



A Brief History of How the Society for Range Management was Founded

By Larry D. Howery

On the Ground

- About eight decades ago, The Society for Range Management's founders began to shape and refine their collective vision to create a science-based professional society that would serve as a platform for learning and collaboration on all aspects of rangeland management.
- The inaugural meeting in 1948 led to the founding of the American Society of Range Management (ASRM), a new journal dedicated to range science and management (*The Journal of Range Management*), an initial ASRM committee structure, and decentralization of ASRM through the formation of local sections.
- ASRM (now known as The Society for Range Management or SRM) has achieved many milestones and accomplishments since its founding. Although today's issues are different and more complex than in 1948, the basic leadership principles espoused by the founders provide a template for addressing the challenges that the rangeland profession faces in the 21st century.

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The 1930s was a time of tremendous economic and ecologic strife in the United States. John Steinbeck wrote about this tumultuous period in US history in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, which provided a fictional account of the misery that the Joad family endured during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl Days (Fig. 1).

The urgent need for rangeland conservation was no fictional matter, however, as the Taylor Grazing Act was

passed in 1934, and several new government organizations were created from New Deal legislation in response to the dire problems of the decade. It was also during the 1930s that rangeland professionals initiated discussions about the need for a new scientific professional society that would be devoted to the conservation and management of rangelands.¹ However, these discussions were mostly curtailed when the United States became heavily engaged in World War II.

Interagency Range Management Conference

When World War II ended in 1945, discussions of forming a new range society resumed and quickly regained their prewar momentum. In March 1946, 66 range professionals representing five colleges and various state and federal agencies met in Moscow, Idaho for what was called the Interagency Range Management Conference (IRMC). A panel discussion was held as part of the IRMC agenda, which was titled, "The Need of a Range Management Organization." Members of the panel included Charles A. Fite, Gene F. Payne, Joseph F. Pechanec, Vernon A. Young, and Harold F. Heady who was the designated panel leader (Fig. 2).

The IRMC, and the panel discussion in particular, were not without controversy. A rather heated debate developed from the floor and it became clear that participants were divided about what direction to take to form a new professional organization dedicated to rangeland science and management. After considerable deliberation, no decision was reached but a motion was passed to appoint an executive committee (EC) that was charged to further study the issue. The EC was co-chaired by Harold Heady and Joseph Pechanec (Fig. 3).

Survey

By August 1946, the EC decided that a survey would be the best instrument to further gauge interest in forming a new professional range society. The EC developed and mailed a survey to more than 800 individuals who were known to have an interest in rangeland issues. Included with the survey was a mimeographed copy of the nearly verbatim minutes of the IRMC panel discussion that had taken place 5 months before.



Figure 1. Dust Bowl days (Photo Credit: NOAA George E. Marsh Album).

The response to the survey was excellent with a 61% return rate. The survey asked respondents several questions, two of which are summarized as follows: 1) Are you interested in forming and belonging to a new range society or section? and 2) Should the new range society be formed as a stand-alone organization, or should it be housed as a section within an existing organization? The response to the first question was overwhelmingly affirmative with 98% of the respondents indicating that they were interested in forming and belonging to a new range society or section. The response to the second question was mixed and reflected the heated discourse that had occurred during the panel discussion in Moscow.



Figure 2. Dr. Harold F. Heady, first secretary-treasurer of American Society of Range Management (Photo Credit: Dr. James Bartolome).



Figure 3. Joseph F. Pechanec, first president of American Society of Range Management (Photo Credit: Society for Range Management).

A slight majority of respondents (55%) said that the new range society should be a stand-alone organization. A slight minority (45%) supported a new range section but felt it should reside within an existing organization. So the conflicting issue was not whether a new organization or section that focused on rangelands was needed as an overwhelming majority (98%) of respondents believed such a need existed. The disagreement came from whether the new organization should be a stand-alone organization, or, if it should merely be a section within an existing organization.

The three prominent professional organizations dedicated to natural resource management in 1946 were the American Society of Agronomy (ASA), the American Society of Animal Production, and the Society of American Foresters (SAF). Some individuals in these organizations took strong measures to block efforts of those favoring a stand-alone society. For example, both the ASA and SAF quickly formed range sections within their organizations in an apparent attempt to dampen the perceived need or desire to form a stand-alone range society.

The main argument of those favoring a stand-alone organization was that the rangeland management profession would never become strong if it was merely relegated as a section within an existing organization. Many of the individuals in the stand-alone cadre contributed as much a \$50 of their own



Figure 4. Frederic G. Renner, second president and first life member of American Society of Range Management (Photo Credit: Society for Range Management).

money (equivalent to about \$500 in 2015) to support mailings and other initial startup costs. They were well organized and quickly appointed a president (Joseph F. Pechanec), a vice president (Wilton T. White), and a secretary-treasurer (Harold F. Heady) of the yet-to-be-named organization. Harold Heady began to collect dues (\$3 per person) from prospective new members and several committees were formed to plan and organize the first meeting of this new professional society.

First Meeting

The inaugural meeting of the new range society (still yet to be officially named) was held in Salt Lake City, Utah in January 1948 at the Hotel Newhouse. There were 192



Figure 5. “The Trail Boss,” by Charles Russell (Photo Credit: Society for Range Management).

registered participants who attended the meeting and there was much to discuss.

The first discussion focused on what to name this new professional organization. This discussion was very lively and two primary options were debated: 1) the American Society of Range Management; and 2) the American Grasslands Society. The attendees eventually decided to table the matter until it could be submitted to the full membership for vote. In April 1948, a ballot was mailed to the members. The ballot consisted of the two name choices along with a full explanation of the relative merits of each name as was discussed in Salt Lake City. When the votes were counted, the members favored the American Society of Range Management (ASRM) as the name of their new professional organization.

Additional discussions at the 1948 meeting were 1) whether the criteria to become an ASRM member should be general or rigorous; and 2) what the requirements should be for a rancher to join the society. It was suggested that only ranchers who had earned the reputation of being a “conservation rancher” should be allowed to join, and, this would be determined by an ASRM subcommittee assigned to inspect a rancher’s property to assess whether the ranch had “a good crop of grass.” At this point in the dialogue, Frederic G. Renner (Fig. 4), who was presiding as discussion leader, suggested that if that level of scrutiny was going to be applied to ranchers, the same criteria should be applied to all ASRM members. Mr. Renner cautioned, however, that if such criteria were applied to some of the public land managers in the room who had already paid their dues, ASRM might find itself in the unenviable position of having to return money to a substantial number of individuals! This comment generated considerable nervous laughter among the members and the discussion ended with a vote favoring broad membership criteria, which meant that anyone who supported ASRM’s objectives would be eligible to join. Those general criteria stand today (e.g., “Membership in *The Society for Range Management* is open to anyone engaged in or interested in any aspect of the study, management, or use of rangelands”).²

Finally, there was discussion about the need for, “a publication of a journal devoted to range ... that would provide a medium for new developments, ideas, and for the discussion of policies.” A journal committee was formed and the first volume of *The Journal of Range Management* (JRM) was published in October 1948.

Sections and Committees are Formed

Soon after the inaugural meeting in Salt Lake City, the ASRM leadership recognized the value and role that decentralization might play in addressing relevant local rangeland issues, and, to infuse more influence on management decisions being made across America’s vast and variable rangeland ecosystems. They also recognized the value that the local sections could play in encouraging participation by those members who could not attend the annual national meetings due to considerable travel and expense. The Wyoming section was the first to be



Figure 6. Charles Russell (Photo Credit: *Rangelands*, Allen Press, and Tammy DeCock; Photo taken by H. Pollard, September 1912, Calgary, Alberta, Canada).

authorized by ASRM in 1948, and was quickly followed by the formation of the Colorado, Pacific Northwest, Texas, and Utah sections in 1949. By 1950, seven additional sections had been formed by ASRM including the Arizona section (my home section). Also, shortly after the inaugural meeting, several committees were formed to provide opportunities for members to actively participate and share responsibilities, and that established an organizational structure from which to more

efficiently operate the new organization. The new committee structure also helped alleviate some of the initial workload that previously had been carried out mostly by the new officers.

“The Trail Boss” Becomes ASRM’s Official Emblem

The original “Trail Boss” was a pen-and-ink drawing created by the legendary western artist, Charles M. Russell^{3,4} (Figs. 5 and 6). Mr. Russell created more than 2,000 oils, watercolors, drawings, bronze sculptures, and illustrated letters that were set in the western United States and Canada⁵ (Fig. 7). The Renner and Russell families lived in Great Falls, Montana at the turn of the 20th century (Figs. 8 and 9). The initial connection between these two families was that the Renners were friends with Nancy Russell, Charles’s fiancée, before she and Charles were married in 1896.^{3,4} When Frederic Renner was a boy he was given “trespassing rights” to sit in Charles Russell’s log cabin studio and watch Mr. Russell draw, paint, sketch, and sculpt.^{3,4} The experience of watching a great artist at work obviously had an indelible effect on young Frederic because after he was elected as the second ASRM president he sent a copy of Russell’s “The Trail Boss” to ASRM members along with the official program of the third annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas (held in early 1950). Mr. Renner asked ASRM members for feedback on whether “The Trail Boss” would make an acceptable emblem for ASRM. Member response was overwhelmingly positive and the ASRM Board of Directors quickly obtained permission to use “The Trail Boss” as ASRM’s official emblem soon after the national meeting in San Antonio.^{3,4}

In 1986, a year before his death, Mr. Renner was asked about the unique aspects of “The Trail Boss” that inspired him to pursue it as ASRM’s official emblem. Mr. Renner replied, “Russell’s drawing of ‘The Trail Boss’ had long symbolized



Figure 7. Charles Russell’s painting titled, “When the Land Belonged to God” (Photo Credit: Public Domain).



Figure 8. Charles Russell standing in his Great Falls, Montana studio next to his best-priced work, "When the Land Belonged to God" (Photo Credit: *Rangelands and Allen Press*).

qualities that it occurred to me were particularly appropriate to our newly formed Society, e.g., the importance of strong leadership, the necessity of all hands working together, and a willingness to travel uncharted trails."⁶

The range profession often is described as being "both an art and a science." It seems extraordinarily fitting that Mr. Renner, who was the first life member of Society for Range Management (SRM), and had a strong reputation for being unabashedly dedicated to the *science* of rangeland management, also had lifetime passion for the artistic rangeland settings that were so vividly portrayed in Mr. Russell's body of work.^{3,4}

We've Come a Long Way Since 1948!

The ASRM (now known as the SRM) has achieved many milestones and accomplishments since being founded in 1948. Here are a few highlights.

- Sixty-seven consecutive annual meetings⁷ have been held across North America and hundreds of section meetings have been held locally.
- Twenty-one SRM sections and several SRM chapters address local issues on behalf of the parent society.⁸
- In 1970, ASRM dropped the designation "American" from its name in recognition of its growing number of members



Figure 9. The Renner family in the early 1900s. Young Frederic is on the left. (Photo Credit: *Rangelands and Allen Press*).

from across the world. SRM's International Affairs Committee⁹ and the International Rangeland Congress¹⁰ continue to be very active in shining the light on critical international rangeland issues across the globe.

- SRM publishes several scientific and popular press outlets¹¹ where scientists, managers, and educators can disseminate their work.
- SRM sponsors prestigious certification programs for rangeland professionals and consultants.^{12,13}
- Universities and colleges offering undergraduate programs in rangeland ecology and management can request a rigorous evaluation by SRM to earn "accredited" status (or to be "reaccredited").¹⁴
- Symposia and workshops are offered by SRM at annual meetings, section meetings, and at strategic locations throughout the United States often on controversial issues, and often in partnership with state and federal land management agencies.^{15,16}
- SRM continues to see increases in female membership with many women taking leadership roles in the society.¹⁷
- SRM provides unique and efficient opportunities for students to find jobs; to test their skills and knowledge in student competitions; and to network with educators, employers, and students from other institutions.¹⁸
- SRM influences and informs rangeland policy through its policy and position statements, resolutions, and issue papers.¹⁹

In conclusion, ASRM's founders shaped and refined a collective vision to create a science-based professional society that would eventually serve as a platform for learning and collaboration on all aspects of rangeland management locally, nationally, and internationally. Current SRM members benefit immensely from the founders' wisdom despite today's challenges being much different than they were in 1948. There is now a complex network of uncharted trails that SRM must navigate and the sociopolitical-economic climate of our time can appear daunting. However, the basic leadership principles espoused by the founders still provide a template for meeting the issues of the 21st century (e.g., food security, renewable energy, and water quality and quantity). Today's SRM members have an important obligation to carry forward the founders' legacy while addressing the unique challenges of our time.

Acknowledgments

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ⁱ "A History of the Society for Range Management, 1948-1985" is available at http://www.rangelands.org/about_history.shtml.

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