass on it, and preferably one that is made up of big sage or Wyoming big sage rather than low or silver sage. In early summer, when the ground is dry, plow it and then follow with a disk. Let it sit quietly for almost a year, until late April or early May. Disk it again. Drag it with railroad rails to smooth out the clods and seed it with six pounds of crested wheatgrass and a pound or two of a drought resistant alfalfa to the acre.

Our results have been excellent. We usually quadruple the amount of grass. Stands that are 25 years old are showing little reinvasion by sagebrush and are still producing well. But maximizing production is not as important as protecting the resource. I think we are. I would guess that there is less sediment loss during spring runoff in a dense stand of crested wheatgrass than there is in a field of sparsely populated sagebrush and bunchgrass. Ground squirrels thrive on crested wheat. So do antelope. The game commission planted ten head in Bear Valley in 1955. By the summer of 1977 there were over 600 head in the valley. The game commission felt that one of the reasons for the spectacular growth in numbers of antelope was the number of acres of crested wheatgrass that provided excellent feed during the summer months. Another side benefit of the seedings is the pressure they take off the native range. Not having to graze bluebunch wheatgrass until late June is a wonderful thing. I mentioned that our country, with the variations in elevation, is a natural for raising cattle since different grasses come in at different times. Having seedings of crested wheat enhances that even more by dividing the spring range into early and late grazing. With more than enough grass the management of the rest of the operation is made easier. There is more flexibility in the face of a drought, and it's also much easier to change the grazing pattern from year to year and to give certain pastures a rest.

The Work

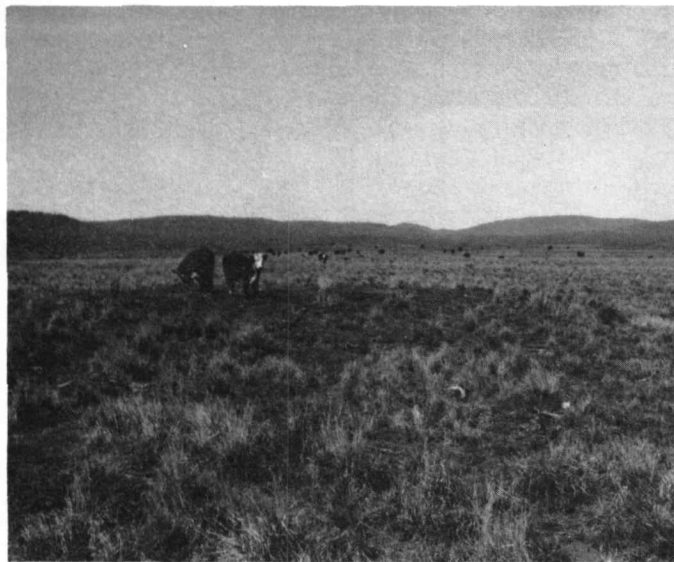
There are two things we all know. With a little rain and some warm weather, grass grows all by itself; and secondly, with no help from us, cattle will try to find enough feed to survive and reproduce. Those facts give us a very easy management plan. Simply do nothing. If we only chose to give cattle enough hay to see them through the winter and then in the spring opened every gate on the place and turned them loose as one big herd, they would probably do all right. Calves would be born, yearling steers would put on weight, bulls would breed cows. But to keep from damaging the resource, you'd have to be understocked. The way to make money is to grow more calves, not less, and to achieve that end you might, for example, start keeping your first-calf heifers in a separate group, letting them eat a little more hay through the winter and watching them closely when they start to calve. We're rewarded for our hard work. The more

management that is put into an operation, in terms of having different groups, keeping production records and using a grazing plan, the better it will produce.

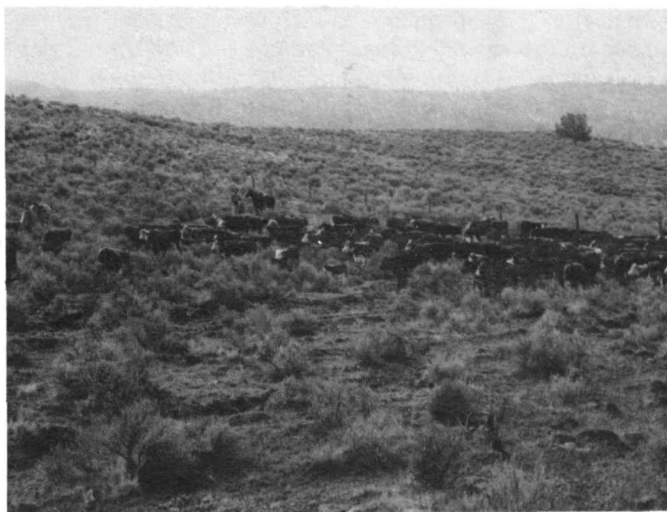
Management is involved with three different time references. Day-to-day management is simply a matter of taking care of what needs to be done. It means fixing the down fence, putting in the headgates to spread irrigation water, replacing the rotten corral post, keeping the machinery in good shape, cleaning the shop, and treating the sick animal. It's very easy to be convinced that everything is taken care of when the cattle are on good grass and there has just been a good rain. The truth is that everything is never taken care of. There is always something else to be done, and keeping up with daily maintenance helps to cut down the number of emergencies you may find yourself running to.

Managing the year is done at the desk. Eventually it becomes work that you do on a certain day. But long before that day you plot out what cattle are going to graze where, what major projects should be undertaken such as plowing a sagebrush field, surveying a set of spreader ditches in a hay meadow or building a new stretch of fence. The grazing plan is vital. We have two separate groups of old cows and their calves, 500 head of yearling steers, a herd of yearling heifers, a herd of young cows, and the bulls. It's important to see where what will be grazing when for ease of herd movement, proper pasture management, and for reducing headaches like having a herd of lusty bulls next to the cows a month before they should be together, or having to move the steers across a field the heifers are grazing. Another nice thing about attempting to chart the year out in advance is that it helps eliminate the exasperation of having to do four things at the same time.

The long-term goals I set are usually not written down. They come from within and their sole purpose is to enhance my own well-being. In '78 we had, due to a combination of vibriosis, a venereal disease, that ran through the herd and our not managing properly during the drought in '77, 50% calf crop. That's terrible. This year we're hoping to hit 90%.



"Wolf plants" in the crested wheatgrass pasture are being grazed down. This pasture is used in late April and early May and the cattle are taken off while there is still moisture available for regrowth. As a result, the entire stand becomes "woffy" each year and each fall the roots are able to store carbohydrates to be used for an early and vigorous start the next spring.



First-calf heifers and their calves on land where sagebrush has been treated and killed with 2,4-D. Sagebrush in background has not been treated.

That increases my sense of well-being by keeping us in business and giving me the satisfaction of seeing a lot of calves tagging along behind their mothers. To achieve that goal I've increased mineral supplementation, changed the pastures where our young females graze, improved our vaccination program, and I'm working on improving the situation where we calve by providing more protection from the weather. My long-term goals change as I do and that's fine. They should be flexible but they should always benefit the land regardless of the manner in which they benefit me.

Recordkeeping is imperative to good management. Whether it be a record of how big a calf a cow has produced the last 6 years, when and for how long a certain pasture was grazed, or when the oil was changed and the U-joints greased on the pickup, making decisions that improve the quality of an operation is easier and better if it is possible to look back on past experiences.

When you're making decisions there are no hard and fast answers. The extremes are quickly recognizable in almost any situation, but the trick is to hit the middle ground, and try to save running up production costs without hurting either cattle or land. You're not doing a good job of managing when you feed an old cow all the hay she will eat all winter long and then run completely out of hay 3 days after she's calved and there's still 6 inches of snow on the ground. By the same token you're not doing a good job if you buy enough additional hay to feed until the middle of May, especially at today's prices. You're dealing with Nature on a first-hand basis. If you're prepared to handle the absolute worst, you're not going to make any money and you're not going to stay in business very long.

Ranchers would like to believe that they are their own bosses, but there are few operations in the western US that don't depend upon public lands for a major portion of their grazing land. The government range manager and the cattleman represent one of the all-time great feuds. Often they hate each other. Often there is no trust, respect or comprehension of the other fellow's point of view, and it's a real shame. They both have a lot of knowledge pertaining to land management that could be shared. So often, the person who is responsible for the management of the government land is seen by the rancher as someone who is overprotecting the resource—

someone who would rather see no grazing at all and who wants a climax stand of grass to evolve within 5 years of his assuming management. And by the same token the rancher is seen as an exploiter of the resource who puts as many cattle as possible on his allotment and cares nothing whatever for the condition of the land. There are examples of both types of people in real life, but what we all should consider is that it is to the betterment of everyone to utilize that resource with negligible detrimental effects. It gives both the rancher and the range manager a livelihood and it produces a good source of protein rather cheaply.

Summer grazing on the National Forests is a very vital part of a ranching operation, representing anywhere from a third to two-thirds of the total grazing resource. It is not something a ranch can survive without. The privately owned rangeland is usually needed for spring and fall grazing, and for summer hay production. There is not any extra land lying around unused. Therefore a reduction in grazing on the National Forest results in a reduction in total herd size which reflects directly on a rancher's income. It is well known by the rancher that abusive use of land owned by the government has a profound effect on his own operation. A rancher grazes his cattle on the same permit year after year. We've had ours since the 1940's. Though the fences weren't build and individual permits had not been seen set up, my grandfather grazed the same forest lands before that.

It is as important to the rancher that the public lands stay in good shape as it is for his private land. If it deteriorates in forage quality it is just the same as having a cutback in the total number of head grazed. He might run more cattle but he'll wean lighter calves and more cows won't conceive when bred, which will result in smaller calf crops. The rancher thinks of the land as his own. He would be cutting his own throat if he overgrazed it. It is always a source of frustration to a rancher for a new ranger to deplore the condition of his allotment. A ranger should not expect to regain climax condition on a grazing permit during his first season of managing it. It is a slow process, one that will span many growing seasons. A lot of the rangeland in our area was overgrazed by sheep in the 1860's and '70's before cattle were even around. My grandfather started grazing on public lands in 1887. We are grazing that same country still. In 1903 the Forest Service started controlling the number of animals each rancher grazed on public lands, though the Forest lands were not

fenced into individual allotments until the 1940's. Since that time (1903) we have never, in 77 years of grazing under Forest Service management, had a reduction in the number of cattle we have been allowed to graze. Instead, there have been increases in allowable AUM's due to an improvement in range condition. Anyone in a management position should not limit his or her thinking to what the grass could be, but also need to try to get an understanding of what condition it has come from and in what direction its condition is heading.

The Reasons

Each year by the end of calving I ask myself why I'm ranching. I become tired of getting out of bed every four hours to trudge out in the mud and dark in search of dilating bovine vulvas. I get frustrated when a cold, wet storm hits and a calf that was healthy yesterday is under the heat lamps today and dead from scours in the morning. My wife gets tired of living with someone who's either outside working or inside sleeping. Other people can leave it behind at 5 o'clock, I tell myself. Other people have those wonderful things called weekends. Other people can sleep in on a Sunday morning rather than go out and feed cattle, have a flat tire, get stuck, and chase cattle out of the stackyard. They go on trips. They think snow is something fun to play in. They don't have to drive 30 miles to go out for a hamburger. And at that point I can never seem to find a good reason to be ranching. I just tell myself to keep on, simply do the best I can. And eventually the snow melts, calving is over with, the cattle go out on grass. The fields turn green, and if we decide to go out for dinner we don't have to hurry home to check heifers. Ours begins to take on the appearances of a more normal lifestyle. But my work is the best in the world. It's something different everyday. We've got a lot of area to fool around with and most of the time no one is telling us what we can and cannot do. It's a wonderful feeling to have a free hand to do the best job you can.

But ranching goes further than that. Because we enjoy it does not mean we can be careless with what we have. Ranchers aren't nomads grazing herds over hundreds of miles during the course of a year. We have well-defined boundaries that change very little with time. Ours are homes of generations. We have very powerful attractions to certain pieces of land. We try hard to take care of the land, knowing that year in, year out, it will take care of us. ●

