

Land Lines

Old and New Agrarians in Quivira

By Cindy Salo

My first job after college in the 1970s must have horrified my parents. But I never actually heard them tell me that milking cows and driving tractors might not be the first step on a solid career path. I wanted to be a farmer. (We were in the Midwest, where livestock live on farms, not ranches.)

Working on a farm was as much fun as I had known it would be. I was thin and tan and, with the help of a come-along and a nose leader, I could handle just about anything on the dairy farms where I lived and worked. One summer, in the drumlins of upstate New York, I slept on the porch each night and fell asleep to the frogs singing in the pasture pond.

In the 1970s, the only way for a woman to get into farming “on her own” was to marry a farmer. But my To Do list was too long: I took the road more traveled and more studied to graduate school, working as a researcher, and living in Africa.

If I had been born a Millennial, between President Reagan firing the air traffic controllers and the Y2K scare, becoming a farmer might have been as natural as becoming an aerobics instructor was for the women in my high school graduating class. The Pew Research Center described Millennials as “confident, connected, and open to change.”¹

This generation is reversing the trend of fewer, older farmers working larger farms with bigger tractors. They are establishing small farms and ranches on the fringes of cities and towns, in rural counties, in urban areas, and on rooftops in large cities. These New Agrarians raise grass-fed beef and dairy cattle, pasture-raised pork, chicken, and eggs, and organic produce and invite their customers over for ranch dinners and farm tours.

The agrarians of this generation are no “Leave No Trace” nature lovers. They yearn for a deeper connection to the land than summer backpack trips can provide. They are creating intricate working landscapes with vibrant local food networks and developing connections that sustain them economically and emotionally.

These optimistic and hard-working young people each travel a unique path to lives as New Agrarians. They face new challenges as they combine old approaches to small-scale ag-

riculture with improved understanding to produce food using less energy and fewer inputs.

I met some of the New Agrarians at the Quivira Coalition (Santa Fe, NM) annual conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, 8–10 November 2011. More than 400 agrarians, ranchers, farmers, researchers, and land managers gathered to learn, trade ideas, share meals of grass-fed beef and locally grown produce, and converse in the wide hallways until, too soon, the cowbell clanged to summon us to the next session.

I was not the only one at the conference with a botanically correct tattoo (although I might have sported the only legume tat), and I did not embarrass myself in the number-of-piercings department. But I cannot match the New Agrarians for their courage and confidence in repopulating the United States with small ranches and farms. And I cannot help but envy them.

The Land of Quivira

Early Spanish-American mapmakers labeled unknown territories, past the margins of the known world, as “Quivira.” The Quivira Coalition works beyond the traditional borders of ranching, conservation, and public land management to encompass all three.

The group is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and focuses on both the economic and ecological health of land and communities. Quivira specializes in on-the-ground workshops that teach grazing management systems, ranch road improvement, and riparian restoration.

The Quivira Coalition’s New Agrarian Apprenticeship Program has been one of its most successful initiatives. Aspiring agrarians are paired with experienced ranchers to learn innovative ways to produce food in the 21st century. Several recent apprentices and a slate of agrarian leaders spoke at Quivira’s most recent conference. We started the gathering with a Ranchers’ Forum.

Ranchers’ Forum: Paving the Way

Jim Gerrish, of American Grazinglands Services in May, Idaho, urges ranchers to “Kick the Hay Habit” and manage for year-round grazing. On the first day of the conference, he

described grazing systems that can save money and improve the function and health of pastures.

Jim reminded us that ranching, in general, and hay production, in particular, are based on two things: “iron and oil.” However, ranchers cannot control the cost of either machinery or energy from fossil fuel. What they can do is change the ways they manage the four ingredients of food and fiber: sunlight, carbon dioxide, water, and soil minerals.

We can all be slow to adopt new practices, even when we know they work well for others. Jim pointed out that most ranchers and farmers do not get to start making business decisions until they are in their 50s—after their parents retire. “When [we are young and] our minds are most open, we’re not calling the shots,” he said.

At one point, Jim asked how many in the audience had grown up on a ranch or farm. He looked at the smattering of raised hands in the ballroom and said, “Oh! I’m surprised; there are usually a lot more.” Many of the young people in the crowd grew up where I did: in a city. Their parents are still in town working, while their children start new lives in rural areas.

The Millennials are on the same page as Jim Gerrish when it comes to farm inputs. They never knew a time of cheap energy or resources. For them, finding substitutes for iron and oil is as natural as separating the recycling from the trash. The New Agrarians are using human labor and small-scale machinery, managing intensively, and reducing chemical inputs to keep production costs low and to meet changing consumer demands.

Jim finished the day with an overview of ideas for “Marketing the Whole Ranch.” “We’ve been told for too long that we need to specialize and get big,” he said. Jim described diverse operations that turn healthy profits from such things as farm vacations, bison, venison, yogurt, and wool roving (which I learned is a step between fleece and wool yarn). He summed up the marketing possibilities by telling us that “people buy food as much for the story as for anything.”

New Agrarians, New Paths

The New Agrarians seem to be more well rounded than my generation. Most attend college, where they are likely to focus at the nexus of the hard and the social sciences. Many graduate with degrees in Environmental Science, Natural Resource Conflict Resolution, or Environment and Community. These majors were not even a twinkle in the eye of the most forward-looking dean when I studied Animal Science and Agronomy at the “Moo U.”

This broad background helps small producers understand both how agroecosystems work and how people interact with the land and the food and fiber it produces. As Jim Gerrish showed us, small operators succeed by developing products that the public wants and sharing stories that resonate with consumers.

Some of the young farmers at the conference grew up on family ranches and farms but usually with a different twist.

The poster for the Quivira Coalition 10th Anniversary Conference features a central image of a man on a horse in a field, surrounded by smaller photos of other attendees. The text on the poster includes:

- QUIVIRA COALITION** (with logo)
- 10TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE**
- NEW AGRARIANS**
- HOW THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS TACKLE 21ST CENTURY CHALLENGES**
- NOVEMBER 8-10, 2011**
- ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO**
- FEATURED SPEAKER: BILL McKIBBEN**
- A grid of 14 small portraits of speakers: Bill Grebuys, Jim Gerrish, Annie Novak, Dorn Cox, Hai Vo, Nikiko Masumoto, Deborah Maubon, Sam Ryerson, Severine Fleming, Sarahlee Lawrence, Lillian Hill, and Tiffany Herrera.
- Social media icons for Facebook and Twitter.
- Website: **WWW.QUIVIRACOALITION.ORG**
- A circular logo with the text: "Education, Innovation, Restoration — one acre at a time."

New Agrarians were the focus of the Quivira Coalition 10th Annual Conference in 2011. Image by the Quivira Coalition.

Nikiko Masumoto told us about her father switching to organic methods on their fruit farm in California’s Central Valley. The orchards began to look so unkempt that a neighbor asked her mother if her husband had died.

Several of the agrarians we heard from led remarkably different lives before returning to family farms. Dorn Cox got a degree in International Agriculture and Development and was working in Hong Kong when a neighbor’s farm came up for sale. It was an opportunity to expand his parents’ operation enough to support Dorn and his young family. Sarahlee Lawrence rafted some of the biggest whitewater in the world before she returned to the organic farm she had grown up on in central Oregon.

Some New Agrarians come from rural areas but do not see themselves as Agrarians until later. Amy Wright grew up in the ranching community of Walden, Colorado, and worked on ranches during college breaks. After graduation, she felt pressured to get a “real job” and went to work for a software firm. She spent 2 years in Cubicle Land before the sight of



Amy Wright, the Quivira Coalition New Agrarian Apprentice on the San Juan Ranch, and Matt Barnes, *Rangelands* Editorial Board Member, wrestle a calf. Photo by Elaine Patarini, Kelsey Edwards Photography, Los Angeles, CA.

cattle grazing on a hillside pulled her away from her computer and back to what she loved. She worked on a cattle station in Western Australia and then returned to the United States for a New Agrarian Apprenticeship on the San Juan Ranch in Colorado.

One New Agrarian: Oysters and Goats

Jo Myers grew up in rural Lemhi County, Idaho, and left for college and then graduate school. She saw the power of connecting people with their environment through food when she worked on an oyster farming project on the coast of Washington. After communities improved the marine habitat so that oyster beds could be established, the oysters returned the favor by filtering out organic matter and cleansing the water.

The connection of people to their food is “essential and visceral,” Jo told me on the phone. “It cuts through politics and religion.” She saw agriculture as a way to return to the mountains of eastern Idaho where her roots are and where she feels a strong connection. Because oysters in Idaho were not a possibility, she turned to dairy farming, which she prepared for with a Quivira Coalition apprenticeship.

The James Ranch, near Durango, Colorado, hosted and mentored Jo. This diversified operation includes a grass-fed dairy, where she made high-quality, handmade cheeses. The ranch was also home to two resident goats, which Jo’s fiancé milked each morning. The couple experimented with the milk to begin developing a repertoire of goat cheeses.

This spring, Jo and her now-husband returned to Salmon, Idaho, where they are establishing their goat dairy. Jo pointed out that they are not doing anything new. “My grandma said, ‘That’s the way we used to do it,’” Jo told me. “But,” she went on, “we have technology that’s appropriate now, a better grasp of how natural systems work, and we’re communities of the world, not of the county or town, anymore. We’re more connected.”

Jo believes that small-scale agriculture can help smooth out the boom and bust cycles of the largely mining- and timber-based economy of Lemhi County, Idaho. “We’re working for more economic diversity, for better schools, for an economic boost here. Our goal is not to make lots of money. It’s more about building community through a food product people can afford and want to eat.”

New Agrarians, New Approaches

In the current model of American agriculture, a tiny number of producers provide an astonishing number of people with inexpensive food. But this model is based on the inexpensive energy and resources of the past. The New Agrarians are using less energy and fewer chemicals to keep production costs down, and they meet consumer demand for healthy food raised on healthy lands.

Today’s innovative producers are not just cutting input costs. They are also trimming processing, shipping, and wholesaling costs by selling directly to consumers. These ranchers and farmers connect with the public on their Web sites, Facebook pages, and blogs. They send e-mail newsletters, Google Group updates, and tweets. They tell their stories on summer weekends at booths in the 7,000 farmers markets across the country.²

These Millennial agrarians stay connected with each, too. The Greenhornsⁱ group hosts in-person workshops plus an online wiki, a blog, and a radio show on the Heritage Radio Network. The National Young Farmers’ Coalition (NYFC)ⁱⁱ advocates for legislation to help young people start farming and sponsors FarmHackⁱⁱⁱ events. These farm-based gatherings feature good food and the opportunity for farmers, engineers, and designers to brainstorm and develop appropriate, open-source equipment for small farms.

Many small producers also furnish consumers with locally grown food on a regular basis through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) arrangements. Consumers purchase CSA shares beforehand and then receive a portion of the bounty during the growing season. These arrangements make start-up money available to producers and spread both the production and the risk of agriculture among shareholders.

Under a similar arrangement, the public can obtain raw milk from the James Ranch (Durango, CO),^{iv} which hosted Jo Myers’ apprenticeship. Consumers purchase shares in the dairy herd and pay their portion of the expenses and upkeep, which allows them a portion of the milk. In Colorado, only owners of dairy herds can legally consume unpasteurized milk.

Most small farms produce high-value crops, such as vegetables, meats, and cheeses. But Dorn Cox, of Tuckaway Farm (Lee, NH), is showing that it is possible to grow small grains

ⁱ Greenhorns, <http://www.thegreenhorns.net>.

ⁱⁱ NYFC, <http://www.youngfarmers.org>.

ⁱⁱⁱ FarmHack, <http://www.youngfarmers.org/practical/farm-hack/>.

^{iv} James Ranch, <http://www.jamesranch.net>.

organically on a small scale. Currently, only 5% of New Hampshire's food is grown within its borders, Dorn reported. Based on his yields, he estimates it would take only 40,000 acres, or less than 1% of the state's area, to produce enough wheat to feed its 1.3 million residents.

"People don't believe that you can grow crops here," Dorn said. He fears that agriculture declined in his area after the soil organic matter was depleted to the point that cultivation was no longer economically feasible. His personal challenge is to build up enough organic matter on his farm that he can grow crops off the interest produced each year, rather than depleting the principal. Dorn believes that our soil organic matter is a resource even more precious than iron or oil.

I am more optimistic about our future after meeting some of the New Agrarians. As demand for our oil, iron, and soil organic

matter increases, we will need their confident creativity and drive to supply us with plentiful, healthy food in the 21st century.

References

1. PEW RESEARCH CENTER. 2010. The Millennials: a portrait of generation next. Available at: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>. Accessed 6 April 2012.
2. USDA. 2011. Farmers markets and local food marketing—farmers market growth: 1994–2011. See "Farmers Market Growth: 1994–2011" at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/FARMERSMARKETS>. Accessed 6 April 2012.

Author is a Freelance Plant Ecologist who works and writes in Boise, ID, USA. CindySalo@SageEcoSci.com.

NEW BOOKS FROM TEXAS A&M

BEEF, BRUSH, AND BOBWHITES

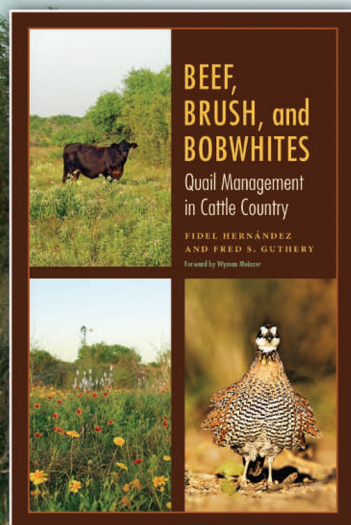
Quail Management in Cattle Country

Fidel Hernández and Fred Guthery

Foreword by Wyman Meinzer

Guthery and Hernández breathe new life into a classic work that for more than twenty years has been teaching biologists, managers, and ranchers to "think like quail."

286 pp. 172 color photos. 6 line art. 2 maps. 14 figs. Index. \$24.95 flexbound



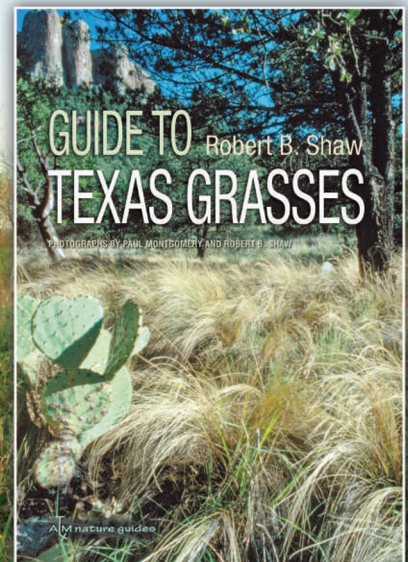
GUIDE TO TEXAS GRASSES

Robert B. Shaw

Photographs by Paul Montgomery and Robert B. Shaw

In this new, complete field guide, Shaw provides an indispensable reference to the world's most economically important plant family.

1,096 pp. 1,357 color, 34 b&w photos. 947 line drawings. 645 maps. Bib. Index. \$45.00 flexbound



TEXAS A&M
UNIVERSITY PRESS

800.826.8911 Fax: 888.617.2421

www.tamupress.com

