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Post by Frank DuBois, June 22, 2014

Issues of concern to people who live in the west: property rights, water rights, endangered species, livestock grazing, energy production, wilderness and western agriculture. Plus a few items on western history, western literature and the sport of rodeo...Frank DuBois served as the NM Secretary of Agriculture from 1988 to 2003. DuBois is a former legislative assistant to a U.S. Senator, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior, and is the founder of the DuBois Rodeo Scholarship.

A Century and thirty years

The 916 Ranch

The Shelley Legacy

By Stephen L. Wilmeth



There are a number of us ... descendants of Peter McKindree Shelley.

He created a western heritage the immensity of which is now only being understood. It started when the milk cow fell through the roof of their dugout in Bell County, Texas. It was then he told his wife, Emily Jane (York) Shelley that it was time to look for another place with a future.

Their journey would take them to New Mexico Territory. They would arrive on Mogollon Creek in what would become Grant County. They tied their horses to trees and left their herd of 80 cows to graze in the flat on the bench above the creek. The same milk cow was head down in grama grass.

She had been driven ... home.

A little boy

When Peter and Emily Jane arrived, their four children were with them. Ellie Josephine, Mary Belle, and John William were all born in Nolanville, Texas. Youngest son, Thomas Jefferson, had been born in Belton, Texas in the process of moving westward. Tom was three years old when the family arrived on Mogollon Creek.

He remembered the burden it had been on his mother. "The three other children were big enough to be of help to mother, but I was just too small and would be in the way," he said. "It turned out to be an awful long and hard trip on all of us."

With no room in the wagon, the children mostly walked. There were repeated times when they had to endure up to three days without water. At one point, "the stock were near dead" when "one small cloud came up and it rained awful hard". The stock drank their fill and more, and the water barrel was filled.

"We started the unknown trail again," Tom continued.

"It was the United States government that would be the ultimate foe and manmade disaster."

His memories of the trip thereafter were mixed. He remembered cattle running to the Pecos on the verge of another near death drought episode. He spoke of flooding of the Rio Grande at El Paso, and he remembered being held up by New Mexican stockmen north of Deming threatening to kill their cattle because of the fear of "Texas fever".

That event has been preceded by a family tragedy in Deming (where the family had off loaded cattle from the rail cars that had been commissioned to haul their stock across the swollen Rio Grande) when a favorite dog was run over by the train. The kids were heartsick as they trailed the cattle northward toward the Gila River.

Several days were taken up in the standoff with the cowmen. On the morning they continued, Peter stood in front of them and told them he was going north.

“If you are going to kill me, go ahead” he began. “Because I have only one way to go ... I have nothing to go back to.”

The family proceeded. They arrived in the fall of 1884 at what to this day is the headquarters of the 916 Ranch. Their nearest neighbor would be their aunt and uncle seven miles away.

The first structure was a dugout. That was followed by a log cabin and then a three room framed house was built in 1887. When she got to move into the frame house, “Mother knew she had a mansion,” Tom would write.

Tom Shelley would experience the horror of an Apache raid when he was four. He would kill a deer with rock when he was six, and he would be working full time with the cowboys at ten. When he was 14, he was on a roundup high in Pine Creek in LC country when he jumped a maverick bull that had been run by many good cowboys, but was never penned. He ran at the bull and got his rope around his horns only to have it break when he tried to trip the six year old brute.

He retied a honda, rebuilt his loop, and continued running the bull eastward onto PIT ranch country where he got another shot at him at caught him around the neck. With the short rope he couldn't trip him, but finally got him choked down so that he got him tied.

He started a fire and put the 916 brand on him right there.

When three other cowboys rode up to help him, he knew they would report to the range boss, Jim Windham, that he had branded a maverick without authority. Jim never said anything. When Windham was told it was said he only smiled. If that Shelley kid could outride the best and get that bull ... he earned the right to put his brand on him.

History

Under Peter Shelley's 50 year watch, the 916 grew to over seven townships and 5000 head of cattle in some of the most beautiful, but roughest country in the Southwest. Peter acquired farms on the Gila River and started the Cliff Mercantile Company, the primary provider of general goods and hardware in the area.

Tom married Hattie Hooker in 1900. They would have nine children.

Emily Jane died in 1920 and Nellie Booth would become Peter's second wife.



"Chase with Grandpa Terrell"

Throughout the first 45 years of the 916 existence, the times would be terribly hard, but the ranch would be the focal point of the family, the purpose of extraordinary effort, and home. Whereas Peter was truly a community builder, Tom and Hattie were glue that kept the ranch together. That would be tested under many assaults that included not just the stark terror of the early days, but drought, the absence of markets and the distance to anywhere, but those were just the things that required endurance and perseverance. It was the United States government that would be the ultimate foe and manmade disaster.

It all started with the drought of 1928. That would be made infinitely worse by the stock market crash and the Great Depression. Peter continued to carry debt and his extension of credit to the community through the mercantile put them in dire straights. The loan company called his loan and “it took a big bunch of cattle to pay (the demand)”. Pairs bringing \$74 in 1928 brought \$12.50 two years later. The cattle sold to cover the debt came from what the family had long referred to as the “Wilderness”. That was the area of the Gila where Aldo Leopold had observed the Shelleys with fascination and became infatuated by their use of the name and the concept. He prevailed on Forest Service administration and the area was designated the first wilderness in the United States by administrative action in 1924.

In 1935, Peter Shelley died and his estate settlement was onerous. Tom was appointed administrator and he oversaw the splitting and distribution of the assets to his siblings. By that time, Tom and Hattie's five boys (Edwin, Worthington, William, Lawrence, and, the youngest and adored, Vernon) were the labor force. They worked the entire decade of the '30s without a formal pay check. With the sales of more farmland and all remaining cattle off the Wilderness, the estate was finally settled.

Then the crushing death of Vernon took place. He died of complications of appendicitis. On top of everything else that happened, the loss of Vernon just devastated the family.

With no cash but having remaining assets, the early war years with improving markets began a healing process. By 1943, the Shelleys were signaling they were going to start restocking the Wilderness. What they had done to survive, the removal

and sale the wilderness cattle to cover debt and obligations, was going to go for naught. The Forest Service demonstrated its propensity of unlawful mission drift long before the term wilderness was elevated to environmental Valhalla.

In action that can only be described as tactical malfeasance, the agency disallowed the restocking. In fact, they countered and evicted the Shelleys in 1944 from heritage ranges they had occupied for 60 years. They weren't about to allow cattle back on wilderness lands that had been destocked.

To add devastation to insult, the agency ushered forth a writ to remove all their cattle for the 1945 season. In the midst of war and at a time of meat rationing, the Shelleys would be forced to vacate without recourse, without forewarning, and without compensation. A taking of historic proportions was mandated on a family that was poorly equipped to defend itself.

A rolling tide of tragedy and fate and agency tyranny swept them aside as if they had never existed.

Perseverance and the celebration of 130 years

Told in its entirety, the rest of the story is truly an American tragedy.

What can be celebrated is the perseverance and tenacity of the 916 through the Shelley legacy. It has been held by only four owners since 1884. Peter McKindree and his son, Tom, are noted hereinabove. Tom's son, Lawrence, owned the ranch from 1946 until his death in 1972. At that time, the ranch was passed to Lawrence's youngest son, Terrell.

Terrell, born in 1947, remains the steward and the patriarch of the ranch today. He and his wife, Charlene, have two children, Gerrell and Tonya. The family, with next generation children, remains engaged in the business of ranching.

There is something extraordinary about a 130 year ranch history.

Knowing Peter and Tom only through verbal history, and remembering Lawrence only in snippets of memory, Terrell is the only Shelley patriarch that I know in adult terms. I would assess him, though, as a combination of all three of his predecessors. He demonstrates the business acumen of Peter, the thriftiness of Tom, and the physical skills of his father. He is probably the best manager of the group. In order to exist and excel as a federal lands rancher as he has from 1972 up to the present, he has had to be. Few if any of his contemporaries have succeeded much less expanded and thrived with a wilderness component.

He has taught us the value of "hitting singles and doubles" as the only route of success through the federal obstacle course. If there is a better cowman under these conditions, I don't know who that would be.

Another little boy

One hundred and thirty years after three year old Tom Shelley arrived with his parents on the banks of Mogollon Creek to start the 916 legacy, there is another soon to be three year old little boy following his 'Grandpa' around these days. Chase Dobrinski, Tonya's youngest child, displays a river of 'ranch' running through his being. In a recent branding, Chase was not going to be denied his place on the crew. He was there alongside Grandpa on the little bay horse as they put pairs back out and insisted on hauling bulls later with his uncle, Gerrell.

Word was he slept well that night.

There are more of us than just Peter, Tom, Lawrence, and Grandpa Terrell hoping that Chase has the eventual opportunity of maintaining the focal point of the family, the purpose of a continuing, extraordinary effort, and home ... on the 916.

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. "A century and thirty years is a celebration for the entire cattle industry of New Mexico. Terrell Shelley gets my nomination as the next Cattleman of the Year."



After the branding Chase chomps on a mountain oyster