

## **The Allen Cattle Ranch: A Different Kind of Modernity**

### **I. Introduction**

The Upper Gunnison Basin in the heart of the Colorado Rocky Mountains is one of the most spectacular places in the state. The path of the Upper Gunnison River, which runs through the basin, is a prime example of the dramatically changing landscape at every altitude. The river begins atop the highest 14,000-foot peaks with the trickling water of the gradually melting snow. It gains power as its waterfalls pour down the most violent cliffs of the mountains. Its bubbling brooks dance through the haunting heavy timber and the majestic aspen forests. Finally, as each of the streams joins together, the unified river rushes through the irrigated fields of the valley basin carrying the frigid water of the snowcapped peaks. Not only does the Upper Gunnison Basin contain this unbelievable terrain, but it is also home to a way of life that's almost unheard of in today's United States.

My great great grandfather, John Allen, purchased a Gunnison Valley homestead in 1886. It was the seed from which the Allen cattle ranch has flourished for over a century. Today, four generations later, the Allens continue a semi-nomadic pastoral subsistence, depending largely upon what the surrounding environment can offer. However, survival is anything but painless. The Allens face a plethora of ecological and social problems. The Allens strive to keep the ranch in operation, despite the pressures of long-term drought, environmentalist groups, a growing tourist economy, increased local development, government and public invasion of land, and misunderstanding from the surrounding community. Much like the Pygmies described in Colin Turnbull's *The*

*Forest People*, the Allens struggle to persist in a world where outsiders often fail to acknowledge the precious value in ranchers' long-standing traditions.

## **II. Transhumance and Ranch Operations**

The Allen cattle ranch is divided into numerous parcels of land, spread throughout the valley at elevations ranging from around 7,800 to 9,500 feet above sea level. All together, the Allen land exceeds 4,500 acres. Each parcel of land is essential to the survival of approximately 1,200 Hereford cows, calves, steers, heifers and bulls.

Throughout the months of March, April, and May, the cattle graze on the lower ranch, where there is usually bare ground, allowing the mother cows to calve. Once branded at the end of May, the cattle are moved onto National Forest land until early October. The Allens have permits to graze on about 44,000 acres of public land, some of which is more than 11,000 feet above sea level. The Forest Service grazing permits are crucial to the operation because the cattle must be moved from the hay meadows onto the public land in order to raise and harvest hay for feed during the winter months. In October, the cattle are moved onto the upper valley Allen ranch land. When feed becomes scarce as the snow accumulates in early November, the cattle are moved back onto lower parcels of the ranch, where they are fed for the remainder of the winter (Leinsdorf).

Not all the animals are part of the described process of transhumance year to year. Some first year mothers remain on Allen pasture land because they need extra nutrition. The steers selected for sale also remain on private ranch land for fattening. Most of the cattle sold are heifers and steers, but some bulls too old for reproduction are also sold. Every fall, the Allens sell approximately 300-400 animals to cattle buyers who truck them to feed lots in the Midwest (Leinsdorf).

The Allens are one of the three largest ranching families in the area still practicing transhumance. The Allens continue the traditional cattle drive every fall and spring when moving the herd, which clashes head-on with conventional modernity. Approximately 500 mothers and calves migrate down two-lane Colorado Highway 135 while the Border Collies nip at their heels to keep up the pace (Leinsdorf). A small group of family members on horseback are dressed in their heavy winter coats with bright orange hunters' vests and flags to attract the attention of the traffic. Dozens of vehicles are slowed as they creep through the herd. Some drivers smile, take pictures, and lean out their windows to commend the Allens on this unique display of the valley's history. Others, annoyed and late for business meetings, rev their engines, flip the bird, or yell, frustrated at having to slow their high-speed lives to the pace of 500 Hereford cows. Whether it is to the delight or dismay of the community, pictures of the Allen cattle drive never fail to occupy the front page of the next week's newspaper.

### **III. Environmental Threats to Operation**

Though the ecology of the Upper Gunnison Basin allows for the survival of the Allen ranching operation, natural predators occasionally kill cattle, especially at the high elevations of National Forest land. The number killed is usually less than 10 and it varies year to year. In the high country, the cattle are occasionally threatened by hungry bears and mountain lions. A pack of coyotes will sometimes take down a calf. The larger threat to calves occurs during heavy snow years, like this one, when the snow hasn't melted by calving time. Equipment must be used to expose bare ground, and even then, the calves are subject to disease because they must be contained within that area and cannot be moved around. Extreme weather can also claim lives if it strikes too soon after

the calves are born. During the summer months in the high country, lightning kills some cattle, and larger numbers can be lost if the cows eat poisonous larkspur. These problems are infrequent and considered normal inconveniences not threatening to the ranch's survival (Leinsdorf).

A larger environmental problem for the operation is long-term climate change. With the exception of this winter, the Upper Gunnison Basin has been facing a drought for most of the past decade. In a very dry year, there is always the possibility of landholders at lower elevations utilizing their senior water rights to call the water that runs through the basin. When that occurs, the water used to irrigate Allen hay fields must be turned off, preventing production of hay. Without hay, cattle cannot survive the next winter and the Allens would be forced to sell a large portion of the herd.

The most pressing environmental hazard to the ranch is very complex. Gunnison County is home to the oldest, stable leks, or breeding grounds, of the threatened Gunnison Sage Grouse. The birds in the area have suffered a loss in habitat and population over the past 50 years (Allen). Though the exact amount of suitable habitat lost is debatable, some groups claim a decrease as high as 90%. In addition to being impacted heavily by development in the area, excessive livestock grazing is viewed as a threat to the birds (Gunnison Grouse). Currently, numerous conservation organizations are pushing for the Gunnison Sage Grouse to be officially named an endangered species by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). If those attempts are successful, there will be adverse consequences for the private and public land used by the Allens. The USFWS could impose strict regulations on how the Allens manage their land and where they can have cattle, greatly limiting the ability to maintain the herd (Allen). Even more

serious is the issue of National Forest land. Losing the grazing permits would severely damage the ranch because it would prevent moving the cattle off the hay meadows long enough to raise and harvest hay for the winter (Leinsdorf). Ranchers in the Upper Gunnison Basin are attempting to solve the problem locally, imposing voluntary grazing practices that would minimize the impact on the Gunnison Sage Grouse. Hopefully, the local action will prevent federal intervention (Allen).

Not only is this possibility a grave one for the ranch's continued existence, it is also extremely frustrating because of the political agendas behind the conservationist organizations pushing for the endangered species listing. They have two principal objectives, neither of which is saving the Gunnison Sage Grouse, and many of them do not deny this fact (Allen). One goal is to limit local development and stop growth in the valley. Another goal is to stop grazing on public land. Having cattle in the National Forest disrupts recreation, because cow pies lie on campgrounds and trails used for biking and hiking. However, the environmentalists fail to see the whole picture. If the Gunnison Sage Grouse becomes an endangered species, restricting ranchers from keeping cattle on public land, the Allen ranch, along with the others in the Upper Gunnison Basin, will cease to exist. While it seems the environmentalists will have achieved their goal of removing cattle from the National Forest, such an outcome will directly keep them from achieving the goal of limiting growth and development. Though some portions of the ranch will not be developable because of proximity to Gunnison Sage Grouse habitat, development would not be restricted on the lands that are not near the birds' habitat (Leinsdorf). These organizations fail to recognize that while ranching may sometimes be inconvenient, it preserves open space, something valued by all.

#### **IV. Social Pressures**

The recreation opportunities offered by the terrain of the Upper Gunnison Basin attracts more people to the area every year. The expanding population creates constant problems for the ranch. Bikers, hikers, and campers recreate on the same public land ranchers use for grazing, making it difficult to graze when a dog decides to chase the cows. More importantly, recreation disturbs the natural migration of wildlife, causing loss of available feed and overgrazing. Overgrazing violates the grazing permit conditions causing tension with the Forest Service. People also trespass on private land to fish or to access public land. There are a few trails onto which the Allens have granted public access, but it is always made clear that the surrounding land is private. However, bikers often create new trails around the original single track, a recurring problem. Unfortunately, the lack of awareness among people who recreate on the land about the ranchers' livelihood causes such disrespectful behavior and discourages the continued allowance of the trails' use. The increased development around private land causes a separate set of inconveniences. Houses are built neighboring the grazing areas. When fences break, cattle often end up in homeowners' front yards, causing irritation. A time-consuming trip up-valley is required to remove the cows from neighboring property and to repair the fence, even though the Colorado Fence Law requires homeowners to fence cattle out. The Fence Law is a carryover from the days when ranchers controlled the Colorado legislature (Leinsdorf).

The Allen cattle ranch also faces legal issues as a consequence of the growing population. The small town of Crested Butte sits in the upper part of the valley and its ski area continues to draw in more tourists and homeowners. The Mt. Crested Butte

Water and Sanitation District has condemned a temporary easement over a parcel of Allen land located near the ski area to determine if it is suitable for a reservoir. The reservoir is intended to serve the growing community. However, 500 of the 700 acre-feet of water to be stored in the proposed reservoir will be devoted to making snow for the ski area, owned by the private company, Crested Butte Mountain Resort. Though legal, it seems an abuse of the power of condemnation. Public entities have the right to condemn private land for public use, but only 2/7 of the water will serve public use (Leinsdorf). This issue alone exemplifies the threat to ranching in the face of a growing and evolving community more inclined to favor conventional modernity.

The problem of illegal immigration into the US has impacted the ranch's operation in the past few years. It has become increasingly difficult to find ranch hands. The job demands long hours and heavy labor. Some of the best workers are Mexican and several of them have been deported. As immigration laws become more strictly enforced, it becomes more difficult to find people willing to work on the ranch.

#### **V. The Will to Persist**

The obstacles currently facing the Allens are nothing new. Since the birth of the ranch in 1886, the Allens have devised methods of jumping over and knocking down hurdles standing in their path. Problems have always existed, and new ones will arise in the future. So why, one might ask, do the Allens continue to ranch? Considering the issues, from the minor inconveniences to the threats to ranchers' survival, it seems assimilation into the surrounding economy would be the easiest (and most profitable) path to follow. After all, the combined ranch land would sell to developers for many millions of dollars. The answer: ranching defines the Allens. My mother, Sandra Allen

Leinsdorf, explains, “It’s not only about continuing the historical family heritage, it’s also about loving the land and the lifestyle. It’s a solitary, rugged existence requiring a wide range of skills. During the course of the year, a rancher is a cowboy, range rider, veterinarian, midwife, fence builder, irrigator, mechanic, machinery operator, harvester, cattle feeder, market analyst, diplomat, and much more” (Leinsdorf). To give up that lifestyle to avoid dealing with problems would strip the Allens of their identity. Selling the land to developers and watching the cattle be trucked off to meatpacking plants is not an option.

The Allens disprove the misconception that there is only a single kind of modernity. They exemplify possibilism, adapting to the changing environment to continue a long-standing tradition of subsistence. Improvements in technology have allowed for new machinery. Larger, stronger tractors, though expensive, allow a more efficient method for feeding animals and harvesting hay. Allowing the public onto portions of private land to access trails and lakes has ultimately raised public awareness and support. Though some users do trespass and damage the land, the Allens’ cooperation with locals has ultimately created goodwill. There is now greater support for ranching, an industry that protects open space and view corridors. Essentially, the ranch operations allow the public to watch “the old west” right in front of their eyes. Even some environmentalists in the area, who tend to dislike ranching, realize the benefits of the existing ranch lifestyle. It’s either cows or condos. Thus, as the number of problems increases resulting from the growing community, a greater support system for the ranchers’ unique way of life has also emerged.



Such adaptations are reminiscent of the Pygmies, written about by Colin Turnbull in *The Forest People*. The Pygmies of the Ituri Forest seem out of place in the changing society around them. They face increasing misunderstanding of their way of life as loggers cause deforestation and villagers hold prejudices against their rituals. However, the Pygmies refuse to leave the forest and assimilate into the surrounding villages. The forest defines who they are. They do learn to adapt to changing circumstances, maximizing the benefits they receive. Technology becomes a part of their life when they discover a metal pipe can be used for the molimo, a ritual essential to their existence (Turnbull 75-76). They also create a system of support by providing meat to the villagers in exchange for agricultural products (Turnbull 20). The pygmies have become a large tourist attraction. They sometimes perform their rituals for visitors to witness in exchange for money (Turnbull 156). They also know that public awareness and support for their lifestyle can facilitate better protection of the forest. Thus, where the Pygmies' hunting and gathering subsistence can be misunderstood as outdated, they have actually developed innovative ways to allow for their ancient traditions to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

In a similar fashion, many Gunnison Valley ranchers, including the Allens, lease fishing rights to anglers and receive revenue from local snowmobile tour operators for the right to ride on private ranch lands. The Allens also earned a mid six figure sum by selling a small access easement to a neighboring land developer. The Colorado Division of Wildlife compensates ranchers all over western Colorado for hay consumed by wildlife (Leinsdorf). For over a century, the Allens have successfully operated their Colorado cattle ranch, a business constantly threatened by a changing social and

ecological landscape. The ranch has suffered setbacks, and challenges remain in the future. However, the Allens' determination and innovative methods promise a tough fight for any forces intending the ranch's destruction.

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