OLD WEST

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New West in Garden Park, Colorado

Twenty-Five Years Ago

University of Kansas geography field course students investigating the viability of ranching in Garden Park, a small valley in central Colorado (left, 2001), discovered that the changing economics of ranching were making it increasingly difficult to earn a living off the land. A reexamination of the valley in 2001 revealed a shift from a commodity-producing landscape to one focused on aesthetics and recreation, a transformation pandemic throughout the West.
Twenty head of cattle waited impatiently along the back fence of the corral at the Richwood Land and Cattle Company. In the cutting competition that was to follow, where riders and horses would demonstrate their skill in culling a single animal from the herd, contestants would attempt to qualify for the national competition to be held later that month in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Cowboys in flannel shirts and Wrangler jeans practiced tight spins and turns on their horses between flatbed Ford trucks. On another flatbed, the competition judge sat, staring straight ahead beneath his dipped-down Stetson and periodically ashing his cigarette off the truck. A cowgirl talked on her cell phone as she strode on her horse toward a newly constructed restaurant near the ranch entrance. On the far side of the arena, the announcer played Patsy Cline over the loudspeaker. A crowd had gathered to watch the contest, which is precisely what the ranch’s owners wanted.

The site of this event was Garden Park, Colorado. Found north of Cañon City, along Fourmile Creek, Garden Park is an area encompassing about ten square miles of valley floor land settled soon after the establishment of Cañon City in 1859. The 1890s were the valley’s golden age, as it provided fresh produce and beef for Cañon City and for miners in the Cripple Creek-Victor area to the north. Small-scale ranching and crop and hay production became the valley’s primary land use following the decline of the mines in the early 1900s, with herd sizes ranging from a few dozen to approximately two hundred cows and calves. Crop farming remained a part of residents’ way of life until the 1950s and 1960s, as did dairying. Since the 1960s, however, ranchers have been forced to abandon these other pursuits and turn instead to jobs in town to supplement their ranching income.

Increasingly, in order to survive in a difficult economy, ranchers are also diversifying their operations. The Richwood, for instance, remains a small-scale working ranch but has added the rodeo arena and restaurant to draw some of the recreational dollars of the New West (a small hotel may even be in the works). The Richwood ranch and its cutting competition, in other words, lie at the interface between the Old West of traditional extractive economies and the New West of recreation and amenities.

When we drove up the main Garden Park road in July 2001, we noticed substantial changes in the landscape we had come to know in previous years. Certainly, the Richwood was a kind of development we had never seen here before—an outward-focused enterprise in a valley whose residents’ focus has been internal. Farther down the road, changes became even more evident. Two large ranches had given way to several dozen thirty-five-acre ranchettes. Houses already stood on many lots, and the dozens of surveyed parcels bore testament to the subdivided future awaiting Garden Park.

Twenty-five years ago University of Kansas geography field course students investigated the viability of ranching in the valley. At the time, the valley was still an active ranching community, dependent on grazing leases on federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land as well as private holdings. However, this lifestyle faced serious obstacles. The economics of small ranching were changing, making it an increasingly undependable living; the younger generation of the valley ranch families, as a result, had little interest in taking on their parents’ way of life. The older generation feared for the future of their enterprise. According to the students’ report, “Present and proposed policy changes by the BLM regarding the use of public lands, urban competition for water, and pressure for suburban development are likely to result in major changes in land-use patterns for the valley in the next 20 years.” Because more than two decades had elapsed since that initial study, our group decided to examine the valley’s rapidly
Garden Park, settled in 1859, encompasses about ten square miles of valley floor between Cañon City and Cripple Creek. In the 1890s, when buggies and wagons traversed Shelf Road between the two towns (right), the valley provided fresh produce and beef to both communities.

shifting cultural and natural landscapes. And, indeed, a quarter century later, major changes had come.1

The tensions and changes that characterize Garden Park are by no means unique.2 Rural areas throughout the mountain West are experiencing dramatic shifts in population and land use. The western U.S. has experienced phenomenal growth over the last twenty-five years, and Colorado is near the top of the list of fastest-growing states (it sits third behind Nevada and Arizona). In fact, in Colorado alone, every year, an area equivalent to Rocky Mountain National Park is converted from farms and ranches into subdivisions and other exurban (rural, low-density development) uses. In even starker terms, this statistic means that every four minutes, an acre of Colorado agricultural land is converted to exurban uses. Much of this development occurs without any sort of oversight; indeed, few planners outside of upscale urban areas such as Boulder, Colorado, and Portland, Oregon, have paid serious attention to the implications of this phenomenon.3

Most westerners are aware of the explosive growth along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. However, similar pressures are now being felt in areas apart from the

Colorado Springs to Greeley metropolitan area. Fremont County, where Garden Park and Cañon City are located, is significantly less populated than many of the Front Range counties. However, the county experienced 43 percent growth from 1990 to 2000, a rate significantly above the statewide growth rate of 30.6 percent.4

Garden Park, and areas like it, are at the front end of the second wave of exurban development. As the Front Range becomes a massive traffic jam, urbanites are once again trying to recapture the “traditional” West, the picture-postcard, wide-open West of ranching country. And they are willing to pay top dollar for their own personal slice of that landscape. Ironically, in trying to capture the traditional West, they are altering it, perhaps irrevocably. As lifelong rancher and Garden Park resident Roy Canterbury put it, “This used to be cattle country; now it’s people country.”5

Garden Park serves as a useful study for examining the tensions and processes transforming the traditional Old West into a New West of recreation, where the land has become an aesthetic and recreational resource and not a commodity-producing landscape. Both the diversified

5. This and all other quotations and paraphrases in this paper come from our notes of interviews and observations carried out in the summer of 2001. For the most part, quotations contained in this article are anonymous; we promised anonymity to our interviewees.
The University of Kansas has been holding a geography field course in Garden Park, Colorado, since 1976. The project's organizers initially chose Garden Park because it is accessible from Lawrence but distant enough to provide an unfamiliar environment in which to immerse students. It also offers a wide variety of issues of interest to budding geographers. Over the years, field course participants have gotten to know the valley quite well; the three instructors in 2001 (Curt Sorensen, Steve Schnell, and Karen Willey Eudaly) together have logged a dozen field seasons in the valley over the last quarter century, studying topics ranging from wildlife habitat, fire, landforms, and water quality to gold mining, gambling in nearby Cripple Creek, and ranchland ecology. The project's goal this time out was to examine the changes that subdivision of ranchland is bringing to Garden Park. Over the course of our stay, participants had in-depth conversations with longtime valley residents, newcomers, and out-of-state land buyers as well as with well drillers, real estate agents, and employees of government agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Over the years, a number of instructors have become friends with many of the longtime residents. The students, of course, were there for the first time, but the ranchers were usually very open with them, enjoying the opportunity to impart an understanding of rural life. For newcomers to the valley, these interviews were the first time most had spoken to anybody associated with the field course, so a rapport had not yet developed. They may well be wary of how they are perceived by longtime residents, and thus more resistant to opening up to strangers.

Without the energy, enthusiasm, and hard work of our students, this article could not have come about. Students in 2001 included Brian Ashmore, Dane Bailey, Nathaniel Brinson, Rio Cardone, Gabriella Blair, Hannah Coulson, Matthew Dunbar, Glenda Gould, Hugh Howard, Keith Hunsinger, Soren Larsen, Andrea Mauro, Patrick McDonald, Erin McGrogan, Christopher Post, Carleen Roberts, Peder Sandheil, Sarah Smiley, Andrew Toland, Alan Waddilove, Brian Wardlow, Dallas Williams, and Shawna Brinson.

Richwood ranch and the proliferation of subdivisions are indicative of changing priorities in western land use, driven in large part by the influx of people without a direct economic link to the land as well as by changing perceptions of public lands. Land ownership in the valley is a patchwork of BLM and private lands, with private land dominating the valley floor and public land on the more rugged valley slopes. For most of the last century, the lowlands have been owned by a group of fewer than ten families (many of whom are related) who have practiced an annual cycle of seasonal grazing; cattle are moved from the leased forested valley slopes in the spring, to grazing leases at higher elevations in the summer, and finally to the ranchers' own irrigated pastures on the valley floor during the winter.6 Cañon City serves as the valley's main service center, while La Junta and Pueblo are the dominant cattle markets.

Over the last thirty years governmental policies, particularly the BLM's grazing regulations, have changed substantially. For decades, critics referred to the bureau as the “Bureau of Livestock and Mining,” and the epithet was not entirely undeserved—resource extraction was the primary goal, and the agency put few restrictions on low-elevation grazing. However, in the 1980s, Wyoming Rancher Tim Cleveland and others began bringing pressure to bear on the agency, resulting in the issuance of a grazing permit for a different range of land uses.

Every year in Colorado an area equivalent to Rocky Mountain National Park is converted from farms and ranches to subdivisions and other exurban uses. This Montana example shows how development encroaches on other land uses.


7. An Annual Unit Month is the equivalent of one head of cattle grazing or a parcel of land for a month. For the government's recommendations, see Bureau of Land Management, Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Royal Gorge EIS Area, Colorado: Proposed Domestic Livestock Grazing Program (Washington D.C., 1980). For a broader discussion of this ongoing struggle between resource users and federal land managers, see William L. Graf, Wilderness Preservation and the Sagebrush Rebellion (Savage, Md., 1990); and R. McGregor Cowley, Federal Land, Western Anger: The Sagebrush Rebellion and Environmental Politics (Lawrence, Kans., 1993).


cost grazing leases. With the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969, the BLM was required to carry out Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) for its land-use policies. In 1980 the first of the EISs for the Garden Park area proposed a sharp limitation to grazing, from thirty thousand Animal Unit Months to fourteen thousand. After vociferous opposition by local ranchers and other commodity interests, the reduction in the end was very slight—to twenty-eight thousand. Nonetheless, ranchers in the region found themselves on the defensive, and increasingly perceived the federal government as hostile to their interests.7

The Clinton years brought the most wide-reaching attempts to create more-balanced BLM land management policies. The Healthy Rangelands Initiative of 1995 created Resource Advisory Councils that allowed diverse interest groups to advise the BLM on public lands management by establishing standards of sustainability and health to be met in all areas. Furthermore, the 1995 initiative raised grazing fees by a small amount. Calling it “Clinton’s War on the West,” Cañon City-area ranchers banded together into such groups as People for the West, a so-called Wise Use organization, and opposed the initiatives, which further reduced their power to manage lands that historically had been available almost exclusively to them at very low cost.

At the same time, some environmental groups pushed to stop all grazing on public lands (a change that would surely have destroyed most ranching in the West), adopting slogans like “Cattle-free in ’93.” In the eyes of many Garden Park ranchers, the government and environmentalists were in league against them. Battle lines were drawn across the West, and the sides became increasingly polarized as the years went on.8

The government and environmentalists became ready scapegoats for ranchers, including those in Garden Park, who felt angry and frustrated at the increasing marginality of their operations. The truth of the matter, however, is that environmentalists and regulations are not pushing Garden Park ranchers off their land—market forces are. It simply is not economically feasible to make a living on a small cattle ranch in most areas of the West. On a national level, large feedlot operations in the Great Plains and elsewhere have consistently deflated the market value of beef; while the costs of production for the small rancher have increased steadily. Meanwhile, land sold for development is estimated to be worth at least ten times its agricultural value. As urban areas sprawl outward, land values have increased dramatically, enticing ranchers to sell at least portions of their holdings, often to settle debts. Urbanites have been amassing capital and are using it to develop rural lands, often in the form of ranchettes, small acreages intended to provide the amenities of a rural life—open spaces, lack of people, closeness to nature—without forcing the owner to actually make a living off of the land.9

As Colorado’s Front Range becomes a massive traffic jam, urbanites seeking the “traditional West” are willing to pay top dollar for a slice of ranching country. The resulting subdivision of ranchlands pushes inheritance taxes higher, forcing heirs to pay taxes as though they owned an entire subdivision rather than a spread producing a few cattle.
Garden Park consists of a patchwork of Bureau of Land Management and private property, with public lands accounting for most of the area on the rugged valley slopes. In spring, ranchers move their cattle from irrigated ranch pastures to leased valley slopes, then to grazing leases at higher elevations in summer. The cowhands above are driving a herd along Shelf Road.

Indeed, the biggest changes that have come to the Garden Park valley over the last two decades have stemmed from exurban development, not from government regulation. For at least twenty years, Garden Park ranch families held their breath, waiting to see who would be the first to sell. Few of the children want to continue ranching. Some simply choose to live a different lifestyle than the one with which they had grown up. Many others, however, would continue their family tradition if they could, and say “ranching is in our blood.” It is only the impossibility of making a small ranch financially solvent in the era of feedlots and ConAgra, Cargill, and other agribusiness corporations that has stopped them. A further deterrent is that the inheritance tax structure has an inherently pro-development bias since it is based on the maximum selling price of the land, not the current-use price. In other words, heirs pay taxes as if they owned an entire subdivision, even if they are only raising a few cattle.

Ranchers in the valley have periodically carved off little pieces of their land in the past, though the scale was relatively small, seemingly unnoticeable. One or two extra houses on a several-hundred-acre ranch meant that the wide-open landscape remained intact. Finally, in 1999, the ranchers’ greatest fears came true: the William Dilley family sold its fifth-generation, 1,350-acre ranch to developers. Tired of the growth in the valley, as well as the ever-increasing tourist traffic, the Dilleys bought ranchland in Nebraska (in an area unlikely to experience this sort of development).

Initially, the Dilleys tried to sell the ranch intact (or as two smaller ranches). It soon became clear, however, that there simply was not a market for small ranches. A ready market did exist for ranchettes. Lots without surface-water rights in the Dilley Ranch subdivision initially sold for between ninety and one hundred thirty thousand dollars. Another ranch, the Innes Ranch, soon followed; it is today the Cooper Mountain subdivision.

Real estate promotional materials indicate that virtually all the valley subdivision lots are just slightly over thirty-five acres. This size is no coincidence. In 1972 the Colorado Legislature passed Senate Bill 35, which required county zoning approval for any subdivided lot smaller than thirty-five acres. The purpose was to gain some semblance of control over rural development and to ensure an adequate water supply for it. The flip side of this

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10. In 1995 the first family put its ranch up for sale, only to have a change of heart and instead sell some higher-elevation lands to the BLM, keeping the main part of the ranch.

11. Subdivisions named after the landscapes they have displaced are hardly unique to the West. In the Midwest, for example, “Prairie Estates” and other similarly named developments are causing some of the few remaining scraps of natural prairie to be plowed under and replaced with lawn grass and pavement.
legislation, however, was that it exempted larger lots from any sort of planning review. Wyoming and Montana have passed similar laws. The end result has been the creation of low-density sprawl on former agricultural lands, as developers skirt county oversight and the requirement to provide utilities.

This process has been termed "exurbanization," for it is a different process than suburbanization; typically, suburbs expanded outward from cities, providing proximity to urban employment opportunities. The motivation behind ranchette-style development is to escape the crowding of urban life and to obtain all the perceived virtues of rural life while at the same time remaining tied to urban economics.

Although none of the remaining valley ranchers plan to sell, actuarial math will take its toll relatively soon; two ranch owners died just recently. The status of their properties remains in doubt, but rumor has it that at least one family will subdivide. In all likelihood, it is only a matter of time before at least three more ranches go the way of the Dillely Ranch. In another ten or fifteen years, the majority of the remaining ranches are likely to be carved up as well if current trends continue.

Garden Park, of course, does not exist in a vacuum. The entire area has found itself caught up in the same forces of transition—from an Old West economy of extraction to recreation-oriented land uses and retirement and amenity economies—found throughout the rest of the West. North of Garden Park, for example, the gold-mining town of Cripple Creek has capitalized on its Old West heritage to become one of three towns in Colorado licensed for small-stakes casino gambling. Near Cañon City, the Royal Gorge has long been a tourist destination, and Cañon City

13. For a discussion of the exurban phenomenon, see Nelson and Ducker, "Exurbanization of America."
Garden Park is in transition from an Old West economy of extraction to a New West economy of recreation, and hunting, fishing, rock climbing, and camping are major draws to the valley. The nearby Arkansas River rapids also attract thrill seekers.

itself has become a retirement center. Rural areas, too, have seen increasing recreational use. Beginning in the 1970s the Garden Park valley became a playground of sorts for Cañon City, with the city-owned Red Canyon Park as well as hunting, fishing, and camping opportunities on public lands as major draws. In the 1990s the Shelf Road Recreation Area, on BLM land at the north end of the Garden Park valley, became a mecca for rock climbers (it even has an entire book devoted to it in the popular Falcon Guide series).

In contrast to its traditional focus on commodity-producing land uses, the BLM has begun to actively manage portions of the area for recreation. It acquired many areas near the Shelf Road climbing area and opened them as campgrounds. Garden Park also found itself at the center of one of the BLM's other projects—the promotion of the Gold Belt Tour, part of the agency's Back Country Byway program intended to promote use of public lands previously bypassed by recreational users; to "preserve the history and culture of the past" and the natural environment of the area; and to increase local tourism. The tour connects Cañon City and Florence to Cripple Creek and Victor by three different routes, one of which traverses Garden Park and the Fourmile Valley, continuing up Shelf Road, a route offering extreme drop-offs and lovely scenery. Most recently, the Garden Park Paleontological Society, in cooperation with the BLM, Cañon City, and the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, opened its Dinosaur Depot in Cañon City with the goal of eventually opening a dinosaur discovery center in Garden Park to celebrate some of the earliest significant dinosaur finds in the U.S. 14

In recent years the BLM has attempted to move away from the top-down fits of its past and to seek community involvement in such projects. To this end, the bureau solicited input about the Gold Belt Tour from a broad spectrum of interest groups—but largely ignored the concerns of Garden Park residents. In fact, valley residents claim not to have even been aware of tour plans until the roadside signs went up and traffic increased. In 1994 a petition to take the road off the tour received nearly unanimous support from valley residents. Counter to the BLM's public rhetoric of "community involvement," however, the agency continued with its original plan.

One of the goals of the byway, according to the agency, is to "maintain the landscapes surrounding our communities as rural ranch land and open space" and to "maintain the scenic views and rural lifestyles along this route." 15 However, the ranchers along the route share in the costs of


the development—with increased traffic, trespassing, litter, and property damage—but see limited benefit from it beyond the paving of portions of the road. Without some sort of financial support for ranchers, perhaps generated from the purchase of development rights, such statements of cultural preservation are merely lip service. If anything, the tour serves to expose the beauty of the region to more people who then might be tempted to purchase their own thirty-five-acre slice.

With the socioeconomic changes currently unfolding, two distinct valley cultures have emerged: traditional ranchers’ and newcomers’. Most of the ranching families have lived in the valley for multiple generations, and in some cases over a century. Recent arrivals among the ranching community are those who have been there a mere thirty-five years. The ranchers cherish their independence, love the sense of accomplishment they get from working their ranches, and find satisfaction making a living from the land. They see themselves as good stewards and caretakers of the land; after all, they argue, their livelihoods are tied to the continuing health of the regional ecosystem.

As one seventy-seven-year-old ranch woman put it, “Life was hard work, but we loved our lives and the land, and we had each other to help in both work and play.” In the close Garden Park community, marriages between the families were common; one of the ranch couples, for example, first met at a cattle branding. More than anything else, the older people say, the entire valley population has long acted as an extended family.

Without question, the ranchers see the landscape as beautiful, and this beauty is one attribute both old-time families and newcomers share. The aesthetics embraced by the ranchers, however, have some notable differences from those of the newcomers. For one thing, theirs is not a romanticized notion of the Old West; it is a beauty enriched by the depth of experience that comes from making a living on the same land for generations. The beauty of the landscape for them, in part, stems from having wrung a living from land with little economic potential; it becomes impossible to separate themselves—their livelihood, and indeed, their entire sense of self—from the landscape. A number of ranchers, in fact, expressed dislike for the mountains since they are not of value to the ranch. This outlook is certainly a very different from that of the newcomers, many of who are drawn by the bucolic mountain scenery.

This depth of history and identity tied to the landscape has made the development particularly painful for the ranchers. Despite their antipathy to development, however, they do not seem to blame the Dilley or Innes families for selling out; they understand all too well the marginal existence that the ranches share. Few if any among the younger generations want to take over these operations, which has forced the ranchers to confront difficult choices. When sales came, frictions inevitably resulted, with some family members advocating selling the land and others in favor of trying to hang onto it.

The second group in Garden Park consists of purchasers of thirty-five-acre homesteads. According to one developer, these properties are targeted to investors from the urban and suburban areas of the Front Range, although they have attracted numerous out-of-state buyers as well. Those who come are drawn by many things. The glossy brochure for the Dilley Ranch development describes the valley as “Historic… Unspoiled… Inspiring. The Dilley Ranch. Come pick up where the pioneers left off.” Yet, the promotional material also stresses nearness to fishing, rafting, and rock-climbing opportunities as well as the urban areas of Colorado Springs and Cañon City. The West promoted here, despite its appeal to Old West precedents, is clearly targeted to a New West population—urbanites seeking a rural lifestyle.

Few of the new property owners had yet moved to the area at the time of the study since the lots had been on the market for less than two years. In our phone conversations with out-of-state owners and in-person discussions with new residents, we found the newcomers to be a varied...
group. Some owners are from Colorado, but many are from out of state: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Florida, New Jersey, Connecticut, and California. They all have different reasons for buying land in Garden Park. Some are looking forward to retiring there. Others find that the higher elevations and drier climate help substantially with health problems such as arthritis and fibromyalgia. Almost all express a desire to live in the country, to enjoy the open spaces, natural environment, and recreational opportunities. Few want to ranch themselves. Interestingly, most of the newcomers express a desire for some sort of development, but at the same time they profess a desire not to have too much.

One of the biggest changes development will bring is to the ranchers’ identity as participants in a unique culture. According to longtime residents, the sense of community in Garden Park has been on the decline for several decades, in large part due to changing economics. In earlier years the one-room Garden Park School provided the local social center, creating a place to meet for community activities, a place where valley residents and their lives became intertwined. Residents also had their own baseball team that played every Sunday during the summer as well as a literary society that sponsored music, readings, dialogues, plays, debates, and mock court trials.

The closing of the schoolhouse in 1961 was one of the first signs that the community was changing as the mechanization of ranching led to a decline in interaction between families. No longer dependant on manual labor, ranchers became less reliant on each other. Furthermore, as the economics of ranching became less favorable, children gradually moved away. Water rights were sold little by little, and the ranches consolidated under fewer owners. Most of the ranches were, at one time, basically self-sufficient, with extensive gardens and orchards as well as hogs, chickens, and other livestock. As the population dwindled, however, the remaining ranchers curtailed many of the agricultural activities. As one put it, “There’s no need for a huge garden when you’ve only got two of you to feed.”

The effects on the valley’s sense of community have been substantial. Ranching families used to be available to help each other with everyday tasks; today, their other activities take them outside the valley on a regular basis. Similarly, while local women used to get together for monthly social gatherings, these have also gone by the wayside as the women have become increasingly tied to jobs in town. As one longtime resident put it, “I think that the ranchers in the earlier years lived a much more quiet, leisurely type of life because they weren’t under so many pressures and weren’t in a rush to go somewhere all the time.”

With the influx of newcomers, the remaining ranch families are likely to become even more isolated since the geography of the new developments hampers the creation of a unified community spirit. There are no common institutions for social cohesion nor is there a common way of life to provide social bonds. Many of the newly constructed homes, too, will function as second or summer homes or retirement homes. Without significant commonalities, it seems that Garden Park as a distinctive social entity, with its own identity and sense of place, will likely disappear with the last of the older generation of ranch families. No longer will Garden Park be a community, only a widely scattered collection of houses.

Land-use policy encourages the fragmentation of the very lifestyle that attracted new residents. Since houses are being constructed as far away from each other as possible to preserve the wide-open views, neighbors are not as likely to interact. As Colorado State University ecologist William Romme has pointed out, the thirty-five-acre rule, while originally intended to provide oversight to the subdivision process, actually hampers developers’ ability to plan subdivisions in a way that could foster a sense of community. Clumped development would help community formation while leaving the landscape far less fragmented. The thirty-five-acre rule, however, is based on the number of acres per house instead of an overall density per area, houses per

The Garden Park school, once the local social center, closed in 1961 as mechanization reduced ranchers’ reliance on each other, children moved away, and ranches were consolidated or subdivided.

hundred acres, for example. With the latter, clustered development would be possible; under current rules, it is illegal.

To a person, the valley ranch families oppose subdivision, even as they themselves are sometimes party to it. When asked whether she gets along with her new neighbors, one ranching woman replied, “They’re sure nice people. It’s just that we didn’t want them here in the first place.” Yet, while some plan to take concrete steps to preserve the ranching landscape, the majority have a fatalistic view: “It’s progress; there’s nothing you can do about it.” Since local ranchers have long united in their fight against government interference, it is somewhat surprising to see them taking such a passive role. This fatalism, unfortunately, has been part of the reason why conservation easements and other solutions to subdivision that have proved effective elsewhere in the West have yet to be tried in Garden Park.

Ranchers elsewhere in the West have slowly learned that they must become proactive to stave off development, learning to sell, in some way, their lifestyle and landscape, both to convince people they are worthy of preservation and to make enough money to survive. Some have turned to providing organic beef to the segment of the booming urban market that desires a more ecologically friendly and humane meat source. Others have opened dude ranches, giving urbanites from Colorado and beyond a chance to experience the life of a working ranch. One of the most popular techniques has been the use of conservation easements. As John Wright has detailed, an easement can be an effective tool for preserving open spaces, wildlife habitat, and traditional ranching economies. With a conservation easement, landowners sell or donate development rights to a land trust such as the Nature Conservancy or other more local groups. Colorado is one of the country’s leaders in land-trust preservation.18

This is not to say that Garden Park ranchers have not thought long and hard about how to preserve their ranches. Only one family, though, has thus far taken concrete action with an eye toward continuing the family property as an

17. Many small farmers and ranchers throughout the country have begun promoting the buying and eating of locally grown food. Whether through farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, or roadside stands (all of which have been expanding rapidly over the last fifteen years), they are making the case that locally grown food tastes better, is better for the environment, and helps to ameliorate the decline of local communities. Not only this, but by supporting local growers and ranchers, local residents help to preserve the open spaces and rural landscapes in their region. Studies have shown that buying locally produced food can indeed make a difference. See Brewster Kneen, From Land to Mouth: Understanding the Food System (Toronto, 1993); María Herrin and Joan Dye Gossin, “Designing a Sustainable Regional Diet,” Journal of Nutrition Education, 21 (1989), 270–78; Gail Peeman, “Local Food Systems and Sustainable Communities,” paper presented at the Politics of Sustainable Agriculture conference, Eugene, Oregon, October 7–8, 1995; Wendell Berry, “Conserving Communities,” Orien (Summer 1995), 49–53.

18. Alexander and Propst, “Saving the Family Ranch”; Wright, Rocky Mountain Divide. While some environmentalists continue to pillory ranchers as environmental destroyers, many are coming to realize that ranching provides some of the most realistic means of preserving open spaces and natural environments. See John B. Wright, Rocky Mountain Divide; Stairs, Let the Cowboy Ride; Perri Klass, “Winning the War for the West,” Atlantic Monthly, 284 (July 1999), 54–62; and Knight, Gilgert, Marston, eds., Ranching West of the Hundredth Meridian.
active ranch. Ron Woodring, of the Richwood Land and Cattle Company, is the son of Mabel and John Wilson. Woodring’s operation is the one described in the opening passage of this article. He has creatively reimagined the ranch lifestyle to make his operation a success in bleak times.

Woodring is a strong opponent of subdivision and is intent on ensuring that as much of the valley as possible remains in active ranches. In part, this activism is out of a practical concern for the valley’s water supply. Not only would dozens of new wells adversely affect groundwater levels, the installation of dozens of new septic systems would increase the odds of groundwater becoming polluted through seepage. Beyond the practicalities, Woodring is also driven by a love of the ranching life: “You’re not in ranching for the big bucks, you’re in it for the lifestyle,” he told us, a sentiment echoed by every rancher with whom we spoke. Woodring and his predecessors have used several creative ways to ensure their lifestyle continues.

The Wilsons sold all but 240 acres of their nearly 2,000 acres of land to the Denver Water Board, which subsequently transferred it to the BLM in exchange for property elsewhere in the state. Consequently, Ron Woodring has been able to lease his family’s former ranchland and other BLM land (approximately ten thousand acres) for summer grazing.

But Woodring realized that traditional ranching alone could not sustain the ranch, and he is taking advantage of outsiders’ growing attraction to the area, relying on tourism, food service, and sport to support the family’s herd, land, and home. Already Woodring has made extensive alterations to the traditional ranch, erecting prefabricated green and red sheet-metal sheds, stalls, and buildings and the competition arena. The ranch’s nascent restaurant plans to build its reputation on (what else?) Richwood steak. In an interesting twist, Woodring is using the iconography of the American West—cowboys, rodeos, and spectacular scenery—to entice outsiders to consume the ranch’s services. In the process, the Richwood ranch is reinventing the idea of what it means to be a rancher in the mountain West.

In some cases, the additions to the ranch are problematic. The large-scale reshaping of the landscape to create the arena, for example, has resulted in extensive erosion, and many areas show early signs of gullying. Nonetheless, the new additions are a way for the ranch to diversify. “There’s so much competition for the land now, with prices going up each year. We need new revenue just to keep our land. The recreation, the competitions, and the restaurant are all ways to do that,” Woodring said. His mother, Mabel Wilson, echoed his sentiments: “This is the time for recreation. Progress has changed the way of life. You now need two incomes to succeed at ranching because you never know what prices will be.” Woodring hopes to use some of the proceeds from his operation to buy other ranchland in the valley to protect it from development; how successful he will be remains to be seen. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, labor, health, and economic problems have forced the family to sell off additional land and to put many of their grander plans on hold. Even the future of the rodeo arena is in doubt.

Even if no additional ranches are subdivided, land ownership in the valley is becoming increasingly fragmented. The two existing subdivisions contain upwards of fifty properties, each with the potential for their own roads, driveways, wells, septic systems, and fences, and each likely bearing the mark of their owner’s ideas about land use. New roads have already been built throughout the area to provide access to the parcels. With this construction, the valley landscape has taken on a different feel. New fences are covered with “Keep Out” signs; even ranchers have posted “No Trespassing” signs, an uncommon sight just a few years ago. The houses, although not the multimillion-dollar mansions springing up in the trendier areas, certainly tend to be much fancier than the old ranch houses; they are built to be showy as well as functional and appear similar to those found anywhere in suburbia. Entrance gates are often store bought, unlike the ranches’ hand-built

19. Neighbors indicate that Woodring also intends to build a hotel on the property to attract rodeo competitors and tourists (perhaps those taking the Gold Belt route) to the ranch.
ones. These new gates, too, reflect a vision of what a western landscape should look like. Ironically, the entrances to the Dilley Ranch and the Cooper Mountain subdivisions are similar in style to that of the Richwood Land and Cattle Company. Although the owners of these developments have very different visions for the valley, they are all marketing a stylized form of the traditional Old West to a decidedly New West population.

However, not all subdivided lands look so markedly different from pre-subdivision times, and many of the newcomers express a desire to blend into the landscape and to build “sustainably.” One, for example, mentioned that he would love to build an all-solar house; another couple plans to build a straw-bale house, a highly energy-efficient building style suitable to the arid West. Said another couple, “We want to touch the land as little as possible, be ecologically responsible. We would prefer to use wind or solar power.”

The concept of “natural” is one of the main differences between newcomers and old-time residents. For ranchers the natural landscape is indistinguishable from their presence on it. Newcomers have a different view. Their definition of naturalness includes not using the land. Virtually none of the new landowners expressed interest in continuing any sort of ranching, though some plan to keep horses on their land. Homeowners could receive huge tax breaks by leasing their property for grazing—tax rates decrease from $300.00 to $7.50 per acre if income-producing commodities are produced—but, despite the obvious financial incentives, most newcomers do not seem tempted.

Ironically, cattle ranching is largely what created the landscape that attracted new residents. Whether through the process of chaining—a method of tree clearing used in the 1950s and 1960s whereby a huge chain hung between two tractors uprooted piñon and juniper trees—or through the grazing process itself, tree growth was kept at bay. It is difficult to determine the specific effects of grazing since no accurate records of the pre-ranching vegetation in the valley exist, but if other studies are any indication, the valley is much more open than it would otherwise have been. As ranching decreases, however, trees are likely to encroach on the formerly grazed lands. And without the grazing and periodic burning vital for a healthy, species-rich natural landscape, the potential grows for more destructive fires, such as the huge Hayman Fire of 2002 that burned large areas of nearby Woodland Park, destroying dozens of ranchette homes in the process.

There is no question ranching has some detrimental effects on the natural world; compared to subdivision, however, ranches are an environmental Eden. In subdivided areas, construction and the mass movement of soil increases the patchiness of vegetation cover, leading to sedimentation of waterways. Biodiversity falls, particularly among those animals with a limited ecological niche. In contrast, “edge-loving” species such as deer and “generalist” species such as skunk and coyote thrive in this environment. In terms of plant life, too, subdivisions have substantially lower biodiversity than either ranches or protected wildlands.

Other problems occur as homes are built in areas that were formerly wildlife habitat. Bears are an increasingly common sight in Garden Park. One woman tells of waking up to a bear rummaging through her kitchen. Unfortunately, bears and homeowners are unlikely to get along, and it is not hard to predict which of the two will be the worse for it. In other areas of the West experiencing rapid growth, such as Trinidad, Colorado, and Montana’s front range, clashes between homeowners and bears have become commonplace.

20. Thomas L. Fleischner, “Ecological Costs of Livestock Grazing in Western North America,” Conservation Biology, 8 (September 1994), 629–44, is an extensive overview of research concerning ecological change that results from ranching. A number of studies covered by Fleischner have indicated that woody and shrubby perennials increase when grazing stops in an area.
22. While a hundred years ago there were unquestionable, catastrophic abuses of the land by ranchers, present-day users, spurred in part by government regulation, tread considerably more lightly. As Paul Starrs has argued, “Study after study finds that range management practices are now vastly better than ever before. In every western state, range condition is improved over fifty years ago. The problem, though, is the past, and in particular the rapacious use of lands early in the twentieth century.” Starrs, Let the Cowboy Ride, 75.
Garden Park, like many other areas in the West, will continue to change, forcing ranchers and newcomers to work together to preserve the small ranches that make the valley what it is. Symbolic of this interaction is the Old West entrance gate of the Cooper Mountain subdivision, formerly the Innes Ranch (above, summer 2001).

One of the most serious issues faced, and in part exacerbated, by subdivisions is the ever-present threat of fire. Never a lush landscape, the Garden Park area is in danger box in dry years; in the decades since chaining ceased, large portions of the piñon-juniper woodland above the valley have burned. Homeowners, though, are likely to push for immediate extinguishing of any fires, and the BLM will likely comply with their demands. However, if dead undergrowth is allowed to build up, the inevitable result will be fires much more intense than the periodic ones that naturally burn through this sort of landscape.

Soil suitability is another concern. Of the soils found in the valley, those mapped as the Fort Collins, Sedillo, and Cerrillos series offer the best locations for building due to the low slope of the pediments, the surfaces on which these soils are located, soil depth, and accessibility. However, many property owners may not be aware that homes built on these soils should be situated away from water since flooding and septic seepage are likely. So, too, many of the places with distinctive and attractive scenery—usually rugged landscapes with high slopes or on floodplains—have soils poorly suited for building. Many landowners will choose to place their homes in beautiful locations regardless of their suitability. These practices, along with the need for roads, will lead to increased erosion, destruction of soils, and increased potential for pollution.

Unquestionably, the most severe environmental hurdle faced is the valley’s water supply; real estate investment in Garden Park is a gamble because the valley’s geology makes predicting groundwater availability tricky. The eastern side of the valley is characterized by a tilted layer of Fountain conglomerate formation, which requires deep wells to tap potable groundwater. Some wells on the eastern side of the valley have had to go as deep as one thousand feet, a thirty-thousand-dollar investment. The western side of the valley generally has water accessible at depths of five hun-

24. Only the southernmost lots in the Cooper Mountain subdivision are under protection from the Canon City fire department.

dred to six hundred feet. According to a Cañon City well driller, the average depth of a new well region-wide has increased from three hundred feet early in the twentieth century to between five hundred and six hundred feet today, and many dry wells have already been drilled. Indeed, in dry years, it is not uncommon for wells to lose yield or go dry and have to be drilled deeper. Sometimes, too, well water is of poor quality, with high concentrations of calcium carbonate, sulfur, and iron. As a result of these difficulties, some property owners have accepted the expensive proposition of hauling in water from Cañon City. The problem of insufficient water will likely worsen as the area’s population increases. Another unknown is the effect of thousands of new wells being added along the Colorado Springs–Pueblo corridor every year that will also tap into the Fountain and Dakota aquifers, the sources of Garden Park’s groundwater.

This valley, like so many others in the West, will change drastically in the next ten years. The most frightening thing for many people, ranchers and newcomers alike, is that they realize their own complicity in the creation of a situation that few want. “We don’t like all the development, but we sold the land, so we have no room to talk” is a typical refrain from ranch families. Newer residents also express a fear that the valley that they fell in love with will soon be overrun by housing developments—what one self-mockingly referred to as the “last-bastard-in” syndrome. In other words, everybody wants development to stop, but only after they have their piece of it. Said one newcomer, “It’s a crying shame; we’re destroying the environment. We’ve got to stop developing. I’m cutting my own throat!” Newcomers who anticipate a sharp rise in property values once the area becomes more fully developed applaud the development.

It is difficult not to sympathize with the ranch families as they watch the decline of a way of life. There is sadness in their voices as they discuss the future. One rancher whose property is now a nascent subdivision told us several years ago that ranching as an occupation is not worth the trouble. He blames government interference for most of the ranchers’ problems. Although the heavy hand of government regulation may have occasionally been burdensome, it is not what will ultimately end ranching in this valley; both ranchers and environmentalists have been focusing on the wrong threats. As a result, the future in Garden Park is likely to be a situation that neither side wanted. Across the West, slowly, environmentalists and ranchers are coming to the realization that they have more in common than either thought, that without compromise, both will lose.

For Garden Park, the realization may have come too late. However, there are still opportunities, whether through tourism, conservation easements, or other measures, for valley residents to preserve the open spaces, natural environments, and small ranches that make the place what it is. Working together, both ranchers and newcomers could—through intelligent planning, shared labor, continued grazing for vegetation health, use of fire as a management tool, limited immigration, development of markets for locally grown food, and individual attention to conservation—preserve a landscape that, for many, has come to define the West. With careful planning and cooperation, the area can support limited development. It is encouraging to hear a number of the new owners giving credence to ideas of living sustainably. Whether such foresight and cooperation will occur on a large enough scale is an open question. The last twenty-five years of rampant development in the West certainly raises doubts.

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