



The *New* American Farmer

Agee Smith & family, Cottonwood Ranch

Wells, Nevada

Summary of Operation

- 400 head cow/calf operation, with 350 yearlings sold annually on 1,200 acres plus 34,000 acres of federal land
- 100-110 horses
- Agri-tourism featuring cattle- and horse-centered activities for ranch “guests”

Problems Addressed

Revitalizing profits. After generations in the ranching business, the Smiths began struggling financially with their cow/calf operation in the 1980s. Market prices were unreliable, occasionally dismal. “We were going broke in the cattle business,” Agee Smith says.

Agee and other family members retooled. They took classes in Holistic Management® and shifted much of their emphasis toward agri-tourism while investing more time in range management.

Ranching on public lands. Before overhauling their range management, the Smiths’ relationship with the federal agencies who owned the land they leased — the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service — were deteriorating. The agencies were cutting cattle numbers, making it difficult for the Smiths to earn a profit. “It was harder to think about being in the cattle business,” Agee says. “The fight was on, without a doubt.”

Background

With the ranch a full 70 miles from the town that’s their mailing address, Agee practically grew up in a saddle. Descended from a family of ranchers, Agee and his sister, Kim, are the fourth generation of Smiths to run cattle in the northeast Nevada mountains.

The ranch is still a family affair. While the family doesn’t use titles, Agee acts as the ranch general manager. Parents Horace and Irene still work on the ranch, primarily handling finances, while his sister runs the recreation business. The fifth generation of Smiths — Agee’s two children and his niece — participates in ranch activities, tending cattle and helping with recreation and special events.

Agee says their agri-tourism ventures not only boost profits for the family, but will be linchpin for their future in ranching.

The ranch’s setting in the Jarbidge Mountains is about as close to wilderness as you might come in North America. Cottonwood Ranch, at 6,200 feet elevation, is 30 miles from a paved road. Its sage-covered hills, alpine-forested mountains stretching into the distance and air cleansed by mountain breezes draw frontier types like the Smiths.

“I like the freedom,” Agee says, when asked why he ranches. “I like the wide open spaces. Where we



Moana Whalen

Agee Smith's innovative range management strategies were integrated into professional development opportunities for area agricultural educators.

ranch is very remote. Nevada is a land of extremes, and the basin we live in is dramatic.”

Focal Point of Operation—Holistic ranching and “guest” ranching

In 1996, the Smiths began to educate themselves about Holistic Management® (HM), which, as the name implies, asks students to take a whole-system view of their businesses. Many ranchers embrace HM because it encompasses setting goals — from family roles to environmental protection strategies to profit enhancement — and clear methods to achieve those goals over time.

Agee had heard about HM, but knew little about it. His father, who had attended a class, encouraged him to take a look. “Once I went to the class, I thought, ‘Holy cow, this makes sense to me,’ ” Agee says.

At that time, the family was running some cattle, renting pastureland to other ranchers and starting recreational activities like horse drives and pack trips. Yet, the mix didn’t seem quite right to Agee, who worried that the ranch would shift inexorably away from cattle ranching toward “dude ranching.”

Moreover, the class stimulated his thinking about the land itself. As Agee had viewed it, raising cattle could potentially degrade the range, particularly in the sensitive wilderness they inhabited. With different strategies, he could turn that concept on its head.

“At the classes, we heard how cattle don’t have to be abusers of the land,” he recalls. “They can be used to rehab the land. That was a totally novel concept that was very exciting and changed my perception of how I look at this animal on the land.”

Today, Smith suspects he focuses more on his land than his animals. He changed his view so much that he began looking at his property through a new lens: no longer the just the ranching son who knew the topography intimately, now a range manager who also regards the natural features and the cattle’s place among them.

Ranching centers on the grass and other vegetation. Smith studies those building blocks and their relation to the soil, then moves up the chain to the animals, then the people who eat them. Integral to his thinking, he says, is how a change to one piece of that chain affects all of it.

He grazes his cattle differently, too, in higher densities and shorter duration than previously. With the ranch’s vast size, he used

maps to define natural boundaries like hills and creeks and created at least 50 pasture areas through which the cattle are moved frequently. In some ways, Agee mimics the patterns of the buffalo moving across the Great Plains.

Cowboys and cowgirls — Smith’s son, daughter and niece — herd the cattle during the summer. They drive the herd into the mountains each spring, the animals remain for the summer, then are driven back down to the basin each fall. Throughout the season, somebody always remains with the herd, sleeping near them in a sheep wagon, moving them often.

On many of those cattle drives, novice cowhands join the group. People drawn to try their hand at the cowboy lifestyle pay to stay at the ranch and participate in ranch activities.

The emphasis is on horses, and people come to ride. A popular trip involves a five-day, 60-mile trek over the mountains to the town of Jarbidge. Guest activities also encompass business retreats at the lodge, fall hunting, winter snowmobiling and cross country skiing, and day trips to check on cattle and family-oriented vacations featuring “cow camps” for the kids. In a typical year, the ranch might host 125 guests.

Economics and Profitability

While 50 percent of the ranch business involves recreation for guests, Agee expects it to grow. The guest ranch remains very profitable. In fact, it “has kept us in the cattle business,” he says.

By contrast, raising calves is profitable, but only marginally, Agee says. One of his goals through HM is to maximize profits through improvements like better-timed calving and weaning, maximizing weight gains through range restoration and marketing grass-fed

animals rather than sending them to the feedlot. Since starting with HM-inspired improvements, Agee has increased the number of cattle two-fold, and revenues increased accordingly.

While beef prices in 2003 and 2004 were relatively high, Agee expects a shift downward in future seasons. He hopes that what he has learned through HM and further classes in business planning will stabilize the ranch's economics.

"We're trying to get things in place so when the [high-price] cycle ends, we're in a position to remain profitable," he says.

Environmental Benefits

Ask Agee about profitability and he segues right to the land, because he sees the ranch itself profiting from their new strategies. "Things are clicking out there," he says, pointing out the water quality in the creeks and riparian areas. Photographs reveal the changes, including more herbaceous plants, trees like willows, and grass growing alongside waterways.

Move up and you'll see that the uplands and rangeland is in what Agee calls "good and improving health." Situated in a high-moisture area compared to other Nevada sub-climates, the ranch receives about 12 inches of precipitation a year. By improving the vegetative ground cover, Agee gets the most out of it. One of Cottonwood Ranch's guests was a birding enthusiast who counted species during his visit, and ended with about 100 different species.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Cottonwood Ranch employs eight people, who are part of three extended Smith families, as well as two full-timers from outside the family.

When Agee began educating himself about new ways to ranch, he rubbed shoulders with Bureau of Land Management and Extension educators who were also increasing their knowledge. While the concepts of HM sounded good, it was hard to visualize on the rugged Nevada range.

"I said we'd be willing to put up the ranch as an experiment to try this," Agee recalls. A team from BLM, Extension, NRCS, Elko County and several ranchers and residents were eager to stay involved. The Smiths opened their ranch gates as an educational exercise, and by 2004, had at least 20 active participants working together as a ranch advisory board meeting thrice yearly. "I would never go back to doing business the old way — it really helps having that many minds with different perspectives working together," he says.

The resulting plan involved compromises between the Smiths and the public agencies. One of the most significant allows more animals on public lands in exchange for the extra labor the Smiths incur moving the herds more frequently to minimize their impact on the landscape.

You can see the results, says Jay Davison, a Nevada extension specialist. "The results have improved decision-making and management efforts on a large public land ranch and continued support of the project by land and wildlife management agencies, environmental groups, local government officials and private livestock interests," he says.

Other ranchers are watching the Smiths. On a neighboring ranch, one of Smith's cousins has put together a team and is implementing similar range management strategies. Another neighbor participates on the Cottonwood advisory board. Smith was named 2004's "Rancher of the Year" by the

Nevada Cattleman's Association as well as the state BLM, Farm Bureau and Department of Agriculture.

Transition Advice

"If you're going to change, get the information and education you need to make sound decisions, then jump on it and do it," Agee says. "Don't wait until your back is against the wall, as it is hard to change and be creative then."

While HM works for the Smith family, he concedes that it's management intensive and definitely not for everyone. Ranchers in general, he says, are trying to do right by their land.

The Future

The Smiths will continue to emphasize recreation. In 2004, the Smiths brought in two financial partners who view recreation as the growth center.

Recreation won't come at the expense of the range, Agee says. "We'll continue and expand the innovative things we're doing with cattle and range," he says. "I want to especially keep working with nature and seeing where this all takes us."

■ Valerie Berton

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Editor's note: New in 2005