

Gold Rush to Glory

A Tribute to the Stone Family—Winners of the Colorado Section Society for Range Management 2005 Excellence in Rangeland Conservation Award.

By Sheila Lamb

The gold-rush days of Cripple Creek, Colorado, have passed with the last century, leaving behind physical reminders of this era in the form of rock piles, stained ore holes, and miles of ditch. At a time when resources were exploited as a means of survival, the value of products was paramount to what was left in their wake. With the heyday of mining and ranching went tons of ore, soil, water, and vegetation. It is not what we would choose today, but fighting for a life in the Wild West demanded these uses. Our history is exactly that: history.



Entrance to the Stones' ranch.



The Stones' meadow.

Driving north out of Cripple Creek today, one's eyes are treated to a new sight, a new gold rush of sorts, exemplified in land held by descendants of homesteaders in the Florissant area. Nearing Evergreen Station, Dome Rock, and Mueller State Wildlife Area, vibrant green meadows, glassy creeks, and tangles of willows spring into view. This is the home of the Stones: Howard, Barbara, and their son Colby, who have made a new life from the life of the past.

In talking with Howard, he describes his father's struggles with the land, different climatic conditions (back when it



Riding.

actually rained and snowed), and trying to balance work with ranching and family. In the decomposed granitic soils of the area, gullies washed and streams eroded. The Stones have spent the past 3 decades rebirthing their ranch without blame. They have learned from many as they have raised their own private phoenix from the ashes of the past. Now it is their time to teach.

With gutsiness and hard work, they have built erosion-control dams, reseeded, timbered, irrigated, fenced, developed water, and gracefully used cattle to bring their ranch into a glory of its own. Teeming with a varied multitude of wildlife, birds, insects, and vegetation, the Stone ranch hardly looks like the “classic” ranch of the west. Visitors might even think they are within the boundaries of the neighboring State Wildlife Area, but instead, this is the new ranch of the new west.

The Stones run over 200 pair of Hereford-cross cattle on a Forest Service grazing allotment in conjunction with long-time neighbor and area resident, Ernie Snare. Their livestock are on public lands from about June to October. This is where we first saw that they did things differently than most. There was no whooping-up the cows, no sagging fence lines, no drippy or dilapidated water sources, no beat-out or scalped-off grazing areas. As a Range Management Specialist for the Forest Service, when I first asked to see the Stones’ ranch, I knew I was in for a treat. I just didn’t know how sweet it would be.

Part of the Stones’ success is attributed to the way they have integrated their grazing management to include a patchwork of public lands, private leases, and their home



The Stones' award.

ranch. Each grazing area receives an adequate measure of rest throughout the year, which is a critical factor in grazing the arid intermountain west. Varying their rotation ensures that different areas are grazed at different times of the year and that no one plant species is continuously benefited at the expense of another.

We all know what poor ranch and rangeland management looks like. With big-hearted neighbors like the Stones generously sharing their time and knowledge, perhaps we can all look forward to seeing more gems in the aftermath of a gold rush.

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