

a7 Ranche

Protecting the Last Native Grass

By Pam Asheton



The grasslands at the a7 Ranche began their ecological diversification over 10,000 years ago and they have roots that burrow three feet, sometimes deeper. Their wispy structures hold fragile reserves of water and anchor in shallow layers of foothills and prairie soil. John Cross, third generation rancher here, is passionate about their survival and adaptability.

Back in the late 1980s many of his neighbours wrote him off as a nutcase as he single-mindedly began exploring alternative methods of grazing cattle along methodology that mimicked bison and other nomads. "Last summer moving cattle," says a7 cowboy Rory Sapergia, "I'd throw my rope and it would stand up, lay on top of the grass. I was used to a different kind grazing, where cows would chew down everything but the rocks."

Drive seventeen miles west of Nanton and the gravel road meanders through Alberta foothills. The last hilltop past where the a7 Ranche's valley nestles into a shallow valley (through which Cross Creek flows) has knockout views of the snow shining mountains right down to Montana. The Crosses emigrated from Scotland in 1826, prosperous merchants fleeing increasing industrial pollution so

acute Lanarkshire was referred to as the "Black Country." Robert died in 1827 of typhus, leaving his widow Janet with nine children. Alexander, the eighth child, remembered vividly the earlier class-established privileges of his original homeland. When Alexander married in 1851, he revisited Scotland and Braehead, returning with an entire set of silver and two huge silver candelabras, already on the first stages of recreating a childhood lifestyle.

A. E. Cross was one of Alexander's nine children, fluently speaking French and raised in a highly competitive entrepreneurial atmosphere. His brothers Harry and Willie Huber decided to seek fortunes in Europe and Wyoming while he, after a character-building beginning at the Cochrane Ranche (and a disgruntled night of drinking at the



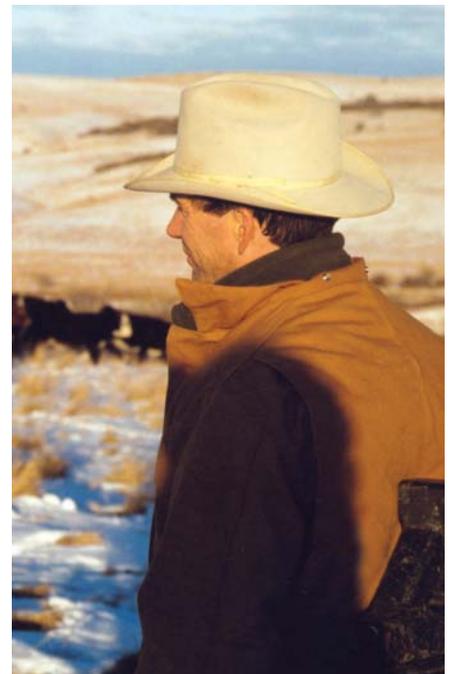
Dwarfed by the towering eastern slopes of the Rockies, 27 cattle stretch across the snow-covered range, lined out on the winter feed

Waldron Ranch, now the Waldron), impulsively bought a \$10 homestead near Pincher Creek. Calgary that year recorded \$17.40 as its civic debt.

His brother Willie Huber Cross was in fact the original homesteader of the 27, later selling it to A.E. in 1903 for approximately \$12,000; the years in between recorded some of Alberta's worst climatic extremes. The brothers sweltered in the rainless nightmare of 1886 (within the homestead's sod-built house), and colts regularly were devoured by wolves, before a winter followed that began with a foot of snow in October. Temperatures of -63 °F were recorded; a milking cow was found frozen upright, her eyeballs as hard as marbles. The 27's purebred cattle began to die, ranchers lamented over 60 per cent losses, and by spring the air was rank with rotting carcasses.

A.E. (38) married Nell McLeod (19, and daughter of Mary McLeod and first white child officially born in the newly formed province of Alberta) in 1899. By 1911, largely through property and liquor brewing interests, A.E. was officially a millionaire. He celebrated this milestone by purchasing the McIntosh Ranch lands that bordered the 27 for \$9,000 – a price that included 827 deeded acres, 4,907 leases and 300 head of cattle (the Flying E, Gregory and Bob's Creek ranches were later absorbed too).

Today, a Chinook wind shrieks endlessly outside the 27's office windows as John Cross, A. E.'s grandson, pulls out a map of the current boundaries and lays the huge roll flat on the chunky table. Many of the fields and sections used for John's innovative Holistic Resource Management concepts still bear names of century-back



Portrait of John Cross checking out his beloved grasslands



The vast sections of the a7 are managed by the small and highly effective teamwork of Rory Sapergia (mounted), ranch manager (as well as Mayor of Nanton, and local businessman) John Blake, alongside John Cross (far right) with his daughter Tanis.

homesteaders: Price, Park, McKissick, Mares, the Hudson Bay Company... "Shanks, Rossfield," John rolls the names off his tongue, "they (the a7's more southern sections) are really rough country... The homesteaders were different from the first wave of well-off British aristocracy and businessmen, say the 1870s to around 1910. I think many of

them came out, staked a claim and then wondered what the hell they'd taken on."

John's father, a high profile rancher and cattleman, was only 13 when he was affected by a stroke, and his son often wonders if that event was precipitated by an accidental earlier spillage of pesticides.

"I think," he believes, "he later got sick again with another chemical, and then

From a 1960s article in *Canadian Cattleman*

The cash book of Cross Bros. a7 Ranche in 1887 reveals that beef sold for 9 cents per pound dressed weight, potatoes 2.5 cents per pound, and oats traded freely at 3 cents per pound. The going wage for cowboys and hands was \$40 per month and board with an extra \$5-\$8 per head for each horse broken. Good saddle horses sold for \$75 per head, good steers from \$40 per head on the hoof, and five Shorthorn bulls were bought for \$250. A ticket to Montreal and return cost \$60 and a night's lodging at the Royal Hotel, Calgary was entered as costing \$3."

Legendary cattleman Jack Dempsey was enticed back from Ireland in 1927, and worked as the a7's foreman for the next 18 years (interestingly, Jack learned his trade between 1897 through to 1904 courtesy of an extraordinary mentor, John Ware). After his original employer A.E. Cross died (1861 – 1932), Dempsey continued in his position. "When Mr. Cross died, his three sons James B, John and Sandy took over active management... they kept the a7 to the forefront of ranching circles," reports a 1960s article by Fred Kennedy in *Canadian Cattleman*. "You know," Dempsey remarked, "those lads buy the best bulls and best cows obtainable and they believe in feeding youngstock. That's the whole secret... there is a purebred herd which is kept separate and in this herd are some of the finest breeding stock I have seen in this country."

my dad had this real war going with thistles, he thought they were going to take over the country! We spent huge chunks of time and money and pesticides... and the next year I went out and couldn't see much effect, all we were doing was a band-aid solution. That got me to thinking there's got to be a different way to managing landscapes but my dad could never quite see my point of view. I didn't have that articulation then, I was in my early 20s and the way that a lot of young people are then, fairly idealistic."

Undeterred and every bit as single-minded as every one of his ancestors, the young rancher began studying trade journals, attending workshops down in the United States then often initiated by innovators Stan Parsons and Alan Savory (whose legacies can these days be accessed too through the internationally recognized Savory Center, or the Californian based Ranching for Profit/Ranch Management Consultants).

"I did make some mistakes implanting the ideas," John admits. "One time I remember, we had a large number of

cattle in one field and there was a heavy November snowfall, and they turned it just black. The field sat there throughout the winter, right by the highway, and everyone could see it!"

"But," he leans back in his chair, considering, "I learned something from it. The last year's young trees all came back younger and stronger than ever. They were part of other patterns that had been established over thousands of years, about fire suppression and buffalo. Buffalo, if they couldn't eat the grass, they'd eat the trees, the willow, and poplar and aspen."

He pauses, half a morning later finally pouring out coffee I am desperate for. Outside, John's teenaged daughter, bundled up against the biting wind, eases her sorrel quarter horse up to the back of a herd; a7 cattle get moved roughly every three days. It's remarkably easy to imagine what conservative ranching neighbours were saying, and the nerve needed to keep plugging along ideas then so radical as to seem outlandishly comical.

Officially, John took over the a7's affairs on December 31st 1986, and by 1988/1989 was already installing the first miles of electric fencing (replacing conventional barbed wire). "In hindsight," he grins with self-deprecating humour, "it

The ranch's distinctive brand was first recorded May 26th 1886. The first brand submitted was in fact 'A1' (denoting then, as now, top quality). Authorities of the day considered this too easy to change by cattle rustlers and A. E. Cross (one of the Calgary Stampede's original Big Four founders – prize money its first year was \$15,000 – also included Pat Burns, Archie McLean and George Lane) submitted the 'a' representing his first initial, and the '7' representing his other siblings. The first blacksmith making up the branding iron made a right angle (allegedly because it was easier to make). This makes a better brand because a right angle will botch less than an acute, a detail noted in pencil in the original brand recordings. Rancho with an 'e' (as in the Cochrane Rancho) was a popular spelling a century back, probably referring to Mexican or Spanish origins of the word.

was one of the biggest mistakes I made, not stepping back and getting the foresight to develop a much better watering system first... the secret to intensive grazing is water, you need to have the water right close to where the cattle are."

"Water's critical," he emphasizes, "our watering sites are approximately 1,000 feet apart on the property, from the water pipeline which is run by springs and with the exception of about 80' it's all gravity fed and runs year round. On the uplands (the a7 has roughly 2,000' of elevation gain throughout its sections), with the cattle grazing up there, it gets them out of the riparian areas so we can increase the stock density. You get healthier riparian grassland shrubby areas and that density's jumped up tenfold."

Today John concentrates on long-term strategic tactical planning ("decisions that'll affect way past my lifetime," he remarks laconically), while two years into the position John Blake runs the a7's operational side (which includes marketing, tenders and cattle production flow assessments).

A third generation rancher, recently honoured by the Friends of the Bar U, the ranch manager is a large bluff outdoors kind of man. "What we're growing here," John Blake's eyes are twinkling, "is grass as opposed to ego." He soberes. "Every ranch is different, what one family needs means their dynamics are always going to be different, using these paradigms, but I see more and more ranchers warming up to these ideas." 



Horses here are so accustomed to Chinook conditions they'll even put their ears forward to get their photograph taken ('Horse' and Tanis Cross)



Rory Sapergia works with colts on a regular basis, gradually and imperceptibly developing their abilities with cattle in any kind of terrain