

## The Gunnison Country – High Altitude Rangelands

by Judy Buffington Sammons

"The Gunnison Country, in spite of its high altitude, long and rather severe winters and short summer season, and in spite of its rough and mountainous topography, has still developed into one of the richest and most prosperous agricultural and stock raising sections of the Centennial State. Where twenty-five or thirty years ago only hungry looking sagebrush mesas and valleys covered with weed and willow brushes could be seen, there are today waving wheat, barley, rye and oat fields, and meadows covered with the most succulent grass—a transformation few, if any, of the early pioneers and trail blazers ever expected would occur."

"While hundreds of mountain ranges hold untold and unfathomable riches in metals and minerals hidden away in their bosoms, the valleys and level stretches along the rivers, creeks and foothills contain as fertile and productive soils as can be found anywhere, and even some of the higher plateaus and mesas have, through the means of irrigation, been made to produce rich yields annually in grain, fodder and vegetables... With the hay and grain secured from the cultivated areas to use in caring for stock in winter, and with the extensive fields for summer grazing, no better place for stock raising could be found... The number of horses in the country is estimated to be about 4,000, with an average value of \$75.00 per head, and 40,000 head of cattle, which would have an average value of \$45.00 each. Among other livestock may be stated that there are about 200 mules in the county, 500 hogs, and some sheep also pastured on the ranges in the summer time, but on accounts of severe winters, sheep raising can not successfully be carried on."

Lewis Easterly, 1916  
Gunnison County Stockgrowers President,

These words of praise for the Gunnison Country came from one of its earliest pioneers. Lewis Easterly, Civil War veteran and teacher, homesteaded in 1880 in the Ohio Creek Valley, north of Gunnison. He enjoyed a lifelong career in the cattle business and ever the teacher, researcher, historian and writer, he was quoted often in the local newspapers. In his above quote, Easterly made perhaps the first attempt to define the unique character of the high altitude ranch lands and grazing lands of the area.

Easterly was referring to the rangelands that he and the other early pioneer cattlemen had found; rangelands extending from shrubby foothills communities to the subalpine zones found above timberline. Here there were huge reaches of grass located in a great country that extended from mountain range to mountain range. To the north were the West Elks, to the east the Sawatch Range and the Continental Divide, and to the south the San Juans. It was magnificent cattle country.

But not many had thought so at first—the country was too remote, rawboned and rugged. Mountain locked and receiving only some ten inches of annual rainfall, the country appeared to be too high, too dry, and too cold for any kind of agriculture to succeed. But soon the country's advantages were being noticed. The area's location at the headwaters of the Gunnison River usually assured plentiful water for irrigation. The stability of ownership of land was being offered to the pioneer, through the various homestead acts. With plentiful water, and land ownership lending stability to the picture, the pioneers—by the late 1870's—began arriving in force to begin the gamble with mother nature called ranching.

In the course of time, the pioneers began to tame the new country and ranches sprung up in every pretty valley. These ranch spreads were never of huge acreage; they were the usual small homesteads that could not support very many cattle. But unlimited use of the free grass in the backyard made it possible for the early rancher to increase herd size. Fairly large numbers of stock soon were being turned out on summer range. At first there was no regulation save a "first come, first serve" code of ethics, but by the early 1900's, establishment of the Gunnison National Forest brought over a million acres or 80% of the county's land into a federally owned and federally regulated status. The free range days were over for the pioneer ranchers but use of public lands was still available through leasing.

The private ranch property—the "home ranches"—were located along the rivers' drainage. Here native grass was in good supply and with diligent irrigation to bring water where it had never been before, an abundant hay crop was soon realized. The clearing of sage and willows and the digging of sizable irrigation ditches—backbreaking jobs—enlarged the early hay meadows. Severe long winters and a 70 day growing season made ranching more difficult than at lower elevations, but amazingly cattle ranching would begin to prosper here. The right breeds of beef would not only survive the bitterly cold winters, but thrive and grow hardy and vigorous.

Having recognized the great potential of this high altitude rangeland and having adapted practices to fit it, the early day cattlemen soon saw the need to join forces. The first attempt at organization was the pooling or combining of cattle herds on the unfenced summer ranges. At first this



*West Side cattle pool-roundup in the late 30's. Winslow family photo.*

was the simple opening of homesteader's gates in the spring and the turning out of cattle and horses to intermingle on the lower ranges. It was a haphazard thing and in the beginning much overgrazing occurred. By the late 1800's formal "cattle pools" were organized. The pool a rancher belonged to depended more or less on his geographic location; divides or watersheds serving as rough boundaries. A pool's collective herds of cattle were moved from off the ranches and onto the lower elevation open range around the middle of May. The grazing areas encompassed tens of thousands of acres, with pool members often privately owning some land in the same vicinity. Grazing occurred in a sequence of pastures, with separate groups of cattle being moved to higher and higher elevations during the peak summer months and started back lower as the summer waned. Drift fences were erected in some places to help keep cattle from wandering off. Riders were employed to look after the herd. These riders trailed cattle daily through some of the most rugged and beautiful country in the West and often without seeing another person for weeks at a time. Several cattle pools or associations that evolved from these early practices continue today.

Organization took another form early on—that of a formal stockgrower's association. Following the footsteps of the state cattlemen's association, a group of Gunnison ranch-

ers met in June 1894, to form a society of men whose purpose was the protection of their fledgling livestock industry. The stated mission of this group was to put pressure on the state legislature to pass laws that were in the cattlemen's interest and to deal with the growing concerns of grass and water rights. The association was also involved in organizing roundups, overseeing branding, controlling disease, and addressing the always critical issue of cattle rustling.

Drive, ambition, and determination characterized the personality of the early day Gunnison County Stock-growers Association. Nowhere was their forcefulness more in evidence than with their stand on the sheep issue. In western Colorado trouble had started in the 1880's when large numbers of sheep began to be brought into the area from New Mexico and Utah. Crossing arbitrary boundaries set by the cattlemen, the migratory sheep outfits were a most unwelcome threat. The cattlemen believed that sheep overgrazed the land to the point of destroying forage and rendering the range unfit for use by cattle. Western slope cattlemen, angry and in no mood for sharing, confronted the huge migratory bands of sheep moving onto what they considered their range—possession established by prior use. Across the West, many sheepmen lost their lives and livelihoods over such incidents, so high did the feelings run. Gunnison's problems never reached the killing stage—not of men—but the killing of many sheep did occur. In three

separate incidents large numbers of sheep were clubbed, shot or run over cliffs. The suspicious stockgrower's association never claimed any knowledge or responsibility for these incidents nor was any proof ever found of involvement by other local ranchers. The role the local cattlemen may have played in the sheep killings is to this day shrouded in mystery.

Whether or not the local cattlemen had involvement in the actual killing of sheep, they were quite successful in discouraging the migration of huge bands of sheep into the Gunnison country in the early years. After the sheep and cattle wars subsided many local cattle ranchers began to raise their own sheep and by 1937, according to the Gunnison Assessor's office, sheep began to outnumber cattle. This trend continued into the 50's and 60's, when sheep numbers again declined. Most sheep owners move their stock to lower altitudes in the winter months so that the animals are in the country only briefly in the summer time. The overall historical use of Gunnison's rangelands, however, has been primarily that of cattle grazing.

As the sheep conflicts faded into history—the last occurring in 1918—the ranchers began to face a new challenge, that of producing beef for the troops of World War I. There were excessive amounts of beef produced during these years and by the Armistice of November 1918, there were far too many cattle in the Gunnison valley. Conditions were worsened later in the thirties by the severe drought in the West. At the same time, the Great Depression had serious

effects on the local ranching community. Cattle prices declined by 40% during this period with ranchers not receiving the cost of production of their beef. The hardships of ranchers at this time were greatly worsened by an increase in cattle rustling. Against great odds and with the understanding of local bankers, most held on somehow and ranching continued into the next decade.

As the nation moved out of the Depression into the WWII years, Gunnison's livestock industry was slowly recovering. It was now one of the strongest economic forces in the community, paying a very large share of taxes. The look of the country side was still very much a pastoral one, with ranches scattered out sparsely and teams of horses still in great use. By now second and third generation ranch families had endured from the pioneering years. Gunnison was shipping thousands of cattle out by rail for the war effort, and there were heavy demands on ranchers to produce even more. Every ranch was hindered in this effort by a shortage of labor. Oldsters and women were put into the hay fields, along side youngsters, to take the place of the traditional male labor force.

Gunnison in the 1940's, absorbed as it was by the war, was also gaining nationwide attention as a prestigious Hereford breeding locale. Local rancher, Dan Thornton, had risen to prominence during this period with his famous "Triumphant Type" Herefords and then pursued political ambitions which led him to the Governor's mansion in 1951. Gunnison cattlemen honored their newly elected colleague



*Early day haying near Crested Butte. Western State photo college photo.*

with a high-priced inaugural Stetson hat and a hometown parade, complete with a white mount provided for Dan's ride down Main Street and dozens of red roses for first lady, Jessie.

The focus of Gunnison's high altitude ranching industry began to change in the latter part of the century. More and more, good management practices had become the strategy needed by ranchers to survive. It simply cost more to produce beef here, than in other places where winter feeding was not so prolonged. Genetics and breeding became more intensive programs. Good land stewardship and the harvesting of quality forage, while always a priority had become even more important. Use of labor saving equipment and the willingness to stay informed on new technologies were a significant part of every rancher's job now.

Playing an important role in research and education was Colorado State University's Mountain Meadow Research Center located at Gunnison. Here extensive research was done on the high altitude sickness of cattle, called brisket disease. The research center developed specially built metal chambers for afflicted cattle, that could produce air pressure equivalent to that of sea level. With use of these chambers, an effective treatment for brisket disease was accomplished.

Intensive new management practices and scientific research, however, could never change or alter some of Gunnison's country's unique cattle raising characteristics. The deep snows of long winter have always brought the necessity of prolonged winter feeding. No modern technique has ever much changed the practice of the movement of cattle through a succession of lower to higher pastures, advancing to timberline and back again in the summer months—a practice unique to high altitude cattle ranching.

The jeep or 4-wheeler will never entirely replace the horse and rider still frequently seen in Gunnison's high country — an enduring symbol of the past.

The difficulties of high altitude ranching have existed from the beginning and have been overcome with grit and determination, by the local ranching families. Currently this group faces a battle that may make them long for the good old days of prior generations. Increased pressure from development and recreation, and increased conflicts on leased public and private lands, are adding further complexity and difficulty to livestock grazing operations in the Gunnison valley. Proposed transmountain water diversion projects would cause loss of grazing permits in some areas as well as the loss of the water itself. A way of life that has survived here for more than one hundred years, daily loses ground to "progress." The distinctive look of cattle country—ranch country, is being lost by the slow but sure erosion of developing ranchettes along the valley floors. While there are still many parts of the high country that retain the look of cattle country, if taken as a whole, one would hardly recognize it for what it once represented to the likes of Lewis Easterly.

The author has been doing research and writing for the Western State College Foundation's ranching heritage project for the past four years and will soon complete a book on that subject.

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