

LAND & LIVESTOCK



From Rocky Rangeland to Pretty Pasture— **Working Together on the James Ranch**

by Jim Howell

Lots of things have been written about the James Family—patriarchs David and Kay, daughter Jennifer and husband Joe, daughter Julie and husband John, son Dan and wife Becca, son Justin and wife Cindy, and daughter Cynthia and husband Robert, plus a whole herd of grandchildren—and the James Ranch. The James Bunch themselves are frequently featured speakers at Holistic Management get-togethers, cattlemen group meetings, and various other venues dealing with matters of the West. All this attention is well-deserved, because these folks have pulled off an almost too-good-to-be-true list of accomplishments.

Sustainable Development

The James Ranch is the last intact tract of real ranchland in the Animas Valley—the majestic red-cliffed canyon that slices into the San Juan Mountains, just north of Durango, Colorado. The rest of this natural paradise has been morphed into a hodgepodge of human artifacts, from trailer parks to condos to golf courses to obscenely colossal trophy homes.

But the James Family is not comprised of dreamy, purist ranchers. Don't get me wrong, that element exists among them, but these folks are also real world businesspeople. Back in the '70s, with five growing kids, a crash in the cattle market, exploding interest rates, and lots of money tied up in breeding purebred cattle, Dave and Kay were forced to pull back and reassess their

resource base. Like most of the rest of the owners of the Animas Valley, they realized that in a changing West, their primary asset was scenery. With their hearts in the valley and strong ties to their community, selling out to developers wasn't an option, but neither was business-as-usual.

So the James' became their own developers, and determined that if part of the ranch had to be sacrificed to a housing tract, then it would be done right. The south extreme of the ranch was split off, and winding roads, ponds, and abundant landscaping with native aspen and spruce trees replaced 110 acres (45 ha) of cow pasture. As lots were sold over the years, an attractive mountain community evolved. For a subdivision, it turned out about as pretty as they come. And, partly because of the revenue generated by the subdivision, the rest of the ranch—450 irrigated acres (180 ha) to the immediate north—has been able to endure as verdant green pasture dotted with handsome red cattle. The fact that the James' have bucked the trends and kept their piece of the puzzle ecologically intact, agriculturally productive, and responsibly developed is a huge success story in and of itself.

Family Enterprises

But, that's just the beginning. Rampant subdivision of the West's most pretty and productive spots, and the associated fragmentation, is an agonizing problem.

Equally as challenging is family fragmentation. Ranching families themselves have long struggled with maintaining intergenerational continuity on the land. As keystone elements of any whole, the (dauntingly difficult) people part has to be functionally working for long term sustainability, but the human stuff is really hard to get right. It's one thing to figure out how to get along and want to stay together, quite another to create a viable economic niche for each family member that wants to stay. Both are necessary to keep families intact and on the land.

The James Bunch has figured (or, more accurately, continues to figure) out how to do this. Three families of the second generation—John and Julie, Jennifer and Joe, and Dan and Becca—are living on the ranch and making their livings. John and Julie have taken over (actually, have purchased from Dave and Kay) the ranch's tree farm and landscaping enterprise (an offshoot business which resulted from the subdivision years). Dan and Becca have built a New Zealand-style dairy barn and cheese-making plant. They seasonally milk on the order of 20 pasture-fed Jersey cows, and convert nearly all of their production into specialty cheeses, most of which is sold directly to customers at farmers' markets, the on-farm produce stand, natural food



A group of coming 2-year-old steers and heifers on the home ranch near Durango. These cattle are heading out of winter and ready to pile on the pounds with the green grass of spring.

stores, or directly to restaurants. Whey, a by-product of the cheese-making process, is fed to hogs (which are marketed under the catchy label “Whey Good Pork”). Jennifer and Joe operate a massive market garden, raising a huge variety of specialty vegetables. They sell the fruits (veggies) of their labor to the same folks (and then some) who buy cheese, pork, and beef.

Dave and Kay are in charge of the direct market beef enterprise. Kay keeps track of and moves inventory. Dave helps out with marketing by telling stories and putting on a friendly smile at the farmers market, but most of his time is spent on the production side of things, ensuring that a quality product reaches their customers’ plates. This is a daunting task, and even now, 14 years after diving into this commitment, Dave is still tweaking his production model.

Before I get too carried away, I need to make a minor disclaimer. The James Family is exceptional by nearly every measure, but they’re still human beings, and they struggle with the same human issues that we all deal with. It’s not all roses, and they don’t try to hide this fact. Differences of opinion are common, the broad range of personalities doesn’t always jive, and values aren’t uniformly shared. Lots of families never proactively deal with these sorts of challenges and end up going their separate ways. But the James Family is so driven by their love of the land, each other, and their way of life, that no squabble or interfamily issue has proven insurmountable. A clear, shared holistic goal, and good systems of communication are key. Synergizing as a family doesn’t just happen. It takes work, deliberate effort, and intent.

Expanding the Bovine Base

In the mid-’90s, and after a good grounding in the fundamentals of Holistic Management, Dave decided he was ready to branch out of the bucolic Animas Valley, take on the management of some serious real estate, and expand the scale of the cattle enterprise (Dave’s true passion). Kay backed her husband’s big vision (for the most part), and they initially ended up with one of the West’s most challenging chunks of topography—50,000 acres (20,000 ha) of rocks, canyons, rocks, mesas, rocks, cliffs, rocks, inaccessible benches, and more rocks. This winter grazing permit, administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), surrounds the thriving town of Slick Rock, comprised of an abandoned post office and diner, and smack dab in southwestern Colorado’s most isolated corner. This winter grazing option would free up pasture back in the Animas Valley (that was formerly hayed to winter beef cows) to grass finish yearling and 2-year-old steers.

A few years later, two other winter permits were added to the James Ranch land base. These included 113,000 acres (45,200 ha) of sand and blackbrush in southeastern Utah administered by both the BLM and the Utah State Land Department and a 10,000-acre (4,000-ha) chunk called Indian Hills not too far from Slick Rock, straddling a gouge in the earth fittingly named Disappointment Valley. They also obtained one heckuva a good 45,000-acre (18,000-ha) summer grazing permit (administered by the U.S. Forest Service). These permits gave added flexibility to winter grazing options, and enabled Dave to devote the 450 irrigated acres near Durango to 100 percent grass finishing, since the cows could now summer in the mountains.

That all might sound pretty slick, but figuring out the right combination

to make it all work has been a Herculean effort. The logistics of moving cattle through and between all this country has proven tougher than anticipated. But Dave, along with hired man Colby Wells, think they’ve about got it figured out. First, they’ve recently decided to simplify their lives and sell the big desert permit in Utah. The cost of trucking to and from this unit, as well as the challenges of managing such a massive tract of land, was becoming too much to bear. By cutting back to a base herd of 300 cows (about the upper limit of what the James’ feel they need to supply animals

for the grass-finished beef enterprise), the Slick Rock winter permit provides enough grass even in the worst-case drought scenario. In good years, Slick Rock can be filled out with weaned calves.

By selling off the Utah permit, Dave no longer has to deal with the headache of trucking (except for shipping yearlings from the range country back to the Animas Valley for finishing). The summer permit, Indian Hills, and Slick Rock are all within trailing distance. Dave is a true cowboy at heart, and trailing from summer to winter range and back again lines right up with his holistic goal.

Slick Rock Challenges

The Slick Rock permit remains tough to manage for lots of reasons, but the main one is lack of stockwater till spring thaw in early February. The Slick Rock has lots of water (in the form of stock ponds), but

these ponds are primarily located up in higher reaches of the permit, and are frozen solid throughout the heart of winter. The only open water through December and January is the meandering Dolores River, which runs through the core (and lowest point) of the permit. There’s no other option throughout these two months but to graze along the river and the multiple side canyons that feed into it. This limited mid-winter grazing is the bottleneck to wintering more than 300 mother cows. Once the ponds thaw out, they can then move out of the river bottom and graze alternate higher elevation areas from year to year.

In the spring, all the cattle are gathered into the Snyder Place, a pasture on the east side of the Dolores River, and on the way to the summer permit. Around the first of May, the cows (which still haven’t calved) are trailed to Indian Hills, which is used as a transition stopover to the summer country. It’s a two-day trip. One end of Indian Hills is used in the spring, and the other in the fall on the way back down to Slick Rock. These ends are swapped each year, so they aren’t grazed in the same season in consecutive years. This stopover lasts ten to thirty days, depending on the year, both going and coming.

Then, about mid-May, the cattle enter the forest permit in one of three points—Ryman, Royce, or Black Snag. By switching these entry points year to year, each pasture receives a year and a half recovery period. For example, if cattle start out in Ryman this year in the spring, they won’t go back into Ryman until the following year in the fall, on the way back out.

The cows commence calving once they enter one of these three pastures, and pairs are gradually drifted up to the top of the summer permit by late June. By that time, the grass is in abundance on top. Cows and calves are moved through several big pastures, with grazing periods never more than



The James Ranch 20 pasture-fed Jerseys supply milk for Dan James’ specialty cheese operation sold directly to customers at farmers’ markets, the on-farm produce stand, natural food stores, or directly to restaurants.

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30 days, and typically planned to ensure a different pattern of use from one year to the next (that is, to ensure plants aren't grazed at the same point in the growing season in consecutive years).

Calves are branded in July up on top, and bulls are put out in late July. At that point, all yearling steers are sent to the irrigated grass in Durango. They begin their finishing phase that summer and fall, winter in Durango, then finish as 24- to 30-month old steers over the course of their third spring and summer. Any cows or heifers without calves at side are also sorted off prior to putting the bulls out, and taken to Durango for fattening. These are surplus animals that can be sold through conventional channels, or made into hamburger to be sold through the beef program.

Ideally, calves are weaned in the fall while still on the top of the summer country, which makes trailing back down to Slick Rock (with dry cows only) quite a bit smoother. Calves are kept separate and fed hay until at least early

December. If it's been a good grass year at Slick Rock, the calves are turned back into the cows in December and winter together. If not, the calves are fed hay in a set of pens next to the "town" of Slick Rock (which Dave and Kay purchased and now use as a winter camp) until early February, when they are put in with the cows after the spring thaw, and the upper benches of Slick Rock can be used.

Most of the grass-finished steers and heifers don't reach their 1,100 lb. (500 kg) finish weight until 24-30 months, but that fits in well with the James' rangeland resource base. They have the capacity on their winter and summer permits to grow out these cattle very economically. When they arrive on that salad bar of fresh leafy greens, these big framey calves really turn a crank, often gaining up to five pounds (2.25 kg) a day as they enter the spring and early summer of their second year of life.

Several years ago, a much needed USDA-inspected slaughter plant was

constructed in Durango. Prior to that, slaughtering and processing beefs was a major hassle, and results were inconsistent. This new plant has struggled but is hanging on, and this year generated enough business to break even. Everybody is hopeful that the volume of business will continue to grow and that this obviously vital link in the production chain grows ever more viable. The fact that it's USDA inspected means that individual cuts can be sold direct to the consumer. This takes a huge amount of marketing, as Kay is quick to point out, but the result is much more gross income than selling commodity cattle.

The James Family latched onto Holistic Management in the early '90s. The triple focus on people, finances, and ecology made instant sense, since they were already thinking and working down that path anyway. Now, they had some new tools to help them stay consciously and intentionally on this path. I'm not sure that I've met another ranching family that epitomizes the result of conscious intention more than they do. They're an inspiring example of what's possible when people that love the land and each other work toward a common goal.



Leader of the James Bunch, David James, explaining the method to his madness.