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Sam Bingham, The Last Ranch

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BOOK REVIEWS

SAM BINGHAM, *THE LAST RANCH*, Harcourt Brace & Company, San Diego, CA (1996); 363pp; \$14.00; ISBN 0-15-600539-5, softcover.

REVIEWED BY FEDERICO CHEEVER¹

The San Luis Valley, in south-central Colorado, is like other parts of the American rural Southwest, only more so: a flat, once fertile valley surrounded by abrupt craggy mountains that defy the comprehension of those who have not spent time with them; mysterious and biologically significant wetlands; small communities of people where everybody knows everybody; and a persistent historical lack of usable water. Sam Bingham's book, *The Last Ranch*, captures the life of one ranching family near the north end of the Valley during the better part of one year, from early Spring to Fall 1992.

Donnie and Karen Whitten, husband and wife, are the pivot around which Bingham's inquiries rotate. Fortunately for Bingham and his readers, the Whittens are energetic and inquisitive people involved in a range of issues that affect the ecological integrity of dry grasslands and the future of cattle ranching in the Valley, in the southwest, and on the planet. They are devotees of Allan Savory's Holistic Resource Management (described elegantly in the book's fourth chapter) and its promise of transformed, environmentally friendly livestock industry in the dry, "brittle" grasslands of this continent and Savory's native southern Africa. They are personally involved in attempts to employ Savory's ideas on Bureau of Land Management grazing allotments. They are acquaintances and joint venturers with the Coleman brothers and their revolutionary natural beef business. Donnie Whitten also manages a ranching operation for John and Carol Wagner—a couple of good-hearted millionaires who enjoy ranching when not tied up in the Caribbean or New York, sympathetic representatives of the "recreational ranchers" who are beginning to occupy so much of the western range. And, of course, the Whittens worry about water and grass.

The laudable qualities of the Whittens make *The Last Ranch* a far better book than the standard "year on the ranch" format might suggest. But Bingham has even bigger game in his sites. The life of the

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Whittens and the Valley provide him with a vehicle for making a subtle and essential point about the availability of water for human endeavors and the health and structure of the biological fabric that captures, holds, and filters that water. Between accounts of trips to the 4-H fair at the Monte Vista rodeo grounds, cattle drives, and school board meetings, Bingham illustrates again and again how human use of Valley lands has altered the successional process among the Valley's plant and animal communities, thereby altering the biological-water dynamic. Observation after observation suggest that these human induced changes are slowly rendering many water-dependant human activities impossible, at least for independent operators like the Whittens. For the Whittens' ranch the key to survival is grass (forage for cattle) on their own land and on the Bureau of Land Management's Tracy allotment. There is much less of it now than there was when earlier generations of Whittens occupied the land.

For Bingham, the Whittens' struggle to make a living running cattle represents a global problem—desertification of grazed grasslands, a problem Bingham would ascribe, in large part, to miscomprehension. Bingham is a veteran of aid programs in Africa and Navajo territory and recalls how the same conventional notions of superior grazing practices have led to catastrophe in the Sahel and the Southwest. He is convinced that the conventional wisdom will only aid the encroaching deserts in dry grassland areas around the world. Unlike his compatriot, Savory, Bingham is not full of answers. By limiting his horizon to the Whittens, he can comfortably suggest potential lines of inquiry without pursuing them very far. While this occasionally makes the book seem like the *Zen of Grassland Ecosystems*, on balance Bingham's format suits the complexity of his subject.

The Whittens are plainly far ahead of most of the planet in their understanding and acceptance of Bingham's point. They struggle to reshape their cattle operation so it enhances, rather than destroys, the water retaining qualities of the lands they use. They are not notably successful. The land's responses to change can still baffle them. The wounds they wish to heal have been inflicted over a century or more. More unfortunate and less inevitable, the human forces arrayed against them, from defensive and uninterested local ranchers and federal bureaucracy to international water development enterprises and inappropriate notions of what a prize lamb should look like, seem overwhelming (particularly after you read the epilogue).

Some of the book's best parts are devoted to the Whittens' allies in their attempt to transform the way we think about water and nature. There is Allan Savory, of course, endlessly energetic former Rhodesian counterinsurgency specialist in quasi-voluntary exile from his native land, less as a result of the victory of the rebels he fought than as a result of his radical views on grazing. There is Steve Berlinger, the outspoken, heretical manager of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuge, and Royce Wheeler, the opened-minded BLM range conservationist. Finally, there is Jim Coleman, the stockman who resists chemical treatment of weeds to protect

his natural cattle operation. All join the Whittens in their decided upstream paddle against the forces of conventional wisdom. Bingham provides a brief biographical sketch of each significant character, helping the reader to understand, sympathize and remember.

Expressed obliquely, in the account of an encounter at the Monte Vista Wildlife Refuge between ranchers and an "Earthfirst! Vegetarian" from Boulder, Colorado, is one of Bingham's postulates that dry grassland ranching will continue and that it should continue. Many environmentalists on this continent, some more articulate and knowledgeable than the maligned Boulderite, would dispute this. Within the context of the book, Bingham's postulate works. The Whittens are sympathetic people who care about the land. The idea of forcing them off to the city to become computer programmers, or whatever, is unacceptable to the reader after the first two chapters. Bingham's postulate also makes sense in the global context. While the United States could afford to withdraw much, if not all, of its dry grasslands from agricultural production, banning cattle is not a reasonable option in the Sahel or Central Asia. This is, however, an important limitation on Bingham's analysis for those primarily interested in the American Southwest.

As an added treat, Bingham provides us with a Valley-level view of the last two grand schemes to tap the theoretically vast and consistently chimerical groundwater reserves trapped in the soils under the San Luis Valley. He traces the demise of American Water Development's grand and half-baked plan to export groundwater to Denver, providing a concise and engaging account of the groundwater modeling issues which, through a six-week trial in Alamosa, sank the project. Even better, we get a personal and autobiographical account from the expert witness who did the most to sink it, Devraj Sharma. Three chapters later, Bingham documents the rise of the Stockman's Water Company and its enigmatic prime mover, Gary Boyce, whose water export scheme remains in the news and whose ballot initiatives—apparently intended to shift the balance of water and power in the Valley—were recently trounced by Colorado voters.

Like any book that covers so much territory so subtly related, Bingham and his editors cannot always tell the difference between wide-ranging and rambling. Periodically, Bingham briefly shifts the scene to Africa or some international conference on the environment. These interludes are not always illuminating. A brief discourse on Donnie's failed attempt at lobster farming in the high desert and a lengthy account of a trip to a Dick Lamm political event in Denver do not seem to serve the book's purpose; but, they are entertaining.

The Last Ranch is a particularly useful book for lawyers. It instructs us about the intricacies of natural systems without descending into technical jargon. It describes the troublesome groundwater quantification business without presenting an equation. Most significantly, it provides a lasting antidote to our inclination to slice the world into separate cognitive boxes—water, wetlands, cattle, grass, weeds, wildlife,

and property—which neither makes sense to the living systems of which they are all part, nor to the people who live in them.

DAVID M. GILLILAN AND THOMAS C. BROWN, INSTREAM FLOW PROTECTION: SEEKING A BALANCE IN WESTERN WATER USE, Island Press, Washington D.C. & Covelo, California (1997); 417pp.; \$30.00; ISBN 1-55963-524-X, softcover.

REVIEWED BY CAROL D. ANGEL²

The authors tell us that they intended, in writing this book, "to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the many issues surrounding instream flow, and to shed new light on a poorly understood but very important natural resource topic."³ This is a lofty and laudable goal: instream flows are certainly at the heart of many water use issues in the West today. A comprehensive, balanced analysis would be useful to a broad range of interested parties, from local, state and federal officials, to private water users, to environmental organizations, to the public at large. This book is a start, but unfortunately not a finish.

In many areas, the authors have indeed been comprehensive, painstakingly cataloging the full range of state and federal approaches to protection of instream flows. This volume pulls together a wide range of information in one accessible format, which is helpful as an introduction to the subject of instream flows. Because the book's thorough approach inexplicably vanishes in several key areas, however, it cannot offer a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Specifically, the book fails by refusing to look squarely at opposition to instream flow protection; and by glossing over the uncertainties in the science supporting the need for and quantification of instream flows, which has been the crux of several recent instream flow controversies.

The book's first two chapters are promising. After a brief introduction, the authors provide a clear, concise, and balanced summary of the development of water law and water use in the western United States. The discussion is simplified enough to provide a reader coming to the subject cold with a basic understanding of western water law,

2. Senior Assistant Attorney General, Federal and Interstate Water Unit, Colorado Attorney General's Office. The reviewer represented the State of Colorado in opposing federal claims for National Forest instream flow reserved rights in Colorado Water Division 1 (the South Platte basin) and is now representing Colorado in ongoing settlement negotiations for similar claims in Water Divisions 2, 3 & 7 (the Arkansas, Rio Grande, and San Juan basin). The opinions expressed in this review, however, are solely those of the reviewer and do not represent any official position of the Attorney General's Office.

3. DAVID M. GILLILAN & THOMAS C. BROWN, *INSTREAM FLOW PROTECTION: SEEKING A BALANCE IN WESTERN WATER USE* 4 (1st ed. 1997).