on the land

Celebrating award-winning farmers and ranchers who improve our environment

Leopold Conservation Award Program
PRESENTED BY SAND COUNTY FOUNDATION

DUPONT

PIONEER

We see new worlds in every acre.

Our mission began in 1926 and it continues today. We help growers improve crop productivity on their land and in widely varying, unpredictable and always challenging conditions. We started by creating the first successful corn hybrids and today are employing our Accelerated Yield Technology (AYT™) system to elevate yield expectations in corn, soybeans and other crops. DuPont Pioneer has led – and continues to lead – the way by combining genetics with traits and by utilizing information technology with field-by-field analytics.

We are now the world's leading developer and supplier of advanced plant genetics, providing high quality seeds to growers in more than 90 countries. From scientists in our laboratories to our agronomists and sales professionals working in every farming community, we meet new challenges every season and provide new opportunities one field at a time.

What **Nourishes** You?

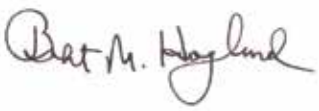
Land. We need it to grow the crops and animals that nourish our bodies. But the great bounty of the land, with its wildlife and open spaces, is also food for the human intellect and spirit. Aldo Leopold, the celebrated 20th century conservationist and author, saw no contradiction in the idea of land providing harvests for both body and mind. Leopold wrote often, throughout the '20s and '30s, of how tilling, grazing, and logging were being practiced with little regard for how these activities affected nature's health. And while his timely criticisms of reckless land use fueled the modern conservation movement, Leopold's environmental classic *A Sand County Almanac* likewise asserted the idea that using land to produce what we need to live—food, fiber, timber—could be done with respect and sensitivity.

As custodians of Leopold's written legacy, we at Sand County Foundation are dedicated to sharing this ethic by introducing people like you to farmers, ranchers, and other producers whose stewardship on the land embodies Leopold's ideals. By founding the **Leopold Conservation Award™ Program**, Sand County Foundation has created a way for America to say "thank you" to these families for the generations of care they have put into creating beautiful, bountiful landscapes and protecting our soil, water, air, and wildlife.

In the following pages, you will read stories of five Leopold Conservation Award recipients. The individuals and families chronicled here (by the talented writer Andy Rieber) stand out not only for having built successful businesses focused on producing food, but also for their personal aspiration to leave the land better than they found it for their families, for their communities, and for us.

As you follow their stories, you'll quickly understand that these "working landscapes" are loved no less, and in many cases nurtured far more, than land some would consider "wild." In their own ways, each of these families must overcome different obstacles, invent creative solutions and adapt in the ever-shifting agricultural industry. But they are united by the common thread of a "land ethic": Affording the land the same care and respect as one of their own.

We welcome you into the lives of these remarkable people. It's our hope that their stories give you even more reason to find blessing in the food that reaches your table. And that the next time you see a rolling pasture or a meadow full of freshly baled hay, you take a moment to thank the folks who nourish our bodies, minds, and spirits by their patient care… On the Land.



Brent M. Haglund, Ph.D.
President
Sand County Foundation

From Red Hot Chilies to Frosty Cold Milk


Dino and Julie Giacomazzi with sons Miro and Gio

Photo by Breanne Schaap

Hanford, California
Leopold Conservation Award Recipient 2012

By most lights, dairy farming is not a sexy occupation—perhaps something to do with its practitioners' interest in things like silage quality and chapped teats, or the prevalence (real or imagined) of bib overalls as standard dairyman's attire. Though some might call this an unfair slight to dairying's pastoral charms, it's hard to argue with facts. Dairymen move in different circles than rock stars and supermodels. They attend different parties. They favor different hairdressers. In all, there is scant crossover between the worlds of stardom, glamour, and rock-n-roll on the one hand and milk production on the other.

And then there is Dino Giacomazzi.

In the annals of the milking parlor, Dino's story is unique. Fourth in a line of Swiss-Italian dairy farmers, Dino didn't follow the well-trod career path from dairy science major to running the family milking business. Instead, he bootstrapped himself into a dream career in the rock music industry, only to pull off a stunning professional encore by founding a successful software company in San Francisco. Thoroughly steeped in the change-obsessed culture of the music and technology industries, Dino made the unlikely decision to come home and manage the family farm, where he developed a system of conservation tillage that has raised the bar for sustainable farming methods across California. But his drive to develop new farming technologies also set Dino squarely on a collision course with his father, in a family face-off between tradition and change.

Fourth in a line of Swiss-Italian dairy farmers, **Dino didn't follow the well-trod career path from dairy science major to running the family milking business.** Instead, he bootstrapped himself into a dream career in the rock music industry, only to pull off a stunning professional encore by founding a successful software company in San Francisco.

Farewell Holsteins, So Long Hanford

The Giacomazzi Dairy is located in the town of Hanford, at the heart of California's vast and fertile San Joaquin Valley. The oldest operating dairy in the Valley (and by some people's reckoning, in California), it was founded by Dino's great-grandfather Luigi Giacomazzi, an immigrant from

Dino Giacomazzi gets an unconventional education in milk production

Photo by Paulo Vescia

Canton Ticino, Switzerland. Luigi, or "Louis" as he came to be called, set up shop in 1893 with 10 milk cows, a couple of mules, and a horse and buggy in which he delivered his milk, cheese, and blocks of butter carefully molded and stamped with the "LG" trademark.

In the 1960s, Dino's grandfather Fred bought out the rest of his siblings to acquire sole ownership of the dairy. Fred's son Don—Dino's father—partnered with Fred soon afterwards. Given that Dino was the second of four siblings and Don's only son, his path to becoming the fourth Giacomazzi to milk cows on the family place looked straight and smooth. But as it turned out, Dino wasn't your average block of "LG" butter.

"I've always been a bit of a rebel," he says. As a youngster, Dino admits, he "probably wanted to be a rock star more than anything."

The dark-haired farm kid was certainly musical. He taught himself guitar. He taught himself piano. He played drums. When he went off to college at Cal Poly, Dino majored in dairy science but took courses in music recording technology. He played in a band, "Tongue and Groove." Then, after accumulating more credits than he needed to graduate, Dino abruptly pulled the plug on collegiate life without getting a diploma.

"I'd decided I'd spent enough time in school, and I just left," he says.

But when Dino came home to Hanford, he also came home to the familial warring and vendetta mongering that was a cherished sport in his Swiss-Italian family. His father and grandfather were jointly running the dairy and were daily at each other's throats, shouting and raging at each other across the patch of yard that separated their houses. After one particularly ugly incident involving a coffee cup hurled through a windshield, Dino was thoroughly soured on dairying.

"This is what my future was looking like," he says. "At some point, I decided I can either have a father, or I can have a business partner that I hate. And I decided that I didn't want to have a business partner that I hate. So I left."

Dino packed up his sound equipment and headed back down to San Luis Obispo. There, he managed to set himself up in a small way as a freelance sound technician for local clubs.

"I had speakers and amplifiers and microphones, and there were a bunch of clubs in San Luis Obispo that didn't have sound systems built in—every band had to bring their own stuff. And not every band had stuff, so they would hire somebody to bring the stuff for them. I was that guy."

That's how Dino got a toe-hold in the music world. Soon enough, though, local bands were asking Dino to book them at the clubs, as well as being their sound tech. Then he started renting venues and promoting shows himself. Over time, Dino's scope expanded. He started booking bands at clubs in Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz as well as San Luis. He eventually established an interstate circuit of venues stretching from San Diego to Vancouver to Montana to Salt Lake. Dino would book the bands into his tour loop, promote the shows, and then travel with the bands on tour, handling all the logistics.

In the music business, success is largely a function of whom you know, and Dino was

The world of rock music is an unlikely setting for an education in agriculture. But as an entertainment provider, Dino paid careful attention to popular trends: what people wanted, what they believed, what was important to them. **A sharp observer, Dino noticed that the public's attitude toward food production in the mid-'90s was shifting in a new direction.**

Photo by Paulo Vescia

becoming known. Bands with a national audience started hiring him to manage their tours. International bands followed. By the time he was 30, Dino was touring with artists like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Primus, and Everlast throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

The world of rock music is an unlikely setting for an education in agriculture. But as an entertainment provider, Dino paid careful attention to popular trends: what people wanted, what they believed, what was important to them. A sharp observer, Dino noticed that the public's attitude toward food production in the mid-'90s was shifting in a new direction.

"Knowing all these urban people exposed me to the fact that things were changing," says Dino. Trends that had formerly been "countercultural"—like organic food—were trickling into the mainstream. Talk of hormones like bST, environmental impacts, and animal welfare issues was becoming more common. Food awareness had not yet emerged as a movement, but its rumblings could be felt beneath the surface.

Second Act: Virtual Abandon

People grow old on the road. Dino could see it in the raggedy faces of his colleagues who had spent their hard-partying careers managing bands on tour. Sure they made a lot of money, but they had no families, and no homes (to speak of). Dino was 30, and he figured it was time for a change.

Ever since the Giacomazzi household had purchased a Radio Shack TRS 80 (Dino's dad had been an early user of dairy software), Dino had been something of a computer geek. When the Internet came on the scene in the early '90s, Dino was right in the thick of it. While traveling on tour, he killed the hours by teaching himself how to build websites for the bands he managed—at a time when few bands could brag of an online presence.

By the mid-'90s, the Internet was coming into common currency, but the technology for building websites was still in flux. Dino's entrepreneurial instinct for sniffing out business opportunity kicked back in; companies needed innovative software so they could create attractive, engaging websites. He picked up the phone and started assembling a team of friends who were similarly talented and tech savvy: programmers, designers, artists. Dino's second company, Virtual Abandon, was born.

"We all moved together to San Francisco and lived in a five-bedroom house, and each person slept and worked in their room," recalls Dino. "We started a company together, and it was, I would say, pretty damn successful."

Virtual Abandon specialized in taking data and packaging it in an attractive, easy-to-use graphic interface. It was the first company to figure out how to enhance Flash software—which later became the engine behind YouTube—to stream audio and video. When the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, Virtual Abandon actually increased its business by contracting out website development services to companies that were forced to slash their workforces.

As with music, Dino's adventures in the frenetically changing software industry were subtly shaping his views of how a successful agricultural business would have to be run in order to stay ahead of the curve.

"You always look to the future, and try to anticipate what the future is going to look like," says Dino. "It was about spotting and following trends. That idea of managing a business from the perspective that trends mean something, and that you need to be ahead of the trends, is sort of what kind of characterized my efforts."

Read More About It

Learn more about Dino Giacomazzi's farming practices in his handbook,

"A Systems Approach To Conservation Tillage Of Forage Crops: A California Dairyman's Perspective."

This practical guide for farmers is the result of Dino's years of research and practice in conservation tillage. You can download the free booklet online at **dinogiacomazzi.com.**

For continual learning and sharing of the latest in agricultural technology and practices, follow Dino on Twitter.

Twitter.com/dairydino

The Whiz Kid Returns

Back home, Dino's father was sick. Don had been diagnosed with lymphoma, and would have to step back from running the dairy. At Virtual Abandon, changes were also afoot. In the aftermath of the dot-com crash, Dino's partners began to splinter off and seek new careers. Dino felt he was ready for a change, as well. With two brilliant entrepreneurial ventures tucked under his belt, he headed back to Hanford to run the farm while his father underwent treatment.

It was 2002, and agriculture was on the hot seat. In California, air quality regulations, water regulations, carbon emission standards, animal welfare—all were becoming major public concerns. Air quality was an especially sensitive issue in the San Joaquin Valley, where its 4 million inhabitants were choking on the filthiest air in the country. Settling into his new role as dairyman, it didn't take Dino long to grasp that big changes were on the yellowing horizon. Farmers had a responsibility to help clean up the air; if they refused, they could get regulated out of existence. This meant that feeding his herd of 900 Holstein cows was going to require a reboot on farming practices. He needed to create less dust and less exhaust while growing his corn and wheat crops. But whatever he did, it had to make economic sense; going broke wasn't going to fix anything.

Dino's problem was that the tried-and-true method of farming corn and wheat involved a lot of tractor work: ripping, disking, cultivating, planting, and spraying. Each pass his tractor made sent more dust and exhaust into the air. Working with Jeff Mitchell, a cropping systems specialist with the University of California Extension Service, Dino set to work analyzing how he could minimize emissions without taking a financial beating. He and Jeff converted the Giacomazzi Dairy into a laboratory where all new technologies were on the table, and no tradition was sacred.

"We had at least seven research studies happening here at once," says Dino. "We wanted to look at different equipment, different practices, different plant populations, different ways of doing stuff. We took every possible thing that we could compare, and we did them all."

In contrast to the gradual acceptance of change typical in agriculture, there was nothing gradual about Dino's approach. His immersion in conservation methods was as amped-up and high-energy as his approach to software development. He was dairy farming, but at Silicon Valley velocity.

"I wanted to see every technology, every practice," Dino recalls. "I wanted to see it right now."

The result of Dino's intensive experimentation was the creation of a farming system based on strip tilling, a method of tilling narrow strips of earth for seedbeds, as opposed to turning the entire field. When combined with specific weed-control methods, irrigation methods, and other techniques, the strip till system reduced tractor passes by 85%, significantly cutting dust and exhaust emissions as well as reducing diesel and labor costs. Dino also proved that strip tilling increased the organic and biological content of the soil, improving both the quality and quantity of his crops.

And that wasn't all. The Giacomazzi Dairy was going high-tech in ways great-grandfather Luigi couldn't have dreamed. For example, a longtime friend and colleague from Dino's music days, Charles Raggio (now senior director of branded content at Pandora) recalls Dino's pioneering use of personal digital assistants (PDAs)—the first wave in hand-held computing technology.

"He was running water on fields with a PDA before people in San Francisco knew how to use a PDA," says Charles. "That's the way that Dino is. Dino was running water and managing people and cows and trucks and vendors and everything in his pocket before any of us really knew how to use smart phones."

The beauty of it all was that Dino had succeeded in growing more with less: better feed, and more of it, at a lower cost. High-tech tools had streamlined the farming process. His conservation tillage system slashed emissions, while making the soil richer. But Dino was also challenging the accepted paradigm in an industry where change is often viewed with suspicion. That complicated things. Because simply improving his own farming methods wasn't going


Photo by Paulo Vescia

to have an impact on air quality; he wanted other farmers to learn from what he'd done.

So Dino threw open his doors and invited farmers to come and look. He put on field days. He toured farmers around the dairy to show them the strip-tilled fields, the unfamiliar equipment, and his unconventional methods.

"Some people looked at it and snickered," says Dino. But clearly not everyone was laughing. Hundreds of farmers have since learned about conservation tillage either on the farm tours or by reading a publication Dino has written about the process. And some are clearly joining the movement. Currently, there are an estimated 1,000,000 acres of California farmland in conservation tillage, up from a scanty 120,000 acres in 2004.

One very important person, however, did not approve of the changes sweeping the Giacomazzi Dairy: Dino's father, Don. A stubborn and deeply traditional man to the end, Don bitterly told Dino that all the recent improvements to the farm had destroyed what he had spent his own lifetime building. Don's opinion was the most important opinion to be won, but Dino couldn't win him over in time. When Don passed away in 2011, father and son were still warring over the changes Dino had brought to the dairy. Their last words together were heated.

An Ever-Open Mind

What makes it difficult for some people in agriculture to embrace change? What makes it possible for others to move beyond tradition? It's a question that Dino has puzzled over at length. For himself, he has an answer.

"My experience of the world was not formed in Hanford, California," Dino reflects. "If I had never left there, it would have been unlikely that I would think the way I do about trying to find solutions to stuff. It made me more open to look at the possibility of change."

Developments on the dairy show no sign of drying up. According to Dino, his conservation tillage system is still a work in progress, open to ongoing improvements. He's also scheming up ways to recruit the latest in high-tech gadgetry for farm work.

"I'm really looking forward to finding a way to use Google Glass on the farm," Dino says. "I'm very interested in figuring out ways to put these things on my employees and have them be able to access records about cows and different things."

But beyond embracing new equipment and new methods and new gadgets, Dino has discovered something about innovation that often goes unrecognized. Openness to change isn't just about buying the latest farm implement. It's about mindset—an openness to new and sometimes challenging ideas. When Dino holds his field days on the Giacomazzi Dairy, that's part of the message. He's not just showing farmers how conservation tillage works. He's showing them a different way to think.

"It's really not about what I do," says Dino. "It's about the attitude I have about what I do."

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> *What more delightful avocation than to take a piece of land and by cautious experimentation to prove how it works. What more substantial service to conservation than to practice it on one's own land?*
>
> ***—Aldo Leopold***

The Unflappable Mr. Plover

Photo by Seth Gallagher

"I am Mr. Davis. I own this land. What are you doing?"

Russell Davis was standing in the Hodgson Hill pasture, the door of his '81 Chevy pickup wide open. The young woman in khaki shorts and a floppy birder's hat had been poking around in the middle of a prairie dog town about a hundred yards away. She trudged back toward Davis, a bit sheepish. A pair of binoculars dangled about her neck. Her pickup, parked nearby, was a little Toyota outfit. Government, probably.

"We're doing research," she explained. Actually, she was supposed to be on the neighbor's ranch, she said, but had wandered by accident onto Davis's. Standing there in his dusty Wranglers and work boots, Davis cringed inwardly. Great. Government scientists.

"Mr. Davis, do you know how many mountain plover you have on your property?"

Davis had never heard of a plover, so no, he didn't. But what the bird-watcher lady told him next turned his mouth into a sandbox. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was proposing to list the mountain plover as an endangered species, and as it happened, Davis's ranch was teeming with them.

"Mr. Davis," she said, "they're everywhere."

The mountain plover is an unassuming little beige and white bird that looks like a killdeer or large sandpiper. Though it's technically a shorebird, the mountain plover is neither a sea bather nor an alpine enthusiast, preferring instead to peck out a less glamorous living on flat, arid grasslands. In winter, the mountain plover decamp to California's Central Valley or northern Mexico. But in spring they return to nest among the blue grama and buffalo grass of the vast short-grass prairie that unrolls from the eastern base of the Rockies. Davis's ranch, it seemed, was booked solid for plover high season.

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Russell Davis is a square-set man with a warm, leathery,

How a little, long-legged bird transformed Russell Davis from an everyday rancher into a cowman conservationist.

Russell and Tricia Davis

Photo by NRCS

ear-to-ear smile. His values are Norman Rockwell vintage: simple, fair, generous. His handshake is as solid as a notarized contract. Looking back on his tense encounter with the young bird scientist, Davis can finally chuckle. "I was thinking, what the heck is a 'plover'? I was scared, to be plain honest."

Recreational birders may delight at the idea of hosting a rare species in their backyard, but there's a reason it gives ranchers heartburn. A federally listed species usually means regulations on their land—including grazing restrictions. Federal authorization may be necessary for any small action that disturbs an endangered critter's critterly business. The resulting red tape can paralyze a cattle operation and ultimately cause a rancher to go broke.

Rooted there in the Hodgson field absorbing the news, uneasy thoughts percolated to the surface of Davis's mind.

Are they going to come and tell me how to run my place?

Am I going to lose the ranch?

Davis couldn't lose the ranch. His grandparents Wallace and Dorothy Wineinger had taken out a loan to buy the first 400 acres just beyond the town of Karval back in 1938—after the Dust Bowl had blown through and land in eastern Colorado was dirt cheap. Money had often been tight, but over the years Wallace and his son-in-law Lyle—Davis's father—patched a sizeable operation together with sweat, grit, and thrift—buying up parcels here and there at 75 cents to $2.50 an acre. By the mid-'90s, Davis and his brother were running cows and yearlings on over 12,000 acres. But in 1997, a freak October blizzard killed off 100 of their 250 mother cows and zeroed out all the gain on their 1,000 yearlings. The next year, livestock markets tanked. Then, in 2000, a drought hit. Feed was thin and dry, the cows wouldn't breed back, and the check from the auction yard was barely enough to keep the Wineinger-Davis Ranch on its feet.

And now…this.

Davis asked the young woman to leave. She handed him a business card so he could telephone her boss—the lead plover researcher. Then she climbed into the Toyota and bounced away over the blue grama and the buffalo grass in a cloud of dust.

A Ritz-Carlton in Karval

Davis would have been happy to forget about the bird lady. But a week or so later, the neighbor whose land she was supposed to have been studying plover on, Carl Stogsdill, rang Davis to invite him to an "RMBO" meeting.

"I guess I thought it was some sort of rifle organization," says Davis. It wasn't. The Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, a nonprofit conservation group, was holding a workshop in Karval to discuss conservation of the mountain plover with landowners. Davis had no inclination to go, but got railroaded by his son, Kyle. At least, Kyle pointed out, there'd be a free lunch.

Grim, humped up, and expressionless, Davis stared at the khaki-clad ecologists as each gave a spiel about protecting habitat for mountain plover and prairie dogs. He ticked off in his mind the work he could be doing if he'd stayed home. But at some point, one of the speakers tossed out the idea of paying ranchers to take part in conservation projects. Davis cocked an ear. His ranch sure needed cash. If these people could help him stay in business, how hard could it be to help them protect some critters?

That day, Davis also learned that his uninvited plover enthusiast was in fact a researcher with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. CPW was working with the Farm Bureau to document the plover populations on eastern Colorado ranches. Although the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was proposing to list the bird, CPW was hoping to show that there were enough birds on ranches like Davis's to make a listing unnecessary.

After the workshop, Davis was approached by Ken Morgan, the private lands program manager for CPW. "I've heard about your ranch," said Morgan. He wanted to come out and have a look at the plover situation. Davis was queasy about letting more government scientists sniff around on his place, but decided then and there to take a chance. Maybe, Davis thought, they could help each other out.

Morgan drove out two weeks later. Davis greeted him by the barn, and the two of them climbed into Davis's pickup. They spent the day rattling around the ranch: through the pastures, among the cattle, around the prairie dog town, along the cool banks of Horse Creek overshaded with towering cottonwoods. Over the course of the day, Davis effectively lifted the veil on his private piece of Colorado prairie to let Morgan see what was hiding underneath. What Morgan saw amazed him.

There were, as Morgan expected, mountain plover in abundance. But there were also stern-faced little burrowing owls, a den of swift foxes with kits

romping among the grass, tawny and cream pronghorn, eagles, ferruginous hawks, prairie dogs, rattlesnakes, and lark buntings. "Russell and Lyle's place had it all," recalls Morgan. "In profusion."

At the end of the day, Morgan shook his head and looked at Davis. "Russell, you're running a five-star hotel here."

Davis stared back, a bit snowed. The idea that he was managing his land to grow plover and foxes in addition to cattle and grass had never been on his radar. Ranching was work. Wildlife was part of the beautiful world Davis ranched in, but not something he had much control over.

"This was all so new to me," Davis recalls. "My focus all these years had been cow-calf: How am I going to get more weight on the calves in the fall…market them at prime time…bring home dollars…?"

Now Morgan was telling Davis something entirely different—that the wildlife was flocking to the Wineinger-Davis ranch because of him. The prairie grasses, cropped for millennia by plains bison, were vigorous thanks to Davis's cows, whose grazing mimicked the bison's habits. The way Davis moved his cattle was creating a patchwork of shorter and longer grasses that provided choice accommodations for a busy community of wildlife. Davis wasn't just raising cattle on his ranch. Unbeknownst to him, he was creating a prairie critter paradise.

Kitchen Table Diplomacy

After that day with Morgan, Davis started letting people in. Not all at once. But over time, with RMBO providing the introductions and social grease, Davis opened his ranch to a small stream of biologists: Vicki Dreitz from the University of Montana; Katy Fitzgerald and Bill Noonan from Partners for Fish and Wildlife; and Casey Cooley, a bright, young biologist with CPW who spent several years documenting the birds and beasts that had set up housekeeping on Davis's place. ("He gave me a four-year education on the wildlife component of the Wineinger-Davis Ranch," says Davis.)

Over the course of numerous kitchen table conversations with Cooley, Morgan, and others—irrigated by countless cups of coffee—a delicate dance of give and take was unfolding. From the biologists, Davis learned about the wildlife he was hosting: which species; their habits; their needs. At the same time, Davis gave the scientists a crash course in the costs and challenges of making a living ranching out on the prairie. Blizzards happen. Drought comes. Markets swing and swing back. Margins are whisker thin. And the work of calving, processing, herding, doctoring, fencing, haying, weaning, and feeding is often an 18-hour-a-day job with no guaranteed holidays or weekends.

Davis also explained that for most ranchers, special conservation projects are a luxury. Projects cost money. Lots of ranchers want to do good things for the land, but many aren't flush enough with cash to dip into their operating budget to cater to birds and beasts.

These discussions ultimately laid the groundwork for the conservation easement Davis and Morgan drew up to preserve the plover habitat Davis was creating by grazing his cattle. The final agreement, which was three years in the making, guarantees that the Wineinger-Davis Ranch will remain a working cattle ranch in perpetuity, as well as protecting a limited area for prairie dogs. In return, CPW will pay Davis for not developing the ranch and maintaining the five-star digs for plover and prairie dogs. It was a quid pro quo arrangement

Photo by Peter LaTourrette/BirdPhotography.com

Take in the Mountain Plover Festival

The town of Karval hosts its popular Mountain Plover Festival each spring to the delight of wildlife enthusiasts, nature lovers and history buffs.

This is a weekend full of bird watching, wildlife viewing tours, entertainment, history, arts and crafts, antiques, and lots of home-style food. Visitors can inquire about home stays with local farmers and ranchers. There are also electric hookups for motor homes and primitive camping sites available.

Visit karval.org

that required both parties to seek out the common ground that lies at the intersection of cattle ranching and wildlife conservation.

"At the time, I don't know if I thought of myself as a 'conservationist,' " Davis admits. "What was driving me was keeping the bird off the endangered species list. And then, we needed some cash flow dollars."

But the easement paved the way for other projects. Davis joined forces with Partners for Fish and Wildlife to protect the lush riparian areas along Horse Creek under the dripping cottonwoods. And he helped biologists to trap swift fox—plentiful on his ranch—for translocation to South Dakota, where swift fox were becoming scarce.

A slow transformation was taking place. Davis was still very much a rancher, and he still had to make a profit raising cattle on grass. But he was developing a new awareness of how—as a landowner—he could create more than fat calves. Davis came to appreciate that he could also be a custodian of wild creatures and their habitat. Through tending to their needs, Davis had created something that, though it couldn't be sold down at the sale barn, had its own inherent, unreckonable value.

Karval's Own Mr. Plover

"It was hard to fathom, to put all the pieces of the puzzle together," Davis says of his journey from everyday rancher to cowman conservationist. But Davis had only begun to stretch his wings at this point; his signature touch was to share his and other Karval ranchers' conservation story with the public. In 2005, a year after the easement was finalized, Davis hatched the idea of putting on the Karval Plover Festival: a two-day event that would bring city bird watchers out to enjoy the rare plover, have rural home stays, tour ranches, and learn a bit about ranching on Colorado's short-grass prairie. After some initial resistance from skeptical Karval-ites, the idea took off. Now in its seventh year, spring finds Plover Festival buses conveying binocular-clad birders—from Colorado Springs, Denver, and beyond—around Karval-area ranches. Local tour guides point out birds and other wildlife while explaining the symbiotic relationship between cattle grazing and wild prairie species. The event is capped off by a chuck wagon dinner that brings the birders together with local ranch families over beef, beans, and homemade peach cobbler.

"It gives us the opportunity to talk about the effectiveness of what we're doing on the land with our cattle, and why the plovers are there," says Davis.

The festival has also proven that transformation can occur in the other direction. City-dwelling bird buffs leave Karval with an enlightened view of how well-managed grazing can benefit birds and beasts.

"It's really changed a lot of attitudes of urban and suburban bird watchers, and their sense that somehow agriculture and cattle ranching are bad for wildlife," says Seth Gallagher, stewardship director for the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. "When they see a landowner that is interested in fostering wildlife habitat beyond agricultural production, it gives them the sense that these folks aren't just out here for their own economic gain."

Man and beast, plant and soil lived on and with each other in mutual toleration, to the mutual benefit of all.

—Aldo Leopold

Photo by NRCS

Russell Davis welcomes a fourth grade class to the ranch.

Davis's zeal for educating the city-dwelling public has extended even further. In 2008, he pulled together a team of biologists and locals to help Karval high school student Katie Merewether develop the Ranching and Wildlife (RAW) program, which buses urban fourth-graders out to area ranches where they are taught a practicum on wildlife and ranching by Karval high school juniors and seniors. In 2012, the Karval high schoolers put on three RAW field days; the fall session was attended by over 100 urban fourth-graders and 50 parents.

In a move to educate ranchers, Davis also helped found Partners for Conservation, an organization that brings together conservation-minded private landowners with partners who want to fund projects. The group's conferences encourage landowners and conservation funding sources to form partnerships—along the lines of Davis's work with CPW and Partners for Fish and Wildlife—that will increase the productivity and integrity of working landscapes.

> **"It's important for us to keep that next generation on the ranch with a focus on conservation and wildlife and continue to do the good things for research here."**
>
> **– Russell Davis**

The efforts of Davis and his growing cohort of rancher conservationists have not gone unnoticed. In 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service withdrew its proposed rule to list the mountain plover as an endangered species, noting that plover often benefit from cattle grazing. It was a fitting end to a saga that has made conservationists of cattlemen and cow-fanciers out of biologists and birders.

"I couldn't have written a better script," says Davis.

New Dawn on The Tavaputs Ranch

Price, Utah
Leopold Conservation
Award Recipient 2009

Photo by Ron Francis, NRCS

Standing at the Tavaputs Ranch headquarters on Desolation Canyon's western rim, an early-rising observer willing to quit his bed before the aroma of coffee or bacon stirs his senses may witness a performance of rare and dramatic beauty. The scrim of sky lightens, blushes deeply, and slowly sets the stage alight with reds, pinks, and violets. There is a pause—then, the sun bursts forth from the canyon's recesses, illuminating sky above and rugged landscape below. As sunrises go, this is one for the bucket list. Standing there on the brink of the canyon, you can easily imagine you're witnessing a cosmic beginning: the first dawning of the ages.

It's no accident, then, that the word "Tavaputs" means "sunrise" in the language of the Ute Indians. It also denotes one of eastern Utah's most remote and spectacular geographical features. The Tavaputs Plateau is a high tableland of alpine meadows and shimmering aspen groves that climbs gradually from the Uintah Basin to an altitude of 10,000 feet, terminating at its southern boundary in the shattered cathedrals and tumbledown ramparts of the Book Cliffs. For millennia, this place was a summer oasis to Ute and Fremont Indians, a verdant island of summer grass and good hunting grounds sequestered high above the baking heat of the painted Utah desert.

In its middle, the Plateau is cleaved in two by Desolation Canyon. Carved over millions of years by the Green River, Desolation splits through the Plateau's russet-colored rock, its sloped walls dropping over 5,000 feet to the bottom where the mazy river twists along its floor. Though its sides are not as steep as the Grand Canyon, Desolation is a deeper cut in the earth. As it happens, Desolation comes by its name honestly; there are no roads in or out. It is still truly wild country, understood to be one of the most remote places in the lower 48 states.

Carved over millions of years by the Green River, Desolation Canyon splits through the Plateau's russet-colored rock, its sloped walls dropping over 5,000 feet to the bottom where the mazy river twists along its floor. **Though its sides are not as steep as the Grand Canyon, Desolation is a deeper cut in the earth.**

"Knowing the land" to the Jensen family has been the work of generations.

Butch and Jeanie Jensen
Photo by Gaylene Erwin

The headquarters of Butch and Jeanie Jensen's Tavaputs Ranch perches at 9,500 feet on the rim of the Tavaputs Plateau, with Desolation Canyon as its astonishing backdrop. Even in this age of heavy-duty diesel pickups and satellite internet, it's hard to fathom life in a place so remote that a quick trip to the store for coffee filters or peanut butter is an all-day (mostly back-road) journey. But the Jensens are as rooted in the Tavaputs country as any one of the stately Douglas firs that congregate along its alpine ridges. This tight-knit family comes from a line of tough, resilient homesteaders who have known how to weather great hardship through to the dawn of new opportunities. But the Jensens' attachment to this country isn't just due to staying power; it's a matter of deeply held affection. In the aspen groves, pine forests, sagebrush flats, and deserts—their nurturing touch is visible everywhere in this land of isolation and spectacular beauty.

Two Ranches and a Wedding

Jeanie Jensen's great-great-grandfather, David McPherson, homesteaded the Tavaputs Ranch in 1889. He emigrated to Utah from the Midwest, planning to work on steam engines for the railroad. It was the mid-1880s; the wilder parts of central and southern Utah were only just being explored and documented at the time. McPherson was able to lay his hands on a copy of John Wesley Powell's notebook from his 1869 expedition on the Green and Colorado Rivers, an adventure bankrolled by the Smithsonian Institution. In his notes, Powell went into great detail about a lush, high tableland stretching from Utah's alpine region down to a great chain of desert cliffs.

"A long plateau stretches across the river in an easterly and westerly direction, the summit covered by pine forests and intervening valleys and gulches," the notes read. "The plateau itself is cut in two by the canyon. Other side canyons head away back from the river and run down into the Green… . The elevation of the plateau being about 8,000 feet above the level of the sea, it is a region of moisture, as is well attested by the forests and grassy valleys… . On these high tablelands, elk and deer abound; and they are favorite hunting grounds for the Ute Indians."

Powell and his men made day trips to explore the Plateau as they boated the Green River, passing through a deep canyon Powell described as having many tributaries, potentially making it good wintering country for cattle, but also with a dark and wild aspect. "…[C]rags and tower-shaped peaks are seen everywhere, and away above them, long lines of broken cliffs; and above and beyond the cliffs are pine forests, of which we obtain occasional glimpses as we look up through a vista of rocks," Powell wrote. "We are minded to call this the Canyon of Desolation."

This account stirred the frontiersman in David McPherson; he figured he could put the lush summer country on the Tavaputs together with the low, sheltered land in Desolation Canyon to build an ideal summer-winter cattle operation—provided he had the gumption to pull it off. McPherson took the challenge. In 1889, he and his family loaded up their possessions, took on supplies at the town of Green River, and pushed off to claim their piece of wilderness.

"The land was there for the taking, and they were the first people in there," says Butch Jensen.

It was little wonder settlers had not yet staked out this country. With no roads in to Desolation Canyon, and none up to Tavaputs, all the McPhersons' belongings and equipment had to be packed in on horses and mules, each trip taking days. Heavy objects had to be broken down for the journey in.

"All the horse-drawn farm equipment, stoves—everything you can imagine on a ranch in that era—they'd just take everything apart, bolt by bolt, piece by piece, as little as they could get it, and put it on pack mules," explains Butch. "Then you had to reassemble everything."

(Amazingly, it wasn't until 1943 that roads were put in to the Tavaputs homestead, ending the era of pack trains up the mountain; Desolation Canyon, however, remains roadless even today.)

The family homesteaded both in the canyon and on the plateau. But within 10 years, both David and his brother would be dead—lost to tragic accidents—leaving the running of the remote McPherson ranch to young Jim McPherson, David's 26-year-old son. Jim embraced the challenge, over time assembling one of the first herds of purebred Hereford cattle in the region. He eventually married, and had a schoolteacher brought in to tutor his five children; he even had an organ packed in on a mule to the Desolation homestead so his family could enjoy music.

"That's what's amazing about young Jim," says Butch, "is that he kept it together as such a

young man, and flourished and did real well."

In 1927, Jim McPherson sold the ranch to his daughter and son-in-law, Pearl and Budge Wilcox, who were Jeanie's grandparents. The ranch then passed to Jeanie's father, Don Wilcox, and finally to Jeanie and Butch.

Butch Jensen's family showed up on the Tavaputs Plateau a bit later, homesteading the Rock Creek Ranch in 1918. By 1947, Therald, Butch's father, had begun buying out his uncles, and eventually acquired the ranch outright. At the time, there were other homesteaders on the Plateau, but little by little they sold out their land and cattle, opting for a less bracing existence than that afforded by the thin Tavaputs air. As they dispersed, Wilcoxes and Jensens bought up the land for their growing operations.

"It's just been kind of a checkerboard game," says Butch. "As ranchers would quit, either my side of the family would buy something up, or Jeanie's family. It's taken two or three lifetimes of a checkerboard game to piece by piece put everything together."

By the '70s, there were only three ranches left on the remote Tavaputs Plateau: the Rock Creek and Tavaputs outfits, and one other. Butch and Jeanie were young adults by this time, but they had known each other all their lives.

"We grew up together in the summer months," says Butch. "They'd be over at our place, we'd be over at theirs, as kids."

In a turn of events any Hollywood director would relish, Butch and Jeanie fell for each other. Their first date was moving cows. Butch proposed to Jeanie down at the old McPherson place in Desolation Canyon; their honeymoon was spent snowed in at a sheep camp, babysitting cattle on the San Rafael Desert. Their two kids— son Tate, and daughter Jennie—came along in 1980 and 1982, respectively. Butch and Jeanie raised Tate and Jennie in the saddle—trailing cattle, roping, and more recently partnering in the running of the ranch. And as a capstone to the Jensens' lasting legacy on the Tavaputs Plateau, in 2004 Butch and Jeanie completed an historic land deal that allowed them to put their family homesteads together as a single operation.

Butch and Jeanie's story may sound like a cowboy fairytale—two ranchers' kids falling in love on the top of an isolated mountain—but Butch likes to keep it in perspective.

"In all reality, you ought to feel sorry for her, because hell, she didn't have anything to choose from," smiles Butch.

Running a Ranch in the Sky

The spectacular Tavaputs Ranch is in fact only one component of the Jensens' cattle operation, which comprises several high- and low-elevation ranges scattered across a handful of counties. Due to impassible winter snow, cattle graze on Tavaputs only in the summer months, same as on the Jensens' other high country, Emma Park, which is located 20 miles north of the town of Price. In the fall, the Jensens trail or haul their 1,200 head of Angus-based mother cows out of these privately owned summer ranges down to lower elevations. After the calves are weaned, the cows are divided among several desert BLM grazing permits—Icelander, Sinbad, Cisco—names that read like a list of action movies. One small group of cattle and some of the ranch horses are in for a real-life cliffhanger—trailing down to the original McPherson winter country in Desolation Canyon.

"The Desolation thing is still pretty tough today," says Butch. "There's no roads in there, so when you go in, you've got to take a string of mules, with your grub and your beds."

> *This song of the waters is audible to every ear, but there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it you must first live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers.*
> ***—Aldo Leopold***

"Pretty tough" is typical cowboy understatement. To drive its stock into Desolation, the Tavaputs crew must pick its way down the 130-year-old trails that were chipped into the canyon's precipitously sloping sides by steely-nerved homesteaders. The drop—if you drop—is several thousand feet. Over the years, a few unlucky critters have taken the plunge, but so far, no cowboys.

The key to success on the Jensens' operation is to manage these winter desert permits with constant attention and care. The high summer pastures receive ample precipitation; when cows and calves are turned out on the Tavaputs Plateau in June, the slopes are lush and green with Thurber fescue—a grass that is

Experience Tavaputs Ranch

Join the Jensens on their historic, 10,000-acre Tavaputs Ranch for a guided hunt or ranch vacation. Ranch trips and activities are planned to create a truly western experience for visitors. Choose accommodations in the main lodge or in private cabins close by. If hunting adventure is your game, Tavaputs offers guided hunts for bucks, trophy elk and black bear. Because of its mountain elevation, the season is limited from June 20th through September 31st.

Email **tavaputs@wildblue.net** or visit **tavaputsranch.com**

native to the Plateau but grows nowhere else in Utah. The low winter country is much drier and tougher; to make matters more challenging, the cows must conceive while making their living on whatever winter feed is available on the desert.

"The mountain country's great, but you really live and die by those winter ranges," says Butch.

Generations of negotiating eastern Utah's dry spells have instilled in the Jensen family a deep respect for conserving the resources on their BLM winter permits. To keep the range from getting overtaxed, the Jensens live by a simple rule: graze moderately. Although they are entitled to run substantially more cattle on their BLM permit, the Jensens have always turned out fewer cattle than their permit allows.

"We've never stocked 'em 100 percent," says Butch, who attributes the practice of running moderate herds of cattle to his and Jeanie's parents. "You try and find a happy medium. Good years come along, and we could run a lot more cattle. But then a couple droughty years come along, and you get beat up."

By not grazing their winter permits too heavily, the Jensens always leave standing feed. It's one way to keep the native bunch grasses healthy and vigorous, but it's also an insurance policy for those tough years when having a little extra grass on the ground makes the difference between making it through or having an expensive hay bill.

Not surprisingly, water is also critical to the Jensens' success out on their desert permits. Water is essential for the cattle's survival, but water is also the tool the Jensens use to rotate their cattle from one spot to another, ensuring that the range is not overgrazed in one location, and that different areas get used at different times each year. The family has made a sizeable investment developing stock ponds and wells; they even haul water out to the desert when necessary. Beneficiaries of the Jensens' water development efforts include antelope, deer, and other wild denizens of the desert—as well as the taxpayer, who pays nothing for this public service.

While the Jensens have spent generations stewarding these public lands with the pride of private landowners, they have also opened the doors of their private range on the Tavaputs Plateau to cooperate with conservationists and researchers to improve habitat for a range of wildlife species. For example, scientists with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—in partnership with U.S. Fish and Wildlife—have worked for several years with the Jensens on a project to benefit the sage grouse by enhancing sagebrush habitat. Through removing older, overgrown sagebrush on over 1,000 acres of private land, the Jensens and their partners have created a diverse mosaic of vegetation, including grasses, forbs, and young sagebrush, all of which are essential to the sage grouse's diet. Through their participation in this project, the Jensens have done more than improve sage grouse habitat on their own ranch, however; they also provide a valuable testing ground for new techniques of sage grouse conservation.

"The Jensens have been real proactive in wanting to sustain good wildlife habitat as well as benefit their livestock operation," says Jeff Fenton, rangeland management specialist with NRCS. "We're reducing that dense canopy cover of sagebrush, and we're creating a lot more openings for the grasses and forbs which are important to sage grouse, as well as deer and elk. It's going to help create a better diversity of vegetation up there overall."

The open-door policy at the Tavaputs Ranch extends to other folks, as well. In the 1950s, Jeanie's family started running a

While the Jensens have spent generations stewarding these public lands with the pride of private landowners, **they have also opened the doors of their private range on the Tavaputs Plateau to cooperate with conservationists and researchers** to improve habitat for a range of wildlife species.


Photo by Ron Francis, NRCS

backcountry outfitting business, guiding hunters on deer hunts in the fall; they later expanded to accommodate summer guests who wanted to experience life on a working ranch. To enhance both the wildlife watching and hunting opportunities, Butch's and Jeanie's parents teamed up in the '80s to reintroduce elk to the Plateau. Today, through the Jensens' careful stewardship, the original herd the families transplanted has expanded to between 2,500 and 3,000 head, with hunting guests taking several trophy bulls every season.

More recently, the Jensen's summer tour business has been dominated by visitors to nearby Range Creek Canyon, formerly owned by Jeanie's uncle, but now in possession of the University of Utah. Range Creek contains extraordinarily well-preserved examples of Fremont Indian granaries, petroglyphs, ruins, and artifacts—the Jensens are one of the handful of outfitters authorized to lead tours. In contrast to the looting sustained by many archeological sites, the Range Creek settlements are virtually undisturbed. This is largely due to being held for over a hundred years in private ownership.

There's no question that the guest business has been helpful to the Jensens' bottom line. But the benefits of sharing their remote and beautiful world go well beyond the pocketbook. City folks have a rare opportunity to witness living history—cattle drives, big game, homesteader cabins, and working cowboys—things that for most people exist only in John Wayne movies. And perhaps more importantly, guests learn firsthand from the Jensens how cattle ranching and conservation can be complementary pursuits.

"It's wonderful to show people our way of life, and how we take care of the land and preserve it," says Jennie Christensen, Butch and Jeanie's daughter.

Little surprise, then, that for many visitors, a stay with the Jensens is a revelation.

"The most common thing we hear from our guests is, 'We had no idea that this kind of thing was still going on in the world,' " laughs Butch. "Hell, it's just an everyday thing to us."

Dark Storms, New Dawn

Everyday things on the Tavaputs Ranch don't change much. Sure, it's handy to be able to drive a stock truck to ranch headquarters as opposed to a mule train (goosenecks still can't make it up the mountain). But the cowboy crew still trails cattle off the mountain in autumn on a five-day cattle drive. The pack mule train still humps bedrolls and grub into Desolation Canyon when the Jensens move cattle and horses down to the old McPherson winter country. In the early morning,

Tate and Butch Jensen
Photo by Gaylene Erwin

bacon and coffee for the crew are still plentiful and hot. And the Tavaputs sunrise will still turn craggy-faced cowboys into poets and dreamers. With the exception of a few technological conveniences (satellite internet: yes, telephones: no) and the passing down of the ranch from one generation to the next, everyday things have carried on with comparatively few interruptions over the years.

Yet even this idyllic life high on the Plateau has not escaped misfortune. Like their homesteader ancestors, terrible loss has tested the Jensens' courage and resolve. In 2011, disaster struck when Tate, Butch and Jeanie's son, was tragically killed. A range science major in college and already a leader in the cattle industry at 31, Tate Jensen was universally admired and respected; his passing has left a big hole in the ranch's future, and many aching hearts.

"Life goes on, but I'll tell you, it sure is lonesome without Tate," says Butch. "He and I, we were good buddies."

The loss to the family, and to the ranch, was beyond reckoning. But Butch, Jeanie, and daughter Jennie have done what homesteaders do: They carried one another through the darkest hours, and now they will carry on. What remains is to remember Tate, and rebuild.

Jennie will eventually take over the running of the ranch with her husband, Jeff, and their son, Jax Tate. "I've got big boots to fill, because Tate definitely was a true cowboy," says Jennie. But she's got good help. Jeff has gamely taken on the task of learning several generations' worth of stewardship with Butch and Jennie as tutors. And more help's on the way. Jennie and Jeff are expecting—they have another little cowboy due next spring.

Butch and Jeanie have every confidence that their daughter and son-in-law will be able to carry the Tavaputs Ranch into the future, and pass the family legacy of homesteading and land stewardship on to coming generations.

"She's my best hand," Butch says of his daughter. "These pregnancies seem to slow 'em down a little bit, but it doesn't last long," he adds with a wink.

The storm is over, and the sky is clearing. It's been a tough go for the Jensens, losing Tate so suddenly, so soon. But the wounds are slowly mending, to the extent that such wounds ever do. Like their homesteader forebears, they will learn to live with the unimaginable, and carry on. And with their seventh generation of cowboy boots planted squarely on the ground, the sun is rising on the Tavaputs Ranch.

Jennie and Jeff with son, Jax Tate
Photo by Gaylene Erwin

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Of Grass and Greenbacks

Ranchester, Wyoming
Leopold Conservation
Award Recipient 2013

Photo by Wayne Fahsholtz

Today's working citizen—one with a job, a mortgage, and a 401(k)—probably has only a hazy mental picture of what cattle ranching on a grand scale is about. That's no surprise; what most of us have seen of these last, vast cattle empires comes from glossy magazine pages—aerial images of sprawling trophy ranches owned by hedge fund managers and media moguls. These big ranches, we surmise, must subsist on a steady drip of outside dollars. How else could big ranches stay solvent and unsubdivided? Surely cattle could never make enough green to bankroll these behemoth estates…short of producing golden cow pies.

Just don't tell this to the folks who run the expansive Padlock Ranch. Owned by the Scott family—longtime area locals—the half-million-acre Padlock straddles the Wyoming-Montana line with its headquarters located 18 miles north of Sheridan, Wyoming. With 11,000 head of mother cows grazing on the ranch's four units, the Padlock is the eighth largest cattle producer in the country. But corporate life support has no part in its operation. The Scott family has long been committed to running the Padlock Ranch as a profitable working landscape—from cowboys to cattle, from farm to feedlot.

Of course, "profitable" may sound like a dirty word when you're talking about wide-open Wyoming, home to some of the greatest grass landscapes in North America. But on the Padlock, the challenge of staying in the black is tightly intertwined with conservation of the land's resources. This holds true for a simple reason: What's good for the cows is also good for wild critters, vegetation, and soils.

Running 11,000 cattle requires grass—lots of it—year after year. **But thriving grasslands also provide habitat for sage grouse, mule deer, elk, moose, and other species.**

Running 11,000 cattle requires grass—lots of it—year after year. But thriving grasslands also provide habitat for sage grouse, mule deer, elk, moose, and other species. Attentive management of this renewable resource has ensured that there's abundant grazing for bovines and wild inhabitants alike.

But this is more than just a story about tall grass. It's about

Staying Profitable on the Padlock Ranch Doesn't Mean Shortchanging the Environment

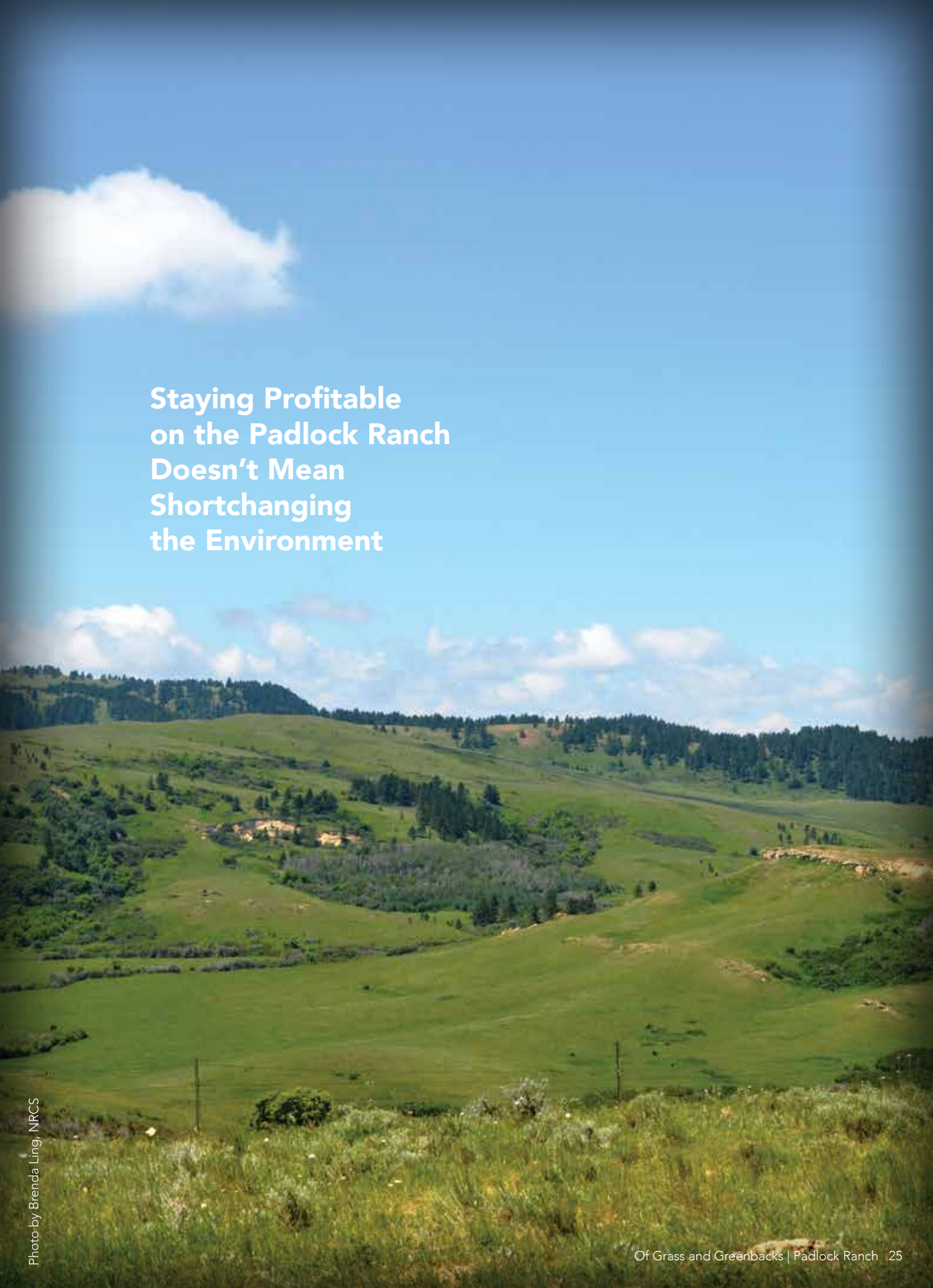


Photo by Brenda Ling, NRCS

the values that guide the Scott family in caring for and running the Padlock.

"We began to really understand that there was a connection between sustaining the resource as a part of our ethic and commitment to the place, but also as an economic asset," says Jim Scott, chairman of the Padlock Ranch Board and executive vice chairman of First Interstate Bank.

Through their commitment to keep the vast Padlock whole, through reclaiming land damaged by the mistakes of generations past, and through their open-gate approach to sharing the natural beauties of the ranch with neighbors and community, the Scotts show by example that ranching on a grand scale can be both down-to-earth and a great benefit to the land.

You've Gotta Make a Living

Homer and Mildred Scott came to Sheridan, Wyoming, from Nebraska in 1936. Homer had come from very little—his parents were small farmers—but he worked his way through the University of Nebraska and got an engineering degree. When they first set out to make their way in the world, Homer and Mildred tried their luck in Alabama. In the beginning, all went well; work was good, they invested a little money, bought a car. But when the stock market crashed in '29, like so many other hard-working people, Homer and Mildred went from comfortable to penniless.

The couple limped home to Nebraska; family put them up until they got back on their feet. Then they started over. Homer got work as an


Photo by Brenda Ling, NRCS

engineer and builder with an Omaha construction company. At that time, mining and road development were booming in Wyoming. Looking to capitalize on the opportunity, the company's owners persuaded Homer to open an office in Sheridan for them. That was the end of the Scotts' moving around. In Wyoming, Homer and Mildred had five kids, put down roots in the Sheridan community, and prospered.

In 1943, Homer and Mildred founded the Padlock Ranch with a purchase of 3,000 acres outside the town of Dayton, Wyoming. It was splendid country. Located just east of the Big Horn Mountains, the original home place is traversed by the Tongue River, which provided ample irrigation for farming. In the uplands, the north-central Wyoming hills rose in great rolling, grassy swells. It was a rancher's version of heaven.

Homer Scott applied his many talents to a variety of business ventures. With the Padlock to run, he eventually retired from his engineering career and worked on expanding the ranch. His land purchases here and there accumulated; the Padlock became a sizeable enterprise. After a sitting on the Federal Reserve Board, Homer tried his hand at banking. In the late '60s, he acquired a controlling interest in the Sheridan-based Bank of Commerce, while continuing to expand his land holdings.

With Homer having so many irons in the fire, Dan, the eldest son, stepped in to manage the still-growing ranch in the '70s.

When Homer passed away in the early '90s, the Scott family was faced with a critical decision: How would the ranch get passed down—and to whom? Dan and his family had lived and worked there for years, and introduced many improvements, but all five siblings felt a deep connection with the home place. In the end, the Scott siblings elected to share the ranch as a family, and to pass it down to their children and grandchildren as a family legacy.

Then there was the question of how this half-million-acre family legacy was to be bankrolled. Financial support was readily available. Since Homer took over the Bank of Commerce, the Scotts had become very successful in the banking business, owning a number of banks throughout the region. But the family stood firm in their belief that no outside dollars should be used to prop up the Padlock. In a nod to Homer and Mildred's thrift and independence, the family decided the ranch would have to pay its own way.

"That was one of the ethics, part of the culture, was that the ranch was a working ranch that needed to stand on its own," explains Jim Scott.

But profitability in ranching can be elusive. Drought, fire, markets—many calamities can conspire to put a ranch in the red. In 2002, Dan retired after diligently captaining the Padlock for 30 years. It was a difficult time: Expenses were high, markets were unstable, and the Scotts feared for the Padlock's future. The family shareholders—who now numbered around 70—hired Wayne Fahsholtz to manage the Padlock as CEO and president, and to set a new course for the ranch's success. From that point forward, Fahsholtz and the Scotts have taken bold steps to secure the Padlock's future as a sustainable, profitable enterprise.

The Business of Growing Grass

The bread and butter of a working ranch is grass. Many ranchers even refer to themselves as "grass farmers," and with good reason. Cattle need to eat 365 days a year; when grass runs out, ranchers have to feed their cows hay. Hay is very expensive stuff—both to buy and produce.

When Fahsholtz stepped up to manage the Padlock in 2002, the ranch was feeding on average a ton and a half to a ton and three quarters of hay per cow, per year. One obvious way to increase the Padlock's profit was to slash the massive hay bill. How? Simple. Grow more grass.

In 2003, Fahsholtz implemented a time-controlled grazing system designed to do exactly that. Under the system, cowboys moved cattle every two to three weeks, herding them to different areas before pastures were overgrazed. The rotation of the cattle wasn't left to chance; if a pasture was grazed early one year, it was grazed later the next to ensure that the plants were being used at a different stage of their growth cycle. To eliminate much of the need for hay, some pastures were turned into winter ranges. These were grazed in the colder months, but left untouched during the growing season, allowing the grasses to recover. Riparian areas were only grazed briefly, under close monitoring.

The result of the new grazing regime was a huge bump in grass production. With grazing pressure spread out, the cattle became a positive tool to stimulate grass growth. Spots of bare dirt grew in. More types of grasses took hold. And when grass did get grazed down, new growth quickly sprang up. As proof of the experiment's

success, the Padlock's hay bill shrank by more than three quarters.

Ramping up grass production didn't just make for happy cows or a positive profit margin, however. Other species benefited from the bounty—particularly the sage grouse, an endangered species candidate.

"We didn't design a system to save the sage grouse," says Fahsholtz. "It would sound noble to do that, but that's not what we set out to do. We set out to make money on our cows. But there's lots of feed and lots of cover that comes in the spring, and all the birds and elk and deer and everything benefits from that."

Photo by Wayne Fahsholtz

Feeding cows efficiently is important, but to make money, you also have to sell them profitably. Here again, Fahsholtz introduced a new campaign. For the past 10 years, the Padlock has sold many of its cattle into the Country Natural Beef (CNB) cooperative, which markets antibiotic- and hormone-free beef to high-end natural food retailers such as Whole Foods at a considerable markup from commodity price. As a member of CNB, the ranch also follows strict low-stress animal handling practices and participates in audits to verify ecologically sound management. The Padlock has even hosted the Whole Foods meat team for a three-day ranch tour.

According to Jim Scott, it is the ability to see profit and conservation as two sides of the same coin that has put the Padlock Ranch on a course for long-term sustainability.

"The principle of being able to understand the resource, work with the resource, and utilize what the resource will provide—and not try to ask it to do things that it won't do—not only is that the right thing to do for stewardship of the resource, but it's the right thing to do for profitability and economics," says Jim Scott.

Riprap into Riparians, Pit Mines into Pasture

Homer Scott was an engineer by trade: a man of the square, straight edge, and angle. Having purchased the home place in the 1940s, one of the "improvements" he made on the property was to alter the course of the Tongue River—straightening out the bends and oxbows to expose more farmable ground. To prevent erosion, the river's banks were reinforced with "Detroit riprap"—junked auto bodies and heavy equipment tires.

Homer's reengineering of the Tongue River was entirely in accordance with the best management practices of the day. It made fields larger, which helped production, and gave them crisp 45-degree corners. But there were unforeseen consequences. Robbed of its natural twists and meanders, a river on a straight course runs faster, eroding the banks and eliminating pools where fish thrive. As the rushing river cuts itself a deeper trench, riparian vegetation is left high and dry, while downstream fisheries are clouded with silt. The rusting auto hulks also have an aesthetic downside.

Though well intentioned, it was clear to Fahsholtz and the Scott family that straightening the Tongue River hadn't been the right thing for the land. The Padlock invested its own resources in a partnership with the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust, the local conservation district, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and other agencies to restore the Tongue River to a winding course, and remove the industrial riprap in the process. In its place, natural rock structures

were used to reinforce the banks and to steer water toward midstream to minimize erosion.

"The Tongue River reclamation project was very beneficial to a number of constituents in the Tongue River Valley," says Andrew Cassiday, district conservationist in Sheridan County for NRCS. On the one hand, Cassiday says, restoring the river's natural flow has significantly improved habitat—both in the stream and in the riparian corridor—and enhanced the scenic value of the ranch. But the project has also served as a model for others.

"It has planted the seeds for that sort of restoration work up- and downstream from there," remarks Cassiday.

The handiwork of past generations was also evident in the two 1950s-vintage open pit coal mines that graced the Padlock's landscape. Thanks to the lax reclamation laws of the day, these deep, barren gauges in the earth hadn't changed much since the Eisenhower administration. Working with a federal mine reclamation program, Fahsholtz and the Padlock team resculpted the scarred land by gently sloping the sides of the steep pits, and directing water so reservoirs would collect in the bottom. Topsoil was brought in to replenish the denuded ground, and native vegetation planted throughout. The reclaimed mines are now pastures providing grass, habitat, and aesthetic value to the ranch.

"We've created some very productive and beautiful places of old mining sites," remarks Jim Scott.

For the land ethic that holds sway on the Padlock, healing these bruises on the landscape was a natural move. But here again, good stewardship is also an expedient to profitability. More grass has been one such outcome. But over the years, the Padlock has also operated a guest ranch business, photography retreats, fishing and hunting vacations, and other agritourism ventures that profit from the beauty of the Padlock's restored landscapes.

"Overall, the Padlock Ranch is an excellent example of high-end land stewardship," observes Cassiday. "They are cutting edge in every aspect of their conservation efforts, and make a good show that the benefits of applying the best available conservation makes good business sense."

The Open Gate

Mining and engineering projects may have been common threats to the West's privately owned landscapes in decades past. But more recently, a new and insidious danger has been creeping in: fragmentation.

Liquidation and subdivision of large ranches across the West have transformed many previously natural landscapes into crazy quilts of tidy home plots, paved roads, septic systems, and power lines. The developer's quest to turn vast open spaces into prime real estate parcels has fragmented millions of acres of wildlife habitat beyond salvage.

The Scotts have taken steps to ensure that the Padlock will not fall victim to this death by a thousand cuts. Due to the voting structure of the Padlock Board, it is now effectively impossible for the family to liquidate the ranch, securing the Padlock legacy for future family generations. The Scott family has also entered into three conservation easements with the Wyoming Stock Growers Land Trust (WSGLT). The easements cover a total of 3,000 acres along the Tongue River, protecting these especially high-value lands in perpetuity from subdivision and development.


Photo by Wayne Fahsholtz

For Pam Dewell, executive director of the WSGLT, the Scotts' preservation of the Padlock as an intact working landscape is a huge benefit both for wildlife and for conserving the breathtaking vistas in the region.

"The defining feature of Wyoming is our wide-open spaces," says Dewell. "Our entire landscape would change radically if a lot of these big, privately held ranchlands were to be fragmented."

Of course, developers are not the only ones interested in buying big ranches. Other prospective buyers—corporations, major organizations, the super-wealthy—have also developed a taste for prime western real estate. A few ambitious buyers have even put out feelers to see if the Padlock might be purchased for the right price.

"It's not for sale," says Fahsholtz flatly. "But we have been approached from time to time by somebody that says, 'We

Photo by Brenda Ling, NRCS

Find Padlock Beef in the Supermarket

The Padlock Ranch is part of the Country Natural Beef program. This cooperative adheres to "Raised Well" animal welfare standards that ensure animals are raised in a humane and natural environment. Padlock beef is marketed in Rocky Mountain Region Whole Foods stores.

Visit **countrynaturalbeef.com.**

Padlock also produces beef for the Meyer Natural Angus program. This program offers great "Choice" natural beef in the U.S. These cattle are fed in the Padlock Feedlot and are processed in Colorado.

Visit **meyernaturalangus.com.**

represent an international group of people who want to buy a huge ranch.' "

Fahsholtz has spent much of his career managing large cattle operations, and has seen plenty of ranches change hands over the years. He points out that rural communities fade when working family ranches are sold to investors and corporations.

"You see places that are purchased, and the first thing they do is buy a bunch of padlocks and it's run as a gated community as opposed as a ranch," observes Fahsholtz.

But the Scotts are committed to the Padlock Ranch being an approachable neighbor. The Padlock was one of the first ranches in the area to participate in the Walk-In Access program operated by the Wyoming Department of Game and Fish, which lets community members hunt deer, antelope, partridge, pheasant, turkey, and other game on certain areas of the ranch. The Padlock has been especially proactive in sponsoring youth hunts for elk, mule deer, and ducks. Hunting and fishing opportunities offered by the Padlock to the community are on the house—no charge. Other good-neighbor activities have included teaching local high school and college agriculture courses on the ranch, and providing opportunities for employees to enjoy the ranch's vast natural resources.

The practice of sharing not just their land, but also their land ethic, with neighbors is a fundamental part of the family culture, explains Jim Scott.

"That connection between economic value creation and protecting the resource is [an idea] that we think is important—not just for us, but for others," says Scott. "To be able to lead by example, and to be able to share is all part of our commitment to be positive leaders in the community."

All in the Family

The Scott family is proof that ranching on a grand scale can be a down-to-earth enterprise. Their approach isn't accidental; it's the product of a long, intimate acquaintance with the land. To grow up on a place, work there, weather the storms, and build a family legacy is a journey—one that inevitably shapes the thoughts and values of those who have taken it. The Scotts have walked that road; the Padlock Ranch is their testimony.

Without question, Homer and Mildred also had a hand in it. Their gift to the family wasn't simply this magnificent property. Along with land, buildings, barns, and cows, they passed down some household ideals about the importance of family and community, and about caring for the land.

"It was part of the legacy our parents started," says Jim Scott. "Their commitment to community, their commitment to this place."

Keeping this legacy in the family, and out of the hands of developers, has required reimagining some of the basic management practices on the ranch. By conserving its abundant resources, Fahsholtz and his team have ensured that the Padlock will continue as a sustainable, profitable operation. And with 70 members and growing, the Scott family shareholders have committed never to part with the place.

"We're all in this together," says Jim Scott.

Does the educated citizen know he is only a cog in an ecological mechanism? That if he will work with that mechanism his mental wealth and his material wealth can expand indefinitely?

—Aldo Leopold

The Patient Work of Healers

Hayes, South Dakota
Leopold Conservation
Award Recipient 2011

Photo by Colette Kessler, NRCS

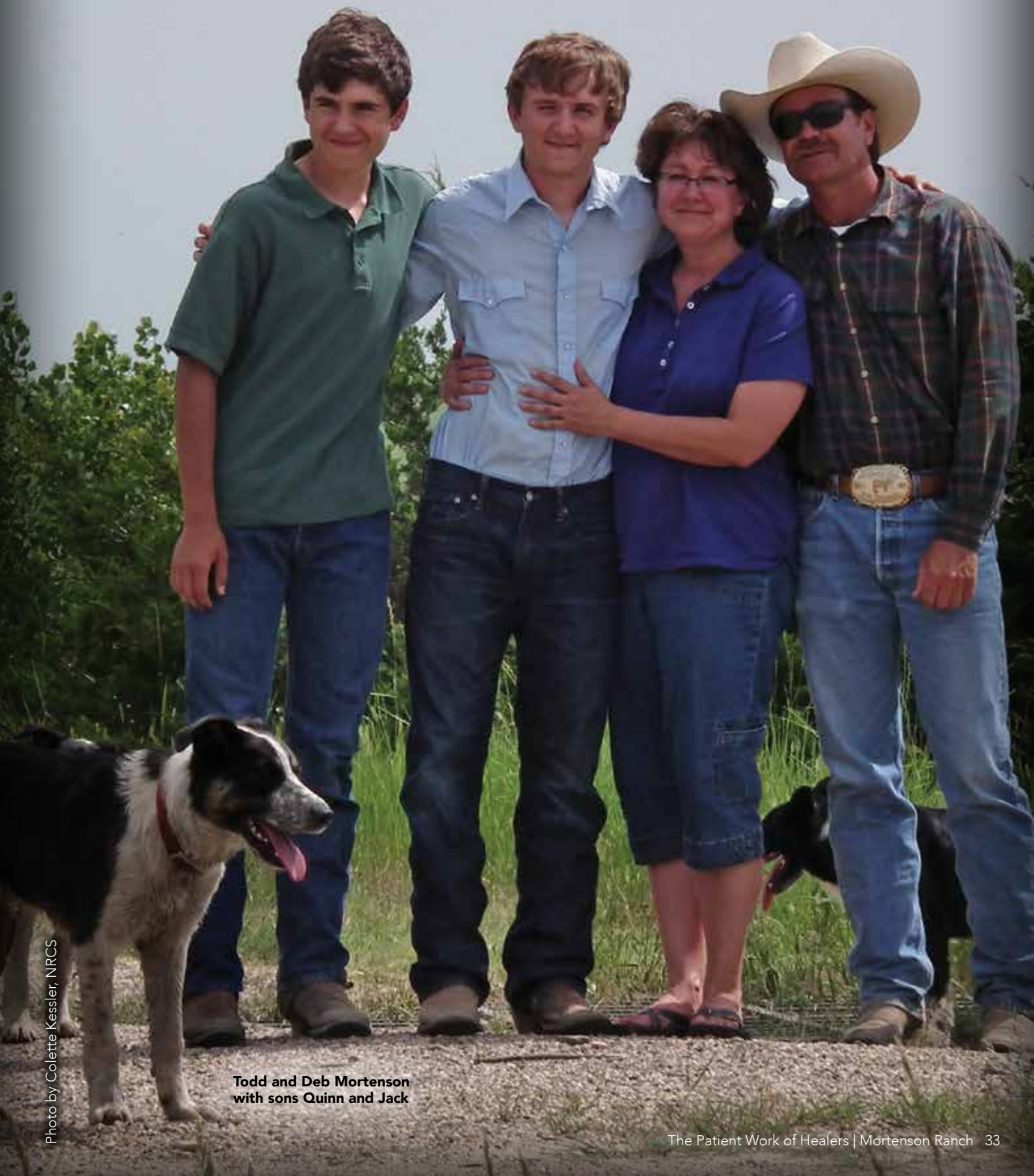
In 1935, when the last homesteader pulled out of the dust-choked little farm settlement of Springview Township, South Dakota, the land was utterly spent. Settlers desperate to make a living off the prairie's bounty had ploughed, grazed, and logged it for all it was worth; now, after decades of being repeatedly turned and stripped, the exhausted land wasn't worth a dime.

As the land had slowly given out over the years, people gave up. Of the 35 claims people made on quarter sections here, only a handful of families proved up. When agricultural prices tumbled in the '20s and '30s, even these gritty souls called it quits. They pulled out one by one, abandoning their cabins—with mattresses, dishrags, Christmas ornaments, yellowing calendars—to the care of packrats and vagrants. Dark, small, and empty, the cabins hunkered down on the prairie, their doors creaking in the indifferent wind.

For these settlers, the Homestead Act had been a cruel folly. They had packed it out west drawn by Congress's golden promise: Settle the vast interior of the country and receive free land in exchange—160 acres for every man or woman who could build a house on the parcel and farm it for five years. In some places, the plan worked. Iowa and Illinois, blessed with deep, black dirt, could support farmsteads on a 160-acre quarter section. But here in South Dakota, west of the Missouri River, a thin layer of topsoil was all the homesteaders had to sow their crops of corn and beans. Summers were hot and dry. Drought was common, and crops failed as often as not. The hungry families hunted wildlife down to nothing to supplement their scantily stocked larders. Desperate to wring sustenance from the soil, they ploughed whatever land they could, and grazed whatever they couldn't right down to dirt. It was a recipe for disaster. With no trees or grass to anchor it, the precious topsoil took wings. When the Dust Bowl hit in the '30s, it blew the dirt, and the last dogged

Desperate to wring sustenance from the soil, early settlers ploughed whatever land they could, and grazed whatever they couldn't right down to dirt. **It was a recipe for disaster. With no trees or grass to anchor it, the precious topsoil took wings.**

Thinking Forward, Looking Back on the Mortenson Ranch



Todd and Deb Mortenson with sons Quinn and Jack

Photo by Colette Kessler, NRCS

remnants of the homesteaders, plumb out of the country.

Hard Luck, Second Chance

Hardship in a person's life will sometimes allow him or her to see beyond the sorry exterior of others. A bullet wound had cost Ben Young his leg in World War I, a grim souvenir of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. He made it home, worked for the county a bit, and ran some cows with his brother—but Ben Young had bigger plans. When Ben got a look at the exhausted country the homesteaders left behind, he saw more than bare ground, silted-in fences, eroded streams. He saw potential for rebirth. Piece by piece, he bought up the abandoned quarters from the county by paying off the homesteaders' delinquent tax liens. By 1940, he had patched together 8,000 acres of tired, used-up South Dakota prairie to make a go of running a registered Hereford outfit. Then he set about ranching, nursing the injured land, and living the life of a family man.

The ranch Ben put together sits hard by the Cheyenne River, a tributary to the Missouri that joins that river at Lake Oahe, where the Missouri backs up behind the Oahe Dam. Today, Ben's place is called the Mortenson Ranch, after Clarence Mortenson, Ben's stepson. The topography on the Mortenson Ranch goes from high, rolling prairie lands up top to rugged timbered draws and gullies stretching down toward the steep-sided river breaks carved deep into the landscape by eons of the Missouri's periodic floods.

In the days before homesteaders made a go on this land, Sioux and Brule Indians were frequent visitors. They came in search of the wild plums, chokecherries, and currants that grew in the woody draws, and to hunt the abundant game sheltering in the timber. Traces of their teepee rings and fire pits can still be found on the ranch, some dating back a thousand years.

It's likely that these prehistoric visitors, plucked from the past, would easily recognize their old gathering ground if they were to see it today. On the Mortenson place, the western wheatgrass, green needle, big and little bluestem, and sideoats grama are lush and rolling. The creeks run slow and clear through draws filled with trees. Deer, antelope, bobcats, eagles, hawks, sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chickens, long-billed curlews, lark buntings, and a chatty abundance of songbirds populate the landscape.

It has taken three generations of patience and care to get it here, brought back from the blasted moonscape the homesteaders left behind.

"What Grandpa saw when he came here was a degraded landscape. It was really heavily used. And abused," says Todd Mortenson.

Todd is Ben's grandson and the third generation of the family to apply his healing touch to the land. Part of the key, according to Todd, is to strike the proper balance between taking and giving back. As ranchers, the Mortensons harvest grass. But as stewards, Todd and his family have given back much to the land in return. It's a practice Todd attributes to his grandmother, a full-blooded Cheyenne River Sioux.

"She was very conscious of what grew on the land," Todd says. In season, she would take Todd and his siblings to harvest the plums or chokecherries to make jam. The land would provide for them, she explained, only if they cared for it in return.

That ethic is infused into the custodianship on the Mortenson Ranch, where every generation writes its signature on the ledger of the land with fresh innovations and changes.

"Every generation has come up with something new that has greatly improved the ranch," says Todd. "We're by no means done improving."

Photo by Colette Kessler, NRCS

Soil and Water Conservation

Ben Young had the vision to see that the prairie could bloom again—he put the place together; he gave the land a second chance. But it was his stepson Clarence—Todd's father—who tackled the critical problem of getting water to hang around on the ranch where it would do some good.

After the homesteaders left, the land was so bare of vegetation and topsoil, the water rolled off it like rain off a tin roof. On healthy land, by contrast, grasses, trees, shrubs, and other vegetation make a natural breaking system for water flow. Plants form obstructions that cause water to slow down and give it a chance to sink into the

soil. But the homesteaders had logged the formerly timbered draws bare of their native green ash, western cedar, hackberry, and cottonwood trees. Storm runoff barreled down the creeks so violently the water couldn't soak in. Overgrazed prairie grass made matters worse; the water simply wasn't hanging around long enough to let the vegetation get a good drink.

"It would rain, and water would run down the draw by the house, and an hour or two later you'd need another rain because all the water had washed off," recalls Todd.

Rapid runoff wasn't the only problem. When the water left in a hurry, it took the soil with it. The charging runoff cut into the earth, eroding stream banks and washing precious soil downstream into Lake Oahe, where it muddied the drinking supply for tens of thousands of people.

"It's not good to have mud running off your place," Todd points out. "That's your most valuable soil—a lot of it's topsoil. You look at the delta down there at New Orleans, that's all topsoil from here on down."

When Clarence took over the ranch in the '50s, he set about finding ways to get the water to slow down, spread out, and spend more time on the land. He spent years, and a sizeable investment, installing dams and spreader dikes in the creeks that would catch and hold water, giving it a chance to soak into the earth.

As the land's thirst was quenched, you could see the change. Washed-out creek beds were broadening and depositing silt. Grasses and shrubs bounced back, as the slow-moving water sub-irrigated the ground. Seedling trees popped up in the draws. Foster Creek, once so eroded and steep-sided that it formed a deep gouge in the landscape, could now be crossed virtually anywhere along its course.

"Once the water cycle was fixed, the thing just started exploding," recalls Todd.

The increase in vegetation was great for the cattle; they had more feed, as well as shelter provided by the new timber that was springing up in the draws. But cattle weren't the only beneficiaries of Clarence's hydrological experiments. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) water quality studies showed that the ranch was acting like a landscape-size water filter; the water flowing across the Mortenson Ranch was actually cleaner when it left the property, helping to filter the community's water supply.

"We're very proud of the fact that the water that runs off this place is cleaner than what's running on," remarks Todd. "That's a direct benefit to anybody that lives, or fishes, or does anything on Lake Oahe."

Moving 'Em: A Holistic Grazing Regime

In 1982, Clarence's health had become fragile; it was time to pass the torch. The youngest of seven, Todd had never expected he'd be the one running the family place, but as his older siblings took town jobs or moved away, the chance of running the Mortenson Ranch eventually landed in Todd's lap. He was only 22—young, but passionate.

"I wanted to make a difference," says Todd. "I didn't know how, but I wanted to make a difference."

The thing that struck Todd as he settled into his new role was the condition of the pastures; they didn't look as healthy as they could have. Some spots were overgrazed, and others were underutilized. The best reason Todd could figure was that the herd of registered Herefords—by necessity divided into several herd sire bunches—was turned out on separate pastures for three months at a time. This meant that for three months, the cattle were unmanaged, free to lounge and loaf in their favorite spots and graze their favorite grasses. Like regulars at the neighborhood bar, they weren't about to move on to a new spot just for kicks.

Todd decided the system needed shaking up. To the great surprise of his family, he decided to switch from Ben's registered Herefords to a commercial herd that could be run as one bunch; that way, he could graze more cattle, but they would be moved frequently from pasture to pasture, allowing for better grazing management. For some family members, ditching the Herefords amounted to sacrilege.

"I wasn't very popular in the family for quite a while after that," chuckles Todd.

More changes were coming. Several years later, Todd got wind of a new grazing system being touted by a biologist and farmer from Zimbabwe, Allan Savory. Savory called his approach to grazing "holistic management." The core of his idea was that grasslands could greatly benefit from cattle grazing, if the grazing replicated the natural herbivory in which the grasslands had adapted.

Taste the Prairie-raised Beef Difference

Beef from the Mortenson Ranch can be purchased through EcoSun Prairie Farms, a nonprofit organization based in Brookings, South Dakota. Since 2007, EcoSun Prairie Farms has restored wetlands and converted former cropland to native grassland. The project seeks to expand the tall grass prairie, one of the hemisphere's most endangered ecosystems. Yearling heifers from the Mortenson Ranch are raised on EcoSun's grassland until being marketed as nutritious, prairie-raised beef direct to consumers.

Visit **ecosunprairiefarms.org** or **nuagra.com**

The key was to move the cattle around, as if they were herds of wild grazers being moved here and there by predators. It also called for a more broadminded approach to cattle grazing, managing not just for livestock, but for the well-being of other creatures with which cattle shared their range.

Todd was ready to give it a shot. He went to a holistic grazing seminar, learned all he could, and then set up a moderate rest-rotation system for his cattle that would move them once every week or two. He wasn't quite sure what to expect, but he didn't have to wait long to find out. Once it was being managed under a carefully timed schedule of grazing and rest, the grass on the ranch started growing better than anyone in his family could remember.

"It made a world of difference," says Todd. "I was shocked at the immediate response that I got on the landscape."

Through holistic grazing, Todd had devised a system in which his cattle could give back to the land, not just harvest. They mowed down old forage, allowing new growth to spring up. They gobbled weeds, aerated the soil, fertilized. So long as the cows were moved on before the grass got chomped multiple times, they could be an indispensible tool in the restoration of the prairie. And by using the prairie as his vehicle for producing food—as opposed to planting crops—the land could provide habitat for other species.

"That's the way it's evolved over the centuries, is with grass and grazing," Todd observes. "The buffalo came through here, and elk. That's what it evolved under, and that's what we try to mimic when we do our rotational grazing."

Naturalist, Philosopher, Rancher

Todd Mortenson isn't just a cattle rancher. He is a student of the land. He observes. He keeps track. He lets the land teach him its inner workings. And he takes an undisguised delight in the natural world of which he is both inhabitant and co-author.

In spring, when baby calves are hitting the ground, Todd packs his holistic range management "red book" to note down calving records. But he also uses it to make an accounting of the migratory birds' return to Stanley County—20 years' worth of Todd's red books bear witness to the birds' spring arrival at the Mortenson Ranch.

"I'll write down the date I saw the meadowlark," says Todd. "Or I saw the curlew this day, I saw a killdeer that day. The cranes came by on such and such a day in April…"

Carter Johnson, distinguished professor of ecology at South Dakota State, Brookings, has worked with Todd for over 20 years studying the recovery of woodlands on the ranch. What began as an attempt to measure and monitor the age and progress of trees has evolved into a long relationship of sharing knowledge about how to better the land.

"They're very open to education," says Johnson. "They just love to learn things. We go out there, we point out things they didn't know, and then they tell us things we didn't know. It's been a really good relationship."

Years spent in collaboration have also given Johnson a look into the Mortensons' way of operating, both as ranchers and landowners.

"A lot of people talk about a land ethic, but then, when times get tough they drop out of that," notes Johnson. "Not Todd. They really will limit their income in order to do the right thing for the land."

If Todd Mortenson wanted to make more money off of his land, he certainly could. With grain prices topping record highs, it would be easy to follow the lead of hundreds of other South Dakota landowners and put his ranch under the plough. Fields of soybeans, milo, winter wheat, millet, and corn have

sprung up all around him, as the native grass prairie, and its wild inhabitants, have dwindled.

Todd refers to the sod-busting craze as "harvesting dollars"; he has no plans to join.

"I'm not interested in making the absolute most dollars, especially if it puts the land at risk," Todd says. "They don't even realize, I don't think, that there's other things that live out here, that make a living off the land."

At the same time, Todd is keenly aware that staying profitable as a cattle operation is a must. If he were to lose money and was forced to sell the ranch, the prairie he and his family have spent generations reviving would almost certainly be ploughed or paved. The key is to strike the right balance—reap the land's bounty; let it renew and regenerate.

That, after all, was the lesson taught to Todd by his Sioux grandmother. It now remains to be seen how the next generation of Mortensons—sons Quinn and Jack—will fulfill the teaching in their own way.

"It's fun to watch the place change, and try to imagine what it's going to become," Todd muses. "I'm kind of excited about what my boys will bring to the table when they come back. They've been brought up in it, and know what it means to care for the land."

Caring for the land, in Todd's universe, is more than a series of mechanical procedures. It's more than soil studies, grazing rotations, hydrological projects. It's more than monitoring riparian zones, stubble height, vegetative communities. Caring for the land, at root, is having a relationship with the land. It means, as Todd will tell you, "knowing the land like an old friend."

"You get an attachment to something that you've been around your whole life, and it's very personal," Todd says. "I don't want anything bad to happen to the land. No matter what season it is, it's got its own beauty. In the wintertime, it's very quiet. You'll hear coyotes, you'll hear owls at night. This time of the year, you hear birds. It's a cacophony of noise, which is beautiful, too."

"There's no amount of dollars, no money value that you can put on that."

It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration…

—Aldo Leopold

Photo by Colette Kessler, NRCS

Our Family is Growing…
Join Us!

The producers featured on these pages are quietly leading agriculture towards a new paradigm. They do not view the necessary practice of growing food as merely a mechanical routine of harvest and removal. In their hands, planting, herding, and tending to the land is equally a means of giving back, of rejuvenating a natural network of plants and soils, water and wildlife, which in turn fortify the agricultural endeavor.

In their creative approach to farming and ranching, the people in these articles are experimenters; they are pioneers. But projects and investments and the countless hours of labor they have put into land restoration are only what we see at the surface. Dig beneath this, and you will find the philosophical taproot. Whether they choose to articulate it, these producers hew to a common principle–that land, and all the wild and variegated life upon it, is a good in itself.

As with many folks whose work tends toward crops and livestock, personal satisfaction is the main payoff these producers glean from their custodianship of the land. Public recognition? Well, that probably wasn't on their radar. That's why Sand County Foundation created the Leopold Conservation Award™ Program: To draw attention to the untold environmental benefits these and other exemplary agricultural producers bring to the natural communities they steward and to the human communities of which they are a part. Through the wide recognition this award attracts, we're broadcasting their stories to the public and to you. Whether you're a farmer or rancher yourself, a member of a conservation or environmental group, in the food or restaurant industry, someone interested how your food is produced, or simply a person who appreciates the joys of the outdoors, we invite you to partake in our vision–that private landowners who take extraordinary care of our natural resources should be recognized and celebrated.

Watch videos about Leopold Conservation Award recipients on our website, sandcounty.net, where you'll see how these and other outstanding agricultural producers are using a creative array of conservation practices to keep private working landscapes productive and vibrant.

Connect with Sand County Foundation and our friends by reading our blog (The-back-40.com) subscribing to our e-newsletter and by following us on Facebook (Facebook.com/SandCountyFoundation) and Twitter (@sandcountyfdn).

Meet us at our Sand County Foundation symposia, where leading agriculturalists, conservationists, artists, scientists, and thinkers converge to share their ideas on land stewardship and inspire one another. You'll have an opportunity to hear from Leopold Conservation Award recipients, and visit with many of them personally.

Share your story with us! If you are an agricultural producer or other private land owner with a conservation story to tell, we'd love to hear from you. We are always on the lookout for new and innovative approaches to conservation on working landscapes. Get in touch, and tell us how you're caring for the land. Email info@sandcounty.net.

Nominate a producer (or yourself) for a Leopold Conservation Award. We believe that exemplary land stewardship by ranchers, farmers, and other agricultural producers deserves to be celebrated, and who better than you to acquaint us with the most innovative conservationists in these fields? The Leopold Conservation Award is annually presented in: California, Colorado, Kentucky, Nebraska, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming, and is expanding into new states. (No award in your state? Keep reading…)

Sponsor a Leopold Conservation Award in your state. Our award program is growing, and we'd love to have your help. Our program is generously sponsored by businesses and organizations that support productive agricultural lands. You can help bring national recognition of agricultural land stewardship within your state by making a similar contribution. Please contact Leopold Conservation Award Program Director, Dave Neu at dneu@sandcounty.net or 608.663.4605.

About the Author *Andy Rieber is a freelance journalist who writes about ranching, cowboys, agriculture, and open spaces. She lives in Adel, Oregon, where cattle and sagebrush far outnumber the human population. Her work has appeared in Wired, Western Livestock Journal, Jefferson Monthly, and Working Ranch, among others. To read more of Andy's work, visit her website at andyrieber.com.*

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Giacomazzi Dairy

Wineinger-Davis Ranch

Tavaputs Ranch

Padlock Ranch

Mortenson Ranch

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