



Historic Ranch Conserved

Project protects agriculture, wildlife habitat, and preserves a family legacy

SHAWNEE, Colo. – The Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT), in partnership with the Park County Land and Water Trust Fund, Trust for Public Land, and Keep it Colorado, are proud to announce the conservation of more than 560 acres of the X Brand Ranch in the North Fork South Platte River canyon area near the historic community of Shawnee in eastern Park County, Colorado. The property lies roughly four miles west of the community of Bailey, and about 30 direct miles southwest of the Denver metropolitan area. This conservation project protects a high elevation cattle ranch operation and critical big game habitat, maintains spectacular scenic views along U.S. Route 285 through the community of Shawnee, and secures the future for the X Brand after more than 150 years in operation.

Susan Hickel has lived and worked on the ranch for 45 years, since her arrival to the area to teach school. Shortly after her arrival in the community she married the late Steven Hickel. After a career of public service in the local school district, Susan retired as the principal of Fitzsimmons Middle School in 2006 and has since run the ranch full-time. Steven’s grandfather (Charles Fitzsimmons) first registered the “X” brand in Park County in 1885 and it is still in use on the ranch’s cattle. The original Fitzsimmons homestead was in the Crow Hill area (now Burland Ranchettes in nearby Bailey, Colorado) and the family extended their holdings throughout the early 1900’s into the North Fork of the South Platte River valley, including the acres making up the present-day X Brand Ranch. Historically known as Fitzsimmons Ranch, it includes Lake Shawnee Reservoir, built by horse and hand, and used for years to cut ice for the Maddox Ice Company. The Company cut ice in huge 120 lb. blocks and slid the ice down a ramp onto the train to be taken to Denver for the ice boxes. Horse drawn saws and later, car engine powered saws, were used to cut the ice. The ranch’s main barn was originally constructed in 1868 as the stage stop and sawmill for the old town of Slaughter, using entirely post, beam and pegs—no nails were used in its construction. Steven’s father Jess Fitzsimmons organized and was the first President of the Central Colorado Cattlemen’s Association (1937-38), was a multi-term Park County Commissioner, served on the Soil Conservation District Committee for almost 30 years and was instrumental in establishing the Intermountain Rural Electric Association. Up until 1965 Fitzsimmons Ranch would drive the cattle up U.S. Route 285 to their summer pastures.

Over time, parts of the ranch were sold to meet family expenses. Among these sales include the nearby land to the east where Fitzsimmons Middle School and Platte Canyon High School are now located. The site of the present-day Shawnee Community Center was also part of the original ranch and was donated to the community by the family. The present-day ranch includes the now conserved 560 acres adjoining the 7,200-acre lower Geneva National Forest grazing allotment. Despite the changes to the boundaries and the transition to Steven and Susan, the ranch has operated continuously raising hay and cattle, and the next generation.

“The X Brand Ranch epitomizes the resiliency of Colorado’s ranching community and its dedication to conservation,” stated Brendan Boepple, CCALT’s Director of Additive Conservation. “Susan and her family’s persistence to protect the land and water resources of the ranch are yet another example of their commitment to the community of Shawnee and Park County.”

With its proximity to the Front Range, the X Brand Ranch is no stranger to development pressure. That pressure has only increased over the years given the ranch’s location, river frontage, and scenic beauty. Challenges in the agricultural economy and the generational transfer of property can make development an attractive option. However, the family has turned to conservation to ensure that the X Brand Ranch cannot be subdivided in the future, forever remaining as it has throughout their nearly century-long stewardship of the land. Susan shares that, “When a family puts as much love, time and work into a ranch as we have, it is impossible not to feel the need to preserve and protect it for the future.”

CCALT will hold the conservation easement conserving the ranch in perpetuity, ensuring that this incredible agricultural, ecological, and scenic resource stays that way for future generations. Trust for Public Land worked closely with CCALT to secure funding for the project. The Park County Land & Water Trust Fund (LWTF) played a critical role in supporting this project. On behalf of the Park County LWTF Board, Secretary Liz Biggs remarked that “The X Brand conservation easement represents, in totality, the spirit of the Park County LWTF ensuring for generations the beauty of the viewshed, wildlife migration, and protection of the land. This conservation easement allows a working ranch to remain a working ranch, which is integral to our agricultural community. The history of this land is rooted in the foundations of the Bailey and Shawnee communities and to preserve that heritage is foundational.” Founded in 1998 and derived from a 1% sales tax, the Park County Land & Water Trust was created to preserve, acquire, lease, improve, and maintain Park County’s water resources and lands associated with water resources, water rights, water system/structures, open space, and wildlife and outdoor recreation resources. Transaction cost assistance for this conservation easement was provided by Keep it Colorado.

The family takes great pride in being stewards of the land, and they are proud to conserve some of the region’s and the ranch’s rich history.

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About The Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust

The Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) is a nonprofit land conservation organization whose mission is to protect Colorado’s agricultural land, heritage and families for future generations by conserving working rural landscapes.

About Trust for Public Land

Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national nonprofit that works to connect everyone to the benefits and joys of the outdoors. As a leader in equitable access to the outdoors, TPL works with communities to create parks and protect public land where they are needed most. Since 1972, TPL has protected more than 3 million acres of public land, created more than 5,000 parks, trails, schoolyards, and iconic outdoor places, raised \$84 billion in public funding for parks and public lands, and connected more than 9 million people to the outdoors. To learn more, visit tpl.org.

About the Park County Land and Water Trust Fund

Founded in 1998 and derived from a 1% sales tax, the Park County Land & Water Trust Fund was created to preserve, acquire, lease, improve and maintain Park County’s water resources and lands associated with water resources, water rights, water system/structures, open space, and wildlife and outdoor recreation resources.

About Keep it Colorado

KIC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to uniting, elevating and empowering Colorado’s conservation community to protect the lands and waters that define our state.