

Riding Into the Sunset

True grit and stalwart determination are no match for political greed.

By Chance Gowan

The plights of the American rancher and farmer are little known throughout polite society. The Hages, Bundys and Hammonds, because of their struggles and trials, should be celebrated as icons of modern western lore.

But they are not.

I have served this country for nearly 30 years as a biologist for state and federal agencies, specializing in the field of range/riparian ecology. I've had the pleasure of working with scores of ranch families across the West, spending innumerable hours in the field, often camping for weeks in some of the most wild and remote corners of our country. I've presented papers and published findings at professional meetings at the national and international level and have acted as science editor for *RANGE* for more than 20 years.

Today I grieve in learning that after 40 years of struggle, the Hage family's Pine Creek Ranch in central Nevada is in foreclosure. (See "The Ultimate Land Clearance" on page 28.) They've fought endless, unfounded battles with our own federal government. And in nearly every instance not only have they prevailed, but they've shamed their antagonists by demonstrating quiet, skillful stewardship of the lands they've loved and nurtured. Sadly, the bureaucrats and do-gooders have finally starved them out.

Their departure has become an epiphany, causing me to consider the value and purpose of my career. Throughout my years as a biologist, much of that time was spent in research. A pivotal mentor was Dr. Jack Ward Thomas, a man who rose through the ranks of research to become the chief of the U.S. Forest Service. Before he gained national prominence, I had the opportunity to spend many nights around a campfire, sipping Scotch, listening to his endless stories, and accepting guidance and sage advice. One priceless tidbit was this: "You can design any research project to tell you anything you want to hear. The trick is to design and carry out the study in a way so that the outcome is unknown, until the end."

Two of the agencies that occupied much of my career, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, have completely abandoned the advice imparted to me by my friend Jack. Implementation of

proven management practices in accord with sound unbiased research has been forsaken along with the doctrine of multiple-use management.

These once proud agencies have thrown in the towel. They've taken the path of least resistance and rather than manage complex issues, they've chosen to fence out the American public and knuckle under to pressure from the far left, led by greedy environmental nonprofits and do-gooders. Those with the most money and political clout now dictate management direction, while sensible administration of our public lands and insightful research has been kicked to the curb.

Not too many years ago, a high-ranking member of the Forest Service convinced me I should become a district ranger—a person with final decision-making authority over a few million acres of federally managed land. Within months of beginning my new job, I realized how corrupt and prejudiced the BLM and Forest Service had become. Right and wrong were no longer important. Soon I was under enormous pressure to succumb to the misguided whims of powerful environmental nonprofits and highly placed agency heads in Washington, D.C., who were more concerned with political correctness than managing the land and doing the right thing. When I bucked the system, I was advised it was time for me to move to D.C., where I could learn "how things are done." I chose to retire.

Today, as a consultant for cattle ranchers, I lose sleep on many nights. My clients work hard to manage their stock, minimize impacts to water quality, and graze in ways that are compatible with fish and wildlife, much as they've always done. Only now they are faced with a litany of senseless standards and regulations and it's part of my job to help them figure out how to meet these requirements while keeping their ranch viable.

Recently, ranchers from several forests

faced unattainable standards and wholly unwarranted restrictions, imposed by regional forester Jim Peña—all without basis in peer-reviewed science and guaranteed to destroy most of the family ranches dependent upon their grazing allotments. Several ranchers, a state senator, and I drove 12 hours to Portland, to carry this message to Mr. Peña, where we were rudely dismissed. (See "Death of a Thousand Cuts," Spring 2017, at www.rangemagazine.com.) In a desperate effort to save their livelihoods, these ranchers pleaded for an audience with the undersecretary of Agriculture. Somehow it was granted, but the participants were admonished that they shall never divulge a single word from that meeting.

The ranchers complied, poured out their souls, and begged for help. In return, Mr. Undersecretary stabbed them in the back and passed along all of the information received in confidence to their tormentors in the Forest Service—leaving them to face the wrathful consequences.

The Forest Service and BLM have turned their backs on multiple-use management and good-faith cooperation with constituents. Instead, they've chosen to favor those with the most power to enrich their individual futures, choosing a path that will benefit few, least of which will be the resources they were sworn to manage. Today, I look back over a career that once felt fulfilling and worthwhile and find myself wondering if maybe it was all for naught.

To the Hages and the thousands of other ranch families who continue to fight the battles and struggle to keep the legacy of their families intact, I say: Ride in peace. You can be proud of your heritage and gumption. You've shown an otherwise uncaring group of bureaucrats that true grit still exists in the American West! ■

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ABOVE: Painting of Wayne Hage, always mounted on a good horse.