



CROSSROADS

FALL 2017

Photo courtesy of John Fielder

WRITTEN BY JAYNE THOMPSON

"This Land Will Remain Whole, and That's What Matters"

When the environmental and conservation movements first hit the West, they weren't necessarily represented by soft-spoken ranchers wearing scuffed cowboy boots. In fact, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the conversation started to include landowning families and their stories. Getting the men and women who knew the land best to share their perspectives and trust in an unfamiliar system didn't happen overnight. This is the story of how one small town rancher from Westcliffe, Colorado became one of conservation's most fearsome

advocates and the face of private land conservation in the West.

Randy Rusk is most at home on his ranch in the Wet Mountain Valley, where he lives with his wife Claricy. The Rusk Hereford Ranch is directly adjacent to the Sangre de Cristo mountain range with hay meadows that parallel the famous "Blood of Christ" peaks. This is where Randy was raised, and where he's had the opportunity to raise his kids and grandkids, who are now sixth generation Custer County cowpunchers. Randy's love of the land starts here, but this is certainly not where it ends.



► Randy and Claricy Rusk
Photo credit: Greg Smith

"If something bothers you, you better get up and say something."

— Randy Rusk

► Rusk Hereford Ranch



Randy and CCALT founding board member, Jay Fetcher ◀



In 2004, the Rusk Hereford Ranch won the Colorado Leopold Conservation Award

INSPIRED THE
CONSERVATION OF
10,000+
acres

In the late 1990s, the Wet Mountain Valley was facing development pressures from all sides, and conservation easements were a fairly new concept that were not popular among the ranching community. With real estate offices outnumbering restaurants in Westcliffe, it seemed like the very thing that drew so many people to this sleepy cow town was going to be what changed it forever. Ag ground was being divided and sold off in small housing plots, and ranchers were being offered double their land's value to sell out. With a strong belief that the best use for agricultural land was agriculture, Randy and Claricy got to work. In Randy's words, "If something bothers you, you better get up and say something."

CCALT founding board member, Jay Fetcher, remembers meeting Randy at a particularly heated debate regarding the value of conservation easements. After an intense discussion, Randy approached CCALT with an interest in getting involved. Randy became a board member in the fall of 2003 and served on the Lands and Stewardship Committees for 13 years. During that time, Randy never lost his passion to learn as much as possible regarding conservation easements. He wanted to know how they worked, what the benefits were, and who they would impact.

Around this same time, Randy and Claricy began conserving their own ranch with the

Trust for Public Land and CCAAL. "It was easy for us to see this valley was changing quickly, and it was going from agriculture to residential. We didn't like it, so we stepped up," said Randy. The project was completed in two phases, and 100 percent of the ranch was conserved in 2004. Randy and Claricy weren't the first to place their ranch in a conservation easement, but they were some of the first to advocate for it.

Conserving nearly 1,600 acres of their own ranch changed the course of conservation easements in the area. Today, an additional 10,000 acres of the Wet Mountain Valley is protected, and it's very likely that none of that would have happened without Randy and Claricy bringing other landowners to the table. Because they were ranchers themselves, their word and their opinions mattered at a time when conservation easements weren't always accepted. To this day, Claricy insists, "We need to remove the fear. Conservation easements are the best thing that's ever happened to agriculture."

As a CCAAL board member, Randy hardly ever missed the closing of a conservation easement; even driving hours to be present when the papers were signed, money transferred, and the ranch officially conserved. He respected the landowners and wanted to be there in person to thank them. He remembers, "When we closed an easement, that was magic time. I wanted to be there. It was fun."

As passionate as Randy is about protecting ag land, Claricy is equally so. She served as a board member for the San Isabel Land Protection Trust for nearly 14 years working with staff to conserve vital agricultural areas of Custer, Fremont, Pueblo, and Huerfano Counties. Randy is quick to point out that "One thing Claricy and I've been totally in agreement on is the conservation of ag land. She always got a kick out of protecting ground."


Today, Randy and Claricy are still on the land they worked so hard to protect, and their kitchen view is still an uninterrupted scene of green hay meadows and Colorado peaks. Their son, Tate, and his wife, Wendy, are gradually taking over the ranching operation; but Randy won't retire from the ranch for another 10 years. He turned 68 this August. If you call him, chances are good he'll be out separating bulls or fixing fence.

Colorado's land is only good if we have strong individuals willing to stand up and fight for it. Randy and Claricy Rusk are those individuals. Their actions over a lifetime will benefit not only future generations of their own family, but future generations of all Coloradans, particularly those in the Wet Mountain Valley. The Rusks' involvement in the easement discussion opened the doors for an entire ranching community to have a seat at the table. Without necessarily knowing it, Randy became a bridge for the agriculture and conservation communities. His earnest demeanor and sincere passion for this work were infectious, and it helped that he simply would not give up.

"...this valley was changing quickly and it was going from agriculture to residential. We didn't like it, so we stepped up."

— Randy Rusk

There will always be ranches that need to be protected, but for now, we celebrate two lifetimes of hard work, passion, and love of land. Randy and Claricy will be honored with the Stuart P. Dodge Lifetime Achievement in Conservation award this year at the Southern Colorado Conservation Awards Ceremony, and there are not two people more deserving.

"In 100 years, no one will remember the names of the people who fought to save this land, or the conflicts they overcame, but this land will be whole. And that's all that matters," said Randy. 



▶ Randy sorts cattle
Photo credit: Bill Gillette

WHAT IS COLORADO'S RETURN ON CONSERVATION INVESTMENTS?

A 2017 STUDY FROM CSU FINDS:

2.1
Million Acres
Protected

\$1 Invested
= up to
\$12 Benefit

BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION

ECONOMIC



AND

ECOLOGICAL



These benefits will continue to accrue over time on a per-acre basis.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS PROTECT STATEWIDE PRIORITIES

1.5 million acres of crucial habitat

300,000 acres of prime farmland

270,000 acres of severe-winter range for elk

4,100 miles of stream, creek, or river frontage

19% of the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Production Areas that occur on private land

To read the full report, visit: <http://bit.ly/colostat-benefits>

Photo courtesy of Allen Birnbach

2017 SUMMER PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

CCALT was proud to partner with the Greens and the Tureceks to conserve their family ranches

THE CRAGS RANCH

Jerry and Judy Green placed a conservation easement on the historic Craggs Ranch, preserving an important piece of Routt County's western heritage with help from the Routt County Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program and the Northwest Colorado Habitat Partnership Program.

Located 10 miles southwest of Hayden, Colorado, along the East Fork of the Williams Fork River, the Craggs Ranch is part of Jerry and Judy Green's family-run cow/calf business. The Craggs Ranch was

homesteaded by Jerry's great grandparents, Leon and Mary Green, and received its Century Farm Designation from the Colorado Department of Agriculture and the Colorado Historical Society at the Colorado State Fair in 1995.

835 Acres Conserved



► The Craggs Ranch

STACKED LAZY THREE RANCH

Keven and Sandi Turecek placed a conservation easement on their Stacked Lazy Three Ranch, located near Deer Trail, Colorado. The ranch is one of three that make up the Agate Prairie Conservation Legacy Project. This project will ensure that the Stacked Lazy Three Ranch remains in its undeveloped state; preserving the open space and rural character of Elbert County, wildlife habitat, and Colorado's rich agricultural heritage.

The Tureceks manage a diversified enterprise with a commercial cow/calf herd, as well as dryland crops. Keven and Sandi's two sons, Travis and Tyler, both help to manage the ranch.



Keven and Sandi Turecek on the Stacked Lazy Three Ranch with their family ◀

5,044 Acres Conserved

Photo credit: Allen Birnbach



WRITTEN BY MAGGIE HANNA

GRADY GRISSOM: PART OF THE RANCHING ECOSYSTEM

In partnership with the Colorado Cattlemen's Association and the Sand County Foundation, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust had the distinct honor of recognizing the Rancho Largo Cattle Company as the 2017 Colorado Leopold Conservation Award recipient. Rancho Largo Cattle Company is managed by Grady Grissom and is headquartered 30 miles east of Walsenburg, Colorado.

At a young age, Grady Grissom knew he wanted to ranch, though his path to ranching would be filled with twists and turns. A child of a West Denver suburb, Grady spent much of his young life playing sports, climbing the Rockies, and visiting family ranches on the Eastern Plains. Grady graduated from high school and headed east to wrestle for Princeton

University. Following his time in New Jersey, Grady spent several years working ranch jobs in eastern Colorado, but knew this was not his path to ranch ownership. Grady went on to acquire a PhD in metamorphic petrology from Stanford University.

In 1994, still in the Bay Area, Grady received an invitation to partner on a ranch. He and his partner looked at ranches throughout the west and eventually settled on the Eastern Plains of Colorado. Grady moved his family to Colorado to begin the journey of land and resource management. His learning curve has been steep, but like any good student would do, Grady leaned into his work.

Like Aldo Leopold, Grady Grissom operates with a clear distinction

between land - the commodity that we own - and land - the community to which we belong. Grady embraces the fact that he is just as much a part of the ecosystem as the soil and the cattle. His land management has evolved from focusing on maximizing stocking rates; to an adaptive management philosophy driven by detailed animal records, financial records, pasture rotations, and an in-depth knowledge of the ecosystem.

Grady's grazing management strategy emphasizes long rest periods for the land. This type of grazing requires many pastures, each of which he views as miniature laboratories. One of his primary goals has been to increase plant diversity on the ranch and improve the quantity and quality of cool season grasses. Since the early



Grady shares his management philosophies, highlighting a playa in the background

2000s, the abundance of Western Wheat Grass and New Mexico Feather Grass (the major cool season species in the region) has more than tripled.

Over time, Grady's management has left more residual grass, improved the water cycle, and increased livestock and wildlife production. When the soil is able to increase water capture and storage, erosion decreases, production increases, and drought resiliency improves throughout the system at large. The improved plant species diversity has been followed by increased invertebrate activity, including more beetles, ants, centipedes, and worms.

Grady regularly hosts workshops (Society of Range Management and the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies), student groups, birding tours, artist gatherings, and a multitude of other

visitors. Rancho Largo has worked diligently to engage partners in wildlife projects. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies (BCR) worked to restore two playas on the ranch.

As Grady has refined his approach to land management, he has become integral to his local community. He serves on a number of community boards including the La Junta Kids Rodeo, Fowler Science Fair, FFA Advisory Council, Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, Otero Junior College Agricultural Advisory Board, and was active in the Piñon Canyon Expansion Opposition Coalition. Grady also has spent the last 21 years as the wrestling coach at Fowler High School. ©

WELCOME NEW CCALT BOARD MEMBERS



CHANCY LOVE
DENVER, CO

TERRY SWANSON
WALSH, CO

TAWNY HALANDRAS
MEEKER, CO

STACY KOURLIS
GUILLON
DENVER, CO

TOM STOEVEER
DENVER, CO

For more info on our new board members, visit the CCALT blog at <https://ccalt.org/news-events/blog/>

DON'T FORGET

Nominations for the 2018 Leopold Conservation Award will be due December 2017, with applications to follow in February 2018. If you have any questions about the award or the selection process, or would like to discuss a nomination, please call Maggie Hanna, 720.557.8266.



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*Conserving Colorado's western heritage and working
landscapes for the benefit of future generations.*

SPECIAL THANKS

The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust is very thankful to Sue Anschutz-Rodgers and the Crystal River Ranch for hosting the 2017 Forever Colorado BBQ.

**SAVE
THE DATE!**

JULY 14, 2018
FOREVER COLORADO
BBQ AT PRAIRIE
CANYON RANCH

FOREVER COLORADO SPONSORS



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Dakan Ranch
Mardi & Brown Cannon



Visit us at www.ccalt.org to learn more or find additional information about the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust.