

# Time Travel in the Old West

By Rob Betasso

It amuses me just a bit when I hear people (usually someone in the media) refer to the 1990's as though it occurred way back in the horse and buggy days. Now granted, that decade did start over a quarter of a century ago but, to me, it seems like only yesterday.... In 1990, I hired on with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and my first project involved rafting down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon studying the ecosystem's fishes.

By the mid 1990's, I had bounced around a bit from one Game and Fish job to another and wound up settling down for a spell at one of the agency's trout hatcheries. The setting was idyllic as the hatchery was situated just off the Mogollon Rim and nestled down along Canyon Creek in the Tonto National Forest.

Among the many highlights of working at Canyon Creek Hatchery was the opportunity to get to know our nearest (and only) neighbors -- the folks who lived and worked at the OW Ranch, about a mile downstream from the hatchery. Often, come quitting time, I'd take my pup for an evening walk along the creek and we would check in at the OW to visit with Patty and Larry who, then and now, attend to all of the daily chores that keep the Ranch operating in tip top condition.

On a recent weekend this past June, after a bit of pre-planning, I headed back out to the OW for an all-too-brief visit with my long-time friends. Not surprisingly, when I arrived in the mid-morning, Patty was busy working in the garden and Larry was out on the riding mower cutting the grass that grows around the old ranch house and its associated "out buildings."

Just to list a few of said structures is to realize that you have stepped back in time to the 1880's when the earliest settlers established "squatter's rights" in the area of the present day OW Ranch. Some of those earliest occupants built primitive structures and, in later years, claim-jumpers made other, non-enduring improvements.

It wasn't, however, until James Ramer purchased the property and homesteaded the area that lasting structures and improvements were made. Some of the historic buildings within a hundred yards of the old ranch house include a spacious barn (constructed in the pegged, post and beam style of that era), tack room, pump house, sawmill, blacksmithing shop, butchering shed and smokehouse.

High on a hill overlooking the spread is a newer building (built in the late 1930's) where the OW's current owners stay when they are up visiting from their primary residence in the Phoenix area. And when I say "current owners," I'm referring to Ed and Margie who, for roughly 40 years, have been the proprietors of this 72+ acre parcel of historic Arizona.

Ed and Margie put decades of hard work and loving care into the OW Ranch and there is no better illustration of this fact than the presence of Patty and Larry who, in 1993, were hired to maintain the property and provide the highest standards of stewardship for the land, the livestock, the wildlife, and the overall aesthetics of the OW valley and the surrounding National Forest allotment for which the ranch holds a 150 head June-October grazing permit.

Sadly, Margie passed on in 2012 and Ed and their grown children have put the OW up for sale. Truly, when the ranch sells, it will be the end of an important chapter; though certainly not the first, and probably not the last, in a long fascinating story.

Some of Arizona's pioneering history can only be retrieved by visiting municipal offices -- courthouses, town halls and other official archival sites for public and private records. Other information can be gleaned from various libraries, museums, churches and even historic structures and cemeteries. Other valuable sources include the oral histories and family records that are passed down through the generations.

Fortunately, thanks to Patty and Larry, I was able to learn much about the OW's history directly from them as well as from a book that they have at the Ranch. Published in 1993, *The Crooked Trail to Holbrook*, by Leland J.

Hanchett, Jr. is an exciting history of the larger ranches that moved their herds along a 19<sup>th</sup> Century cattle trail from the Q Ranch (east of Young, AZ) to the stockyards at Holbrook (an important railroad stop). Cattle herds originating from ranches north of the Salt River and Pleasant Valley areas merged near the Q Ranch and moved north through settlements such as Red Lake, the OW, Gentry Station (and the nearby Baca and Black Canyon ranches), Wilford, Heber, Halter Cross Ranch, Zeniff and on across the Little Colorado River to Holbrook.

The pioneering families and individuals along this cattle route included both heroic figures as well as unsavory characters. A few of the folks covered in Hanchett's book (richly illustrated with maps and diagrams as well as old and modern photographs) include the following surnames: Adams, Blevins, Bushman, Houck, Larson, Owens, Porter, Cooper, Ramer, Shelley and Wattron. Several of these names will also be familiar to history buffs and old timers in our Tri-towns area of Show Low, Lakeside and Pinetop.

In addition to the Anglo and Hispanic settlers' backgrounds, there is obviously an intricate history (both positive and negative) between the settlers and the Native Americans who were the first modern peoples to occupy the area (including the Apache, Navajo and Hopi tribes). Today, while the original boundaries of the OW Ranch are a mere fraction of their former acreage, the Ranch's closest borders are to the White Mountain Apache Tribe and to the public lands of the Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests.

Meanwhile, back at the Ranch, I pulled up the drive to the original ranch house, stepped out from my Tacoma and waved to Larry who, pointing towards the house, indicated to me that I should make myself at home while he finished his mowing. I grabbed my binoculars from the front seat of my truck and headed for the porch where several feeders were buzzing with numerous hummingbirds.

Having just driven for a couple of hours, I stretched for a bit before turning my attention to the hummers. I was happy to see that, in addition to the fairly common Broad-tailed and Black-chinned species, there was also a Magnificent Hummingbird skittishly sipping from the feeders (later in the weekend we would also thrill to the sight of a Blue-throated Hummingbird; a rare treat to observe).

Before long, Patty joined me on the shady porch and handed me a cold drink beaded with condensation. While we chatted about this and that, we watched two robins pulling worms from where a sprinkler was watering the grass. Also, darting to and from his perch on a fence wire, a Say's Phoebe was working a nearby pasture for bugs and, not far from a flower garden, a pair of Bullock's Orioles were taking turns feeding from a jelly jar Patty had set out to attract them. All in all, I felt like I would be spending a few days in Shangri-La.

Besides a relaxing weekend of easy conversation and strolling around the Ranch, I had also planned to informally interview Larry and Patty about the OW since I had intended from the get-go to write this article based on my visit. By the time Larry joined us on the porch, I had flipped open my notebook and was already jotting down a few tidbits of history pertaining to the property.

Of course, the first question many people would ask about the Ranch is where did the "OW" moniker originate? Well, for those inquiring minds that want to know, I'm sorry to disappoint you but that little nugget of lore remains a mystery. About all we know is that it was used as a brand for the livestock and that the letters were arranged with the "O" sitting atop the "W," in a vertical configuration as opposed to the normal (horizontal) way we typically situate letters in any given word, acronym or abbreviation.

That the early settlers to this area found the land conducive to cattle (and sheep) operations is not surprising. The OW sits at an elevation ranging from approximately 6,370 to 6,560 feet. The original property is bisected by two perennial streams -- Canyon Creek and Mule Creek, which converge and eventually flow to the Salt River.

While the area can get a substantial amount of snow in the winter months, most of the year the Ranch property is a lush green oasis surrounded by a vast Ponderosa Pine forest. The oasis-like nature of the property is partly due to monsoon rains but also because the OW has water-rights that allow for irrigation canals to draw from Canyon and Mule Creeks. The Ranch has a 250 acre-feet allowance which can be used for hayfields, pastures, gardens, ponds, and livestock tanks, as well as for indoor use. Water is also piped through a pump house where it spins a turbine

which provides electricity for on-site use. In more modern years, the hydropower has been supplemented by a diesel generator.

In Part 2 of this article, I will continue to mix the historic with the present as I recount my visit to the OW Ranch. Suffice to say, when one explores this extraordinary chunk of Rim Country, you can't help but experience the sensation of time travel. This should come as no surprise given the Ranch's vital history which spans the late 19<sup>th</sup>, the 20<sup>th</sup> and this first portion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With "change being the only constant," one wonders what the future holds for this exquisite, living relic of our past.