



PROLOGUE

Out beyond the ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing
is a field. I'll meet you there.

RUMI

In 1996, I had an anguished question on my mind: why didn't environmentalists and ranchers get along better? In theory they shared many of the same hopes and fears—a love of wildlife, a deep respect for nature, an appreciation for a life lived outdoors, and a common concern for healthy water, food, fiber, and liberty.

That was the theory anyway. The reality was that by the early 1990s environmentalists and ranchers, along with loggers, federal land managers, elected officials, private citizens, and others in the American West, were locked in a bitter struggle with one another, exemplified by two popular bumper stickers of the era: “Cattle-free by '93!” shouted one. “Cattle galore by '94!” retorted the other.

I felt anguished because this fight had all the hallmarks of a tragedy: both sides, and all of us in between, seemed destined to lose what was most valued by everyone—the health and diversity of the West's wide open spaces. And it wasn't just the West: the hardheadedness of this particular fight reflected other divides in the nation at the time—the “red” and “blue” split, for instance, that would soon engulf our national politics.



The causes of the conflict between ranchers and environmentalists were more social and historical than ecological, in my opinion. Certainly, overgrazing by livestock in the arid West had damaged, and in some cases irreparably altered, native plant and animal communities, raising legitimate cries of alarm. However, other issues fueled the grazing debate to a larger extent, including class, political power, and prejudice. Ignorance played a role too, unfortunately—a point brought home in force one day when an environmental activist told me, with a straight face, that cattle were “immoral animals.”

The struggle focused primarily on the publicly owned half of the American West’s one million square miles, including the national forests, rangelands, and wildlife refuges. The fundamental issue was influence. For a century or more, these federal lands were in the de facto control of those who lived near them and worked on them—ranchers, principally—and who operated largely without oversight. After World War II, however, influence began to shift to a new breed of westerner—hikers, fishermen, day-trippers, and other types of often urban-based recreationalists. At first, their influence was largely economic, but over time it grew politically, especially as the populations of western cities boomed.

Concurrently, a concern for the welfare of nature in the form of a resurgent conservation movement—now called environmentalism—started to blossom across the nation. Increasingly, the attention of activists turned toward actual and perceived abuses of the public domain, including clear-cut logging, open-pit mining, and overgrazing. The alarms they raised contributed to a raft of consequential environmental legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Richard Nixon, including the National Environmental Policy Act, the Endangered Species Act, and an early version of the Clean Water Act, as well as a bill creating the Environmental Protection Agency.

The downside, however, of all this activism and bill-passing was the commencement of a kind of tribal warfare between denizens of the “Old” West and advocates of the “New,” with lassos on one side, and lattes on the other. Caught in the middle were the employees of the



federal land management agencies—the Forest Service (national forests), the Bureau of Land Management (rangelands), and the Fish & Wildlife Service (refuges). The “feds,” once considered by environmentalists to be in the pocket of ranching, mining, and timber interests, by the 1980s were viewed by ranchers, miners, and loggers as allies of the environmentalists instead. This meant that federal employees found themselves in the crosshairs of both sides.

Meanwhile, across the West, accelerating suburban and exurban (ranchette) growth shared the same source: former farm and ranch land. When making their case against cattle, environmental activists frequently pointed out that half of the West is publicly owned, and therefore should be managed with public goals in mind. But they overlooked the flip side of their own statistic—the other half of the West is privately owned, much of it by ranchers. Deliberate or not, by weakening ranchers, environmentalists abetted the very thing they decried loudest about the New West—its breakup by sprawl and other forms of land fragmentation.

There were other reasons to worry about the fate of ranchers besides the loss of open space. Healthy food, for one thing. As writer and farmer Wendell Berry has repeatedly observed, eating is an agricultural act. We all do it at least three times a day, which is why it’s worth thinking long and hard about where our food comes from, who grows it, under what conditions it is produced, and what the consequences are of letting a global, industrialized food system fill our bellies. The family rancher, by contrast, could, I knew, produce healthy, locally grown food under humane conditions at a reasonable price. Throw in good stewardship of the land and you have the possibility of an unbeatable combination, which is why the prospect of eliminating the family rancher, even on public land, was so distressing.

Ranchers also had legitimate historical and cultural claims to existence. In northern New Mexico, where I live, the ranching tradition stretches back 400 years—and much farther if you trace it back to Spain. Any knowledgeable historian or anthropologist would agree that ranching is an important subset of American society—and not because of its



influence on Hollywood, Nashville, or Madison Avenue. Ranchers have been a critical part of America's ethnic and historical tapestry, and remain so to this day.

Lastly, ranching mattered, I recognized, because work matters and because land matters. Although I had spent a lot of time backpacking as a youth, enjoying the recreational fruits of our robust economy, I also spent many summers surveying the desert of southern Arizona as a professional archaeologist. It was a form of hiking, but it was also *work*—and as a consequence I came to appreciate the value of labor on the land. I gained a physical and emotional relationship to nature that wasn't play-based, and this made a huge difference.

For all these reasons, the conflict between ranchers and environmentalists began to look like a tragedy of rather serious proportions to me.

By the mid-1990s, in fact, the feud between industry and activists had reached a dispiriting crescendo. Newspaper headlines reported a seemingly endless cycle of unhappy news: effigies of environmentalists hanging from street lamps; road building equipment disabled in the dead of night; federal property attacked by anonymous assailants; hiking trails booby-trapped with explosives; trees "spiked" with large nails to prevent their harvest; cattle shot; endangered species threatened by a campaign of "shoot, shovel, and shut up"; public meetings dissolving into shouting matches; shadowy militias organizing in remote locations; federal raids ending disastrously; livelihoods ruined by lawsuits; and so on.

Emblematic of the times was a lengthy brawl in the mountains above Silver City, in southwestern New Mexico. Called the Diamond Bar fight—for the 145,000-acre Forest Service allotment (ranch) on which the fight took place—it featured an angry young ranching couple, Kit and Sherry Laney, who were determined to prevail over the U.S. Forest Service, and an even angrier local environmentalist equally determined to put them out of business. Public lands are divided into allotments of varying sizes, which are generally attached to a base (private) property owned by the rancher. A grazing permit is issued by the federal agency for that allotment and contains conditions, including allowable numbers of cattle, by which the livestock operation must abide. On the surface,



the fight focused on the government's attempt to force the Laney's to abide by certain regulations, including a recent reduction in the amount of cattle they could run on the allotment. These were restrictions that the young ranchers rejected and that environmentalists demanded be upheld. The real issue, however, was power: who would win and who would lose.

Stuck in the middle was a fumbling federal bureaucracy whose attempts at compromise succeeded only in stoking the conflict. Charges, countercharges, lawsuits, appeals, and threats flew in all directions as both sides marshaled their supporters for what appeared to be the Final Showdown over livestock grazing on public land in the Southwest.

In the end, the Laney's lost. Acting unwisely on poor legal advice, they refused to sign their grazing permit, asserting that the government had no right to regulate them, which meant they were breaking the law. When a judge upheld the Forest Service's position, the Laney's lost their permit and their ranch, as well as their livelihood.

Environmentalists were elated. A significant corner, they said, had been turned in the struggle over public lands in the West.

To this particular environmentalist, however, there was no cheer in the court's verdict. I did not join the celebrations when the victorious activists came to Santa Fe, but neither did I mourn the demise of the young ranchers, who had arrogantly thumbed their noses at public opinion. Instead, I just felt depressed. There were no winners in the Diamond Bar fight, only losers, including all the spectators. That's because nothing had been gained—lives had been ruined, not enriched; land had been abandoned, instead of stewarded properly; bad blood had been created, instead of hope; anger ruled, not joy.

My anguished question involved more than just bad blood between ranchers and environmentalists, however. The Diamond Bar fight fit a national mood in the mid-1990s that had suddenly veered onto the rocky shoals of partisanship, confrontation, and political brinkmanship. From the jeremiads of talk-radio hosts, which capitalized on the new rancor emanating from Washington, D.C., to repeated shut-downs of the federal government, America seemed suddenly caught in



a destructive tug-of-war between Wrongdoing (them) and Rightdoing (us), with no room for anybody in between.

And the more we yelled at one another, the deeper my spirits sank. Then one day something snapped inside me and I knew I had to act.

It happened on April 19, 1995—the day Timothy McVeigh blew up the Murrah Federal building in downtown Oklahoma City, killing 168 innocent people, including 19 children, and injuring more than 800 people. I worked for the National Park Service as an archaeologist at the time, as did my wife, and I remember vividly my reaction as I listened, stunned, to the news report of the bombing coming in over a radio in the office.

At first, I was mortified, and then I grew angry, but not just at McVeigh. I was angry at the whole culture of conflict and odium represented by this horrible tragedy. McVeigh wasn't simply a madman—he had *motivation*, as he explained later. He *hated*. It didn't matter that the object of his ire was the federal government, what mattered was the emotion itself—the same negativity circulating around the nation at the time; the same emotion at work in the mountains above Silver City. Although some pundits later denied any causal connection between McVeigh's act of terrorism and the partisan cultural climate in America, I knew the bombing had happened for a reason.

It happened because it was OK to hate.

I had to do something, but what? The previous fall, alarmed by the “Republican Revolution” in the 1994 midterm elections and the declared intention of its leaders to roll back twenty-five years of critical environmental legislation, I had called a representative of the Sierra Club to volunteer my services. I was quickly recruited as a foot soldier for the Club's local group in Santa Fe and less than two months later I was sent into battle at the state capitol during the legislative session, assigned the job of fighting “takings” legislation—a complex legalistic assault on the public good by private property rights advocates. For my efforts, and to my surprise, I wound up on a stage in an auditorium that summer debating takings with the executive director of the New Mexico Cattlegrowers' Association in front of a large crowd of businesspeople.



I have no idea who won the debate, though I recall being embarrassed at my decision to wear cowboy boots. It was an attempt at an ironic statement, but it came across as just plain silly. I also recall the empty feeling the debate left inside of me. Intellectually, I understood the need to push back against wrongdoers, as the environmental movement was successfully doing against the Republican agenda in Washington at the time, but emotionally I felt adrift.

Eventually, an unexpected opportunity to act on my anguish came. Walking into a statewide meeting of the Sierra Club one day, held in the former mining boomtown of Kingston, New Mexico (and not far from the Diamond Bar allotment), I saw a cowboy hat sitting on a table. It belonged, I learned, to Jim Winder, who lived and ranched nearby. If that wasn't surprise enough, I was told Jim was there because he had accepted the invitation of the chair, Gwen Wardwell, to become a member of the Executive Committee.

A rancher on the statewide Executive Committee of the Sierra Club? And a Republican to boot! What was going on here?

Jim boasted that he ranched in a new, ecologically friendly style. He bunched his cattle together into one herd, he said, and kept them on the move so that any particular patch of ground would be grazed only once a year, mimicking the manner in which bison covered the land. He didn't kill coyotes. In fact, he didn't even mind wolves, because bunched-up cows can protect themselves. There was more: because he ranched for rangeland health, Jim said, he got along great with government employees, he had more water in his streams, and most importantly, he was making money.

It sounded too good to be true.

Curious about this newfangled ranching, in early 1996 I joined a tour of the Winder family ranch Jim had organized for his fellow Sierra Clubbers. Attending as well was an antigrazing activist named Tony Merten, who had recently transplanted himself from Colorado to a remote part of southern New Mexico. I didn't know it at the time, but Tony was the prime suspect in a spate of cattle murders in the area. It would be an investigation with tragic consequences. Whether from fear of a potential indictment, mental instability, or a deep sense of despair for the fate



of the planet (or all three), Tony would commit suicide a little more than a month after the tour of Jim's ranch.

On that day, however, it quickly became clear to me that Tony's mission was to provoke Jim into a confrontation. He obnoxiously challenged nearly every positive statement Jim made, whether it was about cattle, grass, or termites (a favorite subject of Jim's). It didn't work. Jim parried each attack with a patient explanation of ecological principles and a fine sense of humor. In fact, it was obvious that Jim knew far more about the environment than any environmentalist on the tour, myself especially. He was far funnier too.

Impressed, embarrassed, and perplexed, upon my return home I picked up *Beyond the Rangeland Conflict: Toward a West That Works*, a book by environmental activist Dan Dagget. In it, I learned that there were other ranchers of Jim's stripe across the West—people managing for healthy ecosystems through progressive cattle management and collaboration. The book confirmed what I saw on Jim's ranch: thick grass, healthy riparian areas, young plants, wildlife, open space—all the things I *said* I wanted as a conservationist. Of course, I saw livestock too.

The anguished question began to grow.

Inspired as much by his performance as by his knowledge, I called Jim up and asked him if we should try to create a neutral forum where anyone who loved the land, wildlife, and cultures of the Southwest could meet, look, learn, and listen. He enthusiastically endorsed the idea. We were joined by Barbara Johnson, another Sierra Club activist. The three of us quickly decided that there was no point in engaging the extremes on either side of the grazing debate. Instead, we would walk to a new field, beyond the continuum of argument, where we would wave our arms and ask people to join us. Jim called this place the “third position.”

I called it the New Ranch.

I wrote a definition: “The New Ranch describes an emerging progressive ranching movement that operates on the principle that the natural processes that sustain wildlife habitat, biological diversity and functioning watersheds are the same processes that make land



productive for livestock. New Ranches are ranches where grasslands are productive and diverse, where erosion has diminished, where streams and springs, once dry, now flow, where wildlife is more abundant, and where landowners are more profitable as a result.”

The New Ranch became the foundation for an exploration of our larger goal: “to explore our common interests instead of argue our differences,” in the words of Bill deBuys, a conservationist and leader in the collaborative movement in New Mexico.

Exploring common interests was an idea gaining traction at the time. In pockets across the West, groups of ranchers, federal managers, and environmentalists had been attempting to start meaningful dialogues. One highly successful effort was located in the “bootheel” of southwestern New Mexico, where a diverse group had come together to put ecologically beneficial fire back on the land as well as to shield private lands from the predatory attention of subdividers. They called themselves the Malpai Borderlands Group.

We called ourselves The Quivira Coalition. On Spanish colonial maps of the Southwest from the 1600s, “Quivira” designated unexplored territory.

Following the lead of other “common ground” efforts, we vowed to avoid lawsuits and legislation, sticking instead to the grassroots—literally the “grass” and the “roots.” It was our belief that the grazing debate needed to start over at the place it mattered most—on the ground. We knew it was a gamble. When we organized our first workshop in a church in Santa Fe in June 1997, we sent out notices to every moderate rancher, environmentalist, land manager, and scientist we knew in New Mexico. Then we crossed our fingers. When fifty people showed up, we knew we weren’t going to be alone in our little field.

In the years that followed, as the grazing debate faded in the region and as hope and trust began to grow alongside the wildflowers and bunchgrasses, an answer to my anguished question began to reveal itself. Ranchers and environmentalists *could* get along, and in places *did*, especially where the dialogue started with soil, grass, and water. Peace, in other words, was possible; and as a result, progress was possible as well.



But there was more. In fact, a new anguished question had begun to grow.

It started with a map I saw of a 500,000-acre watershed in southern Arizona. It was a map of rangeland health, meaning it viewed the land from a functional perspective—from the angle of soil, grass, and water. According to the analysis represented on the map, significant amounts of the watershed were in poor condition, including big portions of a national wildlife refuge, which had not been grazed by cattle in sixteen years. “Goodness,” I thought to myself after studying it, “how much of the rest of the West is in this condition?”

This issue hit home one day as I walked up a deep arroyo (wash) on a ranch in western New Mexico. As I came to the boundary between the private land and the Forest Service property, I saw a barbed wire fence, complete with fence posts, suspended ten feet above my head, stretching across the arroyo. I knew from a conversation with the rancher that the fence was built in 1935—and the posts rested on the ground. In less than seventy years, in other words, the system had unraveled—washed away.

Poor grazing management played a role, undoubtedly. When the ground lacks a vigorous cover of healthy vegetation, its exposure to the erosive effects of pounding rain and rushing water dramatically increases. But my work with Jim Winder had taught me that cattle could be managed in a positive manner for the health of land. Jim—and others—taught me that cows weren’t the problem, poor management was. Things could be different.

Looking up at the fence suspended above my head that day, I began to ask questions: How do we restore this land to health? What are the tools? How do we pay for it?

Fortunately, a pattern of answers was already visible. The work of the New Ranchers demonstrated that sustainable and regenerative land management was not only possible, it could be profitable too. At the same time, new restoration methods had been developed, which also worked within “nature’s model” of land health, providing relatively simple and cost-effective strategies for reversing ecosystem decline.



In short, peace making led me to see how healthy land and healthy relationships could be restored, one acre at a time.

The chapters in this book—representing a personal journey—are my attempt to illustrate how ranching and environmentalism are changing in the West, and with them, the West itself—and with the West, the nation too, possibly. The people profiled not only ask questions of their own, they also form part of a pattern of solutions. Linked together, they are part of an intriguing mosaic of human creativity, energy, and hopefulness.

This is a book about relationships—among people, between people and land, among ecological processes—and their resilience. When I first started writing the essays that eventually led to this book, I wanted to do nothing more than hold up what I considered to be my most valuable discoveries. Over time, however, I realized that the discoveries were not nearly as important as the relationships that lay behind them. I came to see that, whether in the American West or beyond, healthy *things*—cattle, wolves, watersheds, communities, economies, nations—depend on a foundation of healthy relationships. And often the key to enhancing the resilience of those relationships is to create a field beyond rightdoing and wrongdoing.

I'll see you there.