

# THE GILA WILDERNESS AND A RANCH FAMILY HISTORY

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## The Prelude

It could be argued that violence in New Mexico in the late 1800s was a deterrent to broader scale settlement of the state. The lure of California and other western regions became the more friendly destinations. The uncertainty of New Mexico, though, did not deter those that did migrate into what was to become cow country of New Mexico. They were more often than not Texans who had roots in a life that made New Mexico an extension of conditions that they knew well. Maybe New Mexico was wild and woolly, but its grass offered hope for people who had come to understand the business of raising livestock.

As early as the Civil War, people from Bell County, Texas had come to know something of what is now the Gila country of Grant County. Stories had returned home of the land and its landscape. By the 1870s, migration had started. One of the earliest emigrants that would make the Gila home was Peter McKindree Shelley, or, as most people would know him, P.M. Mr. Shelley was not a Texan by birth. He was born in the Cumberland Mountains in Clinton County, Kentucky in February, 1852. He had come to Texas when he was 10 years old in the midst of the Civil War. By reconstruction, Mr. Shelley was involved in the business of raising cattle.

In 1874, he married his childhood sweetheart, Emily Jane York. A story about Mr. Shelley suggests that he made his mind up to move West one night when a milk cow grazed out onto the dugout where they were living and fell through the roof into the room where the family was sleeping. A more convincing argument came from P.M.'s brother, Absolan, who had moved north of what is now Cliff, New Mexico. Absolan wrote to P.M. to convince his brother that the lands of the Gila River country were special<sup>1</sup>.

In 1883, P.M. visited his brother and returned to Texas intent on moving his family to New Mexico Territory. Early in 1884, he and his wife and four children left Texas with 80 head of cows bound for the Gila. Mrs. Shelley drove the wagon and the kids and Mr. Shelley tended the cows.

The trip was not different from other such moves of that time. It was hard. Near Marfa, Texas, the family ran out of water. Humans, cattle and horses were on the verge of catastrophic collapse. Mr. Shelley got down on his knees and asked that his family could be spared and that afternoon a storm blew up and rained on them. The storm was big enough to run some water and the animals all got a drink and the water barrel was

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<sup>1</sup> Absolan Shelley was better known as Absolan Davis in New Mexico. Absolan was one of the many characters who gave New Mexico it's rough and tumble reputation of the late 1800s.

filled. The next morning the family proceeded and within a half a mile from their camp the country was dry and untouched by the storm.

The little caravan continued on to El Paso and north into New Mexico to a point where the new railroad crossed the Rio Grande. The river was flooding and a deal was made and the cattle and all their possessions were loaded on rail cars and crossed the swollen waters. The Shelleys rode the train to Deming. From there they started north toward Grant County.

North of Deming near Whitewater, a group of ranchers stopped them and told them that no Texas cattle were going to be allowed to go north from that point. They didn't want any cows that carried "Texas Fever" on their ranges<sup>2</sup>. The family was held for two days. On the morning of the third day, Mr. Shelley started the cattle north. He met the ranchers and told them that they were going to have to kill him right there because he had no place to go back to and he was going on. He and Emily Jane and four little kids pushed through the group and went north.

Several days later and after five months of travel, the family crossed the Gila River at Cliff and arrived on the banks of Mogollon Creek at the site that was to become the headquarters of the 916 Ranch. There were no corrals, no fences, no wells, no house . . . nothing but a promise of expectation. Horses were tied to trees and the first meal was prepared on what has become Shelley land.

## The Chase

The site of the first meal became the quarter section of land that was homesteaded and became the nucleus for growth of the 916. It would become the headquarters of a livestock operation that numbered over 5000 head of cattle as late as the early 30s<sup>3</sup>. It would be a battle that endured and survived Indian raids, few markets, no infrastructure, drought, floods, blizzards, depredation, Depressions, and government agencies.

It was also nearly 50 miles to the nearest town, Silver City. As the ranch was developed, Mr. Shelley recognized the need for nearby supplies for himself and other settlers and he became a partner in the Cliff Mercantile Company. He was a good record keeper and he helped ranchers to start keeping their records, and extended credit to many people.

From the 80 head of original cattle his herd grew. Memories and understanding of conditions of those times are largely gone today, but what little market there was for beef was for two to four year old steers. There was no market for cows, heifers, bulls, and younger steers. All heifers were kept and herds grew rapidly.<sup>4</sup> It was from those cattle that many early ranchers of the Southwest expanded their herds.

Mr. Shelley was a respected man within the greater community, and became known as a conservationist who knew that bounty that came from the semi-arid Gila country would

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that it wasn't Texas cattle that were the problem, but rather the tick that was the vector for Texas fever was still an unknown in New Mexico. Later, cattle would be dipped to eliminate the tick problem.

<sup>3</sup> Forest Service records would suggest the higher number while Shelley records and word of mouth history would suggest the lesser.

<sup>4</sup> Cowmen today continue to be reminded of the overstocking of ranges that existed at the end of the 1800s and early 1900s. Factors in that development were the absence of markets, the number of unbranded, uncontrolled cattle, and the inability to adequately control administrative units. Like the stages of any business, stability and technical improvement would come after the difficulty of managing the first stages of the growth of the business.

be assured only if the resource was tended and improved. He worked every day and his interest in technical issues of agriculture and stewardship became a life long pursuit. From his fields came vegetables and grains. From his orchards came fruit, and from his ranges came the first of the improved English type cattle of the Southwest.

## The Wilderness

During the first 15 years after their arrival, the operation dealt with the tasks of existing and building. The building meant more than simply adding cattle. It meant raising a family and building basic structures and a way of life. The four children grew up and started their own families. All of them would spend their lives in ranching.

On the ranges of the Gila in those days the famous LC Cattle Company was the big player in the community. Lyons and Campbell (LC) had made it known that they were going to control southwestern New Mexico from the Rio Grande to the Arizona border and from the Mexican border to the Gila country. When issues came up Mr. Shelley would show up representing himself or he would send a trusted cowboy. The LCs would show up with a number of cowboys. There is little evidence that major trouble ever developed between the outfits although the same can't be said for the LCs and other operations<sup>5</sup>. Mr. Shelley was respected, but the presence of the LCs shaped the country. The Shelley opportunity for expansion was away from the LC country and that meant the high mountains. The Mogollons and the expanse of country north from Mogollon Creek to the Gila River and Miller Springs on the east and northeast, McKenna Park to the north, and the head of the West Fork of Mogollon Creek to the west became Shelley range. The country was rugged and tough. Elevations ran from 5000' at "the river" to over 10,778' at the crest of Mogollon Baldy.

In 1899, fifteen years after P.M.'s arrival, a big change was looming. The United States declared that the lands generally known today as the Gila National Forest were declared to be the Gila Forest Reserve. What the Shelleys and their descendents generally knew as the "Mountains" or the "Wilderness" was indeed going to become a modern wilderness area<sup>6</sup>

## Wilderness Designated

In 1905 all Forest Reserves were transferred to the USDA and the Forest Service was established. Grazing records began in 1906. Decade by decade records trace the evolving control of the Forest Service policies. Although allotment boundaries were established, ranchers were not allowed to fence their allotments until following the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916. Transient sheep and cattle were a big problem in the years up until that time. Ranchers were encouraged to make water improvements and special use permits were approved for such purposes.

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<sup>5</sup> A minor skirmish between the outfits did occur over a spring near Buckhorn, New Mexico. It seems the LC fenced that community water source several times, but when dawn came all evidence of the fence would be gone. Rumors suggesting that the material was seen on Shelley pack mules going into the mountains were never neither confirmed . . . nor denied!

<sup>6</sup> The Shelley interpretation of the Gila Wilderness in a historical context consisted of lands north of "the high divide" which was the areas generally north of the crest of the Watson Mountain- Shelley Peak combined ridgelines. This was mirrored in NM Game and Fish nomenclature of wilderness hunt designations.

In 1922, the Father of American Wilderness, Aldo Leopold was on the Gila. Diary records by Gila Forester, Henry Woodrow, indicated he fought fires with Mr. Leopold that summer. It was through Leopold's greater efforts that a regional forester, without official congressional approval, declared the nation's first wilderness area, the Gila Wilderness, in 1924 in an internal administrative decision. Its footprint overlaid the majority of the 916 as it existed prior to that date.

Ensuing cattle numbers fluctuated but a notable trend can now be traced. Cattle in the Gila Wilderness started to be reduced. In the decade of the 30s, the allowable AUs within "the McKenna Park" District, the heart of the Gila Wilderness, were reduced from 7000 to 1000. From the perspective of history, the federal designation of "wilderness" can be associated with the removal of cattle from that range even though years later, in 1964, Congress would promise that grazing would continue in officially designated wilderness areas.

### The Crushing Loss

In a letter dated May 18, 1944, then Forest Service Supervisor L.R. Lessel matter-of-factly informed P.M. Shelley's son and successor, Thomas J. Shelley that "the range lying east of Shelley Canyon and the main ridge running from the Gila River to Shelley Peak just west of Turkey Creek and the range lying north of the same ridge from Shelley Peak to 74 Mountain and the Forest Boundary, has been eliminated from the Mogollon Creek Allotment as non-usable range." The greater part of nearly seven townships of land that the Shelleys had ranched since before the Gila National Forest was even conceived was eliminated.

The loss was devastating. The Depression debt still burdened the operation, the reduction of cattle compounded the revenue shortfall, and the death of Peter Shelley in 1935 and all the estate related obligations further impacted the ranch operation. It was at a time that the 916 and the Shelley family were still on their knees<sup>7</sup>.

The Forest Service summary of why the allotment was reduced indicated that the range was suffering from overuse and that "practically nothing has been done on range improvements for a number of years . . ." Improvement of the range would come "by use as uniform as possible in the higher country." They went on to describe that the majority of the problem was "the lower third of the range" which indicated that pressure on the Mogollon Creek side of the Mogollon face was where the majority of the overuse was occurring. What was the Forest Service's action? They eliminated all the upper country they noted as being the solution for mitigating the overuse problem! That upper country was none other than the "wilderness" that the Shelleys had interpreted as the Gila Wilderness established in 1924.

### The Modern Wilderness

The question begs to be asked if the Shelley history is unique in the history of the Gila. Dr. John Fowler, NMSU, compiled a history of Gila livestock grazing for testimony to the Public Land Grazing Task Force back in 2000. Fowler's work shows that in 1960 there were 24 active allotments within or adjacent to the wilderness core of

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<sup>7</sup> It was interesting that the time of the reduction came at a time of national rationing during the war. The production of food and fiber was a high priority to the Congress and the war effort.

the Gila. By 2000 only 12 of those allotments were active. The 12 inactive allotments were completely destocked and the remaining 12 had been destocked by a whopping 87%! The latter allotments were arrayed in the Fowler work to have a 1960 allowance of 79290 AUMs while the same 2000 numbers indicated 10533. All cattle had been removed from the actual Wilderness District by 1977. Fowler attempted to qualify market or drought indices that would suggest that the decreases were related to physical or market related issues. He could find no such correlations. The decreases had to come from other factors the primary of which was Forest Service management even though the Wilderness Act clearly allows grazing to be continued where it existed at the time of the signing of the Act in 1964.

### The Wilderness Specter

The Gila National Forest and its designated wilderness of the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness areas is a 3.3 million acre journey into the past, and, it is a peak into the future. With the Forest Service's intention to eliminate certain roads it will be managed ever more like a wilderness in its entirety, making the growing use of the reference to a single wilderness area rather than two distinct wilderness areas a reality. It is also the testing ground for the reintroduction of the wolf, and shots are now being fired across the bow of land management agency planning schemes that the grizzly bear will be next to be reintroduced into this Southwest expanse of land.

When Peter McKindree Shelley brought Emily Jane and the kids to Mogollon Creek he was exactly what Aldo Leopold described when he wrote years later of how true wilderness areas were the domain of the horseman. All other access had been largely halted by sheer distance and isolation from the outside world. Likewise, Leopold contemplated how wilderness lives and the landscape became intertwined even in naming physical features. Names and places of those wilderness areas were creations of people who rode those points and saddles and described them in terms of events or some metaphorical insight. In the Gila, Corral, Trail, Rough, Davis, Sycamore, Brushy, Hell's, Manzanita, Utah Bill, Wild Cow and others are canyons that have been dubbed with eternal nomenclature provided by Peter Shelley. Like the horseman of Leopold's wilderness, he didn't sit around naming places and points for enjoyment. Rather, those were places of duties, responsibilities, and investments that had to be tended and managed. It was a simple necessity to create a system of familiarity to work, direct, and manage the ranch. In the process, he became as much a part of the land as the names of the physical landscape.

The fear of the modern wilderness movement is more than a story of the contempt for outside forces seeking to fulfill an expanded agenda. It is the systematic removal of the social fabric of the lands so designated without regard to the human endeavors, strife, and heroic commitment that took place in our own recorded history of that land. Economics will drive changes and our government will again act as agent of change, but there is no guiding document within our American history that suggests that the destruction of human endeavor should be accepted and condoned on the basis of idealistic change for some greater good. Isn't our Constitution predicated on the notion of individual rights? The Gila was the first of the American wilderness designations. It is also the model that those of us on the Peter Shelley side of the story fear for those like him that are here today and might . . . perhaps . . . be here tomorrow.

The authors of this article are descendants of Peter McKindree Shelley. William Rice is a Great Grandson. Mr. Rice is a former Deputy Chief of the United States Forest Service and former Deputy Chief of the NRCS. He resides in Colorado. Terrell Shelley is the youngest surviving Great Grandson and the owner and continuing steward of the 916 Ranch. He lives at the site on Mogollon Creek where the Shelleys camped and cooked that first meal nearly 125 years ago. Stephen Wilmeth is a Great-Great Grandson of Peter Shelley. He ranches in Dona Ana and Luna Counties, New Mexico and makes the Mesilla Valley his home. Mr. Wilmeth's lower country lies near the route that the Shelleys traveled from the flooding Rio Grande Valley across the flats to Deming on the railroad in 1884.

To learn more about efforts to combat wholesale wilderness designations in western rangelands log on to [www.peopleforwesternheritage.com](http://www.peopleforwesternheritage.com).