

**COMING INTO THE COUNTRY:
NEW OWNERS OF RANCHES IN THE
SIERRA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA**

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Coming into the country: new owners of ranches in the Sierra Valley, California

Ownership turnover of ranchlands across the Western United States is drawing attention from those interested in the conservation of the Western landscape. *Why* is the recent phase of ownership turnover considered important and *what* are its possible effects on the West's social and ecological landscapes? While Western ranchlands have been changing hands for over a century, turnover today is marked by the high market value of land. Some land goes to developers and is removed from ranching altogether; other land—of particular interest to conservation—remains as intact, large-scale ranchland in the hands of new owners. But common to each transaction is that ranches are not sold at prices in line with their production value. Buyers in this market are buying agricultural land at amenity prices, which indicates that new buyers have more financial resources than those in the past, and are likely buying the land for different reasons and with different expectations.

In response to the trend of changing ownership, many scholars ask who will replace today's aging ranchers, and how the land will be managed (Forero et al. 1992). As part of a master's thesis in geography, I intended to answer this question, using new owners in California's Sierra Valley as a case study. But what I found in the valley led me down a slightly different path. The Sierra Valley reveals that in some places, the transition in ownership currently sweeping the West's rural lands may be more significant than the transition in the landscape. Land management practices are only one small part of the picture, and may not be at the crux of understanding what new ownership means for the landscape. The Sierra Valley suggests the complex set of factors that land ownership change implies—all of which will impact the social and ecological communities of the West: stability of tenure, attitudes toward nature and work, knowledge, access to information, openness to innovation, personal and financial investments in the local community, and responses to development pressures.

In this presentation, I've taken a few key points from a more extensive discussion in my thesis. I focus on these points because I think they're particularly revealing of the complexities of new ownership of ranchlands in the American West. They demonstrate the range of factors we must consider when trying to understand what ownership change

means, and how dependent the changes are on the specific locale and specific individuals involved.

While ownership turnover could potentially yield a significant change in land use, it does not in every case; the consequences largely depend on individual characteristics of the areas where ownership change is occurring. But it nevertheless potentially has long-term consequences for the land and community.

Probably the most accurate *sweeping* generalization we can make is that new owners are not solely dependent on livestock production for income. They are likely interested in making a profit, and may want that profit to add to income from another profession or retirement savings. Whatever other changes ownership turnover induces are largely a result of the extent to which new owners involve themselves in livestock production. So connection—or not—to livestock production is a guiding theme here, around which the other themes in this paper revolve.

First, a comment about my methods, which are primarily ethnographic. My approach was to interview to a small section of new owners in the Sierra Valley in a manner which allowed an in-depth exploration of their experiences. Small, targeted sample sizes such as mine are aimed at finding out “what’s going on out there,” and can serve as a basis for future broader research, which my study will ultimately inform (Bernard 2002, 184). My goal is to understand the possible motivations, meanings, and practices of new owners of ranches.

Working at play and playing at work

The first theme I’d like to focus on has to do with work: Today’s West reveals a shift from a production-oriented landscape—in which labor turns natural resources into material goods—to an amenity-oriented landscape—in which natural resources are for recreation and scenic appreciation (landscape consumption); and these activities, rather than those used to generate material goods, drive the region’s economy (McCarthy and Guthman 1998).

The transition from a productive landscape to one of consumption affects our interactions with the landscape. In the New West, as traditional extractive industries

decline, land prices rise, and urban migrants move in, laboring in nature becomes less of a necessity; many urban dwellers look to recreation to connect with nature, and interactions with nature have become largely based on leisure rather than on work. As historian Richard White observes: “We try to make play matter as if it were work, as if our lives depended on it. We try to know through play what workers in the woods, fields, and waters know through work” (White, 174). However, some new residents in the rural West turn to one of the Old West’s struggling industries—ranching—as their chosen form of recreation.

This is the case in the Sierra Valley, where many new owners are “playing” at being ranchers. These new owners seek, through play, a relationship with the land that allows them to know nature in the traditional sense—through productive work. In this way, they move beyond White’s observations that “nature has become an arena for human play and leisure,” because the form of leisure in which these residents engage is indeed a traditional form of work; these owners turn work into a kind of recreation, rather than turning recreation into work.

For these residents, production is still dependent on, as geographer Nathan Sayre puts it, “the natural processes of rainfall and vegetation growth,” even while these new producers, for the most part, are not dependent on their product (Sayre 2002, 225). But contrary to Sayre’s observations of the emergent New West economy, in which, I quote, “now there must be no sign of any commodity production whatsoever; all traces of human labor must be swept or wished away,” these urban transplants are not seeking “unpeopled, ‘pristine’ Nature,” but rather a productive nature (Ibid.). In doing so, they challenge the dominant New West economy, which, again in Sayre’s words, “valorizes recreation, leisure, and places dedicated to the ‘nonconsumptive’ consumption” (Ibid.).

This “work” of ranching is indeed part of the consumptive landscape, since it is a form of recreation, being an activity that doesn’t constitute a livelihood; yet calling this work “play” should not demean its real consequences: these new owners expend real labor, and with it, they bring physical labor in nature into their lives and maintain production in the landscape. And herein lies the significance of their activities: these owners unite the typically divided view of leisure and work landscapes and thus

challenge the binary between these landscapes: rather than recreation simply becoming a form of work, a traditional form of work becomes recreation.

Notions of work and nature

Now I'll move on to the next theme, which focuses on new owners' notions of work and nature.

Our relationships with the land influence, and are influenced by, our ideas of nature. Is nature a place of ecological balance or of complex biological interactions? Are humans part of the “natural” ecosystem of plants and animals, or is true nature separate from human presence and influence? Is it a refuge, a retreat from the industrial world, or does it allow recreation, relaxation, *and* work? Interaction with land that entails work necessarily includes a view of nature as a place where humans have a role—and a view of land as something to be managed.

Contrary to other studies of urban migrants, for these new owners, nature, and the valley itself, is more than a place of leisure. Even the one owner I interviewed who had no pretensions of, or interest in, becoming a rancher, still sees the land as something to be managed and made productive. This view stems from the time she spent on her grandparent's land as a child, which she describes as a “working landscape.”¹ The pine forest on the property, she says, “was managed for forestry and also we had a cattle operation and we had corn and other kinds of things. So it was a huge operation.”

As Lynn Huntsinger (professor of range management) says, in managing land, we are trying “to manipulate an ecosystem to give us what we want and need—whether a commodity like beef or timber, or a nice view, or the preservation of some elements or processes we think important” (Huntsinger 1997,3). The new owners I spoke with in the Sierra Valley all reveal a perspective on land as something that can and should be managed in order to produce a desired result. In some “amenity-rich” areas of the West, new owners buy ranches intending to discontinue cattle grazing and manage the land in order to encourage wildlife—and they regard the two practices as conflicting. In the Sierra Valley, however, many new owners regard livestock and wildlife as compatible, and believe that ranching may even be beneficial to wildlife. Dave and Nancy Andrews

¹ Lucy's use of these terms exposes her own professional involvement in these issues; certainly not all new owners would chose to describe—or even conceive of—childhood places in this way.

say, “We really enjoy the wildlife, so the more we can perpetuate it, the better. And there’s a pretty harmonious relationship. It doesn’t take a lot. It takes a little bit of work to fence out the streams It’s a small area you’re fencing out, so you get maybe a little less grazing, but not significant. So you can actually have both, it just takes a little work.”

Joel Ellis, a retired lawyer from Southern California, says that more wildlife gathers in and around the irrigation ditches he created than in the natural creeks that descend the hillside above the ranch. But the irrigation ditches are an ecosystem. He says, “you’ll see the baby ducks, the mothers with the ducks. You saw the pelicans. The cranes are down there. That’s a complete ecosystem.” The streambeds, on the other hand, are nothing more than erosion: “to say that that’s an ecosystem,” he says, “the answer is no, it’s not.” These excerpts reflect the view that not only can land be managed to produce a desired result, but also that management can actually improve on natural processes: nature on its own doesn’t support wildlife as well as it can when humans help out.

Joel Ellis also expresses the perspective that nature is less efficient on its own than it is when humans give it a hand. He firmly believes that he can improve nature’s course. “There are things I can improve upon,” he says. “I’m going to show you that.” He showed me the irrigation ditches he installed when he bought the ranch. The ranch had no irrigation system before he bought it, so the water “just free-flowed” from mountains and “created gullies, created erosion—lots of erosion.” Without the irrigation system, he says, “there was no control, there was no plan.” Although “some people seem to think that’s better, just free-flowing,” Joel disagrees: “It’s not. Because you don’t create open meadows like this. It ends up like the hills, the mountains there. It’s just sagebrush and so forth.” He continues, and what he reveals is how firmly fixed in individual interests our understandings of nature are. Joel Ellis judges the “best” management system to be the one that furthers his goal of productive grazing land. “It’s much more productive if you irrigate. Much, much more productive. Whereas you may be able to run one cow to ten acres when you have sagebrush, here, where it’s irrigated, you can run ten cows to one acre, something like that. It’s much more productive, much more efficient.”

But the key here is that how we decide to manage—or manipulate—land depends on what one wants it to look like and wants to do with it. But not all managers readily recognize their bias. When I ask Joel if he thinks that how he believes the land is best

utilized depends on his goals—for example, if you want to run cattle, running cattle probably best prepares the land to run more cattle—he says, “You have to understand the history of the land. The health of the land is the amount of grazing the land gets.” I ask if he did not want to run cows—if his objective were wildlife habitat—would the land be “unhealthy” if it were not grazed? Joel continues, “I’m of the opinion that cattle are the key. It keeps things in a fresh vegetative state.”

Of course, even scientists can’t agree on what constitutes “healthy” rangeland (Committee on Rangeland Classification 1994). But the Andrews, in contrast to Joel Ellis, are willing to entertain the idea that definitions depend on goals. As part of a plan they’ve set up with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, for the past two years, the Andrews have taken an unirrigated hillside pasture out of grazing. “It’s really interesting to watch what’s changing,” Dave says. “What I think is happening is that some of the less desirable grasses—or weeds—are taking over.” The grasses are natives, he says, “but at the same time, they’re all woody and sticky, and what we had when we were grazing it was just a beautiful carpet of grass.” Dave is firm that “the land is better if it’s grazed.” But he admits that this conclusion depends on what one’s goal is, and his is good land for grazing—it may not indicate a healthy wildlife habitat. “It might be” good habitat as well, he says. “I don’t know. And that’s why we’re doing it.” Dave is not only thinking of the cows: “There’s an area that’s pretty dry and it’s turning a lot uglier than it used to be”; but, he recognizes, “that’s a visual—not necessarily a biological” judgment.

These owners’ views reflect a desire to unite components of the rural lifestyle that are important to them: keeping the land in a productive state that provides healthy grazing is in line with their goal of raising cattle; at the same time, they appreciate and enjoy the valley’s wildlife, and want to manage the landscape to be beneficial to both. Their conception of the ecological systems their ranch influences reflects their intentions and perception of nature and their place in it. Recognizing this, and the bias it contributes to our views, allows us to consider the worth of other views and management styles. So, as we know quite well, ecosystems are dependent on much more than biological forces; social, political, and economic structures have consequences on ecological systems.

Land management and tenancy

The last theme I discuss, sticking with the idea of land management, is how tenancy relationships affect land management.

As often as they are grazing their own cattle, new owners of ranches in the Sierra Valley are leasing their land to other ranchers. Most of the leases in the valley are held by families who have sold their land but continue to own cattle—not an uncommon way for ranchers to stay in business in this age of high land values.² These previous owners are now tenants on neighboring ranches owned by newcomers to the valley. One potential effect this situation has is to create class-based tension among newcomers and the lessees—usually long-term residents—as the new owners likely have a higher financial status than the lessees.

While economic differentiation is becoming more stark as high-priced land changes hands, tenancy arrangements in which new owners lease to old-timers are not new to the Sierra Valley. Long-time ranchers in the valley did not just become tenants with the most recent ownership changes: when many of these new owners bought their ranch, the land was already being leased to another rancher.

However, what the current tenancy situation indicates is that even in this most recent—and distinctive—period of ownership turnover in the Sierra Valley, the land use has changed little. Because land management is even less likely to change than when new owners buy and manage cattle of their own, this tenancy situation contributes to a stability of land use. New owners who lease to old-timers reduce the likelihood that the change in ownership will introduce new practices or an adjustment in the style of land management.

² Of the nine ranch owners I talked to, five lease land to ranchers whose families have been in the valley for generations, and one to a rancher from the Central Valley. Changes in Forest Service grazing allotments may also cause some ranchers to lease private land. However, Sierra Valley ranchers may be less affected by changes in Forest Service allotments than Central Valley ranchers, because their deeded land is their source of summer grazing. (Sierra Valley ranchers, instead, often lease winter grazing land in the foothills.) The Tahoe National Forest Range Agent I spoke with did not know how ranchers are responding to changes in Forest Service allotments. Sue Berger speculated that ranchers in the valley are not very dependent on allotments; they are considered more of a “bonus,” she says, since the allotments do not allow many cows.

When the Ellises first bought their ranch, they leased the land to a valley old-timer who had a ranch down the road.³ A few years later, another long-time valley rancher took over the lease. Joel Ellis says that a ranch like his—irrigated, with rich grass and good fencing—is at a premium. “I could get much more for it and lease it to other people. I’ve been offered more money for it, but I feel obligated to Bob. We’ve had a working relationship with Bob all these years.” George Peterson, when he bought his ranch, initially continued the lease that the previous owner had established with a valley rancher; he then leased to another rancher who also did some farming and cleared sagebrush to enlarged the ranch’s cultivated area.

Leasing land to long-time ranchers also provides a source of continuity in the knowledge of the land. Knowledge is potentially a key concern in ownership turnover. If, as Nathan Sayre hypothesizes, “the loss of accumulated, experiential knowledge,” is indeed a significant factor in land management after ownership change, then leasing land to previous owners, or other long-time valley families, can counteract new owners’ lack of situational and experiential knowledge (personal communication between N. Sayre and Hannah Gosnell, June 22, 2004).

The Andrews leased their ranch to the previous owners, two brothers, the first year they bought it; and even after buying some cattle of their own, the Andrews continue to lease part of the ranch. Working with the brothers—“perfect cowboys,” as the Andrews describe them—became a way for the Andrews to learn about handling cattle. Dave says, “They needed a little help to do their stuff, so we’d be out there and we’d help them rope the cattle and bring them in and give them shots and brand them and do everything.” The next year, the lessees sold some of their cattle, so the Andrews bought about 40 head of their own, and then gradually increased to about 100 head. For the McDonalds as well, leasing land to old-timers helped them make initial connections in the valley. They rented their pasture immediately to a local rancher, who Russ says was “the first rancher I met in the valley.” Leasing land can contribute to the social cohesiveness of the valley by integrating new and old residents and passing on knowledge and practices.

³ The patriarch of the family died, and the son retired from the cattle business and moved away. In 1992, the ranch sold to a well-known rancher from outside the area; he ran into financial difficulties, retired to his ranch near Placerville, and sold to the Browns in 1997.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, the brief themes I have highlighted in this paper, and especially the more complete discussion in my thesis, reveal that these Sierra Valley owners are a complex set of new ranchers who defy norms and assumptions about newcomers in the rural West. In the Sierra Valley, even while ownership change impacts the political economy and social structure of the community, a surprising degree of continuity in the land and the community still exists. New owners vary in their degree of attachment to ranching—goals for their ranch, involvement in ranching practices, and adoption of the ranch lifestyle—yet they have all kept their land in agriculture, the fact around which further consequences of their ownership revolves. The rural lifestyle draws most new owners to the valley, but whatever their intention in buying their ranch, once they settle in the valley, a set of forces works to funnel new owners further into the tradition of agrarian land use, largely determined by the demands of the land for management and residents' desire to integrate themselves into the community.

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