

# Good Neighbors

Colorado's Green Creek Ranch is this year's *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award winner.



*Bill Gay* returned from Colorado State University, where he studied agricultural journalism, to be a cowboy on the family ranch. His communications skills made him a leader in local environmental, economic and cultural issues.

Story and photos by  
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In the evening, before supper must be served, Elaine Gay has better things to do than quibble with the horses in her flowerbeds. There are potatoes to mash, brisket to roast, and the corn will overcook if it boils too long. So she steps impatiently onto her porch, walks across the

yard, and provides them with "gentle" encouragement to leave.

Familiar with the routine, the horses know they don't belong with their necks stretched over the fence, their lips smacking upon her daisies and phlox. But they're tender and sweet, after all, and the culinary benefits far outweigh the risks of fanning the wrath of an 82-year-old woman.

Reluctantly, they lift their heads, turn away and trot back toward the pasture, knowing full well they got away with it again.

Surveying the damage, Elaine is exasperated. "With all the grass they have out there, I don't know why they come in here to trim off my blossoms," she says.

Then she pauses. The still of evening rises from the fields of timothy and bromegrass. The breeze quakes the aspen on the hillside. Far away, the rattling cry of sandhill cranes carries across the river. She lifts her eyes from the flowers toward the pastures, lined with cottonwood trees and backlit by the setting sun.

There is too much beauty on her family's Green Creek Ranch for anger, too much love that runs too deep to hold a grudge for too long. The corn can boil. The roast can keep cooking. In the end, what matters most is the land.

## Roots

That love and respect for the land netted Green Creek Ranch this year's *Angus Journal* Land Stewardship Award. Managed by Elaine's son, Bill, it lies in the heart of Colorado's Pleasant Valley, a few miles south of Steamboat Springs.

Despite the new homes that line the nearby ridges and all the new people, the Yampa River remains at peace, pushing silently and uninterrupted across the family's land.

Elaine was a Kansas girl who came to the mountains when she was 8. She didn't mind leaving behind the heat of the High Plains. She learned quickly there were tradeoffs — namely, seven months of snowbound weather, bitter cold and isolation.

In 1938 she married Bob Gay, a rancher whose roots in the valley stretched back to 1898. He was a descendant of French-speaking Swiss immigrants who had settled in the valley.

Together, Bob and Elaine took his family's original holdings and bought up neighboring homesteads to form much of the ranch the family continues to own and to operate today.

Like her husband, who passed away several years ago, Elaine is well-known for her straight talk and dry wit. She is a strong, practical, no-nonsense person.

That strength enabled Green Creek Ranch to survive the good times and bad

of the last 50 years. Today the operation is not just a pretty place. It's a productive piece of ground, encompassing 2,000 deeded acres. Much of it is irrigated hay meadow. The Gays manage registered Quarter Horses, commercial crossbred cows and a recently established purebred Angus herd.

The ranch is wedged between much of what the region has become. It's anchored on the southern end by Stagecoach Reservoir — a state park that draws fishermen from across the country — and on the northern end by Lake Catamount — a privately owned, soon-to-be-completed, low-density resort development.

Bob and Elaine instilled their sense of commitment to family and the land in Bill and his two sisters, Roberta and Margaret, who have moved away from the ranch.

### **Voice of reason**

Bill flirted with the idea of leaving the valley. He studied agricultural journalism at Colorado State University (CSU), learned the value of communication skills, then returned to the ranch in 1970.

Unbeknownst to him at the time, it was language and his effective use of it that would enable him to become a persuasive community leader on local environmental, economic and cultural issues. He recognized early that he couldn't just be a cowboy, even though that's what he'd rather do.

So he honed his listening and interpretation skills, which allowed him to see problems long before they arose and to develop solutions well before most were willing to accept them. These things have made him a quiet, but forceful, leader in conservation.

"Bill has done so much to help protect ranching and ranching interests in this valley," says C.J. Mucklow, Routt County Extension director. "He's been a tireless advocate of agricultural interests, demonstrating effectively to the resort community that ranchers and ranches play an important role in protecting environmental quality, social diversity and economic viability."

Susan Otis, a long-time friend and director of the Yampa Valley Land Trust, has worked with Bill on a number of land-preservation efforts.

"The Yampa Valley has seen profound environmental, cultural and economic changes during the last 30 years," she says. "It's been a challenging time for ranchers. Land values are higher than ever, and many long-time ranchers have chosen to sell out.

"Despite it all, Bill and his family have

been a voice of optimism," Otis continues. "He was one of the few in our community who stood up when it mattered, who resisted monetary gain, and said, 'We're not leaving. We love this valley. This is more than just money. It's about doing what's right for the land, for our family and the community.'"

Still, much like his mother, Bill maintains a low profile about all of the attention. The land speaks for itself and stands testament to quiet commitment, not public exhibitionism.

"This award has more to do with my parents than it has to do with me," he says. "My father was the true American, Western stockman.

"He had the ultimate in integrity. His word was his bond. You didn't need an attorney to sign an agreement with him. He had a delightful sense of humor. He was committed to the land, committed to the quality of the product, committed to increasing productivity. Above all, he was a good neighbor."

A good neighbor, indeed. And Bill has worked hard at maintaining his father's example. His colleagues believe the ranch is deserving of the stewardship award for several reasons.

### **Pioneer spirit**

First, the ranch is sustainable.

"The Gays have ranched in the same location for more than 50 years and in Pleasant Valley for 100 years," Mucklow says. "The Gays have committed to ranching for their family in the future by placing about half of their land under conservation easement, forever forgoing the financial reward of subdividing the ranch and moving on."

Conservation easements, which are sold or donated by landowners to land trusts, remove development rights from a property forever, keeping it as open space and productive ranching land.

"There is a lot of comfort in knowing that the ground my grandparents and other family members worked so hard to put together is there and will remain just as it was for years to come," says Todd Hagenbuch, Elaine's grandson, who helps out in the summer. "It's nice to know that someday I'll be able to take my kids there and show them their heritage.

"I can show them where they worked, tell them stories about the blizzards and how they had to shovel the snow so they could feed the cows. This ranch is a link to my past, and it represents a big part of our future."

With support from the community, the Gays were able to place much of their land under conservation easements. The



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family then was able to expand their operation, purchasing neighboring hay fields and pastures threatened by subdivision.

"Bill has been a pioneer of the conservation movement in Colorado," Otis says. "Through his efforts, he's demonstrated how conservation easements can be an effective tool not only to maintain the long-term economic viability of ranching and ranching families, but also to protect the rural and natural landscape.

"The Yampa Valley draws hundreds of thousands of visitors each year," she continues. "Time and time again, surveys indicate that the natural beauty and productive working landscapes of the Yampa Valley are important to those visitors, as well as to those of us who live here.

"Thanks to the Gays and others like them who have made the commitment to conservation, tens of thousands of acres of the valley's landscape will remain largely intact. We anticipate more to follow. It is a gift they've made to all of us, a gift that will continue to have lasting and beneficial outcomes for this valley and our community," she says.

### **Community-minded**

The Gays have learned to embrace the natural environment instead of work against it.

"They fenced off large portions of their riparian areas along the Yampa River to protect water quality, prevent negative impacts of grazing and soil erosion, and increase riparian plant-community health," Mucklow explains. "This doesn't

mean they can't use the riparian forage; it means they've changed the time and timing and duration of use to sustain these plant communities."

The result has been stabilized stream banks and increased biodiversity along the ranch's riparian zones.

The Gays also fenced off wetlands to improve waterfowl habitat, and they choose not to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides on their property.

"Bill feels strongly that pesticide use threatens the Yampa River and water supplies for towns downstream," Mucklow says.

Bill adds: "The ranch itself straddles the Yampa River. We also have Morrison and Green creeks that cut through the property. Both the towns of Hayden and Craig use the Yampa as their municipal water supply. I believe we have an obligation not to pollute that water with chemicals.

"I believe we have an obligation not to cause potential health problems for people downstream."

### **Less is more**

The Gays also have been innovators in their stewardship practices. In the 1980s the family came under intense pressure to sell their ranch, which would have paved the way for the proposed Catamount ski area. Developers had planned to construct it on the property next to Green Creek. Had they done so, the result would have been an environmental catastrophe for the upper end of the valley.

Already reeling from the effects of Steamboat Ski Resort, a second ski area less than 10 miles away would have resulted in more condominiums, more secondary homes, more traffic, more people, more strain on existing resources, less agriculture and an end to the valley's scenic beauty.

The Gays stood their ground, however, turning their back on a mountain of money, deciding instead to stand by their land and way of life.

"What would we have done with all of that money?" Elaine asks. "I can't even manage the little bit I got in my checking account right now. Where would we have gone had we sold out? What would we have done? We have everything we want right here."

In the end, plans to build the ski area fell by the wayside. In the late 1990s, investors bought the ground where the resort would have been and, following Bill's influence, advice and expertise, placed a portion of the property under conservation easement and the remaining lands into a low-intensity development plan.

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*— Bill Gay*



Now, where condos and gondolas would have been, the Gays lease back that land for grazing and hay production.

"We listened to Bill, his family and the whole community and heard that they wanted a kinder, gentler Lake Catamount," says Jody Patten, a spokeswoman for the resort. "They wanted a development without the density or a ski area with 12,000 skier visits a day.

"We have a great working relationship with Bill. He's a practical man. He's been a visionary, and he's helped us strike a balance. He opposed the ski area but had the wisdom and foresight to see that our plan called for much less impact than the previous owners had planned with the ski area."

Bill also helped in the implementation of a countywide Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program, one of the first county-funded programs in Colorado and the Intermountain West. Funds, which are generated locally through taxes, are used to purchase conservation easements from property owners. To date, more than \$1.5 million have been earmarked for protection of rural lands.

The Gays also were key players in the development and implementation of Yampa Valley Beef, a successful branded beef venture launched two years ago. Its goals are to tap into the resort marketplace by providing tourists and others with high-quality, locally raised beef.

The product helps add value to locally produced cattle and increases the economic viability of Yampa Valley ranching operations.

### **Stewards' nature**

In the end, the motivation for protecting the environment goes well beyond personal recognition, transcending fence-lines and mountain ranges. It's something that runs as deep and clear as the waters of the Yampa.

Looking across his pastures, as his mother does each evening from the house, Bill knows they've done what's right. Environmental stewardship is nothing more than doing what's right for the land, making decisions based on gut instincts, not what can be bought and sold for short-term financial or personal gain.

"Regardless of the hardships, regardless of the financial rewards or disadvantages, it's really great to have communal contact with nature on a daily basis," Bill reflects. "It far exceeds any white-collar job or government job that I might have had if I would have done something else. Even though the hours are longer in ranching, the rewards are truly greater."

Elaine, who's spent a lifetime at the base of these mountains, agrees with her son, even though it was Bill's horses that damaged her daisies.

"We could have left years ago," she says. "We could have left with a lot of money. But if you love what you do and where you live, no amount of money can make you leave."

