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Jim and his "incredible wife," Daniela, romancing the next generation—Savanna—on the Ho well Place.

Coming Home to Colorado— **A Sense of Place**

by Jim Howell

I believe that human beings need to have a sense of place. For most of our history, humans were essentially confined to the geographical boundaries of the water catchment in which their tribe or clan hunted and gathered. Even after the domestication of the horse and the beginning of agriculture, most of us seldom ventured beyond the limits of our village environs. Imagine how intimate those hunters, gatherers, herders, and early day farmers were with every minute detail of the landscape in which they made their living. Their beliefs, identities, language, values, customs, games, stories, livelihoods—indeed, their entire culture—were directly tied to the land, to every bend in the creek, every sweet spot in the grassy meadow, every shady grove, every rock and boulder. They knew their land. It was there *their* place.

In today's ridiculously fast-paced and hyper-mobile world, most of us don't even know what species of grass grows in our front yard, how old the trees are that line the street, or even how much annual rainfall our neighborhood can expect to receive over the course of a year. Even those of us making our living on the land are typically ignorant of nature's intricacies.

But so what? Why do we need to know, understand, appreciate, and truly value the details, the nuances, of our surroundings? Why must we have a sense of place? I think that to deeply know something is to love it. When we love something, we do all that's in our power to ensure its well being, to nurture it toward its highest potential. When we have a sense of place, we love our place. If we each love our places, the human race will endure.

That's a lot of poetic rambling. What I'm really trying to do here is set the stage for the rest of this article, because it's about my place, my family's place, my ancestors' place.

This and a series of future articles will highlight the ranches that host the Savory Center's Ranch and Rangeland Manager Training Program. My family's ranch in western Colorado is one of those places.

A Little Howell History

My great grandfather and four of his brothers moved to Colorado's western slope in the 1880s—straight from the lush pastures of southern

England. They were carpenters in the old world, but came to the newly opened West hoping to become ranchers and farmers. Only two persisted: my great granddad George, and great, great uncle John. The rest eventually headed home for the familiarities of England. That was *their* place. John never raised a family, so George's line (of which my daughter Savanna is the most recent arrival) is the only Colorado survivor.

Sometime around 1912, George eventually settled in Bostwick Park, an irrigated farming community just east of the town of Montrose. They raised wheat, barley, alfalfa, and lots of potatoes, and ran sheep in the surrounding mountains in the summer. My granddad Gilbert grew up there, as did my dad, Jim. In 1937, Gilbert had managed to put together sufficient resources to purchase four sections (one section is 640 acres, or 260 ha) of mountain pasture. Two sections were ten miles (16 km) up the state highway from Bostwick Park, averaging about 7,700 feet (2,350 m) above sea level. That part of the ranch has always been called Cerro, which means *small mountain* in Spanish. The other two sections were 15 miles further east, and nearly 2,000 feet (610 m) higher, and it was dubbed The Blue. The diversified cropping and livestock ranch was good to my family. They didn't get rich, but they survived and led meaningful lives for many years.

My granddad Gilbert was a bit of a slave driver, however, and my dad, being an only child, got his butt worked from the time he was four till the day he left for college. Unfortunately, my granddad never heard Joel Salatin's spiel about "romancing the next generation into agriculture." When my dad received a scholarship to play football at the University of Colorado, he left the ranch for good. He majored in physical education and minored in history, and ended up landing a job as a schoolteacher and coach in Orange County, California, after graduation. At that point Orange County was mostly citrus groves, dairy farms, and strawberry fields. By the time I came along in 1968, it was major suburbia.

Back in Colorado, with no heir apparent, my granddad reluctantly sold his cows and the farm in Bostwick Park, but held onto three of the four sections of mountain summer pasture, which he began leasing to

area ranchers. My dad and mom were both school teachers, which freed us up to head back to the high country during each summer vacation. From my very earliest memories, The Blue and Cerro were my places. During the school year in California, I longed to be back in the mountains, and I loathed the artificial surroundings of the Los Angeles basin. I dreamed constantly of reestablishing the Howell family back in Colorado.

New Beginnings

In 1996, at the age of 27, I had graduated from college, married my incredible wife, Daniela, and managed farms and ranches in regions ranging from the Mediterranean-climate coast of California to non-brittle east Texas to the Chihuahu Desert of southwestern New Mexico. Daniela and I had also traveled extensively through Africa, South America, New Zealand, and Australia, studying and learning from some of the world's great grassland managers, most of them successful practitioners of Holistic Management. In 1996, the lease term on our ranch in Colorado was also expiring, and Daniela and I decided we were ready to branch out on our own and take over, to once again make The Blue and Cerro "The Howell Place."

It was the biggest, most consciously holistic decision we had made so far as a couple. Without the clarity of purpose we gained from our holistic goal, and without the skills gained from practicing Holistic Management on the Savory Center's learning site, the High Lonesome Ranch, we probably never would have made that jump. Our ranch is small—just under 2,000 acres (800 ha)—and is covered in deep snow for half the year. Cerro is lucky to receive 14 inches (355 mm) of precipitation in a year. The Blue might get 20 inches (500 mm), but only has about 100 frost-free days a year. We no longer had the valley farm to grow hay and cash crops, so how were we going to make a living?

Six years later, we're still in the process of figuring that out, but without the confidence instilled in us by Holistic Management, we most likely never would have tried to figure it out in the first place, and my lifelong dream would have gone unrealized. We officially took over in 1997, so this summer marks our sixth year back on the ranch. For the past four years, we have also leased our neighbor's 300-acre (121-ha) flood-irrigated ranch, and are actively trying to lease more neighbors' places. We've been able to turn a profit each year with three main enterprises—custom cattle grazing, big game outfitting, and small-scale forestry.

High Country Grazing Planning

Our grazing season begins in late May/early June and, if it's been a

good rainfall summer and the snow stays away, can last into mid-November. Up until the summer of 2001, we ran primarily yearling cattle on the gain for \$.25 to \$.27/pound. With the neighbor's irrigated place, we managed to pull 500 yearling equivalents through each season, but with variable results. The years of 1998 and 2000 saw pretty scarce rainfall, especially the latter, and we learned that even with good grazing planning, it's tough to get great gains on growing steers without a little help from Mother Nature. Those bad years saw gains of 13 to 15 pounds/day (about .6 kg) over a 125-day season. In the good years of '97 and '99, gains were right at 2 pounds (just under 1 kg). Without careful grazing planning, we're sure those tough years would have been even tougher. Like most of our neighbors, we'd have run out of grass a lot quicker and been shipping in August instead of October.

The last two years we've been running cow/calf pairs for two different owners, getting paid on a per-pair/month basis. Potential income isn't as great as with yearlings in the good years, but it's a lot better than with yearlings in the bad years. Not having to worry about "whether the yearlings are gaining" minimizes our stress levels, too. From an economic standpoint of production/acre, we are doing well. We are running close to five times the stocking rate permitted on adjacent

public land grazing permits, and two to three times what our neighbors on private land are supporting.

We use a lot of permanent and portable electric fence in our grazing management. We keep grazing periods short—half a day to three days usually—and stock density as high as practicality allows (around 10 to 20 stock units per acre on the dryland areas, and about 40 per acre on the irrigated ground). Our ranch is fairly brittle, cold steppe/alpine grassland sort of country. We have predictable spring green up on very high quality

perennial cool season grasses after snowmelt, but spring and summer precipitation is typically erratic and minimal, which keeps growth rates slow and forage accumulation difficult. Because of those tough conditions, we can't plan to graze our non-irrigated, dryland pastures more than once during the growing season, because our grasses just don't fully recover from a severe defoliation within the same year. Our monitoring is telling us that up to two years of recovery may be periodically necessary to build up a bank of older organic matter to serve as a source of litter. To that end, each year we now plan to give 20 percent of the ranch the entire year off, which results in a two-year recovery period. This 20 percent will vary from year to year, so that over the course of five years, each pasture will have been able to experience this extended recovery period.



Participants in the Center's 2001 Ranch and Rangeland Manager Training Program having a discussion on riparian management at Little Blue Creek, up on The Blue.

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A Sense of Place

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Trees, Hunts, and Retreats

In addition to moving cows, fences, and water, we also spend quite a bit of time managing our forest on The Blue. We have mixed stands of aspen, Engleman spruce, blue spruce, sub alpine fir, and Douglas fir. My granddad Gilbert had the occasional logging crew come in and spot log through the years, but they mostly pulled out the big Doug fir trees, leaving the rest behind. Without occasional fire or severe browsing by wild or domestic herbivores, however, forest stands in this part of the world soon become overgrown and stagnant. This was the case on most of our forested ground when we took over in '97—lots of small to medium sized spruce and fir and very little to no understory. The only exception was a 200-acre (81 ha) patch that burned in the 1920s and is now dominated by aspen with a fantastic understory of grasses, sedges, and forbs.

The rest of it, however, needed some major work, so we have been selectively cutting each year to move the forest closer to our landscape description, to create a more valuable understory grazing and browsing resource for cattle and wildlife, and to earn some solar dollars.

The first three years we contracted a small logging crew to come in and do the job for us. We hired a consulting forester, explained to him what we were trying to create, and he and I marked all the trees to be removed. For the past three years, my dad and I (with a small tractor

and chainsaw) have been doing all the work—marking, cutting, skidding, and decking. We have a man with a self-loading truck to haul them to town. Most go for saw logs for dimension lumber, but now that we have worked our way through much of the decades of backlogged timber accumulation, we are starting to look for other higher value markets, such as house logs for log home construction. We've also harvested and marketed small trees for landscaping and aspen poles for corral and fence construction.

Our last and most lucrative (for the time it takes) money-making enterprise is our hunting business. We have outstanding populations of Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer, and we bring in three groups of hunters during the fall rifle seasons. Our hunters are all good sportsmen, they are meat hunters first, and they have a strong environmental ethic. They share our values, and "our place" is becoming "their place" as well. They come for a complete outdoor experience in a pristine environment,

mixed in with good food and wine and lively campfire storytelling.

Those three enterprises keep us pretty busy, but we are slowly expanding into a fourth—wilderness camping retreats and educational seminars. We have run four "practicums" so far (in the areas of policy, business planning, facilitation, and team work), bringing Holistic Management educators, practitioners, and enthusiasts together at our summer camp for three days of intense learning. The Savory Center held its first Ranch and Rangeland Manager Training Program at our camp last year and is coming back this year. A new addition to our camping facilities—which already included an outdoor kitchen, shower, deluxe outhouse, and hot water—is the new *cabaña* or *banda* we are building out of our spruce and aspen. The new *banda*, and in fact the whole camp setting, has been inspired by our adventures to safari camps in eastern and southern Africa.

We typically have several groups of friends and family come for visits during the summer. We work them into our daily ranch job

routine, go for occasional exploratory hikes, and go fishing in the evening. They frequently claim their getaway to our place is a summer highlight, and that they'd expect to pay for that sort of experience anywhere else. So we're going to take their advice and start to market our camp and ranch as a rustic ranch vacation destination. We are only planning to attract four or five groups per summer for up to a week at a time. We deeply value our private family time; so we don't want to overdo it with guests. As the days and years go by, our commitment to and love for our little piece of the world grows stronger and deeper. My granddad



Cattle after just having been moved onto a new patch of grass for the day. On the irrigated ground we're moving the herd daily and rationing the forage as tightly as possible (with a combination of permanent and portable electric fence) without damaging cattle production. As of press time in late July, our grazing plan is still on track during our area's worst drought on record.

and dad taught me a lot about our land as I was growing up, but I notice new details of nature's patterns every day. They are things I've been looking at all my life, but for some reason just never noticed. I'm realizing that it's going to take the rest of my life to really *know* our land, to be able to see it in detail, and to be able to translate those new insights into practical lessons for better decision-making. Daniela and I will try to pass our knowledge onto Savanna (and hopefully a future sibling), and then she'll be able to build on that foundation as she matures and potentially takes over the ranch (if that's what she chooses).

The way I see it, that sort of accumulated knowledge, built upon through the generations, is essential. It's the sort of knowledge that bonds human beings to the soils, grasses, trees, bugs, birds, and beasts from which they derive their sustenance. It is that knowing, that loving, that yields a sense of place.