

Ranney Ranch History

June 2020

The Ranney Ranch is a family-owned cow-calf operation that sits at 6200' in high mesa country to the southeast of Corona and the Gallinas Mountains in central New Mexico. We are situated in the Gallo Canyon, on the same road (now Hwy 247) that, years ago, herds of cattle were brought up from the southern plains in the fall, to the scales and railroad pens at Corona. The Gallo runs through this mesa country; the rolling meadows of the limestone-capped sandstone mesas are cut by rough canyons with sandy bottomland soil. Much of the ranch is covered by pinon and juniper woodland.

Pueblo peoples probably lived here continuously throughout the ancestral Pueblo periods, from the 11th through the 14th centuries. The ranch has three pueblo sites and two petroglyph sites. A large masonry pueblo was designated Site 3 by Wendorf, at the same time he excavated Site LA 2945 in 1956 as part of a highway salvage program. A few Chupadero Black-on-White shards and a Jornada Polychrome indicate that part of the site may be even earlier than the 1100's. The Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe has material from twelve sites on the ranch.

The early settlers in the late 1800's were dryland farmers of beans, maize, sorghum and grama hay; some ran a few head of stock. These settlers often homesteaded near the the Pueblo sites. There are ten sites on the ranch with cisterns, old homesteads and barns. The sheep industry started in earnest about 1885 in the then-called "El Gallo Draw" and over the next twenty five years produced about 20 million pounds of wool. A sheepman named Zen Owens who produced about 40,000 lbs lived 12 miles down the draw near the center of the current Ranney Ranch. With increasing drought, these small holdings were absorbed into larger sheep and cattle ranches. We believe that our ranch may have been the northernmost watering for the Block Ranch located on the north slopes of the Capitan Mountains.

The Ryberg brothers immigrated from Sweden in 1908-09 and put together a ranch 12 miles southeast of Corona where the Ranney Ranch stands today. Carl Ivar Ryberg applied for a Homestead patent for Stock Raising on 320 acres on February 19, 1909; it was awarded October 24, 1921. The old stone house on the south side of Hwy 247 with the date 1911 carved into the front was most likely built by him. Harry Ryberg applied for a Homestead patent also for Stock Raising on 640 acres on December 29, 1916; it was awarded August 9, 1928. Subsequently Lula B. Hall and her husband Eber D. Hall owned the land along the highway, selling to Lewis L. and Vera McInnes in 1941.

Earlier, on December 29, 1916, Lewis L. McInnes had applied for a Homestead Patent for Stock Raising at the far north end of the ranch, which we still call "The McInnes"; on June 27, 1936, he was awarded the Homestead Patent on his 640 acres there. In 1956, the McInnes' sold their entire holdings to H.T. (Tom) and Nona B. Sowell who ran primarily a sheep operation. In the 1960's, the sheep industry, which had peaked in the 1940's, declined rapidly as the demand for wool was replaced by synthetic fibers. Cattle became the primary local ranching product.

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In 1969 and 1971, George and Nancy Ranney of Chicago, Illinois, bought the two ranches that straddled Hwy 247; along the highway and to the north, from the Sowell's and to the south, from Alexei C. Scott, now called the Chadwick Ranch. Our father cared deeply about the ranch and the cattle, and about carrying on with his Gallo Canyon neighbors, the ranching tradition that he had long loved and admired. After much experimentation with different breeds, he developed a high-quality cow-calf operation using registered bulls on a largely Angus commercial herd. He followed sound conservation practices, added pipelines, water facilities, roads and fences, and cleared considerable acreage of cedar and cactus.

At his death in 2002, our father left the ranch as a family partnership to his four children, their spouses and ten grandchildren. Although scattered about the country, our family has spent many happy years at the R Bar R, and considers the ranch our family gathering place. We were fortunate that Melvin Johnson, whom our father hired in 1984 as manager, agreed to stay on at the ranch with his wife, Esther. Several members of our family have worked for the ranch during the period 2002-2020: Nancy developing the grazing management, conservation programs and grassfed beef program, Sara Ranney handling ranch bookkeeping, George and Ben Ranney managing a series of wind development contracts for the ranch and the Corona community during the period 2007-2019 and Joseph Ranney Levi and Hilaree Levi handling grassfed beef sales.

Since 2002 we have continued the heritage of good conservation and sound grazing practices. In the fall of 2003, we began a rotational grazing management program (intensive grazing with long rest periods) under the guidance of HMI/rangeland advisor, Kirk Gadzia, Resource Management Services LLC, and have witnessed stunning improvement in soil health and grassland biodiversity: our native grassland species (without any reseeding, fertilizer or irrigation) have increased from a count of five in 2003 to over fifty in 2018, from seeds dormant in the soil for many decades under the practice of continuous grazing. We have observed increased numbers of species of soil microorganisms, insects, butterflies, bats and grassland birds while greatly increasing water retention in our pastures. Subsequent soil testing by Steve Apfelbaum of Applied Ecological Services, Inc. has shown that carbon accrual improvements followed these vegetation changes and with the significant acreage multiplier, per acre gains of .3 to .5 tonnes C/acre per year have translated into larger total quantities of accrued and salable carbon than from many other areas of the USA. Our management program has also reduced feed and fuel costs and improved animal health and yields, thus increasing the economic productivity of the ranch.

Other regenerative practices have included the clearing by excavator of over 2,000 acres of invasive juniper, implementing erosion control structures and many miles of rolling dips on our ranch roads to reduce erosion and effectively retain precipitation on the ranch. These projects have been assisted by grants from NRCS EQIP and CSP and USF&W Partners for Fish and Wildlife. In order to run larger numbers in a single herd, we have installed more cross-fencing, new water tanks and drinkers, and replaced all our windmills with solar panels. Our greatest continuing challenge is to improve our water delivery infrastructure.

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In 2003, in response to the increasing demand for healthier beef, we decided to offer entirely grass-fed/grass-finished beef from our just-weaned calves to direct-market customers and the Skarsgard Farms in Albuquerque. We call this beef “Rose Veal”; now in 2020, it is becoming a more popular and recognized product. We guarantee our customers that our calves are never fed grain, nor confined to a feedlot, nor given any growth-producing hormones or antibiotics. We were certified by the American Grassfed Association (AGA), A Greener World/Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) and in 2017 selected as the New Mexico pilot ranch for the new Audubon Conservation Ranching Program, designed to encourage range practices which promote the recovery of grassland bird species, rapidly declining across the West.

Ranney Ranch has been an active member of the Quivira Coalition, the Southwest Grassfed Livestock Alliance (SWGLA), Holistic Management International (HMI) and the New Mexico Cattle Growers. We have offered numerous workshops and tours over the years on regenerative grazing practices, grassfed beef production and erosion control and sponsored a prescribed burn, the NM Native Plant Society and an Audubon bird outing. For three years 2017-2019, we sponsored young apprentices on the ranch through the Quivira Coalition New Agrarian Program (NAP): Jessica Adcock, Ben Vanderhoof and Mitchell Robert. Nancy has served on the Quivira Coalition board for many years and as president of SWGLA; our manager, Melvin Johnson, has been actively engaged with our local Soil and Water Conservation Board, is on the Otero-Lincoln FSA board and is long-term Vice-chair of Region 6 NMACD.

Around 2005 wind energy production emerged as a potential industry in New Mexico. A number of national companies expressed interest in developing the high-quality wind resources in the Corona area as a result of the improved technology, growing consumer and investor interest, and newly released government wind data. Recognizing an opportunity to support alternative energy development and slow climate change, the Ranneys took a leadership role in consolidating a group of local landowners to collectively meet with wind development companies and negotiate terms. The South Corona Landowners Association was able to obtain enhanced financial benefits for landowners, and introduced meaningful environmental provisions, land protections and restoration guidelines into the wind contracts. Though the Ranneys terminated their involvement in wind energy in 2020, clean energy development is poised to play a significant role in the future of the Corona area.

In 2020, working with the New Mexico Land Conservancy, the family placed conservation easements on roughly two thirds of the ranch. This will protect the unspoiled wild mesa and canyon country on the north side of the ranch. Later in the same year, Heriberto and Jaime Ramos, who have hunted on the ranch for many years with outfitter Marcus Johnson, Melvin’s son, purchased the ranch. The Ramos are enthusiastic supporters of the conservation easement and the conservation values it represents. We hope that they and their families will love their life here on the ranch and take joy in caring for this beautiful country.

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