

# The Guns in August

TNC shows the U.S. Army how to get what it wants in Colorado.

Story and photos by Tim Findley.

Something was wrong with the air in Las Animas County. You can see the heat like it is another dimension, blurring everything else. Here on the vast dry plains crunching out from the eastern slope of the Rockies, it is an infinitely thin plasma of pure heat—dustless, yet fogging.

Maybe this is what the Army brass mean when they say their Colorado training range reminds them of Iraq. Other junior officers shake their heads at the scattered scratches of

ly productive part of the state feel it warmly, cleanly filling their lungs with a perfume of seasonal pollen. It is still a place where the last week in August finds it vacated by so many folks away at the annual state fair in Pueblo.

The little town of Model is truly abandoned. Doors sag in their frames, and the rim of an old fuel sign dangles from its painted pole, but gnarling fingers of thorny weeds have not yet overcome the gravel of old streets. In the surviving small city of La Junta,



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desert juniper or thin, sticky elms on a flat horizon of grass. The arroyos and box canyons are not the Iraq they remember, but theirs are tactical experiences, details. The generals think strategy.

In recent years, ranchers and others have reported strange phenomenon such as “spacecraft” or livestock found mysteriously mutilated. Or it could be just Colorado, already strangling under a relentless drought useful to the political arguments over global warming. It might be a place where a lost stranger finds it hard to breathe against the thin high altitude, or a place where those who have spent their lives in this most agricultural-

a few remaining freights still rumble slowly through the train yard, politely sounding low moans ahead of the crossings. But they clank with an empty sound that is never quite loaded as it once was in this center for melons and truck crops. Somewhere out on the empty flat, they say a pea-processing plant boils alone where it was closed years ago, sinking slowly and forgotten in a stagnant moat.

It is all so softened, so seriously siesta at the end of summer that the signs wired to fences or nailed to posts blare out their message:

“THIS LAND IS NOT FOR SALE TO THE ARMY”

Where else might you encounter such a clear, undisputable declaration except in the wide vistas of southeastern Colorado, where the Army has for years been relentlessly expanding its reach over what is already the second-largest military training base in the nation and due, the secret plans suggest, to become the largest armored maneuver training site on the planet?

“NOT FOR SALE TO THE ARMY,” the signs say without a hint of compromise.

The world is on its head here, looking down at the moon. In the decades since Vietnam, while base closures at seaports and around urban regions’ knee-capped local economies elsewhere, the Army has grabbed for more and more land around its mobile infantry headquarters at Fort Carson, near Colorado Springs, not hesitating to simply take it from private property owners by eminent domain.

That’s what’s happened to small towns like Model and Tyrone along with scores of small farms and ranches made empty long before the place came to resemble Iraq. The Army admits that at least half the 285,000 acres acquired for maneuvers in 1984 were taken by condemnation. People who had lived there for generations were paid what the Army said their land was worth and then moved out, like farmers during the Dust Bowl. Towns died. Money for roads or schools dried up.

For the “next war,” the one not yet begun with Iraq, the most powerful tanks in the world roared out of canyons at 60 miles per hour in nonlive-fire maneuvers, reaching base perimeters so soon they had to square off their turns and return along the line of their attack. Second only by a small margin to California’s Fort Irwin as the nation’s largest base, Fort Carson was still too small from the start for the incredible technology. But after the first shock, the Army said there would be no more taking by eminent domain. They already stretched constitutional limitations with the use of the Corps of Engineers for part of the purchases. But no more, they said.

Yet held out behind the military fences are still the easy, open foothills north and west beyond the Apishapa River. And across the core site, over the Comanche aquifers and the flat splitting canyons of the Purgatoire River south and east through three counties all the way to the New Mexico and Kansas borders, lay thinly populated territory little changed since the beginning of the 20th century. Vulnerable, it seems, to still more taking. The Army, satisfied with its success, denied and

discouraged the rumors about expansion and live-fire exercises and stressed that never, in any case, would they use condemnation again.

Nowhere in the West is pressure on family ranches greater than in this region. Generations of families proud of their closely related small towns and closely worked ranges have fought hard even against state-sponsored plans to offer them alternatives. Enough so that many local producers divided from the alert-softened Colorado Cattlemen's Association to be part of Kimmi Lewis' Colorado Independent Cattlegrowers Association (CICA) that formed a watchdog eye on what was happening in Washington, D.C.

Kimmi, who has since remarried, found a strong focus six years ago when her first husband died leaving her with six kids, all in or near their teens, to help her work the narrow margins on their Muddy Valley Ranch midway between La Junta and the small town of Kim. Classically and elegantly an independent western woman with plenty of grit, her leadership and unshakable determination reminds people of movie images, like Hepburn or Stanwyck. She can't help it, but it doesn't hurt that she also resembles a Dale Evans dealt another hand. As the rumors of the Army training ground's base expansion grew stronger in 2005, Kimmi herself made trips to Congress, seeking answers.

"When we told the others what we'd found," Lewis says, "they weren't just disturbed, they were hacked off." There were hints of new bills in Congress for base expansion, and talk of increasing training needs.

Before the U.S. military was quite ready, Kimmi Lewis already held the high ground in what might shape up as the mother of all land-grab battles with the Defense Department. The Army probed its opposition, hinting at some lack of patriotism and reminding the ranchers how awesomely successful the training base had been in preparing forces for the Gulf War. The military conducted neatly staged meetings like that in February at the Branson school gym and again in April at the community center in Hoehene, a little town almost identical to the late Model and perilously close to the active base.

"When they introduced the combat veterans, we were the first on our feet, cheering louder than any of them. We knew they'd be watching," says Kimmi Lewis. "I think maybe it surprised them, like they didn't really know where we'd stand."

Indeed, many of those even on Lewis's side were not as certain. The Army was com-

ing at them in a smoke screen covering the take-it-and-leave actions of the last 20 years with a new style that presented a fresh-faced public relations expert, Karen Edge, and an Army public affairs officer, Lt. Col. David Johnson, to claim talk of more expansion was just part of needs analysis, perhaps in the long range, but nothing to cause immediate concern.

Lewis knew better. It was at that meeting that a map emerged from somewhere at Fort Carson itself showing a plan drawn in 2002 for staged acquisitions beginning almost immediately and continuing for 20 years or more. Not only would it make the Piñon Canyon site the center of by far the nation's largest base, but it would absorb virtually all of southeastern Colorado in a 2.5-million-acre expanse shaped like a goose egg covering the state's most productive agricultural region.

The surprised military PR began to spin. This was just a plan, and it had nothing to do with eminent domain or condemnations, they pointed out. Instead it relied most on the concept the Army was adopting from its new partner, The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

The concept and the term is "willing seller," and The Nature Conservancy has used it before in its mercenary roles on behalf of federal land grabs. As documents have revealed, TNC had been awarded \$7 million to acquire the buffer zone nearest Colorado Springs that will supposedly discourage development from moving close to the site from the north. The world's wealthiest "nonprofit" property agent also already had in its grasp the first 5,000 acres in a planned network of 50,000 acres on the southern buffer of the base to preserve prairie habitat and grazing.

But that's only the beginning. So con-

cerned is TNC about "encroachment" on U.S. military bases that in 2004 it began lobbying pressure to increase defense spending on buffer zones. Its letters included support for the plan by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club as well as a dozen other green groups claiming that \$250 million is



*Kimmi Lewis is an elegant and independent western woman with plenty of grit. As the rumors of the Army training ground's base expansion grew stronger in 2005, Kimmi herself made trips to Congress, seeking answers. "When we told the others what we'd found," she says, "they weren't just disturbed, they were hacked off." Their fight could shape up as the mother of all land-grab battles with the Department of Defense.*

urgently needed this year to "combat sprawl" near military bases. It made the \$29 million spent by the Army in 1984 to take or acquire the core site of Piñon Canyon seem like a major bargain.

It is true, public-relations-person Edge acknowledges, the Army will need more land to train another 10,000 troops there. Nobody lied about that, she says, but the map just proved that the Army had no intention to use eminent domain to take it.

From their Boulder bastion of leftist





*Army Reserve Command Sgt. Maj. Able Benavidez's eyes don't peel in the late summer heat. A 30-year soldier with a noncommissioned authority capable of bucking full bird colonels, Benavidez's vision of the future in southern Otero County is clear as ever, and it doesn't include the Army. "This isn't Iraq. This is mine and they don't need this," he says firmly, standing with his wife Judy behind one of the sentinel signs on his own property, purchased not long after his grandfather first homesteaded in the area in 1872. Judy's family settled in the same area in 1876.*

hypocrisy, The Nature Conservancy tried to deny it had any deal with the Army to actually expand the military base. Its agreement with the defense department is a "win-win-win situation," argues Charles Bedford of TNC. "The [conservation] easements prevent development which can encroach on military training, allow ranchers to realize the value of their development rights, while keeping the land in production and protect important wildlife habitat to prevent future restrictions on both public and private landowners. In short, the Conservancy is working with the Department of Defense to preserve the benefits working ranch lands provide for conservation and military readiness by compensating ranchers for their stewardship."

Maybe, even for the "transparent" Nature Conservancy, that was just one or two too many wins for anybody to comprehend—or trust. Bedford's boss at TNC headquarters in Arlington, Va., Steve McCormick, made it easier by simply gloating that the deal will help TNC leverage more land. The checkerboard

political win-win, it seems.

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"They don't need this," he says firmly, standing behind one of the sentinel signs on his own property, purchased not long after his grandfather first homesteaded in the area in 1872. His wife Judy's family settled nearby in 1876. The sergeant major and former consultant to the Bureau of Reclamation knows about training troops and testing materials. He also knows about raising grandchildren. Only a day before, his 92-year-old father fell and broke his hip. Benavidez worries as he and Judy get ready to visit the hospital, but they are determined to bring the old man back to his bungalow neighboring their own house.

"Nobody can make me out to be anti-

military," the 67-year-old veteran says, "but unless it's a national emergency, my family is still first. This isn't Iraq. This is mine, and they don't need it."

Jackrabbits rumble through the sage behind his porch—"My dogs are too lazy to chase them anymore," he jokes—and coyote trails wind out onto the prairie, mildly disturbing in the direction they take toward his cattle. "I don't shoot them either unless they get out of hand," Benavidez laughs as a man happy with his life. "Yeah, it's simple, but it makes sense. There's as much value to that as to an armored division. Probably more."

Benavidez has neighbors like George Torres and his cousin Eugene, a retired veterinarian, who feel the same way. "We're just trying to put them on notice that they've taken enough," says the white-bearded vet, tending a small garden behind the fence where his own "Not For Sale" sign faces the highway. "I guess it just depends on how much they want it."

The Army would not try to take the sergeant major's ranch, but its new TNC partners have decades of experience in sniffing out weaknesses that can be found from a crippling injury or a worn-out bank account that could rest better with cash paid for an easement in perpetuity.

No need for concern that the unaccountable, yet highly questioned largest nonprofit landholder in the world is really fronting a deal for the Army. The more ranchers who are eased into help by TNC, the more others still resisting will be left, too literally, alone. The Nature Conservancy doesn't answer to the Army, or to any other public entity except the I.R.S.

Kimmi Lewis had met their generously concerned operatives herself when her first husband died and TNC operatives paid their respects, suggesting some help from an easement or even purchase of the Muddy Valley.

She might try to send out a warning to others in moments of need, but TNC won't give up. And it's not only or even mostly because "Nature's Landlord" really wants to help the Army. Even Lewis was surprised to realize that the same enormous stretch of grassland prairie so prized as a buffer fits amazingly by scale into the even larger jigsaw puzzle of the Wildlands Project, which TNC denies helping to create under the United Nations Agenda 21.

That fantasy, stretching from the Yucatan to the Yukon in a seemingly random spider web of parcels, fits almost exactly over the southeastern Colorado area and the town of Kim itself as if drawn for the purpose in 1997.



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Despite its denial, sources confirm that TNC helped fund the Wildlands Project. It would seal as much as a third of the United States as an uninhabited wilderness. And it seems more than just by stunning coincidence that an overlay to scale reveals parcels identical to those drawn in the Army plan.

Benavidez blinks back the thought. That can't be his proud Army from a lifetime of service that would be so easily captured. "No, I don't know anything about The Nature

## The war against whom?

**A**mong the documents found in Washington by Kimmi Lewis and the Colorado Independent Cattlegrowers Association was a Department of Defense memorandum on the effort of more than 30 environmental and land trust organizations pressing Congress to hugely increase funding for land acquisition around military bases.

Against the Defense Department's own \$20 million budgeted for the purpose, the cabal of nongovernment organizations (NGOs) proposed an increase in fiscal 2005 to "at least" \$250 million for "buffer zones" around training bases. Unanswerable to any public agency or even to its own memberships, the nonprofit groups insisted such appropriations are necessary to "combat urban sprawl" around military installations.

"Unless action is taken now, those pres-

ures will become even more severe and adverse impacts on our military will worsen," say letters produced by The Nature Conservancy, American Farmland Trust, and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The letters were signed by every major land conservation group in the United States, according to sources.

They identified 12 military installations in need of "buffer" purchases, including the U.S. Army at Hawaii, Fort Stewart, Ga., Fort Carson, Colo., Fort Bragg, N.C., Fort A.P. Hill, Va., Fort Ripley, Minn., Fort Benning, Ga., Fort Hood, Texas, Fort Richardson, Alaska, Fort Sill, Okla., Fort Campbell, Ky., and Camp Shelby, Miss.

Sources in the Defense Department said the proposal is still under active consideration.—TF

Conservancy," he says. "That's something else. Kimmi knows about that."

The signs don't say the land is not for sale. They say it's not for sale to the Army. In Pueblo that weekend, Benavidez takes his

turn behind the county booth at the Colorado State Fair petitioning against Army expansion. He also proudly salutes on the weekend devoted to the military. There is no contradiction in his pride.

The Nature Conservancy doesn't usually take part in state fairs, but all that weekend the richly endowed propaganda machine of Nature's Landlord runs a public service announcement on the AM radio in La Junta. The trustworthy voice of Paul Newman is heard urging listeners to help the TNC save the "Last Great Places." It is an old spot, used often before over the years, but it is soft and soothing, backed with a gentle music track that is reminiscent of the closing scenes of the science fiction film "Soylent Green."

Quietly the guns of August line up along the long, wide horizons of the Comanche grasslands; sometimes almost point blank from each other, reading: "This Land Not For Sale to the ARMY" on one side of the road, and in smaller but even more focused letters on the opposite fence replying: "U.S. ARMY. KEEP OUT." ■

*Tim Findley had a 20-year, award-winning career of journalism behind him when he moved to Fallon, Nev., in 1991 looking to get away from politics.*

