

Colorado ranchers' Pinon Canyon victory earns magazine cover story

By Tim Keller For the Comet | Posted: Tuesday, September 16, 2014 12:00 am

TRINIDAD—“In 2005, the entire agricultural community in Southeast Colorado faced losing their ranches to an aggressive land grab by the U.S. Army. By combining biological evidence, cultural heritage, intense document research, the political process, and when necessary, legal action, these ranchers smartly, legally, and collectively saved their land.”

Thus begins, in big type over a two-page southeastern Colorado landscape, an eight-page feature in the October/November issue of American Cowboy written by the magazine's editor-in-chief, Bob Welch. Reaching subscribers last week and newsstands now, Welch goes back to 1983 to tell of what's become known among area ranching families as The Taking, when the Army created the quarter-million-acre Pinon Canyon Maneuver Site (PCMS) by using eminent domain to take the land from families unwilling to sell.

Welch then jumps to 2005 when a map leaked to the La Junta Tribune-Democrat revealed an almost-unimaginably huge new land grab by the Army, which had secretly developed an elaborate plan to expand PCMS to seven million acres—roughly ten percent of Colorado's land, bound by Interstate 25 to the west, New Mexico and Oklahoma to the south, and the Arkansas River to the north. More than 17,000 people would be removed from their vacated land.

“This time, though, the Army lost the element of surprise,” Welch writes. “The ranchers and their allies would fight. They formed the Pinon Canyon Expansion Opposition Coalition (PCEOC) and two offshoots, Grasslands Trust and Not One More Acre!, and began drawing up a battle plan.”

Welch proceeds to tell the story through interviews with many of the opposition leaders, all of them longtime residents of southeastern Colorado. None had experience as political organizers. Most were



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The October/November 2014 issue of American Cowboy Magazine discusses the efforts Southeastern Colorado ranchers went through to save their land.

ranchers, and most of their families had been on the same land for generations.

Welch's initial contact was with Joy and Steve Wooten, whose ranch near Kim shares seven miles of fence with the existing PCMS. "Bob Welch lives in the Castle Rock/El Paso County area," Steve said last week. "His family operates a ranch south of Fowler. They were not included in the expansion area, but like the vast majority of residents, they supported the effort to stop expansion. Joy and I met Bob through Joy's photography of working cowboys and western landscapes back in 1998-2000. Our daughters did high school rodeo with Bob's younger brothers. It's a typical nexus of rural families and lifestyle: business, friendship and recreation all blended together."

The Wootens were at the center of the fight. "It will always be one of the life-changing periods for me and my family," Steve says. "Together we developed bonds of loyalty and friendship forged by a common goal. Our diverse backgrounds added to our ability to be proactive on so many issues and projects.

"We traveled across the state of Colorado speaking at clubs, organizations, colleges, universities, supporters' backyards and the state assembly. Several of us spoke to groups in Kansas and New Mexico who felt they had similar challenges to property rights."

Lon Robertson is another Kim rancher, owner of The Kim Outpost, and president of PCEOC. "If you know Steve Wooten," Robertson said last week, "then you are aware he is a keen source of information and a driver behind all of our efforts to stop the Department of Defense (DoD) from taking our land."

Welch traveled to The Kim Outpost for Robertson's story. "So many things happened over the course of the ten years we fought the fight," Robertson says. "So many hours, so many meetings, so many individuals' efforts. Had we not fought the expansion when we first found out about it in 2005, we would not be here now.

"Our generational ranches and the families that run them are still intact. The communities that depend upon them are intact. The 17,000+ people that were going to be displaced are still in their homes. Can you imagine what that impact would have been locally? To the region? To the state?"

Robertson was able to provide Welch with his story's most valuable asset—sumptuous photography that perfectly illustrates the very people and places and land that Welch spends thousands of words sharing with readers.

Professional photographer Kaylinn Gilstrap works in Atlanta, but she's a native daughter of southeastern Colorado. "I spent the first 18 years of my life in Branson," she says, "on the family ranch, JL Cattle Co. In 2005 I moved to Atlanta from Denver where I went to the Art Institute of Colorado for photography.

"In late 2005, I started hearing rumors and eventually asked my dad, Larry Gilstrap, about the Army's site and this 'proposed expansion.' I grew up in the area and hadn't even realized there was an Army training site there. I still remember that conversation with Dad. I expected him to squash my fears and tell

me it was nothing; instead, he told me that the year I was born, 1983, they established the site using eminent domain.

“If you know a rancher, you’re accustomed to hearing worry in their voice: not enough rain, missing cows, sick calves, difficult heifers and the list goes on. This conversation was different. The stakes were my parents’ home, lifestyle, livelihood—the only home I had ever known. I was scared.

“I started watching from afar and it struck me how the Army only talked about the acreage, never the people. I got the idea that I would come back home and photograph people on the land they feared they would lose to the PCMS expansion. I made six trips back home completely devoted to shooting this. I gave all the photos to Lon to use however he could.”

Lon Robertson gave Kaylinn Gilstrap’s entire photo project to Bob Welch, who took it back to American Cowboy and, with art director Eva Young, created dynamic layouts that illustrate the ranchers’ stories intimately and beautifully. The magazine will be a treasured collectable for many area families.

Gilstrap wasn’t the only artist who joined forces in the war against the Army’s land grab. In fact, there were dozens of them, organized by Trinidad artist Doug Holdread, who was chairman of the TSJC art department at the time.

“I organized artists from all over the state to come and paint the affected landscapes,” Holdread says. “We put together an exhibition in Denver. We made money, but more importantly we drew attention to our cause among people who’d never heard of Pinon Canyon.

“I did a lot of the grunt work of plowing through hundreds of pages of DoD documents. They were virtual haystacks, but within them I found a few needles that we were able to use to inflict some pretty effective pricks.

“I learned through my involvement how important the media is to grassroots efforts like ours. We could never have afforded to pay for ads or employ lobbyists, but we did get lots of free press that was generally good old honest reporting that benefitted us greatly. Articles like this one in American Cowboy are worth more than anything that we could ever purchase.”

Welch’s article tells of many more local people who joined the fight, including rancher Grady Grissom—another key player—and ranchers Charles Gyurman and his son Kennie Gyurman, plus filmmaker Jim Bigham, and Not One More Acre! organizer Jean Aguerre.

In the article, Grissom says he learned important lessons. “Be involved in our political process. Before this, voting was the most involved I ever was. Now I care. I’ve learned to become a citizen... Ultimately, our political process worked, exactly the way it should work in a representative government.”

Despite their victory, there’s an underlying unease. “I’ve learned that, like the war on terror, our fight to prevent the militarization of our region will never end,” says Holdread. “We’ll never be able to declare victory as long as defense contractors stand to make billions.”

Robertson agrees. “We’re anxious still, wondering when the next attempt will be coming to take our land or our neighbor’s land. We’ll always be watching, listening, and waiting.”

Bob Welch, in his “From the Editor” column, explains what drew him to the story. “The fact that these ranchers and their allies fought the government wasn’t my inspiration—how they fought was. In a very basic way, they employed the Cowboy Code in everything they did: they were bold and unafraid, used our political process as designed, and changed their circumstances.”

Welch invokes Thomas Jefferson at the end of his article. “Maybe, if we want to see change,” Welch closes, “we all just need to be a little more involved in the political processes in our own backyards. Maybe, like Grissom said, we need to become citizens.”

Copies of the October/November 2014 issue of American Cowboy are available at newsstands or from www.americancowboy.com.