

The Potrillos

The border and a fight for heritage. By Steve Wilmeth

In the southwest corner of Dona Ana County, N.M., lie the West Potrillo Mountains and the Williams Family Ranches. The journey to this place started in the early 1960s when Dudley Williams graduated from Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo and began his ranching career. He was a product of a San Diego family that had been in California many years. Dudley remembers those early years, though, not so much for what he had learned at Cal Poly but for how little he knew.

“I thought I knew a lot, but I realized how little school had really prepared me for what I had chosen in life,” he says. “I started learning about the real world real quick.”

Part of that learning came from ranching in Southern California. “We were in the path

based operation. The conditions could be difficult, but they didn’t hold a candle to the onslaught of environmentalism.

“About 1970, the environmental movement started to turn negative. Intolerance of rancher presence became the topic of the day,” Dudley remembers. “Issues of [cattle] trespass became more important than land management. We half kidded ourselves that the BLM was going to balance the budget by writing tickets!”

Trespass in the context of what transpired in Oregon was tied to seasonal permits. In the Williams’ case, they had a seven-month permit and then were required to move their cattle off federal lands to their privately held valleys and irrigated pastures. “On big desert country it is hard to strip it clean on the first

dating and friendly New Mexico ranch people were. Later, in Nevada, a BLM official made the same comments to him. New Mexico had his attention.

“I learned about a ranch near Deming. I visited the place and within a week I had a lease and was shipping cattle.” That New Mexico ranch became ever more interesting.

“I was amazed at how every time we had rain in New Mexico, we would grow feed somewhere. Regardless of the month we received it, we would see benefit,” Dudley says. What he also found was a different relationship between the BLM and ranchers than he had experienced in Oregon. “It was a different world...totally different. The BLM would work with you and we didn’t have to deal with seasonal management schemes. We could build a ranch management plan that was year-round.”

In time, he pieced together nearly 350 sections in multiple purchases in the West Potrillo Mountains that span the Dona Ana and Luna county line between Deming and Las Cruces. The Williams Family Ranches had found their home.

Unfortunately, in 2006, environmentalism found Dona Ana County in a big way. The New Mexico Wilderness Alliance (NMWA) came into Las Cruces and convinced every governing body that 302,000 acres of wilderness must be designated in the county before mankind destroyed those lands. A total of 150,000 acres of that proposal just happened to overlay the Williams Family Ranches’ operation. “My heart just fluttered and wanted to quit,” Dudley says. “We were going to find ourselves right back in a battlefield that we knew all too well.”

Rather than giving up, Williams joined a group of Dona Ana County ranchers who had concerns of what the proposal meant to their lives and the well-being of the lands. The group, People For Preserving Our Western Heritage, has grown from a small group of ranchers to a coalition of 750 local businesses and organizations which counters wilderness designation in Dona Ana County.

“We couldn’t just roll over and let this thing happen,” Dudley says. His point was that it is time to recognize that where viable

PHOTO © KATHERINE WILMETH



The Potrillo Mountains are a series of volcanic cones west of Las Cruces, New Mexico. A proposal to designate more than 150,000 acres of the range as wilderness has turned the area into a battlefield.

of San Diego growth at a time when regulation and urban sprawl were colliding.” The family found that their ranching operation was impacted by the competing demands for land. The opportunity to expand was nearly nonexistent. They started looking for alternatives and found one in Oregon.

“When I went to Oregon,” Dudley says, “I knew that it was important for people like me to hold ranches together. The experience in California cemented in my mind why we need to maintain viability in ranching.”

The Oregon ranch was a high desert, hay-

gather. Any cattle left represented a breach of contract and there was hell to pay.”

With prolonged drought and his father’s health failing, the family made the decision to sell the Oregon ranch and call Dudley home. For the next decade, he would tend to the family business. He was also always looking for a ranch that made sense.

Separate incidents miles and years apart impacted his awareness of New Mexico. The first was from a realtor in Arizona who had shown Dudley ranches in the Verde Valley. The realtor had mentioned how accommo-

ranching exists, permanent open space and the health of the land is perpetuated. "There are few people who can, in good conscience, stand up and say the land is better off without ranchers and the entire related heritage tied to the land."

PHOTO © PATRICK HUBER

Wilderness designation has time and again proven that it is incompatible with ranching. Even though the Wilderness Act of 1964 specifically allows grazing to continue where it existed at the date of signing, attrition of ranching has occurred everywhere it confronts the designation. By 1980, Congress had enough evidence of land-agency abuse of delegated authority in managing wilderness grazing that the Forest Service was ordered to rewrite its grazing guidelines to preclude interpretation of the act as a means of eliminating cattle from historical grazing lands.

THE EMERGING STORY

The Williams' story is one of too many emerging accounts of how the collision of government regulation, urban sprawl, an environmental agenda, and money flow have combined to eliminate one of the real factors that can and should be used to maintain permanent open space in the West. Interestingly, it is starting to emerge even in the environmental community itself. Jim Scarantino, a former executive director of the NMWA organization that is pressing for wilderness in Dona Ana County and elsewhere in the state,



Cinder cones in Potrillo Mountains of New Mexico. People For Preserving Our Western Heritage has elevated its objections to wilderness designation in the West Potrillo Mountains to include issues of national security. Experience in Arizona has demonstrated that border wilderness areas become free-flowing channels of illegal human immigration and drug smuggling. In places like Arizona's Organ Pipe National Monument, such activity has closed down some areas because of the dangers it poses to visitors.

A Border Wilderness

The Williams Ranch runs to within a few miles of the Mexican border on its southern extension. People For Preserving Our Western Heritage has elevated its objections to wilderness designation in the West Potrillo Mountains to include issues of national security. Experience in Arizona has demonstrated that border wilderness areas become free-flowing channels of illegal human immigration and drug smuggling. In places like Arizona's Organ Pipe National Monument, such activity has closed down certain areas because of the dangers it poses to park visitors.

Retired Border Patrol sector chief Gene Wood writes: "I know of no better way to describe wilderness designations on our borders except as a 'seam.' Historically, these designations have been exploited by human and drug smugglers.... There is good reason to conclude that news of any new seam will be

received with enthusiasm by those who would do our country harm."

The Wilderness Act clearly states that there shall be neither temporary roads nor permanent roads within wilderness areas. Motorized access is forbidden. How would Border Patrol agents maintain full coverage of surveillance if they were precluded from normal and ongoing motorized access to large and remote border areas? Environmentalists point to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) crafted and signed by former secretary of the Interior, Gail Norton, as the answer. In the MOU, the allowances for access are set forth. Border Patrol agents are allowed to access wilderness if they are in pursuit of a suspect. They would have to "negotiate" with the land-agency secretary, however, on any additional access.

"Don't be fooled by talk of some MOU and how great the BLM and Homeland Secu-

rity will get along when they start negotiating on access in border wilderness," says Richard Hays, retired chief of Flight Operations, Border Patrol. "That MOU cannot supercede any law."

The Williams Ranch has nearly 100 miles of roads, almost the same miles of fence, and about 60 miles of pipelines within the country proposed for wilderness. The BLM was asked what allowances would be authorized for "occasional motorized access" for inspection and maintenance of pipelines and water facilities. The response by the BLM's Las Cruces-area manager, Bill Childress, was inconclusive, but access would not be allowed every week. A practical problem is obviously at hand! At 103 degrees in June, a cow and calf will drink about 32 gallons of water a day. It doesn't take many pairs to drink a trough dry if no water is flowing into it, and there is no way a 60-mile stretch of pipelines and drinkers are going to be covered horseback on a timely basis in the summer heat of Dona Ana County! —*Steve Wilmeth*

has realized that the approach of wilderness groups has been wrong.

“We must,” he says, “recognize that the

very group that this country can rely upon to perpetuate open space has been too long in the sights of environmental groups for elimi-

nation. Ranchers are the key to maintaining permanent open space in the West.”

In 2008, New Mexico Rep. Steve Pearce introduced legislation that offered protection for the lands in the Dona Ana fight without the divisiveness that wilderness designations have brought to the West. Pearce introduced the idea of Rangeland Preservation Areas (RPA). This new designation includes protective measures similar to wilderness but also assures the survival of ranching operations. The ranchers believe that the effort is a welcome attempt to reduce stakeholder divisions with land-agency management.

“The idea of simply removing cattle from rangelands will not create conditions that will return grasslands to a pristine state,” says Chris Allison, animal and range scientist and professor from New Mexico State University. “Once brush intrusion passes a ‘threshold,’ nothing will reverse it but manipulation of some kind.”

And Dudley Williams says with hope, “With RPAs, we have an opportunity to do something special here.”

If history is any indicator, this will not be an easy goal to attain. But there is little doubt that it is an honorable and important mission. ■

Steve Wilmeth ranches in Dona Ana and Luna counties, New Mexico.

PHOTOS COURTESY WILLIAMS FAMILY RANCHES



Dudley Williams and ranch foreman John Elwell (third and fourth, respectively, from left) form a team that oversees more than 350 sections of southwestern New Mexico ranch country. Days after this photo was taken, John was bitten by a rattlesnake at the HQ compound, Spring 2009. RIGHT: Dudley Williams is cutting dries from a gather at the X7 corrals, 20 miles north of the Mexican border.



Rangeland Preservation Areas

The idea of RPAs is to provide protections similar to wilderness, but to also maintain the social-fabric relationships that the land has provided to generations of people. The designation of RPA intends to apply the basic intention—the preservation of federal lands—but allows the dignity and necessity of local customs and economies to have a place in the scope of the protection.

Former deputy chief of the Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service, William L. Rice, perhaps summed it up best when he wrote: “For a long time, those of us who have been in the trenches trying to maintain some sanity of managing federal lands have known that something drastic needs to be done to reel in the blitzkrieg of stakeholder assault taking place in the West. If there is need for special management of federal lands, local input is not only needed, it is incumbent on Congress to



Big sky, big country, and grass were inspiring to the first stockmen of the Southwest. Fences came as administrative boundaries became fixed. Literally hundreds of miles of these fences exist in the corner of this world where wilderness looms.

allow that process to occur. Local customs, local history, and local economies, current and future, must first and foremost be considered.

“The concept that has been put forward in Dona Ana County, N.M., by People for Preserving Our Western Heritage, the idea of Rangeland Preservation Areas, has far-reaching implications across the West. The idea of locally driven standards that ultimately protect the integrity of open space but don’t destroy the social fabric of the area must be considered. If true wilderness is ever to survive, the Wilderness Act of 1964 needs to be held inviolate. It cannot be adjusted, modified, tweaked, politicized, and adulterated for every whim of a special interest group or congressional rep who wants his legacy enhanced.

“If lands today have such characteristics that they need special protection, the people who have had some influence on that have to be at the table. The idea that each such area has special attributes that create ‘standards of expectations’ derived and advocated by local input is fundamental to our founding doctrines. What a novel idea!” —Steve Wilmeth