

A Cowgirl's Vision

In Colorado's heated political battles, one cattlegirl is aiming for the hearts of her foes.

By Marjorie Haun

We as ranchers like being around livestock. We don't like crowds, and that's the hard part. That's why a lot of animal caretakers are in the business we're in. Through the whole wolf thing I just thought to myself, 'I don't want to be here having to do this, I just want to take care of my cows.'"

Janie VanWinkle's words probably ring true to most ranchers in Colorado and throughout the West. This line of work is a nice fit for introverts and folks who like

quiet, wide-open spaces and the company of animals.

With the bulk of its grazing permits situated in the remote combs of the Uncompaghere Plateau and Grand Mesa, the VanWinkle ranch has roots in western Colorado that go back to the turn of the 20th century. Janie, a petite dynamo of uncommon good sense, says: "The Five Diamond Bar brand was registered in the state of Colorado by my uncle in 1910. He gave it to my mom at her high school graduation and we've main-

tained that brand since my dad passed away in the 1980s. My uncle was a card-playing bachelor, so I'm sure there's quite a story behind the five diamonds."

Janie's husband, Howard, whom she met at the age of 12 while showing beef in 4-H, is tall and sunburned with a ready smile. Dean, their only child, inherited his dad's stature. He recently returned from Kansas State University to work on the ranch.

Charolais and Charolais/Red Angus make up most of the VanWinkles' cow/calf opera-



Herding a mix of her Charolais/Red Angus cattle and cows belonging to neighboring rancher, Janie moves through the sage and ponderosas atop Colorado's vast Uncompaghere Plateau. (Photo © Devan Balet)

tion. With about 70 percent of the cattle a creamy white, theirs is a pretty herd, which according to Janie has one major advantage: “We do punch cows at night sometimes, and they’re easy to find in the dark.”

Ranching, however, is no longer just about raising cattle. Livestock producers have to be armed with political savvy, an in-depth knowledge of range management, water law and federal agencies, and a keen awareness of the forces trying to destroy animal agriculture. Ranchers are caught up in an ongoing battle, whether they like it or not, and Janie is a visionary role model running headlong into the fray.

The Best Weapon

A 10-year board member of the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association, Janie served as its president during the turbulent 2020-2021 term. “It’s a one-year term but a lifetime commitment,” she says. “I’m the third woman to be CCA president in 150 years, and all three came from the Western Slope.” She led through unprecedented times: the supply chain issues caused by COVID, JBS being shut down, the wolf introduction fight, the PAUSE [Protecting Animals from Unnecessary Suffering and Exploitation] ballot initiative. “It was something.”

With years of experience defending agriculture from relentless attacks, Janie has honed her sharpest weapon: education. And her tutelage has reached the ears of Colorado’s Gov. Jared Polis, who made an

PHOTOS COURTESY VANWINKLE FAMILY



Unaweep Canyon, sometimes called the Switzerland of Colorado, is furnished with rich, grassy leas, perfect for grazing, at the base of its unusual limestone escarpments. BELOW: Dean (the VanWinkle’s only child), Janie and Howard work as a team to manage their ranch in western Colorado.

Although Colorado has long been targeted for the introduction of wolves, in 2017 the issue exploded when advocates began pushing for a ballot initiative. Taking in over a million dollars—much of it from wealthy nonprofits—wolf proponents were able to get the measure onto the 2020 ballot. The measure passed, but by a hair’s breadth. “The Tides Foundation was behind the wolf introduction, but even without having the kind of money it spent, we were able to move the needle significantly through education.”

COVID-induced remote working, crime and the cost of living in Colorado’s cities are triggering a demographic evolution in its rural districts and ag interests have no choice but to appeal to others, both urban and neo-rural, who love the outdoors and its abundant wildlife. “Livestock is a side note to a lot of outdoor recreationists, but if something benefits the wildlife, they will support it,” Janie says. “We always talk about the impacts on wildlife. We decreased the support

taxpayers are going to spend hundreds of thousands more, if not millions, to bring wolves back here and they’re going to wipe out the moose.”

On the heels of the wolf introduction, the PAUSE initiative, apparently concocted by radical vegans to put Colorado livestock growers out of business, roared into Col-

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appearance with her at the CCA convention. Janie declares: “It all comes back to education and we have to do it offensively, not defensively. We have to seek ways to build relationships with our urban friends. We can’t count on spending money to fight these fights. We in rural Colorado don’t have a lot of money.”

for wolf introductions into Colorado and increased our gains by 20 points, but we needed to move it another half point to win.”

The reality of the situation is piercing. “We’ve spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to reintroduce moose into western Colorado,” Janie says, “but now Colorado

orado. [See “Do Not Touch the Animals,” Fall 2021, at rangedex.com] It also catalyzed the activist spirit in a lot of folks who just wanted to take care of their animals. As CCA president, Janie took a very public role in the group Coloradans for Animal Care, an assortment of ag associations, livestock producers, farmers, veterinarians, and others who coalesced to fight the extreme measure.

“We have to become activists. We have to be passionate about it. We have to spend a lot of time talking to the media. We have to fight fire with fire.”

Defining many of the practices used in animal husbandry and pet care as “felony sexual abuse of an animal,” the PAUSE initiative was rejected by the state Supreme Court in an appeal by Coloradans for Animal Care due to



From a ridge overlooking Unaweep Canyon, Janie hunts for cows and calves during the fall gather. (Photo © Devan Balet)

the initiative's overreaching scope: "When they included pets, that earned the ire of the urban audience. It was a very emotional description, and our argument, as Colorado cattlemen, was that the title was inflammatory. The Supreme Court held that it violated the 'single issue' rule when it stretched beyond livestock to domestic pets. The Supreme Court sent a powerful message when it rejected it in a unanimous decision." But, she warns, the fight is likely not over. "When the PAUSE initiative comes back in another form—and it will—they will exclude the language pertaining to pets."

The Plunge

Janie and Howard have never sought conflict, but in 2015 they were plunged into the West's debate over outdoor recreation. "There was a mountain bike trail being developed on the Grand Mesa called the Palisade Plunge. It drops 6,000 vertical feet in 32 miles. It was originally planned to go right through the center of a fenced, rectangular piece of prop-

erty that we lease for grazing from the city of Grand Junction."

The VanWinkles were the only ranchers whose grazing lands would be impacted, yet it seems they were an afterthought. "In 2015 we got invited to a meeting with Governor Hickenlooper's bike czar. They told us what they were going to do and they knew we would have some heartburn with this. We took them two typed pages of concerns including trash, vandalism, trespassing, impacts on wildlife and vegetation, and watershed issues, to name a few, but we didn't say no. We were ready to have a discussion."

The VanWinkles had given the Palisade Plunge planners the benefit of the doubt. "We never heard another word until January 2017 when I got wind of a Grand Junction City Council workshop that wasn't publicly advertised. We went to the meeting and they had everyone there: BLM, Parks & Wildlife, Forest Service, the town of Palisade. We are the only ranchers up there with land they were going to cross, but we weren't invited. The Palisade

Plunge folks had their presentation and one of the city guys spoke up and said, 'Well, maybe we should hear what the VanWinkles have to say. Howard is sitting right there. Maybe you should ask him what he thinks.'"

Janie and Howard were fortunate that one conscientious official acknowledged them. Howard told the attendees: "We don't have any agreement with these guys at all. They want to go straight through the middle of our land and we don't agree with that."

Janie adds, "In their minds it was a done deal, but the mayor, Phyllis Norris, tabled the plan, and the trail folks were torqued."

Interestingly, the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process—which ordinarily takes a year or two for ranchers wanting to build a stock pond or clear a trail—took only six months for the Palisade Plunge. "Through the four months of planning we concluded that the trail could skirt two corners of our property without major impacts to our cows." Not surprisingly, Janie took advantage of the compromise to create a means for



ABOVE: At a cattlemen's meeting in Grand Junction, Janie gives educational materials to Colorado's governor, Jared Polis, who is known for his extreme politics and "meatless" agenda. RIGHT: Forest Service employees walk out to ATVs that will carry them around the VanWinkles' Uncompahgre permit for a "learning lab" excursion.

dispensing a little education to mountain bikers. "We're really not thrilled they're here, but we can live with it. We got most of what we wanted and now there is a kiosk on the trail that tells bikers about beef production, what to do if they see a cow, and how grazing benefits wildlife and the environment."

Learning Lab

During the summer, the VanWinkles run their cattle on the rugged Uncompahgre Plateau some 30 miles from the Utah state line. But even here where roads are rough and switchbacks formidable, the West's new outdoor recreation reality is creeping in. Janie's tactic is not to combat the change, but to sway those driving it. "Democracy works with the controlling majority, and the majority live in urban settings. I still think it falls back on us as producers to find ways to connect with those urban people."

This family employs the innovative tactic of using their ranch as a learning lab. "Historically, the Department of Agriculture has always been an ally, but I would say that feeling has changed recently. So a year ago, we took the Ag commissioner out with us on horseback for three to four hours and talked about our struggles and the good things we do for the land. They don't yet want to acknowledge what production agriculture brings to this state, but I think we made some impact."

In 2019, the VanWinkles invited the Forest Service leaders to spend a field day on their



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Uncompahgre permit. "We told them we would like to have the range cons, the district supervisors and forest supervisors. We wanted engineering, fire, biologists and camping and outdoor recreation experts," Janie explains. "They came loaded for bear. They probably thought we were going to ask for more AUMs, more permits for cows, but I opened up the discussion with 'We want to hear about your goals and management objectives, and we want to show you some of the cool things we are doing with livestock out here.'"

Janie and Howard guided the Forest Service employees on an ATV tour of their entire permit. "We took them to a dispersed camping area that was in a nice glen of pine trees," she says, "but where the soil was completely mucked out and there was no longer grass growing. There was a lady from the office who was leaning on a tree and she piped up, 'You know, if your cows had done this, we would be all over you guys.' The recreation guys agreed that there is no accountability for outdoor rec."

Winning Hearts and Minds

The West and its ranchers are faced with a

transformation ushered in by outdoor recreation, urbanization, and shifting demographics. Though the VanWinkles would rather be left alone to care for their cows and high-country grazing lands, they are wide awake to the new reality.

"Whether it's a kiosk on a bike trail or Howard and I having a conversation with an ATV enthusiast on one of the trails, it all comes back to education," Janie says. "When I talk to FFA groups, I tell them that yes, you have to know how to use a pair of fence stretchers, but you also have to become an expert on herd health, the impacts of grazing, and how to manage the resources that are available to you. You have to be able to explain to people why livestock are important and how they help the environment."

"With good messaging we can win over hearts and minds." ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist prowling the wilds of southeastern Utah and western Colorado. On a clear night, from her top floor window, she can see the VanWinkles' white cows on the Uncompahgre.