

The Gila Wilderness and a Ranch Family History

By William L. Rice, Terrell T. Shelley and Stephen L. Wilmeth. Photos courtesy Shelley family.

The Prelude

It could be argued that violence in New Mexico in the late 1800s was a deterrent to broader-scale settlement of the state. The lure of California and other western regions became the more friendly destinations. The uncertainty, though, did not deter those who did migrate into what was to become cow country of New Mexico. They were more often than not Texans who had roots in a life that made New Mexico an extension of conditions that they already knew well. Maybe New Mexico was wild and woolly, but its grass offered hope for people who had come to understand the business of raising livestock.

As early as the Civil War, people from Bell County, Texas, had come to know something of what is now the Gila country of Grant County. Stories had been brought home about the land and its landscape. By the 1870s, migration had started. One of the earliest immigrants who would make the Gila home was Peter McKindree Shelley, or, as most people would know him, P.M.

P.M. was not a Texan by birth. He was born in the Cumberland Mountains in Clinton County, Ky., in February 1852. He had come to Texas when he was 10 years old in the midst of the Civil War. By reconstruction, P.M. was involved in the business of raising cattle.

In 1874, he married his childhood sweetheart, Emily Jane York. A story about P.M. suggests that he made up his mind to move West one night when a milk cow grazed out onto the dugout where they were living and fell through the roof into the room where the family was sleeping. A more convincing argument came from P.M.'s brother, Absolan, who had moved north of what is now Cliff, N.M. Absolan wrote to P.M. to convince his brother that the lands of the Gila River country were special.

In 1883, P.M. visited his brother and returned to Texas intent on moving his family to New Mexico Territory. Early in 1884, he and his wife and four children left Texas with 80 head of cattle bound for the Gila. Emily Jane drove the wagon with the kids and P.M. tended the cows.

The trip was no different from other such

moves of that time. It was hard. Near Marfa, Texas, the family ran out of water. Humans, cattle and horses were on the verge of collapse. P.M. got down on his knees and asked

that his family be spared. That afternoon a storm blew up and rained on them. The storm was big enough to run some water, and the animals all got a drink and the water bar-



Peter McKindree and Emily Jane York Shelley, ca. 1892. They married in 1874. A story about P.M. suggests that he made up his mind to move West one night when a milk cow grazed out onto the dugout where they were living in Texas and fell through the roof into the room where the family was sleeping.

rel was filled. The next morning the family proceeded and within a half mile from their camp the country was dry and untouched by the storm.

The little caravan continued on to El Paso and north into New Mexico to a point where the new railroad crossed the Rio Grande. The river was flooding and the cattle and all their possessions were loaded onto rail cars to cross the swollen waters. The Shelleys rode the train to Deming. From there they started north toward Grant County.

North of Deming near Whitewater, a group of ranchers stopped them and told them that no Texas cattle were going to be allowed to go north from that point. They didn't want any cows that carried "Texas Fever" on their ranges. The family was held for two days. On the morning of the third day, P.M. started the cattle north. He met the ranchers and told them that they were going to have to kill him right there because he had no place to go back to and he was going on. He and Emily Jane and four little kids pushed through the group and proceeded north.

Several days later and after five months of travel, the family crossed the Gila River at Cliff and arrived on the banks of Mogollon Creek at the site that was to become the headquarters of the 916 Ranch. There were no corrals, no fences, no wells, no house—nothing but promise. Horses were tied to trees and the first meal was prepared on what has become Shelley land.

The Chase

The site of the first meal became the quarter section of land that was homesteaded and became the nucleus for growth of the 916. It would become the headquarters of a livestock operation that numbered more than 5,000 head of cattle as late as the early '30s. It endured and survived Indian raids, few markets, no infrastructure, drought, floods, blizzards, depredation, depressions, and government agencies.

It was also nearly 50 miles to the nearest town, Silver City. As the ranch was developed, P.M. recognized the need for nearby supplies for himself and other settlers and he became a partner in the Cliff Mercantile Company. He helped ranchers to start keeping their own records and extended credit to many people.

From the original 80 head of cattle, his herd grew. Understanding of conditions of those times are largely gone today, but what little market there was for beef was for two- to four-year-old steers. There was no market for cows, heifers, bulls, and younger steers. All



Lawrence Shelley, grandson of P.M. and Emily Jane, holding mountain lion kitten, ca. 1930.

heifers were kept and herds grew rapidly. From those cattle, many early ranchers of the Southwest expanded their herds.

P.M. became known as a conservationist who knew that bounty that came from the semiarid Gila country would be assured only if the resource was tended and improved. His interest in technical issues of agriculture and stewardship became a lifelong pursuit. From his fields came vegetables and grains; from his orchards came fruit; and from his ranges came the first of the improved English-type

cattle of the Southwest.

The Wilderness

During the first 15 years after their arrival, the operation dealt with the tasks of existing and building. The building meant more than simply adding cattle. It meant raising a family and building basic structures and a way of life. The four children grew up and started their own families. All of them would spend their lives in ranching.

On the ranges of the Gila in those days the

famous LC Cattle Company was the big player in the community. Lyons and Campbell (LC) had made it known that they were going to control southwestern New Mexico from the Rio Grande to the Arizona border and from the Mexican border to the Gila country. When issues came up, P.M. would show up representing himself or he would send a trusted cowboy. The LCs would show up with many cowboys. There is little evidence that major trouble ever developed between the outfits, although the same can't be said for the LCs and other operations. P.M. was respected, but the presence of the LCs shaped the country. The Shelley opportunity for expansion was away from the LC country and that meant the high mountains. The Mogollons and the expanse of country north from Mogollon Creek to the Gila River and Miller Springs on the east and northeast, McKenna Park to the north, and the head of the West Fork of Mogollon Creek to the west, became Shelley range. The country was rugged and

tough. Elevations ran from 5,000 feet at “the river” to more than 10,778 feet at the crest of Mogollon Baldy.

In 1899, 15 years after P.M.'s arrival, a big change loomed. The United States declared that the lands generally known today as the Gila National Forest would be the Gila Forest Reserve. What the Shelleys and their descendants generally knew as the “mountains” or the “wilderness” was indeed going to become a modern wilderness area.

Wilderness Designated

In 1905 all forest reserves were transferred to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service was established. Grazing records began in 1906. Decade by decade, records trace the evolving control of the Forest Service's policies. Although allotment boundaries were established, ranchers were not allowed to fence their allotments until after the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916. Transient sheep and cattle were a big

problem in the years up until that time. Ranchers were encouraged to make water improvements, and special use permits were approved for such purposes.

In 1922, the “Father of American Wilderness,” Aldo Leopold, was on the Gila. Diary records by Gila forester Henry Woodrow indicated he fought fires with Leopold that summer. It was through Leopold's greater efforts that a regional forester, without official congressional approval, declared the nation's first wilderness area, the Gila Wilderness, in 1924 in an internal administrative decision. Its footprint overlaid the majority of the 916 as it existed prior to that date.

Ensuing cattle numbers fluctuated but a notable trend can now be traced. Cattle in the Gila Wilderness began to be reduced. In the decade of the '30s, the allowable animal units within “the McKenna Park” District—the heart of the Gila Wilderness—were reduced from 7,000 to 1,000. From the perspective of history, the federal designation of “wilder-

The 916 Today

The 916 Ranch started in 1884 when Peter McKindree Shelley settled on Mogollon Creek 28 years before New Mexico was admitted to the Union. Lying in the extreme north/northwest corner of Grant County, the ranch, with its backdrop of the Mogollon Mountains, overlooks the county and the Gila

drainage. From that vantage point, it has experienced many changes and yet a visit to the ranch is like stepping back in time.

Over the 124 years of the ranch's history, four men have owned the brand and held the trust as land stewards. Peter McKindree Shelley was the founder. Upon his death in 1935, the ownership passed to his son, Thomas Jefferson Shelley. Tom ran the ranch until 1948 when the ownership passed to his son, Lawrence Hollis Shelley. Tom and his wife Hattie lived out their days in the original

three-room house, which was built next to the original log cabin where they always cooked. Today, years following their deaths, the house and the cabin remain intact complete with dishes, furniture, diaries, and possessions from their lives.

Lawrence and his wife Rosemary built a house under the hill closer to the creek when they took over the ranch. They had three children, Lawrence Hollis Jr., whom they called Buster, Joyce Yvonne, whom they called Tissie, and Terrell Tuck, their youngest. Lawrence was a well-known hunter and county sheriff as well as rancher. He was always an outstanding hand with horses, which was as much a right of passage amongst the Shelleys as a pursuit of life. At the height of the 916 influence, the ranch would consume a ton of horseshoes a year.

Tissie would become Miss Rodeo America in 1963. She followed that with three World Championships, culminating in being crowned World Champion Barrel Racer in 1970.

When Buster was 13 and Terrell was seven, Lawrence sent the boys into the mountains to gather some cows they had left during the previous day's work. As usual, they took two dogs from their hound pack along to keep the dogs in shape. By evening Rosemary was starting to worry when she spied the young cowboys trailing the cows off the mountain. Asked how their day had gone, the boys informed her they'd killed a bear! It



ness” can be associated with the removal of cattle from that range even though years later, in 1964, Congress would promise that grazing would continue in officially designated wilderness areas.

The Crushing Loss

In a letter dated May 18, 1944, then Forest Service Supervisor L.R. Lessel matter-of-factly informed P.M. Shelley’s son and successor, Thomas J. Shelley, that “the range lying east of Shelley Canyon and the main ridge running from the Gila River to Shelley Peak just west of Turkey Creek, and the range lying north of the same ridge from Shelley Peak to 74 Mountain and the forest boundary, has been eliminated from the Mogollon Creek Allotment as nonusable range.” The greater part of nearly seven townships of land that the Shelleys had ranched since before the Gila National Forest was even conceived was eliminated.

The loss was devastating. The Depression debt still burdened the operation; the reduc-

tion of cattle compounded the revenue shortfall; and the death of Peter Shelley in 1935 and all the estate-related obligations further impacted the ranch operation. It was at a time when the 916 and the Shelley family were still on their knees.

The Forest Service summary of why the allotment was reduced indicated that the range was suffering from overuse and that “practically nothing has been done on range improvements for a number of years.” Improvement of the range would come “by use as uniform as possible in the higher country.” It went on to describe that the majority of the problem was “the lower third of the range,” which indicated that pressure on the Mogollon Creek side of the Mogollon face was where the majority of the overuse was occurring. What was the Forest Service’s action? It eliminated all the upper country it noted as being the solution for mitigating the overuse problem! That upper country was none other than the “wilderness” that the

Shelleys had interpreted as the Gila Wilderness established in 1924.

The Modern Wilderness

The question begs to be asked if the Shelley history is unique in the history of the Gila. Dr. John Fowler, NMSU, compiled a history of Gila livestock grazing for testimony to the Public Land Grazing Task Force in 2000. Fowler’s work shows that in 1960 there were 24 active allotments within or adjacent to the wilderness core of the Gila. By 2000 only 12 of those allotments were active. The 12 inactive allotments were completely destocked and the remaining 12 had been destocked by a whopping 87 percent! The latter allotments were arrayed in the Fowler work to have a 1960 allowance of 79,290 AUMs while the same 2000 numbers indicated 10,533. All cattle had been removed from the actual wilderness district by 1977. Fowler attempted to qualify market or drought indices that would suggest that the decreases were related to physical or market-related issues. He could find no such correlations. The decreases had to come from other factors, the primary of which was Forest Service management even though the Wilderness Act clearly allows grazing to be continued where it existed at the time of the signing of the act in 1964.

The Wilderness Specter

The Gila National Forest and its designated wilderness of the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness areas is a 3.3 million-acre journey into the past, and it is a peek into the future. With the Forest Service’s intention to eliminate certain roads, it will be managed ever more like a wilderness in its entirety, making the growing use of the reference to a single wilderness area rather than two distinct wilderness areas a reality. It is also the testing ground for the reintroduction of the wolf, and shots are now being fired across the bow of land-management agency planning schemes that the grizzly bear will be next to be reintroduced into this Southwest expanse of land.

When Peter McKindree Shelley brought Emily Jane and the kids to Mogollon Creek, he was exactly what Aldo Leopold described when he wrote years later of how true wilderness areas were the domain of the horseman. All other access had been largely halted by sheer distance and isolation from the outside world. Likewise, Leopold contemplated how wilderness lives and the landscape became intertwined even in naming physical features. Names and places of

seems the dogs had jumped a bear in the canyon where the cows were and trailed the bear around and right back by the boys. The only elaboration she could get from them was from Terrell, who told her he refused to get off his horse and shoot the bear. “I’m not about to get off this horse and get eaten!” he had told his older brother.

In 1972, with that same kind of western grit, Terrell would become the fourth Shelley to assume ownership of the 916. He and his wife Charlene still live on Mogollon Creek in the house that Lawrence built in 1948. They have an outfitting business and lease or oversee three other ranches in addition to running the home place. Whereas “waters are run” on four-wheelers on the other ranches, horse tracks will still dominate at home. All their cattle are still branded 916.

In a deal cut with the Forest Service, the ranch recently completed the repair of a number of concrete dams on its wilderness allotment. A total of 250 mule loads of concrete were packed and then mixed by hand. In the same agreement, the Forest Service was obligated to pack in barbed wire for fencing. The 36 mule loads of wire were not packed. They



ABOVE: Keith Wilkerson, Dale Shelley and Jill Black gather cattle, summer 2008. OPPOSITE: Terrell Shelley with grandkids Jake and Jarrin, who were helping at the home ranch.

were slung in by helicopter. There remains a disconnect between what is expected of Gila allotment holders and what the Forest Service ultimately demands of itself, but history has proven that to always be the case.

The 916 is one of two ranches along the Mogollon front that is held in any form of historical continuity by the original owners. It will not soon fade into history as so many other Gila National Forest ranches have, because of economics, environmental politics, and Forest Service policy.

“Not on my watch will it go away,” Terrell says as emotion and pride flush his face. “Not on my watch.” ■

those wilderness areas were creations of people who rode those points and saddles and described them in terms of events or some metaphorical insight.

In the Gila—Corral, Trail, Rough, Davis, Sycamore, Brushy, Hell's, Manzanita, Utah

to the human endeavors, strife, and heroic commitment that took place in our own recorded history of that land.

Economics will drive changes and our government will again act as agent of change, but there is no guiding document within our



Log cabin and three-room house, 916 Ranch, ca. 1900. BELOW: Shelley range today.

Bill, Wild Cow and others—are canyons that have been dubbed with eternal nomenclature provided by Peter Shelley. Like the horseman of Leopold's wilderness, he didn't sit around naming places and points for enjoyment. Rather, those were places of duties, responsibilities, and investments that had to be tended and managed. It was a simple necessity to create a system of familiarity to work, direct, and manage the ranch. In



the process, he became as much a part of the land as the names of the physical landscape.

The fear of the modern wilderness movement is more than a story of the contempt for outside forces seeking to fulfill an expanded agenda. It is the systematic removal of the social fabric of the lands so designated without regard

American history that suggests that the destruction of human endeavor should be accepted and condoned on the basis of idealistic change for some greater good. Isn't our Constitution predicated on the notion of individual rights? The Gila was the first of the American wilderness designations. It is also the model that those of us on the Peter Shelley side of the story fear for those like him who are here today and might, perhaps, be here tomorrow. ■

The authors of this article are descendants of Peter McKindree Shelley. William Rice is a great-grandson, a former deputy chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and former deputy chief of the NRCS. He resides in Colorado. Terrell Shelley is the youngest surviving great-grandson and the owner and continuing steward of the 916 Ranch. He lives at the site on Mogollon Creek where the Shelleys camped and cooked that first meal nearly 125 years ago. Stephen Wilmeth is

a great-great-grandson of Peter Shelley. He ranches in Dona Ana and Luna counties, N.M., and makes the Mesilla Valley his home. Steve's lower country lies near the route that the Shelleys traveled from the flooding Rio Grande Valley across the flats to Deming on the railroad in 1884.

PEOPLE FOR PRESERVING OUR WESTERN HERITAGE

PFPOWH is an organization with a coalition of more than 700 ranches, farms, and other businesses and organizations opposed to wilderness and NCA designations proposed on more than 400,000 acres of federal lands in Doña Ana County, N.M.

New Mexico wilderness proponents have listed 164 areas across the state, totaling three million acres they claim have wilderness potential, in addition to 1.6 million acres already designated as wilderness by Congress.

PFPOWH has developed an alternative proposal, which was introduced by Rep. Steve Pearce in June as the Doña Ana County Planned Growth, Open Space and Rangeland Preservation Act of 2008 (HR6300). Rangeland Preservation Areas (RPAs) would replace eight Wilderness Study Areas. The lands could never be sold or traded by the Bureau of Land Management and would remain as permanent open space. Drilling and mining would be prevented. Access would remain open on existing roads. Off-road traffic would be prevented, with exceptions for Border Patrol, law enforcement, and approved range improvements. Livestock grazing would continue under multiple-use-based management. Retention of existing access would allow ranchers to continue maintenance of the water and other improvements.

With wilderness designations, closure of roads and severely restricted use of vehicles and equipment, viable ranching could not survive. All water for livestock, as well as wildlife in the areas, exists only through the efforts of the ranchers.

Doña Ana County shares its southern boundary with Mexico. Areas designated as wilderness would become, like some areas in Arizona, funnels for human and drug trafficking and uncontrolled garbage dumps along the border.

PFPOWH hopes to gain coalition members in New Mexico and across the West in support of its commonsense alternative to overly restrictive wilderness designations. We are working to influence Congress to consider proposals other than wilderness designations. Our concept of Rangeland Preservation Areas can be adapted to local circumstances elsewhere in the West. Learn more on its Web site at www.peoplefor-westernheritage.com. Please click on "Take Action" to join our coalition!

—Tom Cooper, chairman