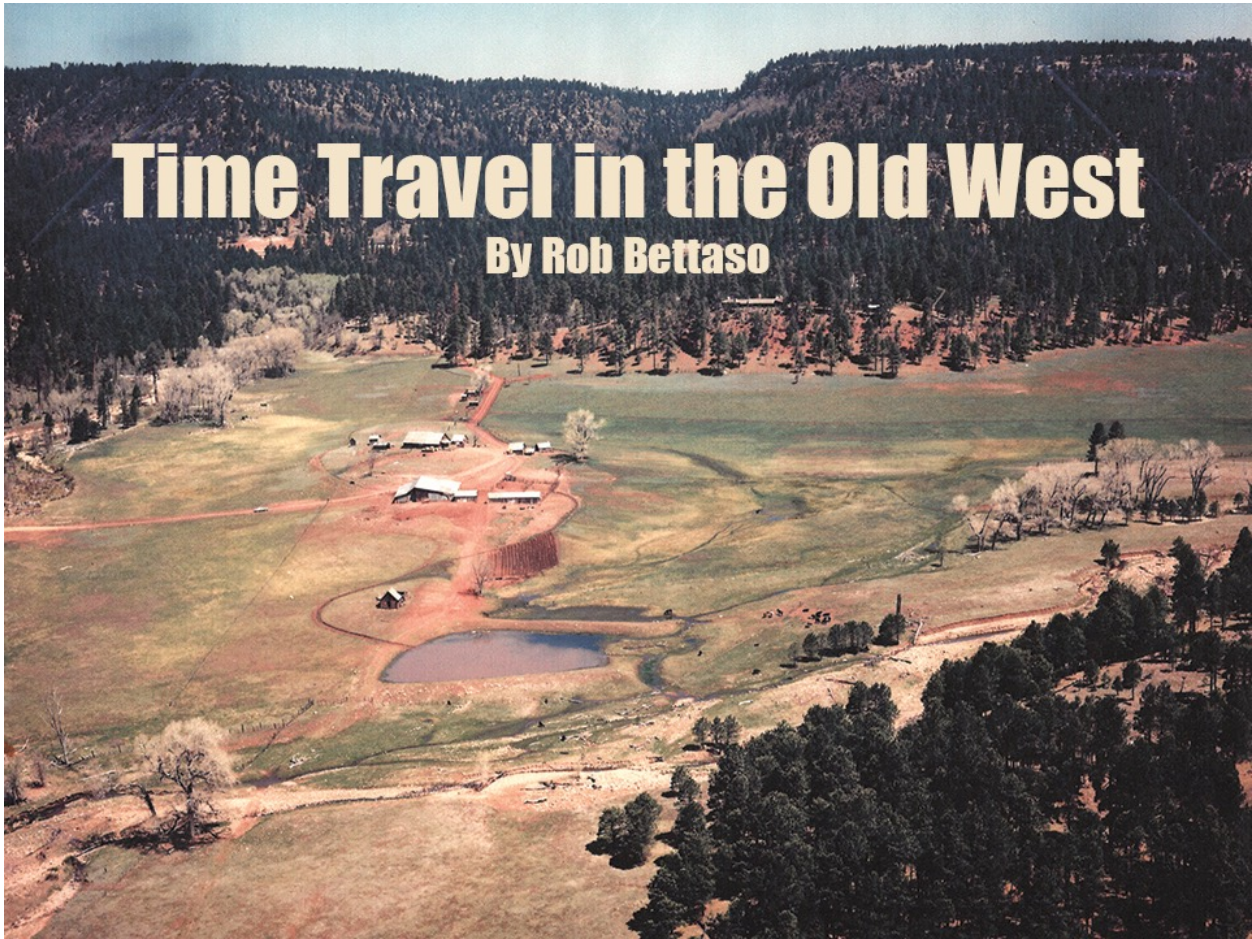


Time Travel in the Old West

By Rob Bettaso



From the other side of the pond I could see Larry giving me the signal to start pulling on the rope; mule tape actually, as Larry had enlightened me earlier to the fact that mule tape tangles less than rope. And “no,” we weren’t trying to pull a mule across the pond but rather, we had tied my end of the tape to the bow of Larry’s small boat and had then tied a similar length of tape to the stern so that Patty could pull that line when her turn came.

The goal was for me to move Larry and his boat to my side of the pond, shift a few paces and then for Patty to pull him back in her direction, on the opposite side of the pond. All the while, Larry would be dispensing an organic weed killing granule into the water using a hand-crank sprayer. In this way, we would be able to cover the entire surface of the pond in a grid so that Larry’s application of the herbicide would be uniform and throughout the pond.

Like many ranchers (and other people who grow things), Larry has a scientist’s mind. A way of approaching the world that dictates: when you have the option, do things in the most precise and accurately replicable manner possible. He could have just slung the bb-sized pellets into the water using a hand scoop while walking the perimeter of the pond, but, that would have created hot-spots in some areas and missed (or under-treated) others.

So, on this, the second day of my two-day visit to the OW Ranch, we were treating one of the two large ponds that were dug decades ago in the middle of the valley in which the Ranch resides. The ponds serve a variety of purposes: they are drinking holes for livestock and wildlife; rainwater catchments and reservoirs; a dipping spot for firefighting choppers; a place to grow and catch trout and, well, who doesn’t like to look at rippling water on a hot day?

Several years ago, Patty and Larry had acquired permits to stock sterile, commercially available grass carp into the OW ponds. The grass carp were supposed to control the pond’s aquatic weeds by feeding on

them, which they mostly do. But, of course, fish aren't all that different from people in that they have their preferred foods. There are even some weeds that a grass carp will turn up its nose at altogether. The plants that were unpalatable to the carp were the ones that Larry was forced to treat chemically as, otherwise, the weeds would grow unchecked and eventually cover the entire surface and bottom of the pond.

As I stood reeling in my share of the tape, I enjoyed the stillness of the area, the call of an occasional bird, the faint whirring of the sprayer and the lapping of water against the hull of the boat as I pulled it across the pond's surface. My gaze was towards the Northeast and I could see the paths of the several drainages that cut down into the OW valley. I could also see landmarks such as Nelson Lake Point, a peninsula of the Mogollon Rim that provides a panoramic view of the valley from up above. Other than my pick-up truck, a couple of the Ranch vehicles and a few manmade structures, the view before me wasn't much different from that which would have existed 100 years ago. And this with the megalopolis of Phoenix less than 100 miles away, in a straight line from where I stood!

When we finished treating the pond, I headed over to the yonder shore where we dragged the row-boat from the water and hung it up on hooks affixed to a small shed. I noticed then that some of my muscles were a bit sore and reflected back on what I had done yesterday that might have caused such minor aches and pains.

Let's see, I had driven from Lakeside to the OW Ranch, a distance of approximately 90 miles and somewhere between 2 to 2 ½ hours of driving time. That certainly wouldn't be the cause. When I got to the Ranch, we chatted for a while on the porch, sipping cold drinks and taking in the view of the verdant summer scenery. No heavy lifting there. Next, we enjoyed a yummy lunch and, no matter how ravenously I eat, I've never pulled a muscle doing it.

I continued my chronological mental retrospective and then it came to me, ah yes, we had spent a good chunk of the afternoon driving quads (ATVs) around the Ranch and the surrounding forest roads. Lest you think that sitting on the saddle of a quad requires no more effort than watching the Oprah show whilst eating bon-bons from a plush couch, let me quickly disabuse you of THAT notion.

The rugged OW area trails and two-tracker roads can be quite hard on the bones and joints of a quad driver. Given my long history of lower back pain, I generally do anything and everything I can to protect my spine from abusive jolting and jarring. This meant that I had spent as much time up, off the saddle (using my legs as shock absorbers), as I could.

And while I generally agree with the sentiments I once read on (ironically) a shiny jeep's bumper sticker, "Use the quads that God gave you," I nonetheless see that as the kind of notion a city dweller might have about using ATVs as a means of recreational transport. But when you live and work on a ranch, there is so much hard work that must be done on a daily basis that, in addition to your legs, you are also going to need to rely on ATVs, pick-up trucks, tractors and yes, good old horses to get all of the chores done and still be breathing by the end of the day.

When we concluded riding the range via quads, we returned to the porch and wound down the daylight hours with more pleasant and meandering conversations. From time to time, I would return to Q&A sessions so that I might learn more of the OW's past and present, in anticipation of writing this article. At some point in the early evening, we noticed a plume of smoke rising from the forest north of the OW. We would learn the next day that the growing plume was from the recently ignited "Slim Fire," somewhere near Chevelon Canyon.

About the time my stomach started making noises like the King of Beasts was trapped within, Patty and Larry began preparing the evening's dinner while I (admittedly, unhelpfully) flipped through a photo album of ranch life over the years. A word about that particular night's dinner: after a good day with friends, enjoying our exploration of the OW's backcountry, it was nothing less than blissful to belly up to

a plateful of perfectly grilled sirloin, a crisp and flavorful salad, and a redolent baked potato heaped with sour-cream and chives. I ate until I was as bloated as a tick and then I ate some more.

After dinner, we didn't stay up late as we had all been active since well before sunrise and the call of sleep was as compelling as a Siren's song. Patty and Larry suggested that I sleep in the same spare bedroom that had been used decades ago by Clark Gable and Carole Lombard. Astonished, I inquired as to the story and they told me that in 1937, an early pioneer in aircraft manufacturing, Ken Jay, had bought the OW and he and his wife had moved out from southern California. The Jays established a cattle company at the OW but maintained their Hollywood ties. As such, they had several celebrities visit the OW during the many years they had owned the property (they sold to the Globe Corporation in 1972).

Despite that appealing history, it has long been my custom, when the weather is good and I'm lucky enough to be deep in the heart of wild country, to sleep on my cot under both a sleeping bag and a firmament of pulsating stars. I fell asleep to the aroma of a campfire, not remembering in my groggy state that what I was actually smelling was a forest fire, drifting in from southern Coconino County.

Several times, in the dead of night (a misnomer in the natural world, as so many creatures "come to life" only after dark), I awoke to bugling elk. I thought this odd so early in the summer and asked Patty about it the next morning while we were having coffee on the porch. She suggested that it was possibly the young bulls, trying out their calls before the rutting season began when only the older bulls dared to call out rivals. As we ate our breakfast, we watched the last few elk, from a large herd that had descended from higher elevations during the night, finish their feeding in the horse pastures and return to densely vegetated pockets just below the nearest ridgeline. They would wait out the hot day in these relatively cooler areas and then drop down again to the valley floor come evening.

After breakfast, Larry and I toured the various buildings and other structures that comprise the work and maintenance components of the Ranch. We concluded our look-see at the top of the hill where Ed and Margie's cabin stands surrounded on three sides by both forest and cultivated greenery. The lodging has been added to and improved upon over its nearly 80-year history. Its original blueprint called for construction in an architectural style known as a "Texas Dog-run" and, over the decades, the many additions have given it a wonderfully expansive feel and with a spectacular view of the valley below.

As we hopped back on the quads and descended the hill to make one final stop at Larry's garage, I spied a songbird I don't see all that often in this part of the State -- a Painted Redstart. This delicate little warbler is a strikingly plumed bird and is known for posturing with its wing and tail feathers spread, thereby revealing its bold pattern of white, black and crimson-red.

We reached the garage where Larry indulges one of his free-time passions -- vintage car restorations. Back in his pre-OW days, when Patty and Larry lived in Kansas, Larry spent time working on race cars (mechanics, rebuilds and driving in competitive events). As he flung open the garage doors, I half expected him to say, "Ta Da!" but instead, he let his craftsmanship do his talking for him.

I don't know much (well, anything) about mechanics or cars, let alone what it would take to assemble various auto components acquired from salvage yards, shops, parts suppliers and what-not. But I do know a thing of beauty when I see it and the fully restored, sky blue, rag-topped, 1964 V-8 Chevy Chevelle that glimmered under the lights of Larry's shop was truly an impressive piece of automotive engineering. And the caliber of workmanship that it must have taken to recreate it from virtual scrap, well, it's just one of the many things about my OW friends that never fails to amaze me.

The morning was fading and it was about time for me to put my own road-machine back in gear. We returned to the porch where I had a cup of coffee to energize me for the drive home. While Patty and I chatted, Larry checked their lap-top computer to get the latest update on the "Slim Fire" and make sure my route home would be open.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, my friends suggested that we caravan to the Colcord Fire Lookout as a mutual friend of ours was the manning the tower this season. I'm always excited to get a view from high places and the Colcord Lookout was one that I had not yet scaled.

We climbed the metal stairs to the top and there, our friend Denny greeted us warmly. He was not expecting our company but was happy to give us a quick run-down of fire activity in the area. I asked him to point out the primary landmarks and to summarize the mechanics of his job. He showed us how to "shoot an azimuth" and described the process of triangulation.

The time for partings came as we all had things to do: Denny needed to return to his solitary vigil; I needed to head home and Patty and Larry had errands to run in Payson. So, we said our farewells. It was a brief but fun reunion and, as I headed back to Lakeside, I reflected on how lucky I was to have not only made such good friends so long ago but how wonderful it was to be able to maintain the friendships and enjoy the occasional visit. I also thought that, while we may not have the type of "time travel" H.G. Wells imagined, it was possible to get a glimpse back in time by noting the living history that surrounds us.