

## 60. "BUT HE'S ONLY A RANCH MANAGER"

In the grocery store awhile back, a friend exclaimed "*But he's only a ranch manager!*"

Thirty-six years earlier, outside the courtroom, Jack Neutze (1925-2009) turned to me. "*What are you up to, going to all this trouble?*"

These seemingly unrelated comments refer to the other part of the water project that occasioned Evan Robert's legal action and Clarence Koch's ire (Chapter 56).

Mr. Neutze, the Poudre River Commissioner at the time, had testified against our filing, but the court had approved it anyway. Irrespective of the court's ruling, Neutze thought this part of our water project was a dumb idea because the water rights involved would be out of priority much of the time.

The River Commissioner wasn't the only one to look down his nose at our shiny new water decree. We couldn't even give it away ~ some years later, when we sold *Tepee Rings*,<sup>1</sup> the buyers turned the water right down.

And so, our poor old water right languished until Zach Thode<sup>2</sup> (the Roberts Ranch manager) got to looking into it. Zach and his wife, Sherryl, bought *Tepee Rings*, and acquired our water decrees. When word got around that Zack planned to irrigate some of it, the local rumor mill went into overdrive. The ensuing fuss was aggravated by ignorance of Zach's plans, knowledge of our old water right, Colorado water law and even the law of gravity.

In the grocery store aisle, I was trying to guide my friend through the rumor tangle, when we arrived at the nub: "*But he's only a ranch manager!*"<sup>3</sup>

The notion that no peasant falls too far from the turnip truck is at least as old as the Age of Reason (when landed gentlemen – not all gifted – decided to apply their '*naturally superior gifts*' toward an enlightened practice of agriculture).<sup>4</sup>

Peasants<sup>5</sup> have, naturally, not been altogether appreciative of this notion, but rarely in a position to do much about it. The story of the United States<sup>6</sup> offers a twist on this dynamic. Our country was settled, to a substantial extent, by European peasants downtrodden, disgruntled<sup>7</sup> and/or starved enough to pack up and emigrate. Added to that desperate formula was the previously unimaginable opportunity to own land as offered by the Homestead Acts (Chapter 6) – an unstoppable wave of settlers poured west.

It is interesting to look at that part of our history as if it were an agrarian 'land reform' (of course it wasn't, but bear with me). Land reforms require someone to give up land, unfortunately in this example, the Indians. Also land reforms almost never provide secure title to the beneficiaries. Our supposed example provides an exception, secure land title (at least for owners who came after the Indian tribes) is a cornerstone of our legal system.<sup>8</sup>

So, with a broad-brush stroke, there you have it: Jefferson's sturdy yeomen farmers, a secure 'landed peasantry', imbued with political rights, ready to stick it in the eye of aristocratic elites at the first chance.

Today, most US agricultural land is still in the hands of the descendants of that landed peasantry, their relatives and neighbors. The urban/rural, red state/blue state divide is partly defined by the historical tension between farmers and ranchers who produce the food and those who presume to tell them how to do it.

Any true picture of US agriculture or the communities and institutions that contain it is complicated and nuanced. To help me make sense of it, I depend on a collection of my own generalizations (kind of like using calculus to measure a compound curve by breaking it into small, simple chunks).

Here's an example: For more than a century, research at publicly funded Land Grant Universities has provided 'improved practices' that allow farmers to produce more and more crops. More crops result

in lower prices. Lower prices put more farmers out of business. The remaining farmers (now < 2% of the US population) are the only folks that don't benefit from all the cheap food they produce – they just get to take bigger risks while their city critics tell them they are doing it all wrong. To see evidence of the stresses this dynamic creates, drive through some small towns almost anywhere in 'red' states.

The attached maps show 'before' and 'after' Zach's irrigation developments on *Tepee Rings* with our 83 CW118 and 83 CW119 decrees.

"*Good job, Zach. Glad you took it on. I couldn't have done it as well in my day.*" Carl

<sup>1</sup> One of the parcels of Phantom Canyon Ranch property – about 500 acres north of the Cherokee Park Road and west of US 287. *Tepee Rings* is subject to a conservation easement that prohibits development.

<sup>2</sup> Zach Thode (b. 1981) was raised in Livermore, attending Siri Stevens daycare and idolizing her husband, Kent Stevens, our foreman. When Zach was nine, he began his apprenticeship/friendship with Richard Borgmann on George Seidel's place.

<sup>3</sup> BTW Zach has a master's degree in civil engineering.

<sup>4</sup> As with some 18th Century landed gentry, but now with less skin in the game, there seems no shortage of agricultural expertise among my non-farm friends and acquaintances. Almost all are ready with a critique of what is wrong with American agriculture and how to fix it. Degrees of conviction and misinformation are approximately proportional to the number of generations removed from family farm experience – but I'm straying onto my soapbox...

<sup>5</sup> I use the term "peasant" with no derogatory intent, rather the opposite. I spent several years working with indigenous Bolivian subsistence farmers and have great appreciation for them and their circumstances. As farmers, they are no dummies – justifiably risk averse, however.

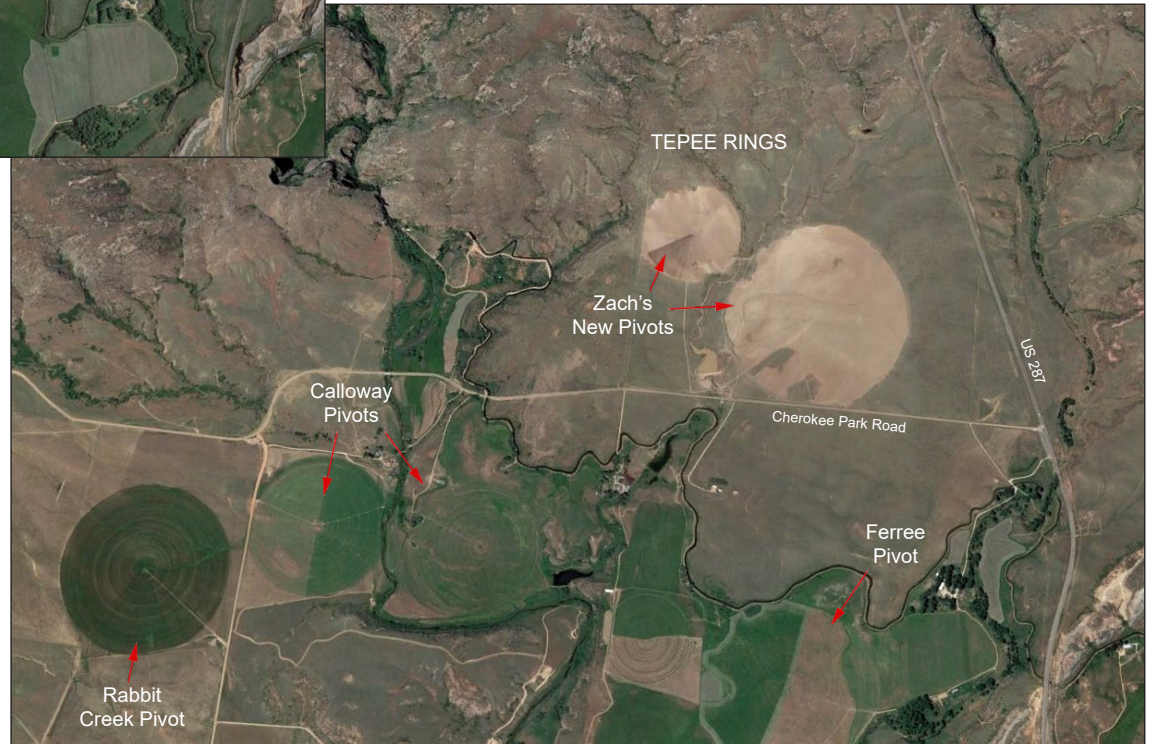
<sup>6</sup> Also, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>7</sup> My old friend, Jim Reidhead, was fond of pondering whether it was possible to be "gruntled" and what a state of "gruntlement" might be like. (more on Jim later)

<sup>8</sup> Doing irrigation development work in Bolivia in the 1990s, I had the opportunity to work in indigenous communities that were reverberating with the after effects of the corrupt and inept Bolivian land reform of the 1950s.



Tepee Rings "Before" June 2014



Tepee Rings "After" April 2014