

**SONORAN DESERT CONSERVATION PLAN  
STEERING COMMITTEE**

**EDUCATION SESSION**

**August 14, 1999 (9:00 a.m - 12:30 p.m.)  
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (Gallery)  
2021 N. Kinney Road / Tucson, Arizona, 85743**

**RANCHING WITHIN PIMA COUNTY**

**Ranch Tradition and Conservation  
in the Empire-Cienega Valley  
Mac Donaldson**

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**INTRODUCTION: SHARON BRONSON**

Let me introduce Mac Donaldson who is a native of Tucson. He graduated from Catalina High School, attended the University of Arizona, and later earned a degree in Fine Arts from the Eastern Technical College in Sydney, Australia. Mr. Donaldson comes from a second generation ranching family and he has lived in the Altar Valley from 1952, until he moved in 1975 to the Sonoita Valley where he and his family currently live. Mr. Donaldson currently ranches on lands that comprise the Empire-Cienega Valley and has worked for a Colorado cattle company representing the Southwestern region. Mr. Donaldson is an active member of the Sonoita Valley Planning Partnership and a member of People for the USA in Cochise County. He is active in local 4-H activities and Little League. He also has served on the Santa Cruz County Fair and Rodeo Association. May I present Mac Donaldson.

## **RANCHING TRADITION AND CONSERVATION IN THE EMPIRE-CIENEGA VALLEY: MAC DONALDSON**

Thank you for the opportunity of addressing you today about ranching in the Empire-Cienega Valley. Let me provide you with a little history on how cattle ranching began in that area.

There were two brothers who were mining assayers in Virginia City, Nevada, who came out in the mid-1870's who thought it would be a good idea to get into the cattle business. It seemed a fairly prosperous thing to do since a lot of people were doing it after the Civil War, and they looked at this area. They decided they would settle in Southern Arizona so they came to Tucson, came out to that valley and saw a lot of potential there. An Englishman by the name of Hislop, who installed streetcar services, put up the money.

The brothers began ranching and providing meat to the mining camps of Bisbee and Tombstone. When they developed this partnership, the Vail's were the dynamic end of it, Mr. Hislop eventually really did not want to continue so he left after a few years and then at the turn of the century, they were grubstaking miners who were looking for gold and silver. Silver was found in the Empire Mountains at the Total Wreck Mine. With the earnings over an eight year period, operations were expanded by buying neighboring ranches.

The expansion included about 1, 000 square miles going from the bottom of (?) land grab down by the Town of Patagonia where the Rail X Ranch is located, all the way up the Santa Rita Mountains, Whetstone Mountains into the Rincon Mountains. Vail was their shipping point and it was an extensive holding where they had about 23,000 head of cattle. All the cowboys and some Indians with their white overseer and a Chinese cook, were centered at the Empire Ranch.

Tom is on the Board of the Empire Ranch Foundation which is attempting to preserve the buildings that were originally built by the Vail's. The brothers would send the men out to different areas to look at the cattle that were traditionally located around water to check on the cattle and ensure they were doing well. There were a few line camps and the cowboys did most of their riding from the Empire Headquarters. They developed a farm at the Cienega which means marsh in Spanish, but the farm was established to grow fodder for their horses or weaning calves. Mr. Hefner was a cowboy who came out from California to manage the properties for the Vail's and he tells the story that in the summer they would eat fresh meat and beans and in the winter, they would eat dried meat and beans.

The property is a wonderful expanse of property and if you come out and look, you can envision what it was like and the values therein that were really dynamic. The first pasture and fence put up was the north fence. When the Boice Family bought the ranch from the Vail's in the late 1920's, it also coincided with a drought and the Vail's knew they had to take steps to protect their cattle because they were dying. That is a good example of infrastructure that fails to allow you to protect your resources.

When the homesteader's first came out they brought cows, they tried to keep all of their heifers so they had more cows for more production. When the climate caused problems, they had to get the cows off this land the only way to get the cattle off this land was to ship them to the railhead. That meant the cattle had to be strong and healthy enough to go to the railhead out of Tucson, Vail or Willcox.

If the cow was so weak that it could not be driven and pushed to the railhead, nothing could be done with them. With 23,000 head of cattle there were losses of perhaps 4,000 to 5,000 head in that drought because the weakened cows could not be moved. The carcasses were so thick over the Elgin-Canoa area that you could hardly traverse the area due to the stench. It was somewhat like the blizzard in 1889 in Montana where they also suffered great losses of cattle due to the cold.

There were people who made a living selling the bones from those dead cows. They shipped the bones back east to the bone mill plants. This is possibly where the perception that cow grazing is bad may have come from.

The Boice's retained their land as a cattle ranch and they were raising purebred Hereford's. At that time, ownership of the ranch was beginning to change and they were selling off some of their smaller parcels of adjoining ranches such as the Empirita, J-6, Cienega, the Rosemont, the Rail X, all those different ranch lands that no longer have ranching. The Boice's were selling them off to have cashflow so they could operate through the Depression and perhaps even through World War II.

The Boice's sold the ranch to a Gulf America Corporation in the 1960's who were home developers who planned to construct 30,000 homes in the valley on 45,000 acres of deeded ground. They ran into financial problems and encountered resistance from Santa Cruz over the zoning and what could be done with that land. The corporation elected to sell the ranch to Anamax Mining, which is a combination of American Metals and Anaconda who operates the Twin Buttes Mining operation in Green Valley. They purchased the land for the ore body in the Rosemont Mountains and Helvetia as they wanted the protection of the land so they would not have a conflict with Green Valley when they were mining copper. Anamax also wanted the water so they could use it in their smelting processing for copper.

This is where we entered the picture as my father was contacted because he was a conservation rancher who was well thought of and they decided to have him come out and evaluate the property and make recommendations for its use. Eventually, that turned into a joint venture in which Anamax owns the cattle and we manage the cows, but the profits became complicated. One gentleman from Anamax said, "We can lose one of those giant trucks and we can lose more money than you can make in one year," and we said, "So if this is ridiculous, why are we doing a joint venture? Why not just go ahead and lease it. That is what we ended up doing, we leased it and took over the management of the property.

In 1988, the Bureau of Land Management entered the picture because they were looking at several issues. One was water and the other issue was how to obtain a corridor of land from the Mexican border into the Coronado National Forest and be able to have control over it which is still an ongoing process. That is what we are doing here, we are talking about holding and retaining open space and keeping development from occurring on those lands. The Endangered Species Act may have had something to do with the process because at that time, the Gila (?) was in Cienega Creek which may have been its primary habitat so those factors were pushing the BLM to purchase the land. They could not purchase the land so a three way trade was conducted for land around Phoenix and because we were in place as lessee's of the land from Anamax, we just stayed in place and took over the lease.

Because we went from a private ranch held by private individuals whose concern for the resource was to benefit their needs, we went from that to a public situation of isolation and locked gates where entrance could only be gained if you were invited, or during hunting season because anyone can have access to state land for hunting. It was very, very quiet and if anyone comes out, we would see perhaps two or three vehicles which we would not know who they were or what they were doing out there, in one month. The pressure of people and the uses they bring with them has increased dramatically leading to threats of fire and open gates.

Education: When you talk about people who are ranchers or hunters, these are people who pretty much understand the issues and the needs of the land. When the BLM came in, that added increased scrutiny over how the ranch was being managed. The political climate that has existed for the last 12-15 years is that ranching is a poor excuse for a living, ranching is taking whether it is from the federal coffers as a subsidy, or the belief that the ranchers are consuming and damaging the resources. Under that type of scrutiny, we were trying to operate our ranch. As I said earlier, my father was contacted and we obtained Cienega Ranch because he was considered a conservation rancher and resource oriented. We have always had an ethic to maintain the resources and manage it to the best of our ability. That was evident in what was done on the Tortuga which is no longer in our ownership but we are still involved in the management of it somewhat. The Tortuga is north of Three Points which is currently owned by the Pascua Yaqui Tribe who purchased the property this past spring.

We felt very confident in our ranching practices and management ability in conserving resource efforts, but the perception of the public was different. The BLM had ownership and they were sort of bouncing around several scenarios that created some conflict. It may have been due to a lack of trust, but I also think it was a bureaucratic position that things had to be done a specific way so therefore, we were going to do them and because we were their lessee, our considerations were really not first and foremost.

Consideration was foremost to the Secretary of the Interior or the State Director and we were left out of the loop at first. There were a few rough times and I actually left the ranch for a time because there did not seem to be any future there. We were told that after our lease expired that they had to honor, we could no longer use the land for grazing and the place would be locked up. At the age of forty, it did not look promising for me to stay around so I went to work for another cattle rancher, however, my Dad stayed on.

They had a few fiery words and luckily, Jesse Juen became the manager and his attitude was much more together to try to work out what was best for the land and resources and leave the bureaucratic and political aspects behind us. He developed an idea to get a Resource Management Plan which is what the BLM has to have on their properties and most of those Resource Management Plans were in place or implemented in 1934, and other acts came down and were added but since this was a recent acquisition, it had no plan in place. No plan outlined what was going to be done with the property such as: Was mining going to be allowed, forestry, burning, paved or unpaved roads or grazing?

There were thousands of different aspects and I credit Jesse with the formation of a group called the Sonoita Valley Farm Partnership. He looked for people within the area but also recruited people from the Phoenix area, Cochise County, Pinal County and people from all other areas to be involved in the planning.

They were asked, "What would you like to see? Would you like to see open space with wildlife? Grazing? Fire?" and then that group of concerned citizens has been meeting for over three or four years to complete the planning process regarding what to do with the resource. We have been participating because our livelihood depends on us being there. Ultimately, there are going to be conflicts and issues to resolve, but this group will get the issues out to the public first as opposed to the property owners telling the lessee's, "This is what we are going to do because it is our property and this is what we see is needed here."

The group is using scientists to help resolve some of the issues and the group even published the plan for public input. Public input has been a positive step to take in this planning process. Through that process, my father and I, as the largest use of that property for cattle grazing, have created a certain amount of trust within those people involved and we have also shown through our commitment to reduce/increase the numbers and put our money where our mouth is in favor of the resources. From our point of view, that has been a good thing and I think if the resources has shown that this year. Tom was right, go take a look at anyone's ranch and it is going to be all right because they are incredible and I am proud of the way the Empire-Cienega Ranch looks.

I was going to give an example of the Endangered Species Act as I told you that one of the issues that probably prompted Dean Bibles to push to get the Empire-Cienega was the fact that there was (?) as an Endangered Species on the creek and it is considered one of the primary habitats in the world. I cannot remember the last time they did a count but I know it was in the millions of fish, it does not have any predators within the creek and they are trying to keep it that way.

This is just an example of resolving conflict: we have established something called Wildlife Planning. Every six months we look at what our uses are going to be, where the pastures are and where they were, why we changed what we said we were going to do and what we plan to do in the future plus any conflicts that might occur between antelope, the lesser longnosed bat, Gila (?), a bicycle race that's been planned or whatever, that is brought up during the meeting so our rotation and our use is somewhat monitored to resolve conflicts before they happen. We were coming out of our winter country when we started counting and we come down into the Sacaton Bogs, the deltas that are adjacent to Cienega Creek with our herd which is the point when they begin to get better nutrition.

Better nutrition starts the calving process and it is also usually the worst time of year because it is spring, there is no moisture, it is hot and it is before the rains. The condition of your cow drops dramatically and you are trying to breed back so you can get another calf next year. All those factors come to this apex about April, May and June. We utilize the Sacaton benches which contain sub irrigated grass that is very productive to freshen our cows, to get the cows into the kind of condition they need to breed back and also to raise those calves. We said, "We want to come down into this area and use these pastures."

Well those pastures were adjacent to the creek at that time, we had been doing that same program for about 17 years and the cattle had access to the creek. We always thought perhaps the Southwest Center for Biodiversity or somebody else like that might sue BLM for an excessive take of the species because the cows had access to the creek, no matter that Father Kino first brought cattle in there in 1600.

The cattle have been there ever since and the creek seems to be doing pretty well, but that did not matter, the fact was that we were at risk for a lawsuit. We were denied use of that creek so that also meant we were denied use of that grass. That placed our cows back in the uplands which are very precarious since they are much more fragile than the heavier soils in the bottomlands.

The cattle were in the uplands and it was a fairly tough year. The calves weighed probably about 30% less that year and less in the next year and we had a decrease of pregnant cows at about 15%. We just lost \$50,000.00 because somebody is worried about a lawsuit due to the Gila Topminnow. We realized we had a problem and had to do something about this so we went in, fenced the creek and said okay, "We will not allow the cows to be in the creek. Can we still use the grass adjacent to the creek? We were given permission to use that land for the grasses, but we had to use alternative methods for watering the cattle. We now have to pump water instead of using the creek that God gave us, but at least there is water underground that we can use.

We solved the problem and whether we created a Gila Topminnow habitat or not, that remains to be seen and Mike Saunder who is not here said, "To hell with the damned Topminnow." He is an environmentalist and really hates cows and wants to see all cows off western ranges but he was looking at the entire riparian habitat. We have created a different habitat here, we may be losing Gila Topminnow population but actually the riparian corridor is going back towards what it should be. It may be better for the willow flycatcher and all those other things that people seem to like to put down on lists, but doing things like that, we have created a certain amount of distrust. Scrutiny was brought in to look as if we were under a magnifying glass, scrutinizing what the Donaldson's are doing out there. I am hoping that we can deal with issues either perceived or real and that we can manage the resources and go forward.

The benefit is that if the resources are in good shape, then we are in good shape. If the resources are in a sorry shape, then we are in sorry shape.

I wanted to say one little thing before I finish this. I titled it, What Would Grandpa Say, because if my Grandpa was here, he would have ranched from about twelve to sixty-five, that time frame. The rancher was doing his job, he was producing meat and fiber for the consumption and people were concerned about how many television sets they had or whether they had a 1957 DeSoto or whatever the hell they were thinking about in Los Angeles and we were left alone. I remember my Dad tells a good story, he was at a Cattlemen's Convention in 1957 or 1958 and he was talking to a man who had a lot of state leases at Houghton, Pinal County, Maricopa County., he had just massive amounts of property. He said we had a great formula because nobody checked us.

We had state leases and no one knew what we were doing, we ran twice as many cattle and paid half as much and now it was sort of an adjunct, we did what we wanted, we had control and now the urban center has control and the ranchers are scrambling, it's a different situation."

I think you need to look at what is management and how it has changed. What was once considered good practice in building cars is no longer good practice. What was considered good practice in farming in some areas is no longer considered good practice because you are losing soil, you are doing this, you are doing that. The same thing is happening in ranching and as you look at the way range management has changed in the last 30 years , it is really dramatic in what the goals and objectives are of those people that are on the land is to stay on the land. The question then becomes, what is sustainable?

When you think about how we, as a society, want to change things, what was created that caused this population to come here? Air conditioning. All these people have come here and changed the environment to their needs. They brought tree's to stop the wind in Sonoita, they brought the Bermuda grass because it is pretty for their lawn and they brought their concepts and values with them. It reminds them of home and by having air conditioning enabled them to stay and survive in this heat. If you look at the Native people's, they would seek shade and they accepted the conditions, they would roll back. They accepted what was here and lived within those bounds. We, as a European, had an attitude, oh we will build a bigger house and we will build a bigger air conditioning and a bigger road and whatever. We would do it, we are industrious and it has been done and that cannot be changed but the only thing that is constant is change.

We have a tendency, as a people, to want to put everything into compartments and boxes. You have to adapt to changes and if you are constantly adapting changes, that is what we, as cattlemen, do all the time.

You are out there in that environment where we have just come out of a terrible series of dry years and we have a good year this year and maybe we will have another two or three, but then it is going to be dry again, and we are going to lose habitat. The thing is that you have to be able to make those changes, to follow that change in order to survive. Laws and people's concepts are really difficult to do that change because they know after reading an article in the [San Francisco Examiner](#), that is the way it is and you cannot change them but you have to be flexible. Thank you for your time.