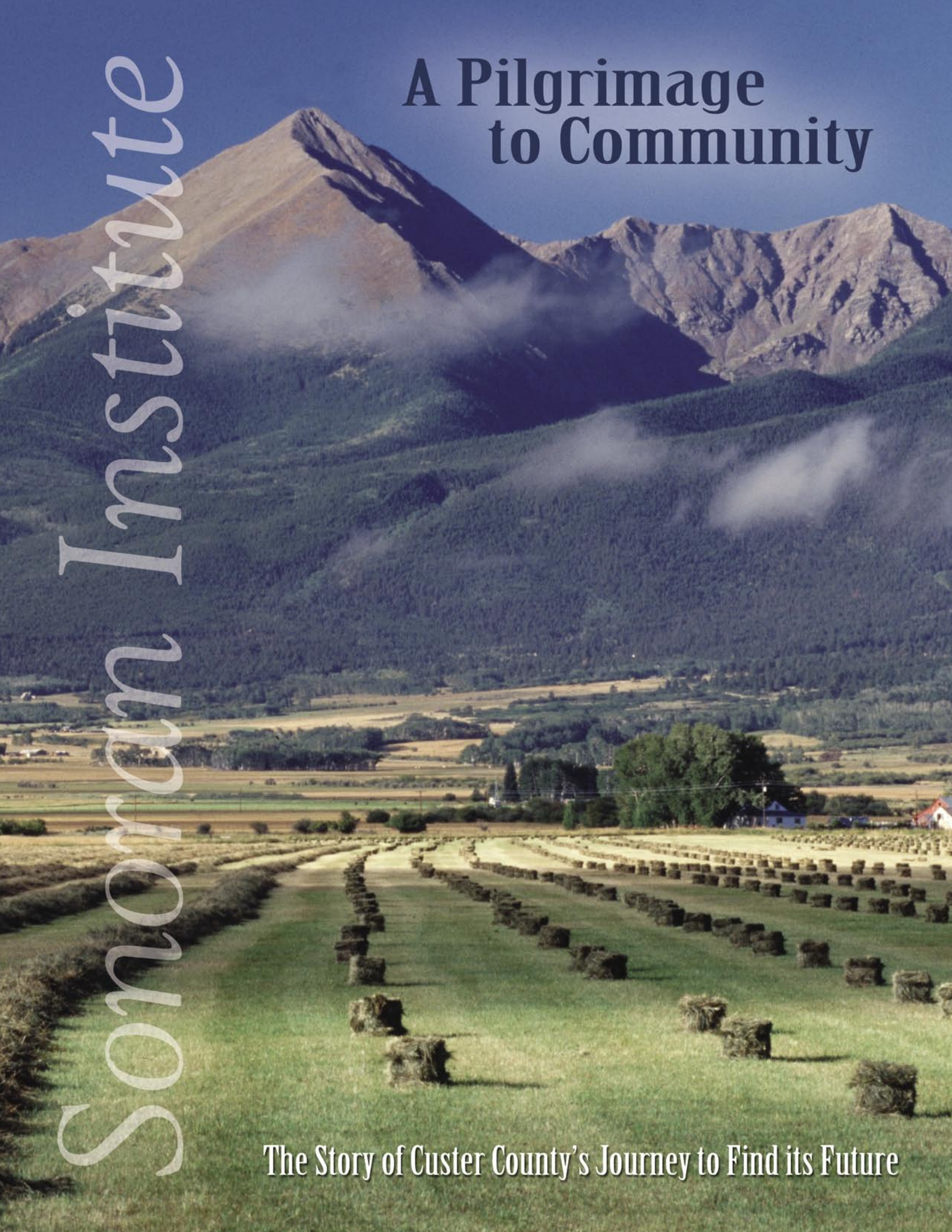
Sonoran Institute
A Pilgrimage to Community
The Story of Custer County's Journey to Find its Future

photo: Bill Gillette
front cover photo: Bill Gillette

Sonoran Institute

The Sonoran Institute is a non-profit organization that works with communities to conserve and restore important natural landscapes in Western North America, including the wildlife and cultural values of these lands. The Institute's efforts create lasting benefits, including healthy landscapes and vibrant livable communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their economies and quality of life.

San Isabel Land Protection Trust

The San Isabel Land Protection Trust, a local land trust based in Westcliffe, Colorado assists landowners in the protection of ranch, farm and forest lands, wildlife habitat, open space for scenic beauty, and historic resources.

Custer Heritage Committee

The Custer Heritage Committee is an informal group of landowners and citizens who are concerned about the future of agriculture and open space in Custer County, Colorado. The Committee works to educate the public about challenges facing agriculture and to protect ranching and open lands.

About the Author:

Todd Wilkinson lives in Bozeman, Montana and has written widely about the American West and conservation issues for a number of magazines and newspapers. His work has appeared in, among others, Audubon, Mother Jones, Utne Reader, Orion Nature Quarterly, Outside, Backpacker, Nature Conservancy Magazine and newspapers including the Christian Science Monitor and Los Angeles Times. He also is author of several books, including the critically acclaimed Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth. "I've had the pleasure of visiting a lot of different valleys in the West where local people are trying to hold on to what makes their communities special," he says. "Against an onslaught of sweeping change, Custer County offers us that rare glimpse of hope – that by setting aside our differences and focusing on our common love for the land, individual people can still make a difference."

Settling back into a rickety chair, Sara Kettle catches her breath. It seems like days, weeks, months, since she's had a good rest.

photo: Ben Alexander

Sara Kettle

As dusk settles on the serrated line of Sangre de Cristo peaks, Kettle crosses a mud-caked work boot over one knee, and sighs. She's thinking out loud about the future.

"This is father's desk," she says, gesturing. "It all looks pretty much the same as it did on the day he died."

The sigh has a double meaning. Kettle is alluding to her dad, Ben Kettle, the family patriarch and legend of Custer County, Colorado, who passed away suddenly at age 78.

Stacked on Ben's old bureau, next to Sara's desk, are volumes of ledger books he meticulously filled with narratives that describe his financial decisions going back across the 20th century. These accounting diaries are the closest thing Sara has to an operational manual for how to succeed as an Old West rancher.

The problem is, times are changing, offering no mercy to those who can't keep pace. Ben knew it before he died. He wanted to be the one to shepherd his family into the future. Now it's up to Sara and an expanding network of non-traditional allies.

Amid the long hours outdoors, Sara doesn't have the luxury of ruminating on the perceived differences between the West known to her frontier ancestors, and the "New West" which has come to symbolize profound, gut-wrenching transformation in the heart of historic cowboy country.

Sara, who is in her mid thirties, doesn't need words because she senses the changes. She sees desperation written on the faces of her neighbors and change etched into the landscape. Every day the West that she knew is fading like a Sangre sunset.

It's a scene that Ben Alexander with the Sonoran Institute has encountered before. As Alexander listens to Kettle, he realizes that her story could be extrapolated to hundreds of rural agricultural valleys in a dozen western states.

The story may be the same, but it's playing out differently in Custer County. To appreciate the novelty of Custer County, you need only consider what is happening around it. This is the state, after all, that is home to Aspen and Vail, and the burgeoning metropolises along the Front Range of the Rockies. Every single year in Colorado, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, as much agricultural land is being taken out of production and lost to sprawl as still remains in Custer County.[1] Like many mountain valleys, the inhabitants of Custer County, including Sara Kettle, are struggling to evolve without sacrificing their working landscapes to subdivisions.

Point of fact, virtually every agricultural valley in the Rockies, Sierra-Nevada and Cascades is confronting loss of productive land and open space, fragmentation of wildlife habitat, threats to limited water resources and water quality, rising real estate values, and general quality of life concerns.

More than three million Americans relocated from urban areas to small towns in the Rocky Mountain West over the past two decades, according to the Sonoran Institute's report, *Preserving Working Ranches in the West*.[2] Shifting population is one of several prongs stabbing into the heart of ranch country. Others include unstable agricultural markets, damaging global trade policies, the monopolistic practices of meat packing plants and grain brokers, and estate taxes.

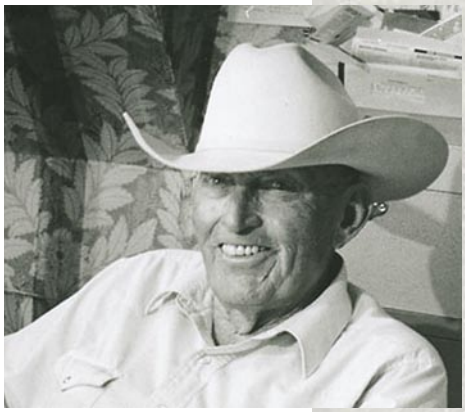

photo: Bill Gillette

Ben Kettle

Another troubling phenomenon originates in ranch country itself and involves the rising age of the average cattleman and cattlewoman. In many western valleys, ranch owners have a median age over 60 and they may have no one to succeed them, both because of kids leaving for other opportunities and taxes which make the transfer cost of land from one genera-

tion to another prohibitively expensive.

As a result, the number of ranching families is rapidly decreasing. Ranches are being sold to outsiders with no connection to the land and sometimes to developers who plant a last crop of asphalt.

Researchers at University of Colorado's Center for the American West have shown that in some counties as much as 45 percent of all large agricultural land holdings have changed hands in the last 10 years, and in many cases the majority of acreage has been purchased by "amenity buyers."[3] Some Custer County ranchers, who are truly sincere about their desire to honor the tradition of their forebears, reject the blueprint of exurban development that outsiders wave in their faces. Cast as underdogs, they want to show the world what stewardship looks like in an evolving social and natural landscape.

The Sonoran Institute's relationship with citizens and elected officials in Custer County began in 1998. It started after members of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust, a grassroots land trust, and the Custer Heritage Committee,

Keith Hood:
Charting the Next Frontier of Ranching

Rancher Keith Hood at age 50 is considered a kid whenever he walks into local Stockman's meetings in Custer County. That's because most of his peers, still working and with no thought of retirement, are around 70. "We're confronting our own demographic demise in Custer County," says Hood who, when he's not pushing cattle or working irrigation ditches, sits on the county planning commission. "Ranchers are getting old."

Hood doesn't know if he'll be the last of his clan to run cattle in the valley. His mother's ancestors came to Colorado in 1870. His daughter, Autumn, an honor student, graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a degree in agribusiness and she's received several offers for scholarships at a number of graduate schools. "Kids are going to college and not coming back. Ranching is an iffy proposition at any rate. Unless you've got family who can get you started in ranching, you're looking at major debt."

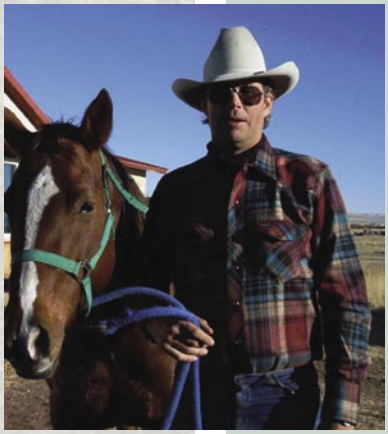

photo: Vic Barnes

Keith Hood

The Hood Ranch, when deeded and leased acres are added together, covers about 2,500 acres, 80 percent of which is irrigated. Hood supports the Rusk and Kettle families in the decision to sell development rights on their ranch for a simple reason: it's the best offer on the table and those who are critical of conservation easements offer no alternative to those who want to continue ranching.

When Hood and his neighbors talk about the greatest threat to ranching in the Wet Mountain Valley, what is mentioned most often after commodity prices, ranchers aging, and kids not coming back? Answer: "We're talking about development pressure," he says. Development takes good soil out of production, fragments pastures, causes ground disturbance that brings invasions of noxious weeds, impairs viewsheds, results in dirtier air and water, increases conflict over water, impacts wildlife, and invariably results in higher taxes to pay for expanded services such as increased police and fire protection, the need for municipal sewage treatment, more schools, and bigger roads.

Hood says the battle against development and fragmentation began in the 1960s when his father joined Ben Kettle in exploring different zoning options. Every year, less land is available for leasing or acquisition, and the land that is available exists in scattered chunks across the valley. He feels a sense of urgency because Custer County's fate is going to be sealed within the next decade.

"We're worried about what is going to happen because most of the remaining ranchers are between 70 and 80 years old and they control a lot of ground," he says. "As ranchers, we won't be able to compete for that ground if it's being sold for full development value. Conservation easements give ranchers tax breaks while they're living and reduce the value of the land so that it's affordable to remain in agriculture after they're gone."

In addition to assistance with exploring tax incentives for conservation, Hood says the Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust has offered help in promoting a conservation beef product that offers higher prices for beef fed on local grasses, not larded up with hormones and finished on grain in feedlots. "For the cattle rancher, this valley offers two products that enable us to expand our income: meat and grass," he says.

When the *Wet Mountain Tribune* recently published a special edition celebrating 125 years of ranching in the valley, reporters interviewed archaeologist John Beardsley, a member of a famed Colorado ranching family with strong ties to Custer County. "The story of the Wet Mountain Valley is really grass," John said. "It's just like gold to the people who use it."

Hood believes the younger generation of ranchers is more open to using grass in different ways that weren't available to their parents. "Unfortunately, many of the people in agriculture are of the rugged individualist mentality and they're the poster boys for why the industry is in trouble," Hood says. "It's the next generation that is taking important steps to keep cattle ranching viable. We need to work to preserve agriculture and those not in agriculture have a stake." For example, sportsmen recognize the dividends of ag land. Colorado's Partnership for Habitat Program rewards ranchers who allow elk to share their meadows.

Despite what some people say – folks whom Hood calls "a vocal minority" – most ranchers have no interest in getting into the real estate business and subdividing their land. He says that conservation easements are often mischaracterized as an attempt to undermine private property rights, an assertion he calls absurd. "Ranchers who place an easement on their property and sell development rights do it after a lot of thought and research. Ranchers aren't stupid. Easements no more encumber the rights of a future landowner than a developer does when he subdivides a hay meadow. I support property rights as much as anyone else and as a landowner I've decided to sell a conservation easement because it helps me live my dream, which is to continue ranching and hopefully pass it on to my daughter."

an informal group of ranchers and newcomers concerned about the future of ranching in the valley, attended a Rocky Mountain Land Use Institute symposium on rural land use at the Denver University Law School.

Hearing a presentation delivered on the challenges facing the rural West by the Sonoran Institute's Executive Director Luther Propst and staff economist Ray Rasker, Custer County landowner Bill Jack turned to neighbors from the Wet Mountain Valley who were in the audience and said, "These guys aren't talking about just any place in the West. They're talking about us."

Between them, Propst and Rasker have delivered hundreds of lectures on the social and economic forces changing the West and the importance of working together at the community level to preserve the region's natural landscape. Their work grows from the philosophy that people living in a particular landscape share commitment and identity that allow them to forge meaningful, homegrown solutions to conservation challenges. This unity of vision, place, and people is the key to what the Sonoran Institute calls "Community Stewardship."

The Sonoran Institute's signature approach to conservation is the "Successful Community" workshop in which citizens participate in an civil (and civic) dialogue aimed at identifying important community values and creating a vision that draws them together. The Sonoran Institute then provides follow-up assistance to locally prioritized initiatives, carrying them from vision to fruition. The lasting benefits of the Sonoran Institute's community stewardship work are healthy landscapes and vibrant, livable communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their quality of life and economic vitality.

"From the moment I arrived in Custer County, I knew it was a special place," says Ben Alexander, who is the Associate Director of the Sonoran Institute's SocioEconomics Program. "But I could also see that without a concerted effort to protect key natural resources, what makes this place so unique today would be lost by the next generation."

When Luther Propst founded the Sonoran Institute in 1990, he was adamant that successful community planning, linked to conservation outcomes and safeguarding natural capital, should not be led by outside entities telling locals what they needed to do. According to Propst, "The direction must come from the ground up, originating within the community, and it must involve citizens making a conscious public commitment to the process."

Part of this philosophy calls upon citizens to invest the time and money to complete basic groundwork such as getting to know their community better. Often, reality defies perception. Before citizens can ponder the future with an open mind, they must break down myths that have narrowed and hardened their thinking.

The Sonoran Institute recommends that each community prepare a local socioeconomic profile, using cold, hard facts from the U.S. Department of Commerce and Census Bureau to identify the forces that drive the local economy, who lives in the community, and where future economic opportunities lie.

Selling one's land to the highest bidder can be enormously lucrative, but over the long term the negative consequences – what individuals and communities give up in terms of family heritage, community identity, open space and wildlife habitat, higher taxes needed to underwrite growing service costs – all add up.

The Kettle's San Isabel Ranch, known for its purebred Herefords, is among just 30 or so working livestock operations remaining in Custer County, remarkable for a valley whose agricultural heritage is its symbol.

This is a rustic province that to city dwellers in metropolitan Denver still serves as a psychological emblem of pastoral Colorado. But each year, more ranching families are passing from the scene, leaving behind few testaments to their role as land stewards.

From where Sara Kettle sits inside the weathered outbuilding that Ben Kettle used for half a century as his office, Sara sees a very different valley than the one seen by the first Kettles who arrived in Colorado in the mid 1860s.

Like her predecessors, Kettle's stock portfolio grazes on the hoof and the color of money translates to knee-high timothy turning into golden hay in August. Along with her remnant rancher neighbors, she's wealthy in sweat equity and in the dollar amounts waved in front of her face if her family would only sell out.

Beyond that, she hardly fits the common

photo: Ray Rasker

Ben Alexander

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urban stereotype of a rural ranch kid. Where her father assiduously recorded numbers by hand in a ledger, Kettle tracks expenses on a computer and knows the going market rate for yearlings in real time. With her dad's stoic cowboy hat on the wall, hanging over fraying wall paper purchased by mail-order catalog well before she was born, she knows keenly that economic frugality alone won't ensure her a future on the San Isabel.

During her teenage years she was encouraged by her parents, Ben and Elizabeth ("Bet" to her friends), to leave Custer County, secure a degree in business, and go her own way. Kettle's folks aimed to set her free because they didn't want her bound to a family legacy saddled with an increasingly uncertain outlook. The writing, as some said, was on the wall for ranching.

Kettle dutifully followed their instructions as so many ranch kids have done in what has turned into a epic wave of depopulation among descendants of original homestead families. Many become city slickers and lose their connection. Heartbroken, they vow never to return after seeing what development has done to what was once their land.

Yet near the start of this new century, Kettle felt compelled to come home. She wanted to renew her ties to a place rooted deep in her marrow. Her decision to stay in the Wet Mountain Valley was sealed by Ben's death when she was presented with the daunting proposition of becoming a modern Custer County cattlewoman.

At night with the sound of yipping coyotes heard in the distance, one observes beyond the vast dark sea of openness, faint flickering clusters of yard lights from 35-acre ranchettes. The evening darkness, still remarkably absent of residential sprawl, exists today only because a few ranching families – joined by a few recent arrivals – have held their ground.

Ranching is at a crossroads and not just here, Kettle admits, looking forlornly at her father's desk. "My goal is to hang on as long as I can," she says. Whether Kettle succeeds has implications that stretch far beyond members of her immediate family and the wranglers she employs.

The presence of the San Isabel Ranch, and others around it, have a rippling effect on the sense of community that reaches into every corner of Custer County. "Special places like this are part of an evolving vision of what the larger West is yet to become. The alternative futures available to the Kettles and other ranchers are forcing people to ponder the meaning of prosperity," comments Sonoran Institute's Alexander.

[1] www.ers.usda.gov/StateFacts
[2] www.sonoran.org/pdfs/si publications list.pdf
[3] www.centerwest.org/ranchlands

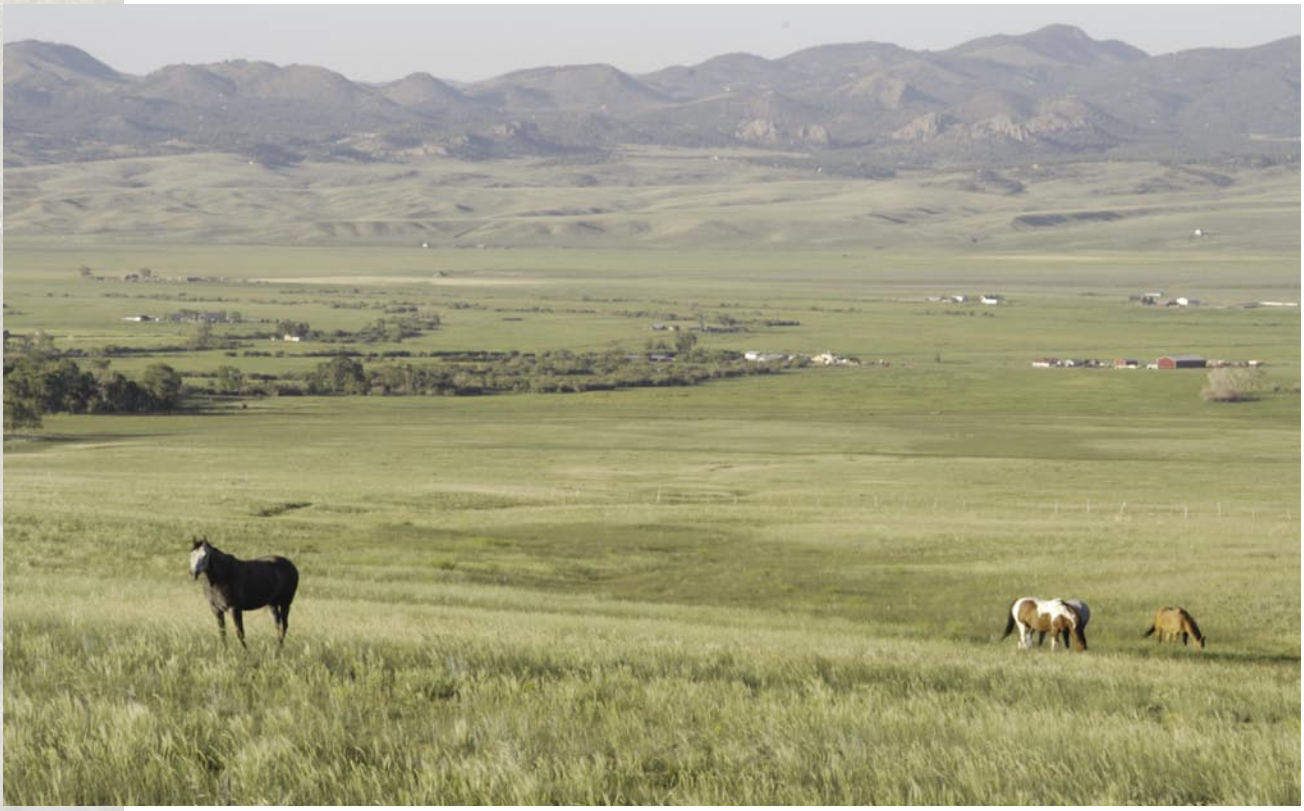

photo: Bill Gillette

Steps to Self Discovery: Looking ahead to save the past

On a raw January morning, a few hundred neighbors in Custer County rise before dawn and continue on a pilgrimage that began with the help of the Sonoran Institute.

Attending to the ritual of chores first, ranchers like Sara Kettle and Keith Hood stride into the middle of their snow-covered hay meadows to spread feed for hungry cattle.

Upon finishing, each climbs into a pickup truck and drives alone to a makeshift town meeting hall in tiny Westcliffe, a historic hardrock mining town and county seat, overlooking the purplish, 13,000-foot peaks of the Sangres towering over the Wet Mountain valley floor.

This isn't a forum in which elected officials are leading from the top down; this is an example of local citizens listening and talking about things that matter most to them. In essence, it is a demonstration of democracy, pure and simple. "Many people in Custer County are concerned that their opinions aren't being reflected in the attempt to write a new master plan for the county," Alexander noted.

Following real cowhands like Kettle, Hood and three generations of the Rusks (Harvey; his son, Randy; and grandson, Tate) come a steady stream of other local folks: they hail from Westcliffe, adjacent Silver Cliff, Rosita, and from every remote dirt road in between. Retirees, old timers, newcomers, anglers, hunters, wealthy and working class, political conservatives, a smattering of those brave enough to admit they

Vic and Jacke Barnes:
The Link Between Past and Future

On a shelf in Vic and Jacke Barnes' house is the massive bleached skull of a brown bear, known in Rocky Mountain parlance as a grizzly. The skull didn't come from the Lower 48, but from Alaska where Barnes worked for years as a respected wildlife biologist studying brown bears on Kodiak Island and polar bears along the coastal ice flows. Over the years, in various jobs for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he has also conducted research on sea otters, pocket gophers, porcupines, and mountain beavers.

Talk to him about wildness, and while he can wax eloquent with stories about America's final terrestrial frontier, he's more impressed with the diversity of creatures in the Wet Mountain Valley, where, as a boy during the 1940s, he helped his grandparents run their ranch.

"My first relatives came here as miners in the 1880s," he says. "My great great grandmother is buried in Silver Cliff."

While Vic and Jacke have a handsome home in Silver Cliff, the Barnes still have a ranch on the western edge of the valley beneath the Sangres that has been in the family since 1911. Today, the spread covers 882 acres.

Vic says he began working and hunting at the ranch in 1951. "The reason I'm in the wildlife field is because of the ranch," he says. "My grandfather would look me in the eye in the morning and say, 'You have to hay for half the day and if you want to keep your job, you're gonna have to fish the other half.' He loved brook trout."

As a boy, Vic told his granddad that he wanted to be a cattle rancher and the elder retorted that he was a fool. To which he replied: "If I can't be a rancher, I don't want to be a businessman either. I want to work in the outdoors." In Alaska, Barnes' brown bear work was focused on identifying critical habitat and it led to an aggressive approach by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to acquire land before it could be heavily logged. That strategy had implications not only for solitude-seeking grizzlies, but for salmon and trout on spawning runs.

After retiring in 1998, Vic and Jacke settled in the Wet Mountain Valley to oversee management of the ranch. "The valley hadn't changed all that much in the years I had been away," Vic says. "But I was lured back into a false sense of security."

Today, Vic is a member of the County Planning Commission along with Pat Bailey and Keith Hood. His experience in wildlife management sharpened his ability to decipher what keeps landscapes healthy. "If you want to have a good barometer for ecological health, look at the status of wildlife in the interior of the valley," he says. "Big mammals there are like canaries in the coal mine."

The Walker Ranch encompasses stretches of Goodwin and South Taylor Creeks and is home to hundreds of elk, mule deer, mountain lions, and occasionally pronghorn. Turkeys gobble in the forest and bighorns scramble in the rocky crags above. "You can shoot the hell out of some animal populations like elk and deer, and they will rebound, but if you take their habitat away they have a hard time recovering," he says.

photo: Ben Alexander

Jacke and Vic Barnes

Given the pace of development on the valley shoulders in wildlife winter range, Vic, Jacke and other family members jointly decided to put a conservation easement on their land and work with adjacent property owners to do the same. With assistance of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, over 1,000 acres are protected in easements on the flanks of the valley and there is hope of doubling that acreage. The effort dovetails nicely with the purchase of development rights in the center of the valley.

"People told us that we're fools and that we're signing away everything. Actually we're protecting everything we most love about this ranch," Vic says. "The important thing is that you have an organization that will defend your decision and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is a strong ally that's willing to fight for easements. I think we owe it to our forefathers who left us with something special. How can you squander a gift so wonderful? We are the connecting link between the past and the future."

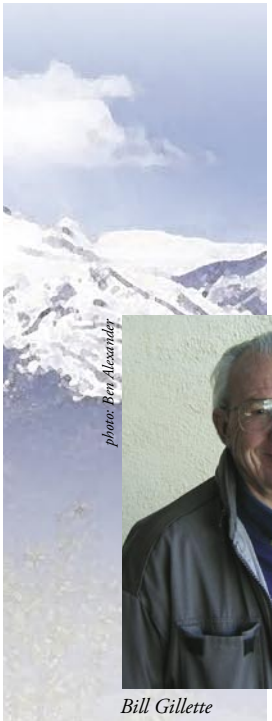

photo: Ben Alexander

Bill Gillette

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are liberals, and citizens who in their day jobs labor as shopkeepers, librarians, bank tellers, postal clerks, county commissioners, home builders, solar power entrepreneurs, real estate agents, wildlife biologists, newspaper publishers, and lawyers to name a few. The room is filled to capacity, but with rare exceptions everyone knows one another on a first name basis.

To help crystallize a vision of their community, the pilgrims, at the request of the Sonoran Institute, bring their favorite snapshots of the valley. At the front door, they tack them together on a bulletin board to create a mosaic of shared values. The emerging collage portrays ranchers operating irrigation ditches, mending fences, baling hay, pulling calves, and herding cows down dusty bucolic roads, like scenes from a classic western movie. Today, less than 10 percent of Custer County residents live on real ranches or farms, but the presence of agrarians looms large.

The bulletin board is flavored by other images, too: scenes showing mountains bathed in alpenglow; fleeting glimpses of majestic Custer County elk, which calve on the wooded foothill flanks of the Sangres; bands of regal pronghorn antelope darting across the sagebrush uplands of the Wet Mountains; raptors soaring through a panorama of unblemished open space; and anglers casting for trout in local blue-ribbon tributaries of the Arkansas River.

In the background of all the scenes are portraits of extended friendships, stitched together across a shared landscape. Today the people in the frames showed up en masse committing themselves to a singular purpose: saving the "quality of life" in their valley by ensuring it doesn't suffer the same fate of other dells already blighted by sprawl.

All along the Colorado Rockies, the ever-widening footprint of asphalt and concrete is linked to the disappearance of western character and home-grown community values, says Alexander. Among the hundreds of pictures brought as testimony, none proclaims the trappings of suburbia as a vision of real prosperity, notes professional photographer Bill Gillette, who worked for years with the Associated Press and served as a professor of journalism before moving to Custer County. Gillette has a gifted eye when it comes to capturing the spirit of a moment and his acclaimed portfolio marks the intersection where myth blends with reality.

Paradoxically, folks who consciously embrace the idea of assembling a vision for the valley want their community to be different, and the answer, they're convinced, lies in keeping the Wet Mountain Valley's natural aesthetics largely unchanged.

They want to ensure working ranches remain viable; that wildlife has a permanent home; that scattershot, unplanned development is replaced with carefully thought out development so that it doesn't transform the rural lifestyle into something no longer recognizable – or desirable.

They want good jobs, low taxes, schools they can be proud of; they want their property rights respected, a reason for their kids to stay, and growth that occurs on their terms.

Citizens believe they can protect what's fragile and create new opportunities by showing that what's right by the land makes economic and social sense, explains Alexander, who has helped to chaperone an ongoing community visioning process for half a decade. This process has included developing a socioeconomic profile so that elected leaders better understand the forces driving the local economy; a Cost of Community Services study that examines the benefits and real costs of sprawl on the rural landscape; a study that examines what Custer County would look like under future build-out scenarios; and a study examining the hydrology of surface and underground water, considered the most precious natural resource in this corner of the arid West.

Right now, Custer County is in the middle of a grand experiment that has attracted headlines in national newspapers. Citizen ranchers like Sara Kettle and the Rusk family aren't content to be passive, allowing their fate to be determined by outsiders who might not have their best interests in mind. With help from the Sonoran Institute, they've voluntarily become players in a landmark campaign for community conservation that focuses on protecting the heart of the Wet Mountain Valley – forever.

What makes this story so timely is that a multitude of possibilities still remain on the table in Custer County – opportunities that have been foreclosed elsewhere. In a much larger context, this valley may be a bellwether of hope for much of the threatened agrarian West trying to find a new bearing.

Paradise: Lost or Found?

A few months before he passed away, Ben Kettle appeared on camera before cinematographers who were making a folksy documentary about ranchers in the Wet Mountain Valley. Tongue in cheek, he declared: "Instead of dying and going to heaven, people are coming to find paradise in Custer County."

In fact, Ben wasn't far off. Sara and Bet Kettle, Harvey and Verna Jean Rusk, Randy and Claricy Rusk, Tate and Wendy Rusk, Keith Hood, Bill and Smokey Jack, Paul Snyder and Marty Frick, Carol and John Barnett, Nancy Kendrick, Vic and Jacke Barnes, George Draper, Curt and Phyllis Wilson, Scott and Wendy Geary and hundreds of other Custer County residents with divergent backgrounds hear in Ben's haunting comment the ring of truth.

If you ask commuters stuck in rush hour traffic in metropolitan Denver, Los Angeles, or Atlanta, many would say they'd die to live in a place like Custer County. Here, people wave to one another as they pass on the highway, whether they recognize each other or not. They help each other when they're sick or under duress. They take pride in the simpler pleasures of life. They lack pretension; and they are willing to listen to folks on the other side of the fence even if their world views don't always align. The rural West can be a big lonesome place, and folks here savor their own privacy. Although for many ranchers it feels as if they are standing alone in the middle of a storm, they are bound together to this place and to each other because of Custer County.

In 1936, Harvey Rusk rode into the Wet Mountain Valley on horseback over the top of the Sangres from the town of Crestone. Twelve years later, after he served in the Army during World War II, he started buying cows while still in Europe and then came back to the valley with his wife, Verna Jean, and settled here permanently. "We used to trade 10 head of cattle for a new pickup," he says. "Now, because of cattle prices being what they are, and the rising cost of pickups being what they are, it takes a whole herd. That tells you something about the commodity prices for agriculture."

Rusk recently turned 81. His eyes turn moist when he reflects upon his desire to give his kids the chance to remain in the valley where they were born without burdening them with debt.

Custer County covers approximately 740-square miles of south-central Colorado. Look on a map, find Interstate 25 south of Denver and it's located just to the west. The twin towns of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff are about a 75-mile drive southwest of Colorado Springs (population 400,000) and roughly 55 miles due west of Pueblo (population 100,000). Pueblo is the city that Custer Countians identify with when they "go to town."

Explorers have been coming to Custer County for a millennia. Revered by the Ute, Plains Apache, Comanche, and Jicarilla Apache as a summer hunting ground, the Wet Mountain Valley remains rich with wildlife to this day and contains the most dramatic geographical elements of the county. Cupped between the slopes of the Sangres and the Wets, this chalice glass formed by retreating glaciers is, at 8,000 feet above sea level, cooler and moister in summer than the adjacent San Luis Valley.

Fur trappers found their way to the lush network of beaver-inhabited creeks webbing the valley and Hispanic herders grazed sheep on the grassland benches. Zebulon Pike crossed the Sangres within a year after Lewis and Clark completed their historic journey to the Pacific and back. Pike reportedly came to the Wet Mountain Valley via Grape Creek up from the Arkansas River near Canon City. Ask Randy Rusk about it and he can show you the route. Grape Creek flows through his family property.

photo: Ben Alexander

Paul Snyder and Marty Frick

Settlers, including a large contingent of Germans, officially incorporated Custer County around the time John Wesley Powell, just a little to the west, undertook his oft-told reconnaissance of the Green and Colorado rivers. "Custer" County, however, was officially born after its namesake U.S. cavalry officer, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, who met his demise at the hands of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe warriors along the banks of Montana's Little Bighorn River in 1876. History often is recited by the locals because, to them, the past has a special meaning.

Prior to the 1870s, no one lived year-round in the Wet Mountain Valley. Then gold and silver were found. By 1893, at the height of a hard rock mining frenzy, Custer County had 9,000 year-round residents, with a spur rail line leading in. After the mining boom turned to bust, the population shrank dramatically leaving only ranchers and a few shopkeepers behind. It remained that way until the latter half of the 20th century.

Aesthetically, Custer County still has the quality of a pastoral oasis. You blink and ask yourself: "Can this really be the same Colorado besieged by development?" Cows, not condos, still rule. The valley isn't a haven for Hollywood celebrities. It hasn't been colonized (yet) by Wal-Mart. There is not a single stoplight, which itself is an emblem of local pride. Custer County also doesn't have a major destination ski resort, though one was attempted and aborted in the Sangres a few decades ago due to insufficient snowfall.

This latter anecdote says two things about Custer County: First, its stunning beauty makes it attractive to developers. Second, the beauty of the valley has natural resources that are finite. Nature itself has devised a master plan for what is possible and what isn't.

The Wet Mountain Valley remains a sanctuary for wildlife, including wapiti (elk), pronghorn, mountain lions, black bear and wild turkey. The state's largest herd of bighorn sheep have a place here, so does the endemic Wet Mountain marmot, nesting goshawks, peregrine and prairie falcons, Mexican spotted owls and imperiled Colorado greenback trout. Rare plants include the yellow lady's slipper, dwarf hawksbeard, Altai chickweed, prairie violet, and broad-leaved Twaybladr. Birders from throughout the Rockies regularly drive the "Wet Mountain Loop" in the spring to add breeding and nesting birds to their life lists.

The forests that drape across the Sangres mostly fall under the jurisdiction of the San Isabel National Forest and much of the sagebrush-covered foothills of the Wets fall under the jurisdiction of the federal Bureau of Land Management and the state. About 240,000 of the forested acres, which largely encompass the headwaters of every river, are protected as federal wilderness.

Between the mountains is a huge sweep of private land. Of the approximately 150,000 acres of private land in parcels greater than 160 acres, only 2,700 are located on the mountain slopes and 30,000 in the foothill forests, while the largest percentage lies in the middle of the valley.

photo: Bill Gillette

A Landscape Reflecting What the West Was

photo: Ben Alexander

Custer County, with it's sparse population and wide open spaces, may be the exception amidst the growing number of boom communities in western Colorado, but it is typical of the rural west.

According to Charles Wilkinson in the *Atlas of the New West*, "These are the most low-population counties, the greatest distance between neighbors, the most open space. The rural West also gives the West its most distinctive qualities – Indian country, ranch country, the tidy Hispanic settlements in the Southwest, mining towns, the big sky plains, the high country, the deep canyons, the wilderness. Objectively justified or not, the West is a place where romance is unavoidable fact, a place where you cannot talk about, cannot think about, without an overlay of romance. The hinterlands give the West that aura."

Wilkinson could just as well have been describing Custer County or, for that matter, dozens of other Custer counties found between the Mojave Desert in California and the Sand Hills of Nebraska. Every state has its own Custer County. However, Wilkinson's observation comes with a punch line: "Yet the West is at once the most urban region in the country," he adds. "Eighty percent of its people live in the cities, islands in the big empty."

Today, these people are dispersing rapidly outward from the cities, and it only takes a relatively small number of them to alter permanently the rural valleys they are adopting as their new homes.

The challenges facing Custer County echo throughout Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Washington, Oregon, Nevada, interior California, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Agricultural valleys in Colorado, however, are acutely threatened, just as they are in Arizona and California, by close proximity to large population centers spilling into the hinterlands. The exodus is spurred on by the relocation of a work force made mobile by delivery services and the Internet, and by Baby Boomers seeking perfect places to retire.

Custer County receives over 600,000 visitors annually. At Morgan's Restaurant, a busy local hub in Westcliffe where Custer County held a recent community visioning workshop, Diana Hall, the eatery's owner, describes the scene on a typical weekend night during the summer. "Some nights we're filled with people from out of town looking for land. They come from all over. Although there are some in Denver who have never heard of Custer County, we're considered a well-kept secret among Texans and Californians and people from back east."

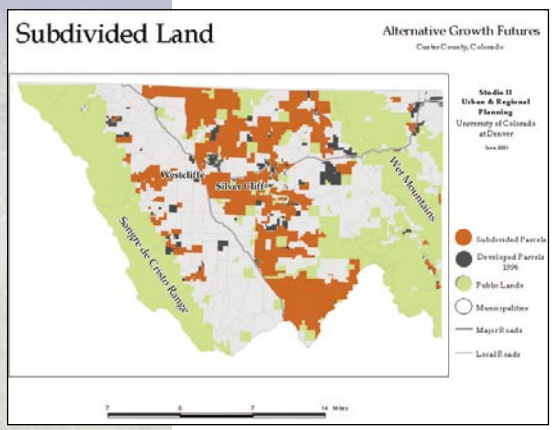
photo: Bill Gillette

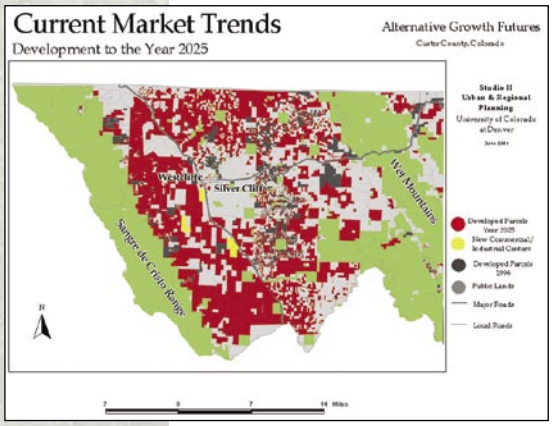
what makes this story so timely is that a multitude of possibilities still remain on the table in Custer County

How Fast Is Change Occurring?

The late Ben Kettle made his fair share of mistakes and openly admitted them. For one, he was guilty of selling off and subdividing a portion of his ranch. He learned his lesson the hard way and he knew that his past decisions would create a burden for Sara who now confronts the challenges of operating at a scale that makes economic sense while having less land to operate on because of Ben's land sale.

But Ben, it turns out, was also remarkably prescient. He saw the connection between conservation and the persistence of ranching long before it became a trendy topic of conversation in the New West. Earlier in his life, when he was appointed to the local planning commission back in the 1970s, he spearheaded the first attempt at progressive land use planning by enacting an ordinance that limited subdivision to one home per 80 acres on the valley floor.





Maps from buildout study for Custer County

The goal was to protect large expanses of agricultural land from fragmentation, knowing that for ranching to be viable it must operate at scale. His recommendation was adopted by the county commission. Later, Kettle realized that limiting development valley wide to one structure per 80 acres was too lenient. Today, in Jefferson County, Montana, ranchers arrived at the same conclusion and enacted their own restrictions to limit one home on every 640 acres.

Until the day he died, Ben recommended that planning officials promote clustering of development and provide economic incentives for higher building densities in places where development makes sense. The enemy of ranching, he said, time and again, was sprawl overtaking moist bottomland in the heart of the valley, and he also pointed out that leap-frog development, in the form of ranchettes proliferating in the uplands and forests at the foot of the mountains, also posed serious threats to wildlife. Clearly Ben Kettle believed fervently in the sacredness of private property rights, but he also recognized the necessity of communities coming together to make decisions. And yet, in times when elected officials showed themselves incapable of being visionaries and grasping the long-term implications of their actions, Ben said there was an important role that individual citizens must play.

Until recently, the Wet Mountain Valley was thought by some to exist in splendid isolation, just far enough away from the Front Range to be immune from urban spillover. But during the 1990s, as booming population growth began spreading westward from the I-25 corridor, long-time residents of Custer County noticed an alarming trend.

While the population of Colorado, as a whole, grew by about 31 percent between 1990 and 2000, Custer County's population increased by more than 80 percent – from 1,926 permanent residents to 3,503 – attracting attention as one of the fastest growing rural counties in the country.[4]

Imagine, for a moment, your own town doubling in just 10 years, then doubling again in 20 more years. In Custer County, this is the picture, and then add to it thousands of seasonal residents, such as retirees and others, coming to build their second or third dream homes.

By the year 2025, conservative estimates are that Custer County will more than double from present census figures to 8,147 residents. According to a build out study sponsored by the Sonoran Institute and completed by the University of Colorado at Denver, 4,100 more homes will be scattered across the landscape, the vast majority – 86 percent – sited in unincorporated parts of the county.

Visitors don't see it when they stand in Westcliffe, peering in awe across the valley to the Sangres. Invisible to them is a grid of subdivision plans spread over the land that have been on file down at the Custer County courthouse since the 1960s.

During the 1990s, much of this traditional ranchland, which had been subdivided into 35-acre or smaller parcels prior to Kettle's zoning changes passed in the 1970s, saw brisk sales. A truly daunting statistic is that the number of platted lots in Custer County – around 9,000 – is now several times greater than the total population. Many concerned residents see this as a prelude to widespread ranchette development sweeping across the valley in years to come.

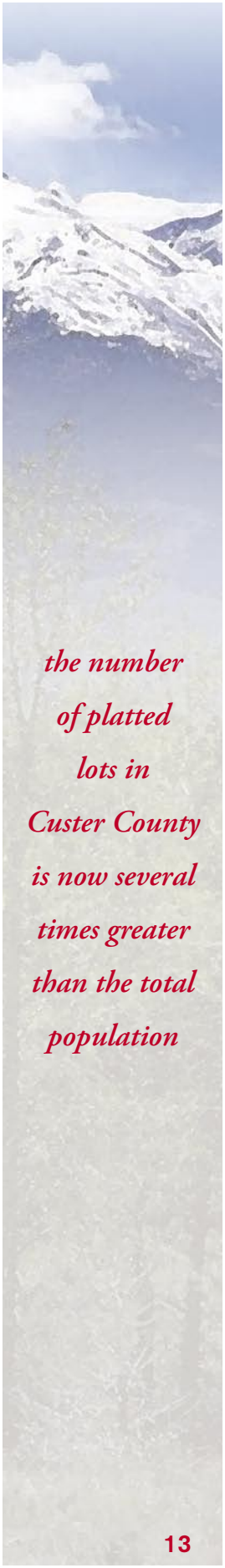
"As much as Custer County is special, I tend to think of folks there as also being incredibly lucky, although that luck is at least partially by their own design," says Lee Nellis, a renowned Western planner, who has worked with communities throughout the Rockies and who, until recently when he returned to private practice, was Director of Land Use Planning at the Sonoran Institute.

Everywhere that Nellis has worked, from the wild fringes of the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem to the U.S.-Mexico border country, the very natural beauty that attracts people often becomes the first casualty of shortsighted planning.

"Fortunately, Custer County had some zoning in place, which so many western counties did not when the first waves of rapid growth hit," Nellis says. "The zoning put some reasonably effective sideboards on development from the beginning. Custer County citizens also have little baggage from bad experiences with developers or environmentalists. More out-of-the-way places seem to have an advantage over those where there is a history of bad development and/or environmental controversy and failed attempts at achieving visionary planning and zoning."

Today, some in Custer County, joined by outside developers, would like to weaken the subdivision provisions advanced by Ben Kettle decades ago. Moreover, they are working behind the scenes in contrast to an open, public groundswell of citizen support for tightening planning codes in order to protect the valley's most prized asset: its working agricultural lands and the aesthetic character they exude.

[4] www.dola.state.co.us/demog/Census/SummaryFil1/DemographicTrend/Custer.pdf



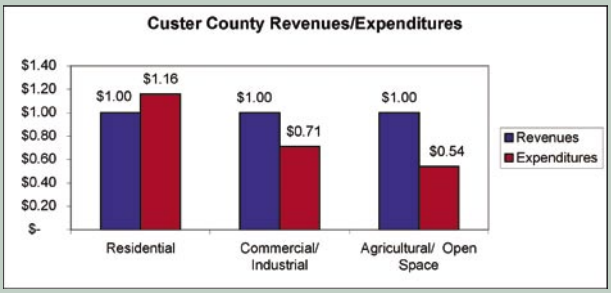
the number of platted lots in Custer County is now several times greater than the total population

The Paradox of Paying To Destroy the Things We Love

"Drive around Custer County. You see farmland and that's a great thing," says Mark Haggerty, who completed the Cost of Community Services study on Custer County, one of several he's been involved with across the West.

"The notion among many people is that when they see a rural county rich in farmland, they think 'this is a poor county,' but in fact, it's the other way around," Haggerty notes.

County commissioners who take the attitude that green-lighting development after development will lead to growth and prosperity often find themselves swimming deeper in a pool of red ink, Haggerty says, noting that he's tested the windshield survey hypothesis in a variety of counties from Montana to Utah.



Wherever one finds a county with a lot of remaining open land, big blocks of working landscapes and a strong ag community, Haggerty says that, with few exceptions, these are signposts for community spirit, a healthy environment, and a vibrant economy. "Make a stop at the courthouse and I'd be willing to wager that what you'll find on the books is a strong county fiscally speaking," Haggerty says.

"But, if instead you drive around a county and see ranchettes and roads and weeds and no ag implement dealers, you will find a courthouse that is unhealthy and dysfunctional and employees who are stressed out by the ills of growth pains. You'll also find potholes in the roads, a sheriff's department that isn't able to cover the county as adequately as it thinks it should, and a fire department worried that they might not be able to reach your home out in the middle of nowhere because rural sprawl has increased their response time."

What few taxpayers realize is that in high-growth counties with poorly planned development, they are subsidizing development by paying higher taxes. In addition, the subsidy often comes at the cost of open space and other community values they hold dear.

Developers bemoan Cost of Community Services studies because they know it exposes the fact that they are not footing the bill for burdens they are imposing on taxpayers. "Developers rarely agree to foot the full bill for their projects because they say it is too expensive and yet they are willing to pass along that expense to taxpayers," Haggerty says.

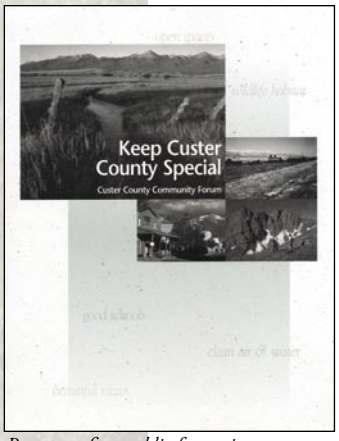
"I look at it this way. One way or another we're going to need to provide subsidies for the way land is used in our communities. We have the choice of subsidizing subdivision that destroys ag land and leads to higher taxes or we can subsidize a different kind of development – the purchase of conservation easements – that protects farm land, open space, wildlife habitat, and leads to community as well as economic health that you'll see on the faces of those who work at the courthouse."

Transforming Values Into Policy

The Sonoran Institute operates with a written-in-stone tenet: it will only come into a community and offer assistance if local residents extend an invitation. Long before the Sonoran Institute arrived on the scene, citizens in Custer County were voicing concern about change, in gatherings at the local cafe, in the public library, during outings into the mountains, at cocktail parties, and even at funerals.

As members of the grassroots San Isabel Land Protection Trust, a land trust, Paul Snyder, his wife Marty Frick, and Bill and Smokey Jack helped organize community meetings which led to the broader realization that Custer County was woefully under-funded and unorganized to confront growth issues.

Snyder, Jack and their neighbors took the crucial step necessary to plot their own course for the future. They made the decision to confront change head on. In 1997, the San Isabel Land Protection Trust published an important and insightful status report on the Wet Mountain Valley entitled "The San Isabel Resource Plan." Prominently cited as an impetus for the plan was the fact that the Colorado Department of Agriculture had classified Custer as one of three Colorado counties most vulnerable to conversion of working agricultural land to other uses.



Report on first public forum in Custer County

Most charter members of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust were recent arrivals in Custer County, namely people who did not derive their principal income from ranching. For more than a dozen years, Nancy Kendrick had visited Custer County to get away from the rat race of the Front Range. In 1998, she moved to the valley full time and was hired not long after as San Isabel Land Protection Trust's first executive director. "We were looked upon as elitist outsiders trying to force our values on the community," she remembers. "There was this perception that we weren't interacting enough with long-time landowners."

As local rancher Randy Rusk observes: "There seems to be a common perception that ranchers get together often and talk with their neighbors, that we all sit around together at night and chew the fat. The reality is that we're all too busy to chat or get involved in community organizations other than, say, the Stockgrowers Association. It wasn't that we weren't interested in what was happening to Custer County. It's just that we were so darn busy trying to make a living that we didn't have time. We've learned since, that if you want to have a say in the direction of your community, you have to make the time to get involved."

Like Sara Kettle, Rusk came home to Custer County after obtaining a college degree. For several years, he worked on ranches throughout the West gleaning insight into the modern ag economy. Initially, Rusk says that he was wary of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust's goal to protect open space because he had heard rumors – most of them inaccurate – about how land trusts operate and their objectives. Members of the ranching community were certainly concerned about the fragmentation of agricultural lands, but they were worried more about economics than aesthetics. They had fears about newcomers and outsiders advancing a plan, crafted by "environmentalists," that might not be in their best interests.

In response, they became defensive. Eventually, some San Isabel Land Protection Trust members reached out to longtime local landowners, including Keith Hood and Randy Rusk, and formed the ad hoc Custer Heritage Committee in the late 1990s. The Custer Heritage Committee was initially comprised of five working ranch families in the valley and has grown to represent many more – including some newcomers. Their goal is to ensure the long-term viability of agriculture in the valley, and to raise public awareness about the challenges and benefits of ag to the valley as they pursue concrete land protection strategies such as purchased conservation easements.

According to Alexander, "The San Isabel Land Protection Trust was formed with all of the best intentions. One of the most important parts of any community dialog is reaching out to those who own most of the land and have the most at stake, but who may be the least outspoken, which in Custer County's case were the ranching families. Between SILPT [San Isabel Land Protection Trust] and CHC [Customer Heritage Committee] we have two

home-grown organizations that continue to be vital catalysts for bringing people together."[5]

When Bill Jack, who calls himself a conservative Republican, heard the lecture by Sonoran Institute's Propst and Rasker, he saw the Sonoran Institute as a bridge between old timers and newcomers. After the Sonoran Institute received a request from the Custer County Planning Department, at the recommendation of Jack, to develop a socioeconomic profile, Propst asked Alexander to visit Custer County.

At the first meeting with community leaders in Westcliffe, Alexander explained the Sonoran Institute's "Successful Community" approach to involving the public in a process to define and realize a compelling vision for the future of Custer County. "As I listened to people talk passionately about the valley, I was moved by their sincerity and the intensity of the desire to keep Custer County a special place," recalls Alexander. "I told everyone in the room that this was their meeting and then laid out a couple of different directions they could go. Some said this kind of strategy had been tried before and it doesn't work. I reminded them that we needed to stay focused and not get sidetracked. This isn't a process that produces solutions overnight. In order for it to succeed, communities have to stick with it."

Working with published statistics and local information, Alexander assembled a profile of Custer County and made it available in a meeting held in the basement of the court house in Westcliffe. A bigger picture began to emerge. The economy of Custer County, it turned out, was surprisingly less monolithic than local residents had supposed. "As I was leaving town, I said that if residents of Custer County were willing to make an 18-month commitment aimed at broadening the community dialog and examining a full range of options relating to conservation planning and keeping ranching landscapes viable, we'd love to work with them," he remembers saying after his first visit. "Before I got back to Bozeman there was a message on my answering machine inviting us back. They were dogged and determined to make it happen."

Ben returned to stage Custer County's first "Successful Community" workshop, sponsored by the San Isabel Land Protection Trust and Custer Heritage Committee, and underwritten by a $10,000 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado, an organization that receives proceeds from the state lottery and channels them to worthwhile conservation causes.

"Initially, there was suspicion from the ranching community about an outside group coming in," says rancher Randy Rusk, who is the first landowner, along with his father and son, in a major ranchland protection campaign. "Ben won over our trust because he showed us the Sonoran Institute was not here to preach, but to help us realize the options we have," Rusk says. "Once Sonoran made a commitment to our community, it has stayed with us and didn't walk away."

The inaugural weekend event went better than anyone expected. It opened with a barbecue attended by more than 400 people – more than 10 percent of county residents. The following morning, more than 250 residents attended an all-day session. "Every person I met had their own distinct point of view, even as they shared the fear that they were losing the very things they love about Custer County," Alexander says.

Together, the Sonoran Institute and local community partners, including the Custer County Stockgrowers Association, the towns of Silver Cliff and Westcliffe, the chamber of commerce, and the planning commission, raised money to underwrite the costs of ongoing public forums and completion of a document titled "Keep Custer County Special" that identified important community threads all linked in some way to the health of the surrounding landscape.

A folksy documentary video, based on interviews with local people, was produced by area resident Chris Riggs. It touched a sensitive nerve and proved cathartic. When aging ranchers from pioneer families spoke on camera about the profound connection they felt to the land, many in the audience who screened the film sat in silence with tears streaming down their faces.

In summarizing the first meeting itself, authors of the document wrote: "While not everyone agreed with every point made during the day, there was significant overlap on key issues and how to address them. No attempt was made to steer workshop participants in any particular direction. Nor was any attempt made to find consensus on issues where there was disagreement. Instead, discussion focused on areas of general agreement."

photo: Ben Alexander

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"Custer County has been fortunate that enough people have left the old-timer versus newcomer divisions behind them to set a direction and try to follow it," Sonoran Institute planner Nellis says. "I think smaller, more remote places have an advantage. Though there are always exceptions, people in such places are more likely to have a feeling that they are all in this together. They also tend to have more experience at working together as they naturally rally around community events."

Public forums continue and they draw large crowds. "Custer County residents know they have an opportunity to live up to the grandeur of this place and they are hungry for ideas about how to do that," Alexander says. "The best way for citizens to get to know one another in any community is to get them talking and working from the same page. When you do that, you are better able to mobilize limited resources and generate the critical mass to change public policy."

[5] www.sanisabel.org/home.asp

Bill and Smokey Jack:
New Blood and Fresh Eyes

If there's a single lament about newcomers arriving in the New West, it's the perception that those transplants who adopt the Rocky Mountains as their home all want to get their own piece of paradise and lock the gates behind them. That might be true for some folks, but not for Bill and Smokey Jack.

The Jacks are examples of two Easterners who came west for adventure, fell in love with Custer County, used their resources to buy a historic ranch, and then committed their property to be part of a plan aimed at protecting the center of the valley for all to enjoy.

Bill and Smokey moved to Custer County in 1992 after they rented a home while there on vacation. Bill, a former bond attorney in Pittsburgh, and Smokey, who was raised in Orlando, Florida, bought the historic Texas Creek Ranch and intended to settle quietly into retirement. Activism was not part of the plan. But as they got involved more with members of the community and realized the scale of land use challenges confronting the valley, they not only volunteered their time and generously supported civic causes, they wanted to do their part in protecting the landscape.

photo: Ben Alexander

Smokey and Bill Jack

Wapiti, mule deer, and antelope travel across their property, bald eagles nest in the trees, and there is a huge array of songbirds. The West changed Bill Jack's perspective on the landscape and how to develop it. "The spectacular aspect of the West, obviously, is the open space," Jack says. "Eastern lands, because the dense vegetation shortens the views, can absorb a lot more human intrusion. A small ranch here is a suburb in the east. You can't take an eastern model for development and apply it to the western landscape if you want to protect the view and, in turn, protect everything natural that is found in the view; it doesn't work."

Custer County Commissioner Dick Downey says he knows from personal experience, as a recent transplant himself, that locals judge their neighbors on deeds rather than reputation. Not long ago, Bill Jack, who served on the county Board of Adjustment and Planning Commission, and has been active with both the San Isabel Land Protection Trust and the Custer Heritage Committee, ran for county commissioner.

Although he didn't win the seat, Downey says members of the community give Jack credit for raising issues in his campaign that were central to discussions taking place about Custer County's master plan and its planning and zoning regulations. Jack, after all, was the first to recognize the utility of inviting the Sonoran Institute to the valley and a leading voice pushing the county to take a hard look at costs of services and water issues.

"One of the things about coming here was a great appreciation of place," Jack says. "At first that didn't include the ranches and we didn't fully appreciate their role until we had been out here a while. I hate to admit this, but I didn't even know what a conservation easement was. When we arrived, there was an element of fatalism among many of the old-time ranching families. They felt they were on the way out. That bothered me and I found people who felt the same way I did, but the effort to do something about it was disorganized. We sent out trial balloons and what floated down to our valley was the Sonoran Institute."

For Smokey Jack's part, she has championed the local Dark Skies campaign, which is part of a growing national movement to minimize nighttime light pollution and protect star-watching opportunities. Custer County, she says, fits within a small constellation of outposts in the Lower 48 states where astronomers say star-gazing is exceptional. More and more, families interested in the study of planets and star systems are seeking out such places, bringing tourism dollars to local economies.

"When you grow up in Custer County you take these kinds of things for granted," says Sara Kettle. "The gift of having people like Bill and Smokey Jack in our community is that they've given us reason to approach what we have with fresh eyes."

Drawing upon his experience as a bond attorney, Bill Jack worked closely with Dick Downey and Deb Love and Woody Beardsley from the Trust for Public Land to devise a way of financing the purchase of development rights effort, which has been a prime platform of the Custer Heritage Committee. The Jacks' donation of a conservation easement on their ranch and a donated easement on the adjacent ranch owned by Dick and Audrey Stermer, combined with plans to secure easements on Kennicott Corporation holdings, have helped to make easements popular and profitable. Their donations have increased the value of the campaign to purchase development rights from the Rusks and Kettles.

Today, from the eastern face of the Sangres to the primary viewshed of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff, residents of the Wet Mountain Valley have the promise of an open space panorama that will be there for their grandkids to enjoy. The Jacks have also rehabilitated a number of wetlands that are home to trout, birdlife and mammals.

The Hard Work Begins

The advantage of synergy between local groups and those with a wider regional perspective is that organizations like the Sonoran Institute have experience with what's worked or failed elsewhere and can help to provide direction and neutral facilitation.

As many bad land use planning examples as there are beyond Custer County, there are promising new frontiers in community-based conservation. One is the campaign to purchase development rights in Routt County, Colorado that has been embraced by ranchers. When C.J. Mucklow, who works in the Colorado State University extension office in Steamboat Springs described how 16,000 acres of ranchland had been protected, ranchers in Custer County felt like they had been given a license to think big.

From the moment old-guard ranchers got involved in the community visioning process and efforts to update the county's master plan, momentum started to build and it forced some elected officials, who had formed political alliances with developers and land surveyors, to take notice.

In a stinging editorial, Jim Little, publisher of the historic *Wet Mountain Tribune* wrote: "Saturday's forum, the third in a series of meetings sponsored by the Custer Heritage Committee, focused on the public costs associated with population growth in rural areas like Custer County. It provided considerable food for thought, which would have been useful for our public servants. That is, if any had taken the time to attend.

"As it was, we counted two esteemed elected officials each from Westcliffe and Silver Cliff in attendance. But there wasn't a single county commissioner among the 100 attending, nor were there any other elected county officials who may have benefited from the four-hour program. There were, however, ranchers and housewives and retirees and business owners and working slobs and environmentalists and the idle rich and others who truly give a damn about Custer County and its future."

The editorial brought public derision upon county commissioners, who until that point, had largely ignored the concern of their constituents. Now that their attitude was exposed, they had no choice but to take seriously the push for meaningful land use planning.

The current approach to community-based conservation in Custer County involves two parallel paths. One aims to elevate citizen discussions about quality of life, natural resources, and economic concerns to the public level so that they are reflected in revised county polices such as the master plan and governing zoning ordinance.

Another is geared to advancing private land partnerships and helping ranchers realize that tools exist to keep them on the land and to ensure their ranching operations remain viable.

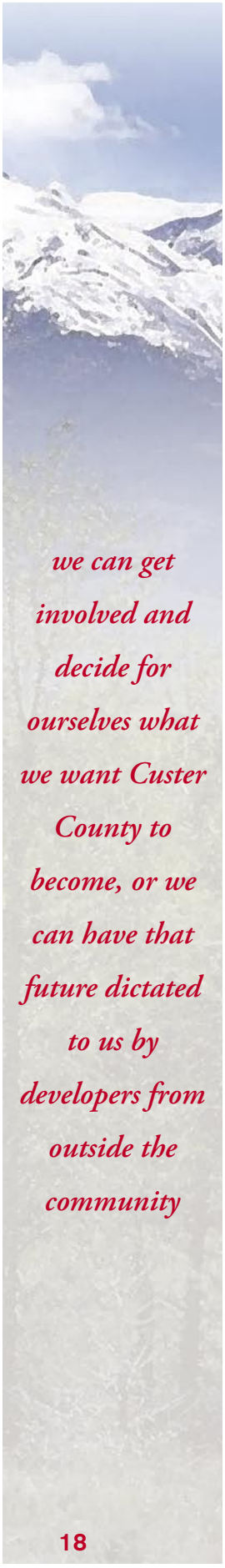
This dual strategy reflects local citizen sentiments expressed in a 1996 San Isabel Land Protection Trust survey that showed 55 percent of 353 respondents wanted planning efforts focused on the slopes of the Sangres and the valley floor. Custer County is an exciting example of community-based conservation because it involves a combination of non-governmental and government-directed efforts, and a tremendous amount of public support, according to Alexander.

photo: Ben Alexander

Paul Snyder and his wife, Marty Frick, who used to run the affordable housing program in Boulder and now oversees Custer County's library, are two newcomers who realize how important the old ranching families are to the fabric of the community. They readily admit that just as ranchers have experienced a revelation in understanding how newcomers can be allies in keeping them on the land, non-ranchers need to appreciate the huge benefits that ranchers give to communities without being paid for them. "For me it isn't the beauty that sets this valley apart," Frick says. "It's the fact that we're all a bunch of characters in this together. I've never experienced such a sense of community anywhere else."

Snyder's respect for local people is based on real life experience. A former attorney in Boulder (he now is attorney for the town of Westcliffe), he was deeply involved in the creation of Boulder County's now legendary master plan and its greenbelt. In fact, he successfully defended the county in lawsuits brought by developers to overturn its zoning stipulations. Although open space was protected in Boulder County, Snyder says problems occurred in that notori-

Custer County residents have an opportunity to live up to the grandeur of this place and they are hungry for ideas about how to do that



we can get involved and decide for ourselves what we want Custer County to become, or we can have that future dictated to us by developers from outside the community

ously liberal county, chief among them that land use planning was driven by a top-down relationship between government leaders and citizens. Snyder, like the late Ben Kettle, is a firm believer in community planning that begins at the grassroots level and is reflected in the policies adopted by elected officials.

But Snyder also brings something else to the table in Custer County. A native Coloradoan, he grew up during the 1950s in Castle Rock, which is a symbol of how a small community can be transformed by population growth. Back in the 1950s, when Paul's father was the mayor, Castle Rock had 900 residents. Today, there are 25,000 residents in Castle Rock and 185,000 in Douglas County, which used to be rural. "It's everybody's poster child in Colorado for how overwhelming numbers of people and poor land use planning can trash a place," Snyder says. "I don't think anyone with a heart can look at Douglas County and say it's better today than it was then, because it's not. You can lose the jewel of your community if you don't pay attention and once it's lost you can never get it back."

The lesson for Custer County is this: "If you take moderate steps at this stage of designing your community, you can avoid the need for taking Draconian, heavy handed steps later," Snyder says. "Planners in Douglas and Garfield counties have had to take Draconian steps to restrict development because they've let it get out of hand. We have not let it get out of hand in Custer County. Not yet. Hopefully not ever."

Still, in Custer County the clock is ticking. Just take a look at the big picture. Gathering all available demographic and land use data, combining it with regulations and current market trends and then plotting it on a map, the University of Colorado at Denver concluded that nearly 30,000 acres of hayfields, 93,000 acres of livestock rangeland, 18,000 acres of habitat for threatened and endangered species, and 11,000 acres of game species habitat will be lost over the next 25 years. It would result in a valley unrecognizable from the one today.

Back in the mid 1990s, citizens attending public meetings sponsored by the San Isabel Land Protection Trust "stated that they felt the 35-acre pattern of development is destroying Custer County's rural character," mentions the San Isabel Resource Plan. "Under Colorado's Senate Bill 35, landowners can subdivide properties into 35 acre lots or larger without going through any county review."

To put in perspective the options before elected officials in Custer County, ponder this: the University of Colorado at Denver study also analyzed various development options to illustrate how much land would be affected by clustered development versus the one house 35-acre model. The analysis took into account 2,250 new dwelling units occupied by 4,500 residents.

Under the 35-acre scenario, the 2,250 homes would cover 78,750 acres (an area equivalent to more than three Manhattan Islands in New York City). Add in infrastructure, including miles of road, power lines, as well as thirsty Kentucky bluegrass lawns that need watering and mowing, septic systems that are bound to fail, fences, smoke drifting out of chimneys, yard lights, barking dogs, and suddenly Custer County has been completely suburbanized. Under the cluster development scheme, which figures one home on a quarter acre lot with lots assembled as planned mini-communities, the same number of dwellings could be accommodated on 563 acres, or 99 percent less land, leaving room for traditional ranching, wildlife and uncluttered views.

"We have a choice," Snyder says. "We can get involved and decide for ourselves what we want Custer County to become, or we can have that future dictated to us by developers from outside the community who are not sensitive to what we love about this place. Whether we like it or not, we have a decision to make, but the fact is, we have to decide."

Still, no matter how compelling community workshops on land use issues are for the majority who attend them, there is always a group of residents who, for a variety of reasons, oppose managed growth. Some see the process as an obstacle to potential profits on real estate sales. Others insist it's an intrusion on their "personal liberty." Still others remain silent because they perceive community-based planning as a threat to old-guard political power structures and a challenge to certain laissez-faire attitudes, often defended because "that's the way things have always been done."

Martin Landers, hired by Custer County as a planning consultant, says what's happening in the Wet Mountain Valley is indicative of how land use planning is changing. "Planning today is much more bottom up, grassroots oriented," Landers says. "The priority is to identify local issues and to focus on values of the local

region. This is where people come together and find common ground, especially in rural areas. In the past, planning was much more of an urban practice and experts would come in and offer strict models for what to do and what not to do. That doesn't cut it anymore."

Adds Lee Nellis, "One of the real failures of planning is when a county does a plan, the dust settles, and then nothing happens. Goals are nice, but strategies are what makes a difference in how citizens interact with local government. What I've found in 25 years of helping other communities plan for the future is that the heat of controversy generally goes away once the process of public involvement is clear. You get into trouble when people try to go around the process."

"New people are going to come to Custer County, that's been established. This is an attractive place…. People are going to come to attractive places. The goal is not to stop them from coming…. The goal is to steer people in the direction you want them to settle on the landscape."

Alexander says that residents of Custer County, who have watched numerous other valleys in Colorado forever transformed by bad planning, understand the need to look beyond their own generation. "If folks can get beyond day-to-day conflicts to the big picture, and this includes respect for property rights and values, there is an opportunity to craft a solution that works for most landowners while leaving a legacy everyone can be proud of."

Jim Little:
Champion of Free Speech

Established in 1883, the *Wet Mountain Tribune* is one of the oldest newspapers in Colorado. Today, subscribers can be found in all 50 states and 15 foreign countries. People read it every week to stay connected.

Jim Little, the publisher, has been affiliated with the paper since 1973 and in 1981 he bought it. Little fits the profile of a local. His great great grandfather prospected for gold in Fairplay and then came to Canon City, where members of the family have lived ever since. Although he lives in nearby Wetmore, he has commuted to the newspaper offices in Westcliffe for 25 years. "Every day that I make the drive, I come over the hill and as this beautiful valley opens up before me, my jaw drops," he says. "In other places, you'll never return to the good old days. This place still has its value and it's something I'm trying to maintain as much as I can and I know the general public is too."

Little's policy at the paper is this: "I try to make sure all our stories are fair and factual. We have a totally open letter to the editor policy. We'll print any opinion as long as it's not too long or libelous."

Little, who has been a major advocate for community planning and has written editorials challenging the "good old boy" dealings of the Custer County Commission, believes that open discussion of issues is the purest expression of democracy at work.

As a businessman and citizen, he took pride in how the community rallied together and crafted a land-use plan, which in some ways was ahead of its time. "Look at Douglas County and Park County. They're destroying the goose that laid the golden egg. Look at the once quaint little town of Breckenridge. It possesses the relaxing ambiance of Disneyland. Traffic is a mess and the character that once defined it will never return."

After the Sonoran Institute, San Isabel Land Protection Trust and Custer Heritage Committee collaborated on the second educational forum, Little wrote in an editorial about a speaker brought in from another high-growth area of Colorado: "The lessons provided by the county extension agent in Steamboat Springs and Routt County seemed particularly in tune to the situation here in Custer County. The sprawling ranches along the scenic Yampa River valley were particularly prone to the threat of development. But a rather strange bedfellow coalition of ranchers, businessmen, environmentalists and concerned citizens have helped preserve as many as 16,000 acres of prime land through conservation easements and other means. And a strong 'value added' program is helping ranchers there squeeze more profits from their livelihoods. May we in Custer County learn from the successful lessons of others."

But Little says that Colorado is filled with examples where the lack of planning caused more problems than it fixed. "The Libertarians don't want any government regulation," he says. "They're trying to create an atmosphere of us-versus-them and make us believe that the United Nations has aspirations of taking over the world. Most people I talk with don't buy into it. They're committed to be part of a community that works toward positive solutions instead of one torn apart by fear mongering."

photo: Ben Alexander

Jim Little

Of the Sonoran Institute and Ben Alexander, Little says, "Ben is the symbol of how Sonoran Institute is received in this community. He's pretty well accepted by virtue of not bailing out and leaving us. Sonoran is gaining in its standing and respectability." However, Little adds, there is a vocal minority of citizens who have attempted to subvert the reputation of Sonoran Institute, and its promotion of donated conservation easements and purchase of private development rights.

Remarkable to Little is how the Sonoran Institute's community visioning exercises have led to the cultivation of relationships between people who previously were not aware of each other's existence, let alone striking up conversations at the grocery store. "You had ranchers who had read the writing on the wall and retreated into a defensive posture and those who built trophy homes and wanted to lock the gates behind them," he says. "I have to admit that much of the change we've seen has been good. We're more of a community than we were before."

water should be looked upon as the determining factor of how much and where future growth will take place

Threats to Custer County's Lifeblood

Another worry about development in Custer County involves the availability of water. Ben Kettle, who attended a public forum that discussed the valley's build out study, said that water should be looked upon as the determining factor of how much and where future growth will take place. He told county commissioners not to devise optimistic development strategies based on the abundance of water during wet years, but to remember how dry years impose profound limitations on water use. Let nature be the guide. Repeating the wisdom of John Wesley Powell, he said it is folly to ignore that most of the country west of the 100th meridian is essentially an arid desert.

The fact is that agriculture can't survive without a predictable water source and land development threatens supply. So does drought. Although the Wet Mountain Valley catches more precipitation than the San Luis Valley on the other side of the Sangres, water resources are finite. Surface irrigation is the lifeblood of agriculture and provides benefits for roaming wildlife. Underground aquifers, recharged by spring runoff, rain, and irrigation practices, produce the water that people drink at the tap.

Custer County is removed from the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies, but it is not insulated from water wars. From outside the valley, the tentacles of growing cities have long been reaching out toward tributary streams of the Arkansas River flowing off east slopes of the Sangres. Colorado is already heavily over-appropriated, and agriculture in the valley enjoys priority status with its water rights – so long as the land remains in agricultural use.

Despite hydrologists's belief that underground aquifers hold plentiful supplies of water, water abundance and quality is not guaranteed. The San Isabel Resource Plan, for instance, notes that while relatively few county residents live on farms or ranches, approximately 70 percent live in scattered rural areas that depend on private wells for drinking water. Concerns over water have bubbled to the surface as developers drill new water wells and install septic systems. Some wells have gone dry in recent years and there is already evidence of septic contamination of groundwater.

To help the county gain a better understanding of water hydrology issues, the Sonoran Institute contributed funding to Custer County for a study intended to provide benchmark information about water quantity and quality. The study's findings will be used by elected officials to help determine development carrying capacity and areas of ground water depletion.

The way that water cycles through the valley is enormously complex. Pumping unsustainable quantities of water from below the surface by owners of private wells has consequences above ground. Colorado state law requires new development to implement an "augmentation" plan that diverts water from surface streams and irrigation ditches to make up for the deficit created by pumping the aquifer. This

photo: Bill Gillette

requirement has put developers, who are now buying ranches with the sole purpose of drying them up, at odds with ranching, which cannot survive in Custer County without an abundance of water to irrigate hay.

Less than a year after Ben Kettle died, his prophetic warnings about water played out in dramatic fashion when a severe drought in 2002 prompted District 13 Water Commissioner Steve Trexel to shut down irrigation ditches along Grape Creek that hadn't been turned off since 1963.

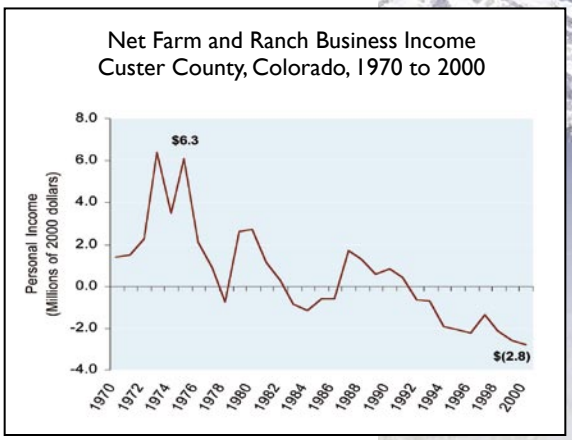
Keith Hood, who in addition to his numerous other community roles, serves as president of the Wet Mountain Valley Water Association, told the Wet Mountain Tribune: "We're going to be in bad shape. At the present time, if we don't get some significant moisture there will be very little irrigation and stock water." In a normal year, Hood and Randy Rusk said they farm about 700 acres of irrigated hay land. But in 2002, Rusk had fewer than 16 irrigated acres while Hood had none. Beyond the woes of agriculture and surface water, drought reinforced Kettle's fears about the finite amount of water in underground aquifers. "There could be a lot of people's wells not having water because they're depleting the underground water source," Hood said.

These were no Chicken Little scenarios, which those with anti-planning agendas had accused conservationists of foisting on the Wet Mountain Valley. This was reality. The looming question is this: if the landscape is having difficulty providing water for the number of residents in the valley now, what will happen with thousands of additional residents and homes?

Good decisions, Sonoran Institute's Alexander and local ranchers agree, can only emerge from transparent, informed discussion, and it doesn't hurt when open government serves as a catalyst.

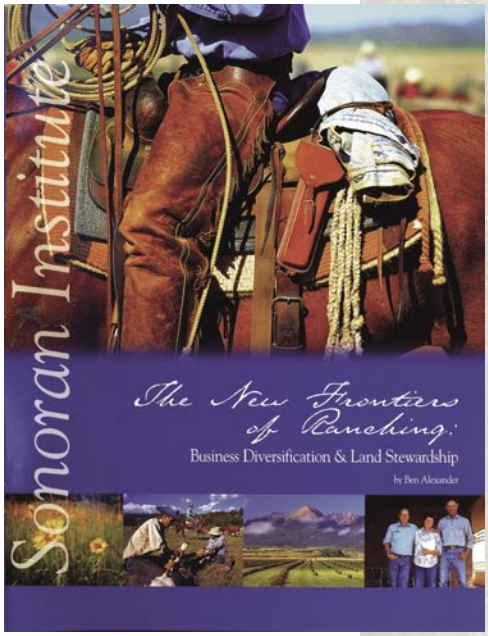
"Lasting public policy always begins with a discussion of common values," says Alexander. "Rarely do we have an opportunity to facilitate such dialogues in the West because of acrimony, the rapid pace of change, and partisan politics. By and large, people here have set aside their differences to work together as neighbors. So far, it has never ceased to amaze me how aware this rural community is about what it takes to look after, not only themselves, but the integrity of the land."

Ben Kettle believed that citizens must step forward and do what the government cannot accomplish with planning and zoning – thinking a generation or two into the future, for instance. "Conspicuously absent [in Colorado] is an official state policy favoring the encouragement of commercial ranching and conservation of ranchland," the American Farmland Trust wrote in its report, *The Last Roundup?* "Instead, Colorado appears to have a de facto policy of promoting the development of ranchland and, by implication, the demise of ranching in the Rocky Mountains."[6]



Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, REIS, Washington, DC

However, the American Farmland Trust added, "If there is a ray of hope in this otherwise cloudy scenario for commercial ranching, it is that ranchers themselves are taking the initiative to chart an alternative future for their land and livelihood. The cooperative planning process… concentrating development to minimize intrusion on ranchland, while maintaining the agricultural core… demonstrates that the demand for recreational development can be accommodated without a total transformation of the landscape, the ranch economy and the culture of the Colorado Rockies."



Sonoran Institute report on ranch diversification

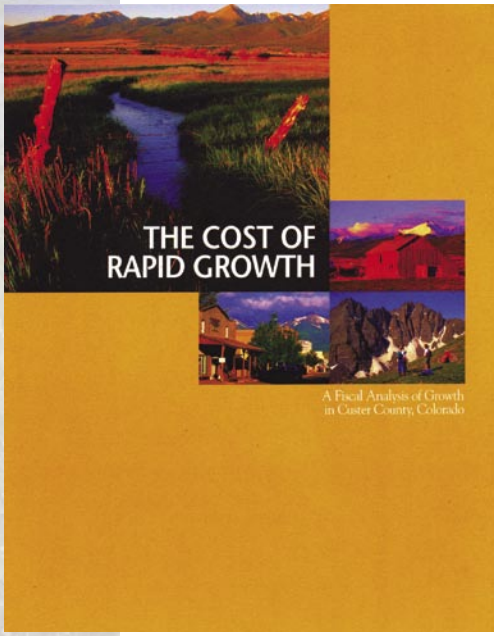
The Custer County Commission's adoption of a meaningful master plan, and approval of a planning and zoning code with teeth is vitally important. But most exciting, perhaps, is what is coming from the commission's own constituents, the ranchers themselves.

[6] www.farmland.org/cfl/cfl2000.htm

The Myth of "Good" Sprawl

For decades, promoters of growth in the rural West have advanced a premise that, until recently, went largely unchallenged. They asserted that converting farm and ranch land into residential subdivision was obviously good for the local tax base. County commissioners across the West accepted the argument, rubber stamping virtually any development proposal that came before them, only to discover afterward that, when examined, the logic didn't hold up.

Escalating land values may delight real estate speculators in resort towns, but for ranchers they can mean trouble. In today's world of fluctuating food commodity prices, agriculture is most prosperous when it can operate on a scale that permits flexibility. Bigger is often better. Many of the ranchers who celebrate inflated land values are those who have no interest in staying on the land.



Report on fiscal impacts of growth in Custer County

In the old days, if a rancher went out of business, the adjacent ranching family would usually purchase or lease the land and add it to their acreage. But at the dawn of the 21st century, skyrocketing prices make acquisition by ranchers virtually impossible. Fragmentation of land also increases expenses, and creates logistical hassles and liability problems.

The only kind of development that actually pays its own way is commercial and industrial development. It's true. Residential land development generates more gross revenue than agricultural land and open space, notes Lee Nellis. However, after the costs of providing public services, such as road maintenance, fire and police protection, and schools are factored in, county treasuries actually report a net drain – not a gain – to local coffers.

Stated more simply, the loss of agricultural lands to sprawl usually results in higher taxes and declining quality of public services, in addition to the disappearance of farm land, open space, and wildlife habitat. In Custer County, after much public debate, the Sonoran Institute along with the San Isabel Land Protection Trust, Custer Heritage Committee and American Farmland Trust put the ag land versus development argument to the test in the form of a Cost of Community Services study – the first ever completed in the state of Colorado.[7]

On average, for every tax dollar Custer County receives from agricultural land, it has to pay out only 54 cents in services. Yet for every dollar collected from land in residential development, the county must pay $1.16 in services. The more development, the more that taxpayers have to make up the deficit in the form of a subsidy, says Mark Haggerty, who completed the study when he was a graduate student at the University of Colorado.

For example, the study showed that for a typical 160-acre hay meadow which generates $540 in taxes, the same tract demands only $290 in public services. Meanwhile, a residential subdivision of similar size that generates around $21,000 in taxes requires more than $23,000 in service expenses.

The study's findings cannot be misconstrued as "anti-development." In fact, the report showed that commercial and industrial properties, similar to ag land, yielded more in taxes than demanded for services. These properties required only 71 cents in service costs for every tax dollar they generated. Ag lands represent slightly less of a windfall for taxpayers.

The study, too, led to another revelation. In many cases, taxpayers of Custer County are actually subsidizing developments which destroy the very ag lands and community values they hold dear. "The results of the Cost of Community Services study opened the eyes of many of us in this valley," says County Commissioner Richard Downey, who recognizes the need for progressive planning. "As an elected official, I am obligated to make responsible fiscal decisions on behalf of my constituents. For the first time, we realized that saving ranchland and being more discerning in how we approach land use planning makes economic sense."

[7] www.sonoran.org/resources/guidebook/COCS%20Long%20%20Final%20Pdf.pdf

The Essence of Community Conservation

Although Ben Kettle died before his dream of protecting the Wet Mountain Valley was realized, he would have been the first to applaud the Rusk family, his daughter Sara and wife Bet for courageously charting a new course for Custer County.

Their ambitious goal: to secure a visionary greenbelt. In partnering with the Sonoran Institute, Colorado Cattleman's Agricultural Land Trust, Trust for Public Land, San Isabel Land Protection Trust, Custer Heritage Committee, and Colorado Conservation Trust, a handful of ranching families are piecing together a quilt of conservation easements in a multi-phase effort that initially will protect 10,000 acres in the center of the Wet Mountain Valley.

By selling development rights at fair market value to non-government conservation entities, Randy, Harvey, and Tate Rusk, and the Kettles are deliberately devaluing their land by removing its ultimate income-earning potential as a residential subdivision. Lowering the value reduces estate taxes and yields some critical cash which they can use for operations and estate settlements. It does not, however, eliminate property taxes. Counties continue to reap tax dollars on the property at the agricultural rate.

"The first to courageously step forward and teach by example was Randy Rusk," Alexander says. "He's president of the Custer County Stockgrowers. He's been around the West, and he can see the future. He knows that if he doesn't do anything, the valley is going to be gone." Moreover, Randy's son, Tate, who is in his twenties, has his own small herd of cattle and would like to stay in the business.

This first easement will involve the purchase of development rights on Rusk's 1,553-acre ranch and is part of a larger $10 million first phase that includes adjacent land owners. "They [the Rusks] are well respected in the community and throughout the livestock industry in Colorado and represent the heart of this very special and unique area," wrote Lynne Sherrod, executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust in praise of Harvey and his wife, Jean Rusk; Randy and his wife, Claricy; and their son, Tate, and his wife, Wendy. "Successful completion of this effort will provide the jump start for conservation in the Wet Mountain Valley and lead the way for the rest of the ranching community."

Another key player, the Trust for Public Land, has secured options for easement purchases on the adjacent Kettle and Kennicott Ranches. Plus, Bill and Smokey Jack expect to donate an easement on their 2,089-acre ranch and another is being offered by Richard and Audrey Stermer on their ranch. The Jacks already have made a generous investment in habitat improvement on their ranch which includes the creation of ponds for migratory waterfowl and other animals. And, as a gift to the valley, they purchased land to protect the historic Beckwith Ranch.

When all of the properties finally come under easement, it will form a pastoral belt reaching across the heart of the valley, ensuring enough pasture land for participating ranchers who can work together, and offering a corridor for migratory wildlife.

The Rusk Ranch is located near Grape Creek, the same watershed visited by Zebulon Pike in 1807. "We may not be able to stay on the land forever but by putting restrictions on development it will stay open and by keeping it open will be more likely to stay in ranching," says Randy Rusk. "This is the best we can do to give Tate a future in ranching. One of the biggest myths is that once you put an easement on your land you end up with government zealously monitoring what you do and breathing down your back. It's just not true. These rumors seem to fly around and get believed by people who have not done their homework. Ranchers and ag people – and by that I include myself because I'm one of them – tend to be independent, bull-headed buggers who don't always get along with each other. They think that, because of their nature, they can get along without anybody else. The fact is, we need each other now more than ever."

photo: Ben Alexander

Claricy and Randy Rusk

Launching the experiment made headlines in the largest newspapers in the region and as word of it spreads, agrarians, conservationists, and rural governments across the country are taking notice. "Other Colorado counties struggle with similar changes. Custer

only through cooperation can we succeed as a community

County's experience, however, is perhaps one of Colorado's starkest examples of the uneasy co-existence of the new and the old," the partners wrote in a grant application to Great Outdoors Colorado. "The preservation of the Rusk Ranch and other Phase I conservation area ranches is the logical outgrowth of the community-based conservation efforts that have been unfolding in the Wet Mountain Valley."

A recent botanical inventory on a nearby piece of property found at least 237 different plant species and the Rusks themselves say they've seen an abundance of deer, elk, pronghorn, waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds and upland birds, foxes, and coyotes on their land. Debunking the criticisms of developers, the partnership points out that it has the firm backing of the ag community through the Colorado Cattleman's Association Land Trust, which holds over 30 conservation easements on Colorado ranches and farms.

The vision for the Custer County pastoral greenbelt was a community effort, and a key broker has been the Trust for Public Land led by Deb Love in Santa Fe and Woody Beardsley in Denver. While Love laid the groundwork, Beardsley, a native Coloradoan, had the contacts and the context. Beardsley's roots run deep in the ranching community of Custer County. His great grandfather came to the valley in the late 1880s and started a bank in Westcliffe. He also became mayor.

Beardsley's grandfather grew up here, as did his father, and so Beardsley himself spent many summers in the area. "We used to buy cattle from the Kettles," he says. "There are a couple of Beardsleys buried in the Rosita graveyard." It's Beardsley's personal connection that has helped the Trust for Public Land form a lasting partnership. He also acknowledges that credit must go to the Sonoran Institute for laying the foundation in the community for the ranchland protection effort.

"This is a monumental effort on everyone's part," Alexander says, adding that the Custer

Dick Downey:
From Top Cop To Community Steward

Of the recently elected leaders in Custer County, Richard "Dick" Downey is often praised as a forward-looking thinker. Downey and his wife, Jan, decided to settle in the valley after Downey spent his entire career with the Colorado State Highway Patrol. He began as a patrol officer and ended as the Commander of Field Operations, the number two position in the department.

Never forgetting the six years he spent on assignment in Custer County during the early 1960s, he returned 30 years later to retire and is now a county commissioner. "People move in here because they like what they see, but what they don't pick up upon is that the ambiance is a creation of the ranching culture," he says. Whenever he can, Downey visits with valley ranchers and doesn't hesitate to help them with branding or mending fences.

photo: Ben Alexander

Dick Downey

"I think for me Custer County exemplifies what as Americans we think the West was, is, and what it should be," he says. "Whether you get your image from a vacation or from the movies, this is the place that offers the authentic lifestyle of the West."

Cowboys, open country, inspiring scenery, calving season. "It's all of these things and the social life that goes with it," Downey says. "At dinner parties you talk about the culture and the way the kids went to school. It's fundamentally about a value system and it's important that we have an opportunity to preserve it, because we're losing it. I've been handed an opportunity to have a little voice and influence. What impresses me are the efforts that citizens are making. It's very obvious to me that you cannot, by yourself, do something without the help of the Sonoran Institute. Their whole reason to be is in helping rural communities."

Downey praises his two colleagues on the county commission who recognize the value of the Cost of Community Services study, the compiling of a socioeconomic profile, examinations into the amount of groundwater, and experts who have delivered talks about the dividends of keeping ranching landscapes intact. "Planning is a slow process. All of us are learning," Downey says. "I'd say the best indication of how we feel about conservation is our letter of endorsement for the Great Outdoors Colorado grant to acquire development rights from the Rusks and Kettles. The future lies in public-private partnerships."

A fierce defender of private property rights, Downey says he is guided by two fundamental principles: first, that when land is acquired by government or quasi government entities, the property owner receives fair market value; and second, that when adjacent landowners entertain possible uses for their land, one should not undertake a land use activity that results in your neighbor's land being devalued.

As studies suggest, the presence of conservation easements in many western valleys result in making surrounding properties more valuable. Unattractive development can have the opposite effect. "I respect your right to do what you want with your land as long as it doesn't infringe upon my ability to enjoy my property," Downey says, adding that ranchers give everyone in Custer County the pretty views they enjoy. His fondness for ranchers also has patriotic overtones.

"One thing you don't often hear is how maintaining agriculture is important to our national defense," Downey says. "Most people don't know where their food comes from. We have people in Custer County who are putting meat on the table for America. We owe our ranchers thanks. Apart from all of the other good reasons why agriculture is important, this reason alone makes me want to give them a helping hand."

County commissioners have endorsed the project by letter. "This wasn't the federal government coming in and creating a new protected area. This was a group of ranchers setting aside an area to protect themselves and, in the process, makeing a gesture with profound public benefits."

Looking back at how much attitudes have changed, Randy Rusk says with a laugh, "All of this coming together has been a good thing. Paul Snyder is a smart man and an attorney and I don't know why he's on my side but he is and I'm grateful. Then there's the other attorney, Bill Jack. Ten years ago if someone had told me to go have dinner with him, I'd have thought 'No way, not with a lawyer and a newcomer like him!' But things are different now. I'm glad to be able to call him a friend."

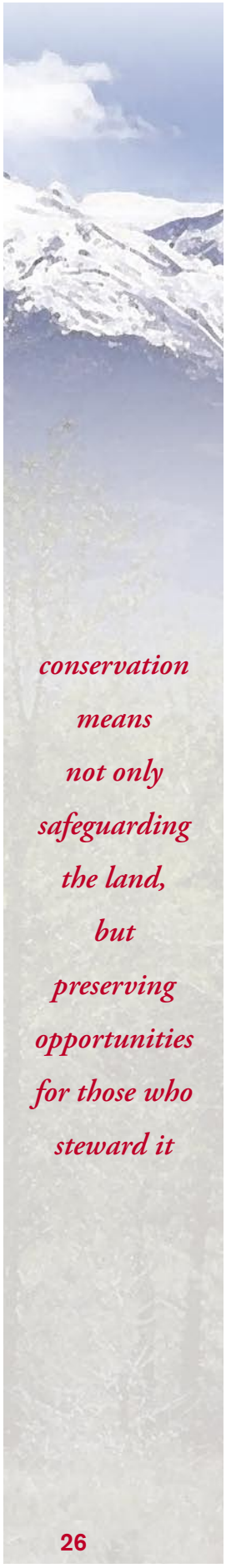
Adds Margaret Karsten, president of the San Isabel Land Protection Trust: "We know the latest agricultural income figures for Custer County show that the average rancher's income has drifted lower over the past several years. They face enormous pressure to sell the land to those who want to break it up. And we know the Rusk family is one of the few ranching families with young people who want to stay and work the land. We are pleased to work with the Rusks and their neighbors to help make this happen."

Not long ago, Sara Kettle delivered a talk to a 100 county commissioners, planning board members, and land use planners at a training event sponsored by the Sonoran Institute and National Association of Counties in Estes Park, Colorado.

The message was this: ranchers who want to stay on the land must come together and explore emerging options, such as land protection and business diversification. Meanwhile, observers say, those agrarians who have no desire to stay on the land should stop pretending. Moreover, they should stop criticizing those within the conservation movement who are making serious attempts to keep ranching viable. Those who throw stones are helping to tear communities apart.

As Kettle told the story of her family's heritage, of her father's death and of her own desire to stay on the land, many in the audience were visibly moved. They recognized that Kettle's story was not only hers but theirs, too.

Just as ranchers of a century ago braced against winter blizzards and held barn raising parties and hoe downs and chipped in when their neighbors were in need, ranching in the New West, in order to survive, requires re-embracing a community spirit.



conservation means not only safeguarding the land, but preserving opportunities for those who steward it

The Continuing Epilogue: A Handshake That Lasts Forever

Whether it is a friendship, a business deal, or newcomers and old timers encountering each other for the first time, the foundation of any lasting relationship is trust.

When the Sonoran Institute answered the invitation from Custer County to help citizens ponder their future, Ben Alexander says it came with the implicit promise that the Sonoran Institute would be a conservation partner for the long haul. Conservation means not only safeguarding the land, but preserving opportunities for those who steward it. "We believe in the power of a handshake," Alexander says. "When we say we will stand by you, we mean it."

Perhaps there is no example more meaningful than what happened during the summer of 2002, as Custer County coped with the worst drought in a century. With flows to irrigation ditches turned off earlier than at any time in memory, groundwater levels dropping, wildfires raging all around, and grasslands left desiccated and devoid of forage, ranchers were in trouble.

Conditions were so tough that even Harvey Rusk was confronting the prospect of having to sell off his renowned Hereford herd, including prized animals which were the descendents of the first cows he bought half a century ago. Carefully bred across decades to thrive in the high-elevation environment of the Wet Mountain Valley, the herd and its fate seemed a bellwether for agriculture itself.

Up in southwest Montana, where farmers were enjoying a reprieve from dry conditions that had gripped them for half a decade, Alexander looked out upon the lush Gallatin Valley and had an idea. Relating the hardships of Custer County ranchers to their brethren in Big Sky country, Alexander advanced the idea of a haylift to make feed available at reasonable prices. "By talking with ranchers in Colorado, we knew they simply needed a fighting chance to beat the drought," he said.

The relief effort was enthusiastically embraced by a number of Montana hay growers and members of the conservation community who had seen the Sonoran Institute in action and wanted to help.

In mid September, a fleet of semi trucks rolled into Custer County carrying 100 tons of hay, which enabled a large group of ranchers to feed their cattle and get through the winter. "In a drought year like this, most ranchers were looking at selling off their cattle because there was no forage," says Randy Rusk, who as president of the Custer County Stockgrowers Association coordinated the hay distribution. "We were tremendously grateful for the hay."

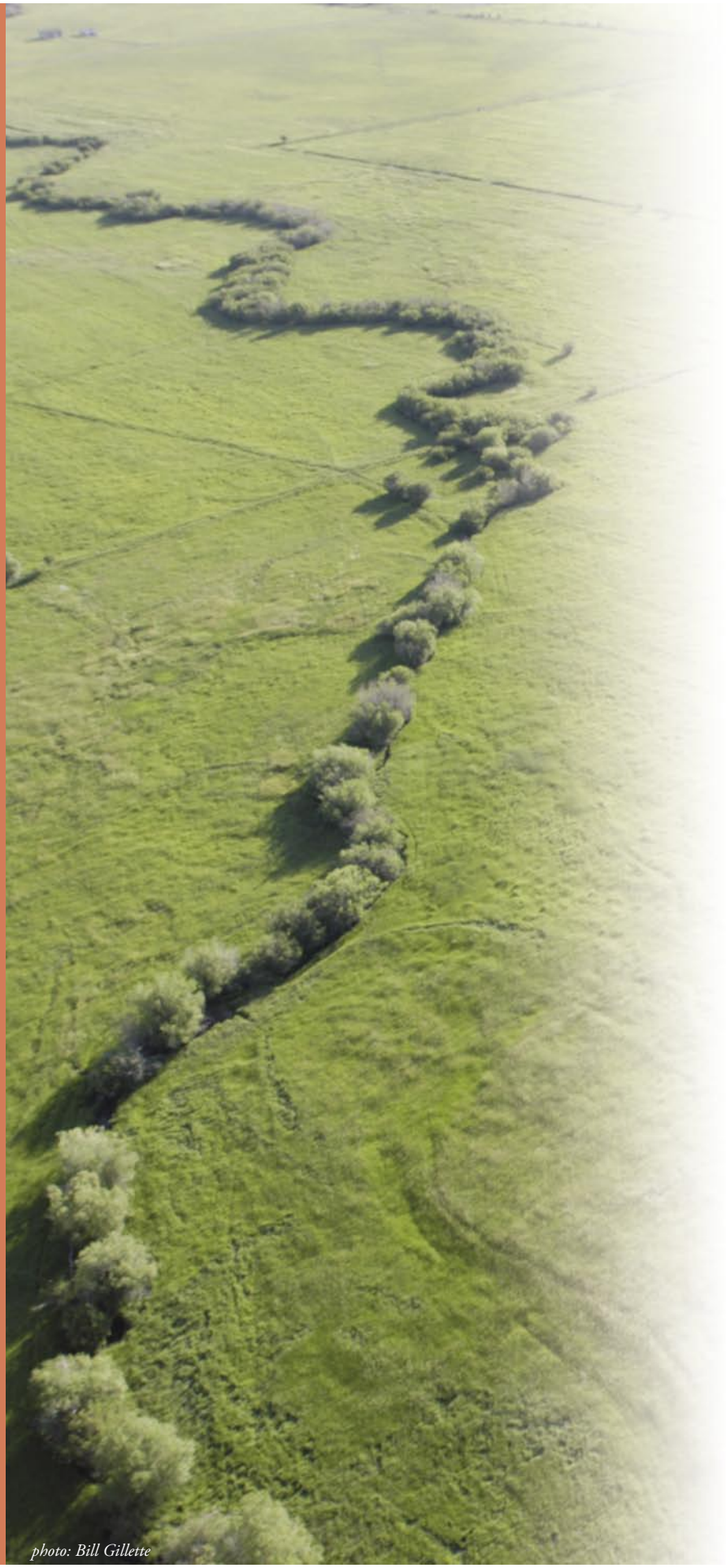
The gesture made headlines across the region. "Ranchers have historically helped out other ranchers in times of crisis," Alexander says. "We think it's time conservationists step up to the plate and help ranchers who are making arrangements to protect their lands and the conservation values on them. And that's what we're doing. Since beginning the process of finding ways to protect ranching and the conservation values it supports, we have become partners with landowners in the valley and the community as a whole."

Years ago, Rusk says, there was a perception among agrarians in Custer County that ranchers and conservationists were unnatural allies, but he's learned they both want the same thing. It's a friendship, he says, based on trust.

"When groups like the Sonoran Institute say they care about what happens to us, it's heartening to see they really mean it," he says. "This is just one more example of how conservationists and ranchers can build partnerships that maintain working ranches. The response in the ranching community has been strong – we need to work together."

The emerging partnership in Custer County is centered on a shared appreciation of what we all have at stake as individuals and communities in today's rapidly changing West. The conversation reaches back across generations and ahead to untold futures. "The remarkable aspect of this process is the fact that outcomes are not predetermined," notes Alexander. "We don't know where Custer County will end up. Yet we endeavor together as neighbors, in good faith, because we believe in the promise of an open and fair process as the best path to a future we can all call home."

The Sonoran Institute would like to thank the people who have contributed to successful community building and conservation in Custer County, Colorado. Although too numerous to mention by name, we would like to thank the many volunteers, landowners and citizens who work so hard to "Keep Custer County Special." Thanks also to Todd Wilkinson who took time out of his busy schedule to write about the evolving Custer story, and to Bill Gillette who graciously donated photographs for this publication. Finally, the Sonoran Institute deeply appreciates the support of the Colorado Conservation Trust, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Great Outdoors Colorado, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, whose generous support has made our work in Custer County — and this publication — possible.



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