

## 18. GRAZING NOTES

Rangeland science emerged as a discipline at the end of the 19th century partially in response to growing alarm at the rapid degradation of range lands in the west.

Unfortunately, conclusions from the early research data were dumbed down as they were fed to the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. Grazing was often seen as a politically necessary evil – zero grazing being optimum, but in any event, the less grazing the better.

That remained the general perception for the better part of a century within the conservation community<sup>1</sup> and with members of the public – if they thought about it at all. I remember road signs, plastered with stickers throughout the inter-mountain west, which read “Cattle Free in '93,” the assumption being that only then could public rangelands be properly preserved

In the 1970s, a wildlife manager in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Alan Savory, building on previous research, was postulating a symbiotic relationship between the African savannah grasslands and the herds of wild animals that grazed it.

Large herds grazed less selectively than individuals or smaller groups while trampling the ground in a brief orgy of destruction before moving on. But the seemingly devastated grasslands recovered quickly and thrived.

The assumption was that grasslands and large herds of grazing animals had evolved together with each depending on the health of the other.<sup>2</sup>

Savory also began to apply his observations to the management of domestic livestock in the form of a pasture management approach that became known as the *Savory System*. This system sought to replicate the impact of wild herds of grazing animals under ranching conditions.

Ideally, the *Savory System* manifests itself in the form of a central hub containing a water source from which radiate a number (30 or so) of small, fenced pastures that are used intensively in rapid succession, returning to the first after it has recovered. This basic approach is tempered by an awareness that the grazing eco-system is more than just grass and cows, but includes all the plants, animals, insects and micro-organisms, soils, topography and local climate.

By 1980 Savory's work was beginning to have an impact on ranchers, conservationists and range scientists alike. At the very least, it got the pot stirring. Ranchers, in particular, began to gain a new, positive self-image. By 2010 the conservation community had largely done a 180° to see ranchers as de facto conservationists rather than indifferent pirates. And among ranchers, conservation was no longer the dirty word it had been twenty years before.

As the devil-in-the-details raises its ugly head, adherents of the *Savory System* have resorted to dogma while range scientists uncover issues that muddy the water. However, the basic idea has widely influenced the practice of range management.

The principal drawback to the *Savory System* in arid climates is the prohibitive cost of fencing needed to implement the system.

Jumping ahead in the story for the moment: When we had acquired all the property that became Phantom Canyon Ranch, we had eleven sizable pastures south and east of Halligan Reservoir on both sides of the canyon comprising over 11,000 acres (including our lease of a State School section and the Parker place, now owned by Jim and Nancy Carpenter).

Kent and I came up with a plan to use these eleven pastures in rapid rotation. We moved the cattle (up to 600 cow-calf pairs) from one pasture to another in intervals of a few days to two weeks (depending on the size of the pasture and other conditions) from late May through October.<sup>3</sup> Along in August some of our

water sources played out and we had to open gates to combine two or more pastures to compensate.

One year when we didn't have enough cows to utilize the eleven pastures, we took in 1500 yearlings for a rancher from San Angelo, Texas, Hal Noelke (1930-2009), who paid us per AUM.<sup>4</sup>

You can just imagine what the neighbors had to say.

As imperfect as this approximation of the *Savory System* was, it had a dramatic positive impact on the health and productivity of the range over the years we had it in effect.

<sup>1</sup> In the mid-80s, we were negotiating with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) for their acquisition of the Phantom Canyon Preserve property. TNC was determined that their preserve could never be despoiled by grazing. In turn, our demand was that TNC take sole responsibility for construction and maintenance of a boundary fence. It was a long and tortured negotiation, but we prevailed on that point.

<sup>2</sup> My interest in the *Savory System* led me to identify a textbook example of what happens in the absence of grazing. The Livermore Cemetery, a one-acre plot that had been enclosed within a fenced boundary, off limits to livestock, for more than a century. The cemetery's grass had largely choked itself out and been replaced by prickly pear cactus.

<sup>3</sup> This plan was complicated by Larkspur patches in some of the pastures. Larkspur is poisonous for cattle, primarily affecting the respiratory system. Toxicity and palatability vary over the growing season but peak during the flower stage when as little as five pounds can kill a mature cow. Interestingly, sheep are much more resistant to Larkspur toxicity – enough so that pasturing with sheep is sometimes considered a way to control Larkspur. We tried this for a couple of years by renting out early spring pasture to a sheep outfit from Oak Creek, Colorado. The results were promising, but we got stiffed for the pasture bill the second year.

<sup>4</sup> In the end, this took a bad turn. Coming from Texas, the yearlings had a lot of ear on 'em (they were high percentage Brahma blood). Brahmas are not well adapted to cold. We had an early cold spell and the yearlings weren't used to ice. Sixteen drowned one night in Koch Pond No. 1.

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