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Profile- Bill Trampe

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Born of deeds, firm of principle

By Molly Murfee

In the early eighties, rancher Bill Trampe was asked to be the Marlboro Man. He put on his grubbiest clothes and got on his ugliest horse and went to the interview with the executives of this enormous cigarette company. If selected, Bill would have a source of income that would last him his entire life, could afford him a new home; he could retire.

But Bill said no.

Being the Marlboro Man meant he would have to be at the beck and call of the company, jetting off to Utah and other such locales to shoot an ad. As Bill says, "You can't run a ranch that way," and running his family's ranch takes top priority.

He could have sold his land to developers as real estate in Crested Butte and the Gunnison Valley escalated not only in desirability, but also in price. Again, Bill could retire on the money generated from the sale of his land to be divided into thirty-five acre parcels.

Again, Bill said no.

And it is a significant "no." Bill Trampe's land runs extensively along Highway 135 - south of Almont, just north of Almont where bald eagles flock in the late fall and winter, in the East River Valley in that beautiful sprawl of land where the river serpentine on itself behind Mt. Crested Butte. Instead, he committed the nine hundred and seventy-eight acres just north of Almont to a conservation easement, meaning that his land will forever remain in his family and that they may continue the traditional use of it through ranching.

In a world where many are coerced by monetary gain, where real estate exchanges hands as quickly as trading on the floor on Wall Street, Bill Trampe stands unique - and firm. He makes decisions based on principle, on ethics, and on his dedication of preserving the ranching culture and lifestyle in the Gunnison Valley. He is devoted to the land his grandfather settled before the turn of the twentieth century, the same land that his father ranched, and now him. It seems that three generations of ranching heritage means more to Bill than just about anything. More than money or ease of lifestyle or lightness of heart. He points to his young days in Future Farmers of America and their creed of "I believe in the future of farming with a faith born not of words, but of deeds" as a guiding principle in his life.

To that end Bill became a founding member of the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy (GRCL), an organization whose goals are simple and straightforward - to help landowners to protect their land and to educate them about their conservation options. Through the GRCL, fourteen thousand acres of ranchland have been preserved through conservation easements.

The organization came of two unlikely partners - Bill, and Susan Lohr, an ornithologist and former director of the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) in Gothic. Bill grazed cattle where RMBL conducted field studies, and so they met. As Bill tells it, Susan was someone who understood where he was coming from, and he felt comfortable speaking with her and tossing ideas around. As the two stood looking out over East River Valley where Bill's cattle were grazing, she mentioned that she hoped the valley floor would never be developed and that Bill should protect his land through a conservation easement. Bill responded that he had no need for such an easement but that if someone gave him money for the easement he would consider it. Crazy talk, thought Susan, but then they toyed with their novel scheme for several years.

They sent out letters about their idea. They spoke with all of the other ranching families in the valley, conducting informational gatherings and meeting in kitchens. Only two families responded negatively, all other families showed positive support. Through local support they received funds through Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), six million in grants to protect land of cultural, environmental and aesthetic value. Bill and Susan became a classic example of people from different backgrounds coming together for a common goal.

When you look at a map of Gunnison County, agricultural lands embrace both sides of the road on Highway 50 that runs from Monarch Pass through

Blue Mesa Reservoir, on Highway 114 stretching down towards the San Luis Valley, and Highway 135 that connects Gunnison and Crested Butte. It covers Ohio Creek Valley, the East River Valley, Quartz Creek Valley, and Tomichi Creek Valley. Ranching is the oldest economic industry in the Valley, preceding mining by four years. Family ranching lands date back into the 1800s for many of the generational ranchers in Gunnison County.

But it's not an easy life, and as Bill explains, it isn't becoming any easier in present day Gunnison and Crested Butte.

Bill remembers a time when his family ran cattle on the Rozman property, which is now the Glacier Lily housing development, and when Blue Mesa Reservoir was a hay meadow. He remembers when the current Bakery Café was the old stockyard and as a small child watched the last train leave out of Crested Butte full of Trampe cattle before they pulled the tracks. He remembers when Gunnison and Crested Butte were ranching communities and his neighbors were ranchers who shared ditch and fence maintenance. Now, new homeowners are incapable and unknowledgeable about helping him fix the fence and the financial burden falls on him and the few ranching families that are left.

Many factors have made it difficult to continue the ranching lifestyle for Bill and others like him. Recreational users of public land dislike cattle grazing there, contributing to the fact that the number of cattle Bill can graze on that land is diminished, a forty percent reduction in twenty years in animal unit months to be exact. Lack of business has forced farm implement dealers to move to Montrose, making it more costly for Gunnison Valley ranchers to obtain the equipment they need. Increased recreational use and desire of land has driven land prices up to the point that ranchers can not afford to compete in today's land market, watching what used to be their neighbor's land go to condos and second homes. The most productive ranching land also happens to be the land up valley surrounding Crested Butte, where the land prices are the highest. Additionally, a nationwide trend has the average American spending less money on food, nine percent compared to the twenty-five percent they spend on recreation from vacations to the equipment needed to play.

"It's the emotional drain that will kill us," laments Bill, "People need to understand that we're in it because we have an attachment to the land and to the business. We are proud of the product we raise and the food we provide. We're not in it for the dollars. The public should also understand you don't just pick up and ranch somewhere else. I've spent a lifetime learning how to ranch this valley. I don't want to ranch somewhere else. I want to continue to ranch here."

As the valley becomes more and more dependent, and more and more focused, on tourism and development as its major economic drive, Bill sees ranching as an economically sustainable alternative, a business that used to be the largest taxpayer in the county. He uses the example that one mother cow will produce one calf every year. That calf produces up to \$500 with eighty percent of that calf's life being spent in the Gunnison Valley, providing important economic revenue for businesses that support ranching.

However, instead of agricultural support, with the push towards recreation and tourism, those that are supportive of the viewshed ranches provide, also come with expectations of bigger, faster roads, the need to guarantee seats on airplanes, and money spent in advertising. These things, says Bill, are part of what drive the land prices up. It's just plain more expensive to provide the amenities that a tourist based economy expects.

As such, Bill spends much of his time, which used to be taking care of his cattle and taking care of public lands, in meetings. Meetings on land use and three-mile plans and the sage grouse and water rights. Time that he would rather use creating a better product for his consumer. And it's tiring, he says, of being cussed at for manure in the trail by the hiker or biker, or the rafter as he releases irrigation water into the river.

His upcoming week includes the conundrum and paradox of modern day ranching: tomorrow he will haul his cattle north to their traditional grazing grounds, not lumbering down the road as they used to, but by a semi truck. In the following days he will be traveling to Denver as the Gunnison County representative of the Colorado River Water Conservation District to speak about trans-mountain water diversions.

Today, being a cowboy no longer means simply being at home on the range. But as his prized creed dictates, he is a man not just of words but of deeds, and so forward he goes.

I leave the tall man with the sun-weathered face and stark white hair just as the sun is setting, watching as his porch light goes off as I turn onto Highway 135. He has patiently endured my questions into the early evening on an empty stomach, "Common," though, he says. As I drive home north I take note of the fences that mark the ranches along the way. I think back to a time when the valley was a ranching community, when the culture was neighbor helping neighbor maintain communal irrigation ditches and fences. It gives new light in my mind to the old saying, "Good fences make good neighbors." And I wonder, as this community goes forth and presumably forward, if we will have the resolve to act like Susan and Bill did when

forming the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy. To find a common solution, across potential ideological differences, that preserves the beauty, cultural heritage and lifestyle we all originally sought, more solidly based on deed, ethics and principle, than mere puffs of air.

Bill Trampe was chosen as this week's community profile in honor of Cattlemen's Days, a celebration of ranching in the Gunnison Valley. The week has a host of activities from cowboy poetry to rodeos to concerts and food. For more information call the Gunnison Chamber at 641-1501 or visit www.cattlemensdays.com. More information on the Gunnison Ranchland conservation Legacy can be found at www.gunnisonlegacy.org or by calling 641-4386.