

21. M. A. "PAT" FERREE

Pat Ferree was a good man, the salt of the earth. A rancher's rancher, well-liked by all. In his 50s when I knew him, he had a big French nose, a potbelly and a sunny disposition.

Active in the Colorado Cattlemen's Association¹ and the National Cattlemen's Association, I remember him reporting back to meetings of the Larimer County Stockgrowers Association, beginning his comments with "Well, fellers..."

Pat grew up on a ranch in southeastern Colorado, near Arlington. Tough, high-plains country, made tougher by the Missouri Pacific Railroad, which ran through the ranch.²

After World War II, he came up to Fort Collins to study animal husbandry at Colorado A&M. Liking the area so much, he convinced his mother to sell the ranch at Arlington and buy a ranch in Livermore.

The Ferree family moved to their new place on Stonewall Creek in 1948 – just in time for the disastrous blizzard of 1949.

The Ferree Ranch was a make-do affair (that's a compliment). There were no fancy improvements and the equipment was just sufficient. Jeanne and I helped the Ferrees brand in 1980, using a temporary corral constructed of old snow fence – no frills.

However, when it came to cattle, Pat was progressive. He was one of the first ranchers to use artificial insemination, still a rarity in 1980. He also knew how much to feed his cows to meet his breeding and calving objectives, and no more. His cows looked a little on the trim side compared to some of the neighbors' cows – cause for some ignorant disparagement.

Pat called one day in September 1980 and asked if I'd mind coming over. I thought he was going to follow up on a conversation we'd had about me doing some field work for him. I had worked up a seedbed and planted some alfalfa for Clarence Koch, over the fence to the west of the Ferree ranch. On my way

over, I was thinking how to politely decline because I'd hit too many rocks over at Clarence's and wasn't looking forward to a return engagement.

It turned out he had something else on his mind: Pat wanted Jeanne and me to buy his ranch. He said he had been diagnosed with liver cancer and had only a few months to live (he was only 59). He needed to sell his ranch to square things up for his estate. He and Shirley had an offer from the lawyers that had developed the Bonner Peak Ranch north of Ted's Place. Pat didn't like them. He told Jeanne later that "One of the bastards didn't even take his hat off in the house."³

The Ferree Place had been on the market for a while, but not being in a position to buy it, we had thought about it only in passing. I had talked briefly with the realtor who had the place listed and that must have gotten back to Pat.

"You know my kids aren't in a position to take over the ranch. We've got an offer from those lawyers, and Shirley (Pat's wife, 1922 - 1994) wants us to take it, but I sure hate to see houses built on the rim of the canyon."

"Canyon?"

"You haven't seen it? Well come on, I'll show you."

We got into his old '59 Plymouth – it was the kind with the big bat wings – which he used to get around the ranch. We drove out onto US 287 and went up north about seven miles to the road that goes west to Halligan Reservoir. We went west most of the way to the reservoir and turned off on a dirt track that ended where The Nature Conservancy's Phantom Canyon Preserve headquarters is now and walked up the hill to the rim of the canyon. My jaw dropped.

I had grown up in Larimer County, spent a lot of time in the Cherokee Park Area, and had lived and ranched in Livermore for more than three years. I knew there was some rough country below Halligan Reservoir, but had no idea that a spectacular canyon like the one below us existed.

"I wish you folks'd buy this place and keep it in ranching. You know, those lawyers are even talking about build-

ing a helicopter pad up here! If you could, I'd make sure Shirley goes along with it."

It seemed obvious to me that it would be a crime to develop what lay before us. After a little hesitation, I said (not having the foggiest idea of the implications), "We'd have to find some partners because this would be too big for Jeanne and me alone."

Later that fall, Jeanne and I made a deal to buy most of Pat and Shirley's ranch – the ~6400 acres (including a School Section) west of US 287 together with water rights and cow herd.

No question Pat Ferree was the father of the Phantom Canyon Ranch project. Without his desire to protect the canyon from development, Phantom Canyon Ranch would never have come into existence.

This was the beginning of one of the first private investment conservation projects in the country, but of course we didn't recognize it at the time – the canyon wouldn't even have a name for four more years. Jeanne and I were about to be swept into a stream of rapidly unfolding events that held compelling logic for us, but left most others scratching their heads.

That was more than 35 years ago, and in the intervening time, I've been mindful of my undertaking to Pat – for what we were able to do but disappointed that we couldn't do more. But I'm getting ahead of myself again...

Thanks to Steve Ferree, DVM, for his encouragement and help with this installment.

¹ Pat served as President of the CCA 1979-1980.

² Those were the days of steam locomotives that belched coal smoke laced with sparks that frequently set fire to surrounding grasslands (when there was enough grass to burn). There was a bureaucratic process for getting the railroad to pay for damages, but it was a pain in the neck.

³ Awfully strong language for Pat.

