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GUNNISON, COLORADO: COWS OR CONDOS?

By Eric Pooley

Donna Phelps loves a good chat, so when the retired schoolteacher answers the phone one morning at the Gunnison County, Colo., ranch where her husband Duane has been raising cattle since 1958, she is happy to find a former student on the line. But the caller isn't interested in idle talk. Like so many people in the area--a remote sage-and-wildflower valley--the student is in real estate now. She tells Donna that a client from Texas wants to spend \$105,000 on a 35-acre "ranchette" of undeveloped land. Would the Phelpses be interested in selling part of their 508-acre spread?

They could use the money. Their ranch has been profitable in only two of the past 10 years, and Donna, a vivacious 61-year-old, is sick of scraping by. She wants to enjoy retirement with Duane, a soulful, laconic man of 67 who in the past two years has survived four operations and two broken limbs. But Duane is stubborn. His family has been ranching here for more than a century. "I know how I want to die," he says. "Just fall over in my field. That's the best way." Yet he also knows that when his time comes, the couple's three grown children--ranchers who work outside jobs to make ends meet-- could be forced to sell the ranch just to pay the federal estate tax. "We need income," says Donna. Yet she tells the agent she is not selling. "I'd say yes," she admits later, "but the family would outvote me 4 to 1."

The Phelpses are trying to hang on, but many of the 75 other families still ranching in the county are just waiting for the right deal. In the lush valley bottomland along the Gunnison, Slate and East rivers, FOR SALE signs are almost as common as cottonwoods. Countywide, 13,000 acres of ranchland have been sold for development in the past two years; of the 75,000 prime acres that remain, 17,500 are for sale. Development's pace is fastest at the northern head of the valley, where the funky ski town of Crested Butte is a money magnet. Opulent homes necklace its ridges, and a million visitors pass through each year. Though still rural, the county has a choice: either it finds a way to shape the sprawl, channeling development into existing growth areas and preserving open space, or it loses its high-lonesome charm and becomes, like so many Colorado valleys, overbuilt, overcrowded and irrevocably scarred.

Gunnison still has a chance, thanks to an unlikely coalition of conservative ranchers and left-leaning environmentalists who have put aside their cultural differences and teamed up to launch a grass-roots campaign to save ranches from the bulldozers. The Gunnison Legacy Project, as the effort is known, is the brainchild of Susan Lohr, a soft-spoken ornithologist from California, and Bill Trampe, a lean, crusty

rancher whose family has been in the valley for three generations. The bird watcher and the cowboy, as Lohr and Trampe are sometimes called, hope to save 3,000 acres of rangeland in the next year--including half of Duane and Donna Phelps' place--and as many as 20,000 more acres by the year 2002.

With matching-grant money from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), a conservation program funded by the state lottery, they will use land-preservation tools called conservation easements to pay ranchers for the development rights to their property, then place those rights in permanent trusts. By selling development rights instead of the property, ranchers raise capital while saving open space and hanging on to their land. And because the property can never be developed, it loses half its market value. Thus ranchers can suddenly afford to pay taxes and keep the land in the family. Gunnison isn't the first community to launch a land-trust program: 1,200 of them have sprung up so far in the U.S. But unlike most, the Gunnison Legacy is a true grass-roots effort with no involvement from national conservation groups or wealthy landowners seeking tax breaks.

"Ranching is worth preserving not because it's a quaint 19th century agricultural practice," says Lohr, "but because cows are better than condos. Rangeland is crucial wildlife habitat, and tourism depends on pristine views. Bill and I agreed that ranchers deserve to be compensated for the open space they provide."

What's astonishing is that the bird watcher and the cowboy ever began having this conversation. The Old West of ranchers, miners and loggers has been so alienated from the New West of environmentalists, recreationists and urban refugees that bridges between the camps usually get washed out. A culture clash still divides the rock-ribbed citizens of Gunnison, a sleepy city of 5,000 on Highway 50, and the flamboyant ex-hippies and ski bums of Crested Butte, the pastel Victorian resort town 26 miles to the north.

Lohr, 43, a San Franciscan with blond hair and a soft, open manner, moved to Crested Butte from New Hampshire in 1986, when she became director of the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, a high-altitude field station based in the ghost town of Gothic. The federal grazing land around the lab was leased by a "range pool" that included Trampe, now 50, who left college and started ranching in 1967 after his father dropped dead in the field. Trampe's elders in the range pool couldn't fathom the lab's scientists. "To a rancher, it's strange to see somebody crawling around the hillside huntin' bugs," says Trampe.

The two sides were always fighting. When the ranchers were ready to move a herd, for instance, they didn't stop to think what a thousand hooves would do to the tiny sponge traps scientists use to collect invertebrates from beaver ponds. Seeking detente, Lohr and Trampe started talking, and each was surprised by the other's willingness to learn. They began having long discussions about agriculture and the environment. Lohr saw that the area's century-old cattle-rotation system--driving the herds into the high country in summer while growing hay on the valley floor--meshes with the natural ecological cycle, benefiting the land. She married a local plumber and became a board member of the High Country Citizens' Alliance, an influential environmental group, but grew impatient with trust-fund recreationists

who wanted to force cattle out of the high meadows to make room for mountain bikes. Slowly, other enviros came to realize that cows weren't the enemy. A new alliance began to emerge.

Ranchers, who value hard work and fortitude above all else, take the measure of their neighbors slowly, winter by winter. Trampe didn't fully accept Lohr until she joined him on the Upper Gunnison Water Conservancy Board, which is fighting a decade-long court battle to prevent the Denver suburbs from taking Gunnison's water. It wasn't Lohr's eloquence on the subject that broke Trampe's reserve. It was the way Lohr got to the water-board meetings. Since the only road to Lohr's cabin in Gothic was closed from October to June, she had to ski out, an hour's trek to Mount Crested Butte, where she would jump into a Subaru wagon and drive an additional 45 minutes to Gunnison. After the meeting, she would snowshoe home in the dark. "Anybody who lives all winter in Gothic," says Trampe, "is either crazy or all right with me."

Stand in the field beside Trampe's house on a Sunday afternoon in April, and you'll see what's killing ranching. The sport utilities full of skiers fly past on the two-lane country road that leads from Crested Butte to Gunnison. From time to time, a car pulls over and people emerge to drink in the scene--the West Elk Wilderness rising white and jagged above a graceful slope known as Antelope Ridge. It's an astounding vista, and naturally some visitors decide to buy a piece of it, at \$3,000 to \$10,000 an acre.

But Trampe, one of three cash-poor ranchers who own most of the open land between Gunnison and Crested Butte, was not among those selling. "This is home," he says. In the field beside the brick house his father built sits a huge pile of stones, polished smooth by 100 winters, bleached white by 100 years of high-country sun. It was created by Trampe's grandfather, clearing this land for farming and cattle. When Trampe took over the ranch after his father's death 30 years ago, little had changed in the valley. As late as 1990, Trampe could use the road to Crested Butte to drive his herd home from the high pastures. Along the way, the cows rested in midvalley meadows he calls "crucial stepping-stones up the valley floor." The stepping-stones are gone now. In the early 1990s, half a dozen ranches in the midvalley were sold off and subdivided. Standing in his field, Trampe points north, where the land climbs toward Crested Butte, and concatenates the old names: "Mountain Lair. Delmont. Danni. Roaring Judy. Now they're all vacation properties."

So he and Lohr hatched their plan, mapping the valley from Gunnison to Crested Butte and pinpointing what was most at risk. Studying conservation easements, they hit on the idea of paying ranchers for development rights. "We said, 'These preservation tools are great, but we've got to find funding,'" Lohr recalls. "We had a million ideas and no money."

Then, in late 1995, GOCO began identifying Legacy Projects that would preserve land and wildlife. Trampe and Lohr spent 1996 traveling the county, sitting in kitchens drinking coffee and talking about their plan. "This project had to start with ranchers," says Trampe. "Cattlemen don't take kindly to people telling them

what to do." Eventually, 25 ranchers wanted in.

Lohr wrote a formal proposal to GOCO, requesting a \$10 million grant to be matched with \$1.25 million in local money, a sum that could save 20,000 acres. GOCO promised \$1 million to \$2 million for the project's first phase. Now Lohr and Trampe faced another hurdle: Where would they get the local money to match GOCO's grant?

The valley began to rally. Shopkeepers in Crested Butte launched a voluntary donation program: each of their customers could add 1% to their bill, with the proceeds divided between the Crested Butte Land Trust and the Gunnison Legacy. After three months, 38 merchants had joined the program, which was expected to generate \$2,500 a month--far short of the \$125,000 needed to match GOCO's first \$1 million grant.

Shopkeepers in the city of Gunnison were slow to get involved. Some saw the issue as an "up-valley" matter and questioned the need for open-space preservation in a county that is 85% federally owned (even if much of it consists of vertical mountainsides). Others saw the idea as welfare for ranchers--private-property zealots who, now that times were hard, were asking for handouts (even if they would be donating a quarter of their development rights).

But the naysayers failed to carry the day, because something extraordinary had been taking place in the valley. Many of the old adversaries--ranchers in white Stetsons, trust-fund hippies in silk parachute pants, resort developers and local officials--had been sitting around a table, talking out their differences. The Gunnison Valley Forum, as this monthly meeting is called, was launched by Lieut. Governor Gail Schoettler in 1996, when a battle raged over the ski resort's plan to expand onto a second mountain. Eventually, after the resort put its plan on hold, the Forum tackled other issues. At one meeting, rancher and county commissioner Fred Field, a skilled, homespun politician, proposed using a fraction of the local sales tax to back a bond issue for open-space acquisition, the only sure way to raise the money needed to match GOCO's grant. But while the towns of Crested Butte and Mount Crested Butte backed the idea, the Gunnison city council balked--let's keep Gunnison's money in Gunnison, they decided. In response, the county vowed to put the issue before voters this November. "We'll see how serious people are about preserving this valley," says Field.

At a stubborn 35 m.p.h., Duane Phelps steers his pickup along the shoulder of Highway 50. Skiers in SUVs roar past at 70. It's a late-April day shortly before the family will drive its herd up the ancient buffalo trail to the high country (other ranchers now load their cows into trucks). In a battered hat and wire-rim shades, Duane mutters at the cars, picks his moment, then wheels across the road to a corral bisected by the trout-rich Tomichi Creek. "I always wanted to fish that crick the first week of May," he says. "Never had the time."

The truck rumbles into the pasture, a bovine maternity ward. Here a gawky newborn nuzzles its mother;

there a fetal head and two hooves peek from the hindquarters of a cow that's ambling, wholly unconcerned, through the field. Sage grouse--a preposterously showy endangered species--strut and preen on the hillside. While Duane tours the scene in his pickup, his son Brad works from the saddle of a quarter horse. They stop to watch as a cow lies down, her calf beginning to emerge. Finally, with perfect timing and great effort, the cow clambers to her feet and lets gravity deliver the newborn. It is motionless. Duane watches closely as the mother licks mucus from its face. At last, the calf shudders to life; Duane smiles. "Now, tell me," he says, sweeping a leathery hand past cow and calf, up beyond his sage hills to the peaks of Fossil Ridge. "How much did they say this place is s'posed to be worth?"

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