

## 8. THE WILLIAMS PLACE -- RABBIT CREEK

Not all 35-acre developers got rich in the 1970s. The old Williams Place on lower Rabbit Creek was bought by Speculator A in 1973, who sold it to Speculator B on the installment plan. When Speculator B didn't pay, Speculator A foreclosed and took the property back.

The Williams Place (aka Steinhoff Ranch) had been a fine small ranch with a reputation for excellent hay production<sup>1</sup>. Irrigation water was provided by a well-designed diversion that delivered water to hay meadows extending on both sides of Rabbit Creek for more than a mile (see blue circle on map opposite).

The improvements consisted of two houses, one on either side of the creek, a good calving barn, other outbuildings and corrals. A modest businesslike setup – no frills (see pink area on map opposite).

The Williams Place had had summer range on the headwaters of Sheep Creek in Roosevelt National Forest and Union Pacific land.

By the time Speculators A and B got done with the Williams Place, the irrigation system was destroyed by mismanagement, neglect and floods; the buildings were in disrepair; the Union Pacific lease had lapsed and the National Forest Permit was lost.

In 1977 the Williams Place was for sale with no takers. It was not really a 35-acre development prospect and Speculator A was no rancher.

When I took a look at it in the winter of 1977-78, I felt that it had sound agricultural value, particularly if the National Forest Permit and Union Pacific lease could be recovered.

In the spring of 1978, I proceeded to see if we could find a way to buy the Williams Place. Speculator A came up from Boulder to meet with me, and when the dust settled, Jeanne and I had traded the commercial building in old town Fort Collins that housed our manufacturing business, and we had the ranch. We called it the Rabbit Creek place.

In structuring the purchase, I was careful to establish a claim for transfer of the National Forest Grazing Permit that had been associated with the ranch<sup>2</sup>.

I had the privilege of knowing George C. Williams (1917 - 2005) who lived in Fort Collins and worked for Centennial Livestock as a country rep. He and his father, George F. (1892 - 1963), had ranched the place together until they sold it to James and Mabel Steinhoff in 1962. I visited with George several times at his home and came to understand some history of the place and how he and his father had managed it. George's help and advice proved invaluable.

The Williams had participated with the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS) projects in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

What remained of the irrigation diversion on Rabbit Creek when we took over bore the stamp of the SCS. It had featured a curved earthen dam at the mouth of the Rabbit Creek canyon that created a small reservoir, equipped with a modern headgate, overflow works and a flume across the creek.

Unfortunately, the speculators had not maintained the overflow works, which had become clogged with driftwood and the resulting backup had caused the failure of the dam's spillway after a flood (date unknown).

In the northwest quarter of Section 24 was a beautiful stand of dry-land crested wheatgrass that had been established also with the help of the SCS in the 1950s (see pale green area on map opposite). Crested Wheatgrass is an early cool-season grass. The objective had been to improve early season grazing since blue gramma and other native grasses don't produce well until later in the summer.

George Roberts (Evan's father) remembered hauling logs cut on the Rabbit Creek place for the foundation of *The Forks Hotel* on a bitter cold day in March of 1875.<sup>4</sup>

Curious mysteries were an old trench silo and windmill near the center of Section 24 (See X on

map opposite). I never got historic particulars on the silo, but it is an indication that serious effort had been made to raise silage corn. The windmill never pumped more than a few gallons of water at a time (I later gave the windmill to Lars Larson and Amy Brackenbury – I think it still lives at their place).

Rabbit Creek consisted of 1263 deeded acres and 640 acres of 'State School' land, leased from the State Land Board (see shaded area on map opposite).<sup>5</sup>

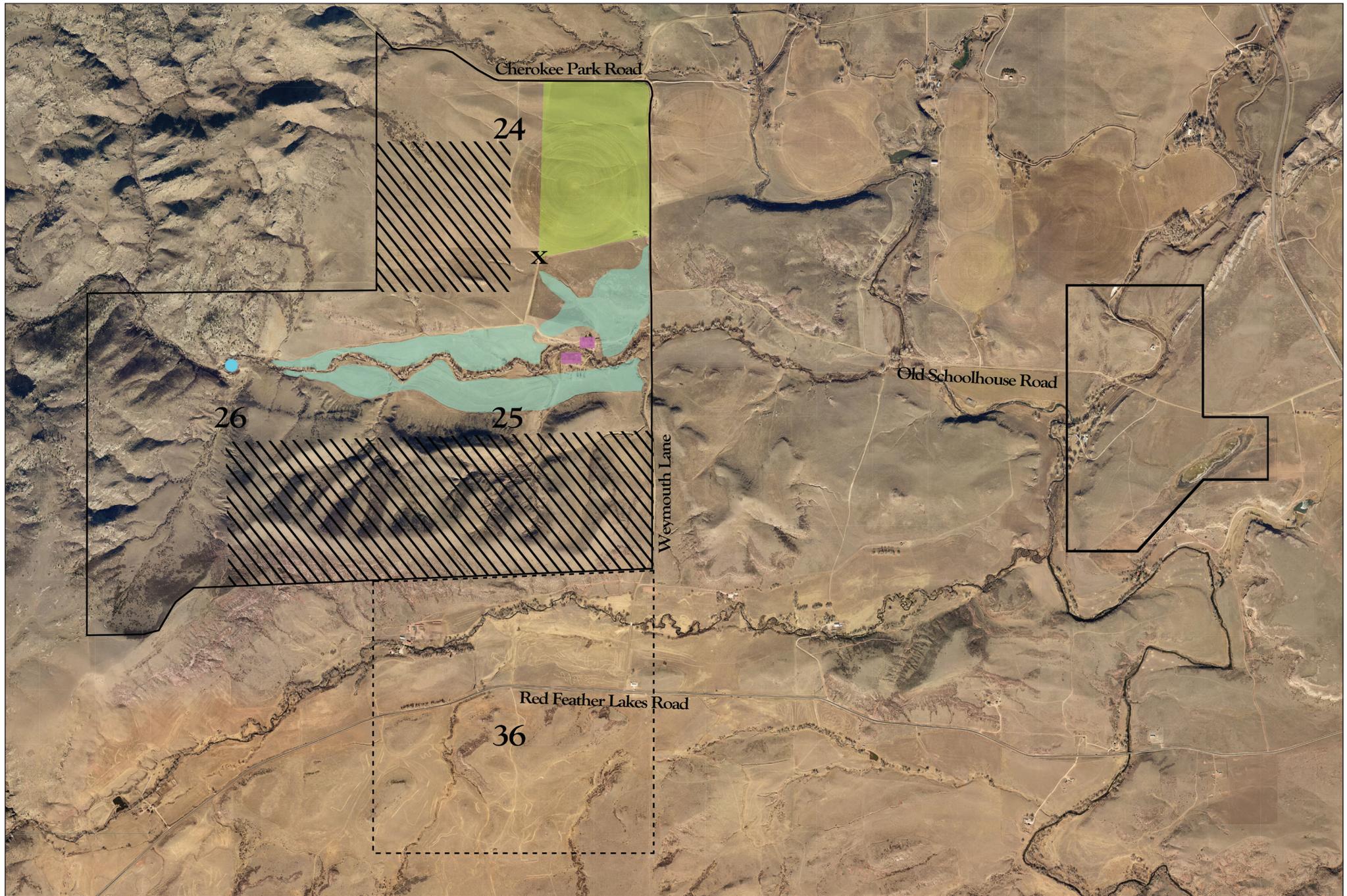
<sup>1</sup> Lyle Van Wanning (ref. *The Meadow* by James Galvin) spoke highly of the hay meadows on Rabbit Creek. He had hired on to hay crews at the Williams Place in the 1950s. Lyle knew the Williams (father and son) well. Lyle's place was on the Sheep Creek Road right in the middle of the Williams' summer range.

<sup>2</sup> I was advised this was a long shot. National Forest Grazing Permits are subject to a labyrinth of Federal regulation that often leave ranchers frustrated and feeling powerless. The process of transferring a Grazing Permit can be tricky. National Forest bureaucrats have many means at their disposal for blocking transfers if they want to.

<sup>3</sup> The Soil Conservation Service (now the National Resources Conservation Service) was established during the Dust Bowl and helped promote soil and water conservation. Especially in the 1950s, the SCS provided engineering services and construction oversight, together with funding for a significant portion of the expense of small farm and ranch projects.

<sup>4</sup> *The Larimer County Stockgrowers Association 1884-1956*, p. 20

<sup>5</sup> Early shenanigans? Section 36 (which should be the 'school section') includes the beautiful hay meadows along Lone Pine Creek and the Red Feather Lakes Road west of Weymouth Lane (CR 37). Instead, the school's acreage lies in Sections 24, 25 and 26 on very marginal land. You don't suppose there could have been some funny business back in the day....? (see map on opposite page)



Rabbit Creek Place