



Moving the cattle herd on Badger Creek Ranch. (Photo courtesy of Chrissy McFarren)

## THE BIG DREAM: Nourish, Educate, Restore

by Starr Hill

WHEN I THINK ABOUT CATTLE and the sage-strewn prairies of South Park, I immediately recall my father at the top of a berm protecting our tipi enclave, literally shaking his fist at the sky. Then, he would load newspaper wad and powder into an ancient canon. Yes, a canon, and light the fuse. The result was a resounding, echoing boom that would rattle the mason jars in the cellar. The herd of roaming cows would, however, widen their path and go around our camp. Because our land was a lease in the center of cattle grazing, there were no fences to protect our belongings from the thousands of hooves that passed through each summer.

This memory came back strongly as I opened a conversation with Chrissy McFarren, co-owner of Badger Creek Ranch. McFarren was in the winter headquarters of Coaldale while Badger Creek Ranch was “tucked in for a long winter’s nap.” Badger Creek Ranch is a working ranch, not to be confused with a dude ranch. They host guests but no more than six at a time, most of whom are interested in conservation and learning from the land. McFarren explained their stays simply as, the guests “head out to do whatever needs to be done that day.”

McFarren, co-owner of the 6,000-acre ranch resting in the rolling hills between the northwest corner of Fremont County and the southern edge

of South Park, is dedicated to healthy, humanely raised meats for our local community. The ranch has just earned the “Grazed on Audubon Certified Bird Friendly Land” label, which guarantees the ranch’s cattle are improving the health of open grasslands, creating bird-friendly habitat for endangered bird species and other wildlife, and helping to store and purify surface waters.

McFarren appreciates the collaboration, as well as a recent connection with the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service. “We take a bird’s-eye view of the entire ranch and look at what is the best way, not just to graze it, but to monitor it ... what things can be changed.” The approach helped the ranch qualify for a recent Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) grant, which helps farmers, ranchers and forest landowners integrate conservation into their working lands. “The more we can document,” McFarren pointed out, “the more we can track how well we are doing.”

The Audubon Society press release recognized Badger Creek Ranch because grassland conservation is such a critical matter. Central Colorado has lost more than half of its natural environment, specifically, its native grasslands. This is due to a combination of poor agricultural practices and uses as well as the introduction of invasive species, which are often allowed to proliferate. As most

residents of the valley notice, encroaching human development is also impactful. In the case of the Badger Creek Ranch, the conservation measure within their control was to mitigate poor grazing practices and open their practices to a different way of grazing.

McFarren expressed the desire to be better stewards of the land; water has always been the challenge. Like many farmers and ranchers, they were doing the best they could with what they had. She described an interesting debate — let the land go back to the wild or let it be grazed. She added that the land was once grazed by bison, which avoided the riparian systems near the water for fear of predators. She noted, “Cattle can mimic that, with great improvements to the soil.” Bison would “mob graze,” a term used regularly in regenerative agriculture and defined by the Soil Association as “short duration, high density grazing with a longer than usual grass recovery period ... between 40 and 100 days.”

Cattle don’t have the instinct to move out of the riparian areas, so ranchers like McFarren and her guests have to push them off into other pasture areas that have not been grazed. “By getting them on the land, you have poop, pee, saliva — even their rumen, depositing moisture back into the soil. They are also trampling, aerating, and disturbing the soil” which, according to researchers at the University of Wyoming, can promote the growth of local vegetative species.

McFarren noted, “We let the pasture rest until the entire next year ... it’s a brittle environment.” Thanks to the NRCS grant, Badger Creek was able to add more water points and worked with the organization to create a three-year prescribed grazing program. The EQIP is the NRCS’s flagship conservation program that helps farmers, ranchers and forest landowners integrate conservation into working lands. “Now we can graze more effectively,” she said.

As a movement to become more sustainable sweeps the nation, there is more attention to the source of food. The Colorado General Assembly recently passed House Bill 20-1343, which requires businesses to stop selling eggs produced

by hens in cramped spaces. Because there are three main farms that produce the majority of Colorado’s eggs, when the law took effect Jan. 1, egg prices skyrocketed, nearly doubling, and the shelves in many grocery egg sections were consistently bare. Families having their own chickens or a prior relationship with a free-range chicken farm have enjoyed their eggs with no pause.

So, while there is no similar legislation regarding beef, Chris Wilson, director of Audubon Conservation Ranching pointed out that eating beef with the Audubon certified label is a direct support not only to the health of the cattle prior to processing but also a help to build bird habitats. Anyone who eats beef can now support conservation efforts more easily.

“The range of land benefits rolled into the Audubon certification includes healthier soil, cleaner streams and increased plant diversity that supports bees, butterflies and other pollinators,” added Wilson. McFarren agreed: “It’s about improving the health of our pastures and trying to heal all the overgrazing.”

Aware that her own children and much of the younger generation has no interest in ranching, McFarren explained, “It’s not going to happen in my lifetime. However, our main goal is to set the stage on the lands we steward and get these practices in place. Then we can hand it to the next generation to create some preservation.” The co-owners of Badger Creek Ranch are looking at putting the private land into a conservation easement in the near future.

Badger Creek Ranch dedicates itself to being “caretakers of this land [that] has provided life to humans and animals for millennia. In addition to keeping this land open, pristine and in equilibrium, our efforts are focused on maintaining it as a vigorous and vital habitat.” McFarren added, “We are learning and evolving, trying to remember our original instructions.” ♦

*Starr was raised off the grid in tipis and old mining cabins. Now a teacher, she is raising a family of her own and working on a memoir of lessons she learned growing up off the grid.*

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