

Grazing the Tomichi

By Polly Oberosler



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Fred's Dreams

By Polly Oberosler Photo of Tomichi Dome by Polly Oberosler

Stories of faith, hard work and ethics reverberated at the service in Gunnison honoring Fred Field's life last week, but the single most mentioned thing about his life was his passion to keep the west whole. Rather, wholesome, nourished and viable to the benefit of all. Key speakers reminisced about his desire to see this area kept intact as it is and not use it as a commodity.

Fred Field's presence in this county and the ranching industry resonated like his raspy voice when folks spoke of him. One by one they told of his commitment to helping this county grow like it must, but in constructive ways. He saw the strong winds of change in the west and tried to rein them in. Changes that are destroying the very things that draw us all here are occurring at a dead run, and only a few like him even notice. If you take one thing from his life or his service to this county you must take a hard look at what he was saying to us all if you value the life you have in this corner of the world: we are tearing down the foundation of the west.

Folks are trying to shape the west to their likeness instead of taking it for what it is. Fred knew that we had already screwed up the lands of the eastern part of this country and he dreamed that it would not happen in his corner of the world so he became a commissioner in a growing county of the west to try and turn the tide. He and folks like him try desperately to communicate the land value to all of us but are talking to deaf ears in most cases.

When you really take a hard look at it, we, as a people of discard, have simply left the eastern part of this nation's resources in ruin and are now onto a new land and will do the same here for it is ample, or so it seems. If you did not see this county even as little as twenty years ago you have no idea what Fred and folks like him are trying to say when it comes to conservation.

To get a feel for why Fred Field was so passionate about nurturing this country you only have to look around as you drive and notice the arroyos that once held at least seasonal water. Thousands of water wells drilled sporadically across the west to supply homes where water is scarce sap the underground aquifers that once spilled their contents down long sagebrush covered hillsides or nourished the stands of aspen and cottonwood.

As a child I remember a strong spring along the highway on the way to Montrose that we would stop at for a cool drink. Nothing remains of that spring but the box that directed its flow when it came from the ground. Recently folks were in an uproar about what is killing the large stands of aspen and some blamed the elk. No, I say it is lack of H2O in a land of 2MENEES dragging their habits of waste behind them like an anchor.

Even now in a period of drought the powers that be of Mt. Crested Butte not long ago enacted a landscaping code which requires intensive watering of grass on every new home site. Meantime, the wide-open spaces provided by the ranches of this valley are being sold 35 acres at a time because they cannot compete or don't have adequate water in this time of lean water resource.

Most of you reading this column never saw the Vail valley prior to the ski area or South Park before it was dried up, but both were similar to what the Gunnison valley is now; pristine, lush and productive. Tourism advocates here have made reference to the Vail area when they speak of what we are not. Well, as sure as Fred sat on his horse, we are falling headlong into that exact scene and within twenty years we will look just like the I-70 corridor, from Crested Butte to Blue Mesa dam and Taylor Park to North Pass.

Many speak of living the life style here and loving it for its effect on their psyche, but few of you will know what Fred knew when it comes to emptying your mind and not wanting anything else from life or the land that sustained it. The west is fragile and he knew it and lived to protect it. I think that it is time to listen to folks like Fred and follow his dreams of a land where people fit in rather than fit on.

I challenge every one of you to lay aside your monetary potential at least in part and become a part of Fred Field's dream. Look at the big picture as he did and have a passion for what this area is and what it should remain and not what it can do for you. Set precedence in Colorado as he did for the ranchland on the Tomichi he loved and do whatever you can to keep it special. Donate to The Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy locally to set a tone westerly for what you love will be gone as fast as a horse can shy.