



COURTESY, TERRI SNYDER LAMERS

# In Lone Cone's Shadow

*Colorado's Snyder family has worked with sheep spanning three centuries.*

*By Marjorie Haun*

Rising to 12,700 feet in altitude, the laccolithic pyramid Lone Cone looms big on the horizon south of Norwood, Colo. In its shadow, seven generations of the Snyder family have farmed and ranched sheep and cattle. With a history going back to the 1890s, the Snyder Ranch is one of the largest in San Miguel County.

Terri Snyder Lamers and her three siblings, Steve, Todd and Jackie, now manage the ranch, which holds thousands of acres including summer grazing country southeast of Gunnison. Lamentably, Colorado politics are hardly favorable to farmers and ranchers. Progressive regulations have heaped economic burdens on producers and demographic trends are casting a less friendly shadow over Norwood and nearby rural communities where the Snyder Ranch and other multigenerational ranches struggle just to get through another year.

## Early Colorado Sheepmen

Born in Ohio in 1854, Calvin Andrew Snyder married Florence May Eton in 1877. Of their eight children, three died within days of one another during a diphtheria outbreak, and a baby passed away in infancy. Only three lived past the age of 21. They lived in Illinois and

Nebraska before resettling permanently in western Colorado around 1914, where they had joined relatives to run sheep on a seasonal basis for 25 years. Few details exist of their early exploits, but "C.A. Snyder 1879" is etched boldly into a slickrock cliff near Egnar, Colo., to the southwest of Lone Cone. Other names, dates and brands carved into the

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stone—"Hank Snyder '81" and "J.E. Snyder 1922"—hint that this cliff was near one of the extended family's sheep camps.

Calvin's eldest son, Fredrick Roy, married Nina Minerva Farley in 1897 and moved with his father's family to Bedrock, a few miles east of the Utah state line, to farm and raise sheep of his own. Fred ran the family farm in Bedrock where over a span of 22 years he and Nina had 13 children. After Florence died in 1937, C.A. lived in his own little house on the Snyder farm and is said to have been so fear-

some in temperament that grandchildren dubbed him "Satan."

The children grew up during the 20th century's most trying times. From World War I, through the Great Depression and World War II, the Snyder family faced privation, toil and early death. Fred's son Claude, when just four years of age was killed in a hunting accident while out with his older brother Vivian (Bud), and son Clair was killed in a logging accident at 31. Neal Ellsworth, third from the oldest, married a local Paradox girl named Lorna Swain. From Paradox/Bedrock they moved to Norwood and in 1936 purchased the ranch house that would become the heart of the Snyder Ranch operation. There they took up farming, sheep ranching and raising rams.

## From Norwood to the Cochetopa

Neal was successful as a sheepman and became something of a legend in the area. One yarn holds that with his ample proceeds from lamb and wool, Neal purchased a shiny new Cadillac. One day a local gentleman spied Neal in his big sedan with several ewes in the backseat doing what sheep do, and asked, "Neal, why would you put those sheep in the backseat of your beautiful new car and

let them crap and pee all over that expensive leather upholstery?”

“Well,” Neal mused, “those sheep paid for this Cadillac, so they can do whatever they want in there.”

Neal and Lorna expanded the original ranch and planted crops that still grow lush and green. They acquired water shares and bought a place on Wilson Mesa to the east of Norwood for summer grazing. Terrell (Terry), Neal and Lorna’s youngest son and his wife, JoAnne (Hills), moved into a house across the road from the ranch house where they raised their own children—Terri, Steve, Todd and Jackie—and expanded the ranch further. They bought a section on the north-east flank of Lone Cone where to this day the Snyder Ranch grazes Suffolk sheep. Around 1987, Lorna sold the Wilson Mesa property, which meant that Terry and JoAnne had to either cut back their herds or purchase additional acreage. So they acquired the Cochetopa ranch, a vast spread near Gunnison with 7,000 private acres of grazing land and 70,000 in BLM and U.S. Forest Service permits. At 9,000 feet in elevation, the base ranch of the Cochetopa is suitable only for summer grazing, but it always has plentiful water, even when the lower elevations are stricken by drought.

Terry’s four kids all took part in summer sheep drives. Terri, the eldest daughter says: “One of the favorite things we did was trail the sheep from the ranch up to the Cone, then to Wilson Mesa. It was a three-day trail from the Cone to the mesa. We would always take a few extra kids along with us, camp out along the way, and Mom would take along food we ordinarily couldn’t have at home.”

Todd followed closest in his dad’s footsteps. He says: “When I was 10, I started camping with the sheep up on Wilson Mesa. Sometimes I’d take a friend the same age with me. The folks would come up every few days and check on us and bring us food.”

Terri, Steve and Jackie all took life paths that would lead them away from and back to Norwood. Todd stayed on, however, and shortly after high school went to work on the ranch. His daughter, Shelly, and her husband, Michael Donnellon, now live in the ranch house with their three children and help out as needed.

### Blessings and Burdens

With sixth- and seventh-generation Snyders now raising their own families and running their own households, holding the ranch



COURTESY SNYDER FAMILY ARCHIVES



PHOTOS © MARJORIE HAUN



FROM TOP: Calvin Andrew and Florence May Eton, ca. 1920. ▶ Neal and Lorna and daughter Francis, ca. 1957. ▶ Steve Snyder in 2023. ▶ Todd Snyder and Shelly Donnellon in 2023. OPPOSITE: Terry Snyder with sheep on Wilson Mesa, ca. 1970s.

together is daunting. “A lot of the younger generation don’t want to let the ranch go,” Shelly says, “but they don’t know how to help. Some of them have spouses who also have generational family ranches of their own, so they’re torn. I feel like the biggest blessing is that it is a family ranch, and the biggest burden is that it’s a family business.”

But even as they navigate the difficulties of communication and delegation of roles on the ranch, their dedication is paying off. Following the completion of a big water project on Cochetopa Creek, Snyder Ranch was recognized as the Conservation Rancher of the Year for 2022 by the Shavano Conservation District. According to the *San Miguel Basin Forum*: “The award comes after the multigenerational ranching family completed a big project...that helps to conserve water—something crucial in Colorado. In addition to the monstrous headgate structure, Snyder Ranch built and installed 26 metal boxes placed downstream throughout the field. These diversion boxes help to control the irrigation water.”

### Pressure From All Sides

To the unknowing eye, Norwood is a setting of green pastures, white mountain peaks and wide-open skies. But novel pressures are encroaching as the nearby city of Telluride—which ranks with Aspen and Vail in unaffordability and political tilt—purchases land and buildings in and around town to house its population of service workers. The workers are bused in and out daily because they cannot afford housing in Telluride. Terri says, “Telluride buses its service workers to Norwood because they want them to do their jobs but be basically invisible the rest of the time.” A modest class of tourists is also getting the boot. She continues, “Telluride also doesn’t want hordes of people recreating there, so unless they’re the type of tourist who spends a million dollars, they’re pushing them out to our rural areas as well.”

The ranches are also under threat from urban transplants who love the pretty views and green fields but want nothing to do with livestock or agriculture. Terri says, “If even one of the big cattle ranches is sold, our ag interests will no longer be the majority water rights’ holders.” Todd adds, “They want the



*ABOVE: Snyder grandkids help load lambs in 2022. On the ground, left to right, Terri Snyder Lamers, Jacob Gordon, Shelly Donnellon and Michael Donnellon. On the fence, left to right, Annie Donnellon and Waylon Donnellon.*

*RIGHT: Lots of things can help move sheep, including a four-wheeler, a minibike and dogs.*

land and they want the water rights so they can expand with no limitations.”

Although Neal set up the ranch to be successful, he could never have envisioned a time when so many adversaries were committed to its failure. Regulations coming out of Denver are even more immediately impactful than Telluride’s land purchases. In 2021, Colorado adopted rules requiring agricultural workers to be paid overtime, which is now defined as 60 hours per week and will decrease to 45 hours by 2025. According to Terri: “Fifty hours equals less than four days during the ranch’s busy season. That’s a big deal because beef and lamb prices aren’t supporting that kind of pay. Colorado requires a higher minimum wage for both citizens and foreign workers than the federal government. We argued that our men are happy to work for us at a lesser wage because their lives are vastly improved as is. The labor activists don’t care about us or the employees. They wouldn’t listen to the workers who want to keep their jobs but I worry we won’t be able to afford them in the future.”



Of Colorado’s wolf introduction initiative, Terri says: “It’s aggravating that Front Range people are telling us that we must have wolves. I don’t think the average taxpayer knows how much that’s going to cost them. We already have Mexican grays here. It’s scary because you worry about your men and your sheep.”

The Colorado Legislature recently passed a “lethal control” provision which was quickly vetoed by Gov. Jared Polis. Terri continues: “I asked a Colorado Parks & Wildlife representative if you can protect yourself if a wolf attacks you. He said, ‘Well, yes, but you will be investigated.’ Not to mention being publicly humiliated.”

### Hangin’ Tough

The Snyder Ranch is just one of thousands darkened by shadows of uncertainty. But for now, the family is hanging tough and everyone gets involved in the most intensive tasks. Gleeful grandkids help with lambing. Men take on the heavy-duty work of sorting and moving cattle, and despite occasional confusion about who is supposed to do what, everyone has a meaningful role.

Diversification of Snyder Ranch lands may serve to satisfy an expanding appetite for outdoor recreation and bring in needed income. “I don’t think just the cows and sheep will continue to support us,” Todd says. “Where we live, we have to feed hay for about 100 days out of the year. We’re thinking of adding a few camping spots on the farm for ecotourists. If we get involved in a few more things, we’ll be able to sustain future generations.”

Shelly adds: “It’s going to be a challenge to keep the ranch together in the future, but communication is the key thing. Everybody needs to know what is going on and what we would like to see happen. We really hope that it can.” ■

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