

Kirk Hanna's vision for Colorado is still possible

By Eric Schlosser *The Denver Post*

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Kirk Hanna was the first person I met in Colorado when I started my research on the fast food industry. It was July 1997, and I'd called Hanna to learn about the marketing issues and development pressures that the state's ranchers were facing at the time. He was the president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association — and could've easily passed for a Hollywood cowboy, tall and handsome, with well-worn boots, a thick moustache, and a big white hat. But his battered Dodge minivan didn't quite fit the image.

As we drove through the subdivisions south of Colorado Springs, heading toward his ranch in Fountain, I soon realized that Hanna defied easy categorization. He was a proud rancher — and an ardent environmentalist. In those days, it was rare to meet anyone brave enough or foolish enough to admit being both.

Ranchers tended to view environmentalists as commie/pinko/white-wine drinkers from the city who wanted to destroy a great American way of life. And environmentalists regarded the ranching community with even greater disdain. Edward Abbey had said it best: "The rancher is a man who strings barbed wire all over the range; drills wells and bulldozes stock ponds ... poisons coyotes and prairie dogs; shoots eagles, bears, and cougars on sight; supplants the native grasses with tumbleweed, snakeweed, poverty weed, anthills, mud, dust, and flies ... then leans back and grins at the TV cameras and talks about how much he loves the American West."

Kirk Hanna was working hard to bridge the gap between two groups that had long hated one another. He saw that environmentalists had become increasingly alienated from the lives of ordinary people — more concerned, it often seemed, with saving rare frogs from extinction than with preserving rural culture and agriculture. And Hanna understood that ranchers in Colorado had become an endangered species, routinely driven off the land to make way for new highways, malls, and housing developments. He believed that the desire to protect open space could be a source of common ground. Ranchers could serve as stewards of the land, instead of its despoilers. And environmentalists could learn to appreciate a landscape that included human beings.

I found Hanna to be bright, articulate, and charismatic. What he said made a lot of sense. And what he did was even more impressive. He ranched like an environmentalist, restoring stream banks, rotating his cattle through different pastures, allowing native grasses to recover. After spending time a good deal of time with him, I honestly thought Hanna would some day become the governor of Colorado, a leader dedicated to building coalitions and inspiring a sense of community. Instead, he passed away less than a year-and-a-half after we met, having taken his own life just a week before Christmas.

I wrote about Kirk Hanna in my book, "Fast Food Nation," calling him "Hank" to protect his family from unwanted publicity. One of the central themes of the book is the conflict between the new West and the old — and I set most of the book in Colorado because the state seemed to have become what California once was: a laboratory for the future, setting trends that the rest of America would soon follow. I didn't use Hanna as a convenient symbol to illustrate those larger themes. He was a complex man, and his undoing had as much to do with deeply personal struggles as with larger social forces.

But his death was not an isolated event; suicide is still the leading cause of external death for Colorado ranchers and farmers. They are more likely to take their own lives than to be killed on the job by tractors or livestock. And the forces that are shaping Colorado in the 21st century threaten those who regard the land as more than just a commodity to be bought and sold, who view agriculture as a calling and just a occupation, and who hope to hand their ranches and farms down to the next generation in better shape.

First drought, then floods; a cattle market ruled by a handful of multinational corporations; a state population that has grown by more than 50 percent since the early 1980s; a mindset that values profits over open space, that celebrates the short-term, not the long-term view — these are some of the things that continue to drive Colorado ranchers off the land. The recent calls for succession reflect the persistent gulf between the state's rural and urban inhabitants. And yet, all is not lost.

The kind of range management that Kirk Hanna championed has become more commonplace — as has the notion that ranchers and environmentalists must work together. An organization that Hanna helped to create, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, has removed almost half a million acres of land from future development. That's an area larger than that of all the state parks.

Almost 15 years after his death, Hanna's vision for Colorado — as a place that cherishes both urban life and agriculture, that opposes growth for its own sake, that refuses mindlessly to pave over its past — remains urgent and compelling.

As tens of thousands of people once again move to the state, I hope the newcomers won't be allowed to destroy the unique spirit of the place and the beauty that drew them here in the first place.

Eric Schlosser is an executive producer of the locally produced "Hanna Ranch," which debuts at the Starz Denver Film Festival Nov. 9. A second screening will be held on Nov. 13 at 2:15 p.m. at the Sie Film Center. Schlosser will appear at a noon brunch and panel discussion, "The Land That Feeds Us," at the center on Nov. 10 at noon. [Click here for tickets.](#)