

OVERCOMING THE COLONIAL MINDSET

by Tony Malmberg

My earliest memories revolve around my dad waking me with the sun to work cattle. My feet took the shape of the pointed boots and my head grew within my Stetson, leaving an indented white forehead. I never even thought about not ranching.

In 1978, I partnered with my dad to buy a ranch in the foothills of Wyoming's Wind River Mountains near Lander. Bad timing compounded high interest payments with tumbling cattle markets, and the harder we worked, the more our ranch payments went up. Our ranch was sucked into bankruptcy. Losing the ranch seemed unjust. I blamed consumers, environmentalists, liberals. Most of all I blamed our new neighbors.

A Californian had paid twice what a cow could generate per acre for a place next to us. He bought nice equipment, remodeled the two houses, bulldozed all remnants of the old ranch into oblivion. A fancy sign at his gate read: "Red Bluff Ranch." I hadn't met him but I couldn't stand him.

Another new owner, this one from the Pacific Northwest, drove his fancy pickup across some of the best summer grazing in the region, as well as a Wyoming cowboy's envy – great winter range. His orchards back home were paying for the place. Then the Nature Conservancy bought 35,000 acres to the west and south of us. I was angry again. But this time something worked against my anger. I believe that markets don't lie, and if that's true, then the premiums paid by my new neighbors reflected value far beyond cows.

Acting on that idea, I first leased and eventually bought back the ranch we'd lost. Then we started a ranch-recreation business, marketing it to Easterners, Europeans, and even Californians. From 1989 to 2000, we gave our guests the real ranch life. It failed to really boom. I got a hint why from a Pittsburgh stockbroker guest: "I don't particularly mind the trailer house's leaky roof or cramped quarters, but I don't like sharing my bed with your local mouse population."

Rather than go back to cows as our sole support, we plunged, building a three-story log building with room for 14 guests. It wasn't luxurious, but it was clean and spacious and mostly mouse-free, and our clients liked it.

Then the jets hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. We had four guests at the time. The two from Israel helped us realize such events are more commonplace than we could imagine. A nurse from Manhattan, who rented a car for her return home rather than brave the airlines, helped us realize that another era had ended for us.

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My wife, Andrea, concluded that we had to go local. I resisted. I couldn't imagine our neighbors buying anything from us beyond grass for their livestock. For three generations before me, my family had exported to distant markets.

Even though we cowboys all complained about the West being a colony, I longed for the comfort of the past.

But Andrea pointed out that when land and labor were cheap, we could afford to produce high-volume, low-cost commodities for distant markets. But now, some of the consumers who used to live a long way away were living around us. The same values attracting the hobby ranchers I found so irritating had also brought a diverse bunch of city refugees here.

We started by hosting a class on weed control for local ranchette owners. One couple notorious for their environmentalism- at least among us older timers - was elated to find that goats control weeds better than herbicides. We found that a seminar on monitoring rangeland health stimulated both new and long-time ranchers.

Those who liked beef but not chemicals bought our grass-finished beef, free of hormones or antibiotics. Andrea offered yoga classes. A winter solstice party packed the lodge with the strangest assortment of people I'd ever seen together.

The hodge-podge appeared to be a demographic accident, yet they all ended up in central Wyoming because they wanted the same things we want: a beautiful landscape, healthy ecology, wholesome food, and sense of community.

In the old days I didn't have to deal with people different from me. But this is better. Distant consumers care only about price. Our neighbors care about what's in the beef they're eating and what raising beef does to the land. We can sell a life beyond what is fast and convenient. Hell, I even put up a sign on the gate: Twin Creek Ranch and Lodge. My traditional neighbors may see it as selling out. I kind of like it.

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