

How the Swansons Came to Red Feather Lakes

By Byron Swanson, August 29, 1999, Campfire Evening Phantom Canyon Ranch

The ranch — if you don't know where it is — used to be called, years and years ago, way back in the nineteenth century, Squaw Rock Ranch. And when Peter and Marie got married, they were married at what was part of the ranch which looked at Squaw Rock, as the background up in the meadow. Later it became Snowy Owl Ranch. And today, we just call it Swansons' Family Ranch for lack of a better name. I know Gene Barker — a lot of you know Gene Barker — grew up on the ranch. The Barker Ranch, it was called then. The Barkers sold it to Greg Roth and his wife KG. The ranch is on the Red Feather Lakes Road, just as you get ready to turn to the right as you're coming up the hill to go up to the village, there's a sign for "Swansons" on the gatepost just across from Prairie Divide Road. It's a beautiful place. You just turn left through the gate and down into the valley. It's the valley that has our ranch on the west end of it and now Charlie Monfort owns the ranch on the east end. Before Charlie Monfort, it was McMorris, before McMorris it was the Roths, before the Roths, it was Mapelli, before that Scott, Ben Scott, and so forth. We feel like we're the luckiest people in the world. But now we've got to talk about that story — and how in the world a family from Omaha came to live in that particular part of the world.

I just want to focus on the period 1940-1965 tonight. I've got to back up a little bit before 1940, because you have to put 1940 into context. My dad had a small business. He sold fuel oil to people in Omaha. Nobody needed fuel oil to heat their homes in the summer, so we were always free all summer, usually four or five months. But as soon as school was out, we traveled a lot. He even had a trailer — a whole-house trailer. I think we must have been one of the first families in Omaha to have one. I remember going to Boston and to Florida and to Minneapolis and all over.

That was what we did in the summer, just traveled and really enjoyed it — until all of a sudden the first serendipity came along and that was the tragedy of World War II. Because of World War II, it became impossible to do what we had done for all sorts of reasons. Are any of you old enough to remember all the rationing, all the things that were disrupted? I'm sure a lot of you fought in World War II, so you would remember. My wife tells about how, in her family, women painted their legs because you couldn't have silk stockings. And you couldn't buy sugar — we had to ration sugar, we had to ration coffee. Remember all these things? Anyone old enough? Gas? Well, okay, we'll get to gas in a minute.

Now, as far as automobiles were concerned — that's why that's important for our story, because that's what we used to do all summer. All of a sudden they stopped making cars. So for about five years, no new cars were made. You had to get along in the old one, and make repairs and so forth. Tires were rationed, gas was rationed. In fact, correct me if I'm wrong, but the story that we've passed down is that you could only drive 500 miles at one time; if you went beyond that, you'd be breaking the law. And it just so happened that Omaha, Nebraska, was 500 miles from Red Feather Lakes, Colorado. So the serendipity is starting to fit in now — that we no more could be nomads, no more could we be wandering around, going here, there, and everywhere with the trailer. We had to attach ourselves to a piece of land. Anyway, not only did they ration gas, but you had to drive, I think, 35 miles an hour - and whatever some of the other requirements were.

Anyway, a friend of ours had a cabin in Red Feather. If you know where the thrift shop is, right next to Ramona Lake on the dike side? The friends had a little cabin — it's still there. It was just a couple of houses from the lake, an old log house with about 10,000 mice in it. And we came out and spent two weeks.

Because of those travels before the war, we had been to places like Estes. And my mom, my sister and myself *loved* Estes with all our hearts — and here's where The Nature Conservancy came in — because there were lots of people, everything was developed, you had ice cream cones and movie theaters and all kinds of stuff, salt water taffee. You had beautiful scenery too but ... my dad always joked that my mom, if she had her wishes, would live in Omaha on 16th and Barnham — which doesn't mean a thing to you, but that'd be right in the middle of downtown. It'd be like 42nd and Broadway in New York, or it'd be like Hollywood and Vine in Los Angeles. I don't know what it would be in Denver. But anyway, just the opposite of where we are tonight. She wanted to be right in the middle of millions of bustling people. And my sister and I — I was ten years old — I thought that was pretty great too, to be around all those things.

So that's a part of the serendipity. So, for us, it was a *terrible* experience — for my sister, my mom and myself — those two weeks. There's nothing you can do in Red Feather back in those days. It was gravel roads. We had to take 100 miles of gravel from Sterling to Fort Collins — the worst roads I've even been on in my life — then a gravel road all the way up to Red Feather, which was horrible. With the war going on, there was no grading, I'm sure, for five or six years. There was no electricity when you got to Red Feather. Somebody said the REA came in after World War II. I don't think it was 'til the early '50s, So no electricity, no ice creams, and no movies. But no refrigerators? Back in those days, everybody had

ice boxes. Do you remember? There was a barn in Red Feather some place, I think between Ramona and Hiawatha, that had all sorts of straw and ice that they had cut out of the lakes, and we'd go over once a week and get a new block of ice. No running water, because of no electricity, so my job was to walk to the well with two buckets about six times a day, I thought. So I just hated Red Feather all the more because of all this stuff. We like to ride horses, but there weren't even any horses you could ride in those days. So Red Feather was just not the kind of place, we decided in those two weeks — the three of us, my sister and myself and my mom — that we wanted to have anything to do with.

But my *dad* had a Nature Conservancy philosophy, which said: The beauty of life is to get away from people to get out into pristine nature. And so on And you know, you all know what that means. So anyway, before we left that two weeks — and this was back in 1940 before the war, of course, but the rationing had already started — my dad bought a cabin. Ted Dunning — you all know Ted Dunning? Oh, Ted just was one of my heroes. We loved him as a family. He, of course, was the postmaster, the only gas station, I think, (maybe there might've been one more), only general store (there might have been one more), and the only realtor (there might be one other, but he's the only one we knew). So he was kind of Red Feather. And the population of the town was probably 25 people or something, that stayed in winter.

But anyway, before we left, Ted and my dad got together. And we bought a little cottage that was just off of Hiawatha by the lake, about three to four houses from the well — not on the lake, but to the west, I think — or to the north. Yeah, north of the lake. And it cost \$225 — that's going to be an important factor. The walls were made out of paper — pressed beaver board — and it was just a little rectangle, with a kitchen at the front and then a little bedroom and then a little living room and then an open front porch. All for \$225.

The next year, of course, 1941, the war — well, the war [didn't begin] until December — but we came up again. My dad brought some wiring with him, so that we could have electricity, and he brought a generator. But all you could generate was just some weak light bulbs; you still couldn't have a refrigerator or ice cream or any of that important stuff. So at least he brought that. And then he also bought some native Red Father Lakes knotty pine, and paneled the rooms in the house and enclosed the front porch. Now we actually had four rooms in the house. I was only eleven, so I wasn't much help. But that really made it — for those days — a pretty fancy house, we thought.

The next year, we just enjoyed — or my dad did. My sister and I still were bored. Here we were, right on a lake — Hiawatha — but it was so cold, we couldn't even go swimming. Still couldn't go horseback riding; still no ice cream cones; no movies — nothing that really appealed to us. But my dad was in seventh heaven.

The next year, 1943, right in the middle of the war, my dad realized that now we had a place in the mountains and he recalled his great love for horses because every summer when he was growing up, he used to go to northern Nebraska to some of our relatives who had a farm. He would spend the summer with them and he would ride their horses, and this became his *obsession* — to have a horse of his own. So since we lived in the mountains and had a house — that wasn't even electrified — he said, “Now we have to have horses.” That's another story... .

We bought two horses that were five years old, had been in a meadow (probably some place up at Snowy Creek, oh, no, it was actually on the Manhattan Road, way way down there), that had never seen people in their lives, never had a halter on, never been broken, never been touched by a human being. He bought those horses and we were supposed to break them. I was 13 years old then and had probably been on a tame trail horse about once in my life. That's a story I won't get into. But now the point was, we had horses and a house, but we had no place to keep the horses. So we had to lease grazing rights from some rancher — and I'm not sure who that was or where that was — but that's what we did.

The next year, 1944 — it's almost serendipity — but I won't call it that. The golf course (which is still the public sand golf course today, only it looks different than it did then) went bankrupt because it was late in the war and after all these years, people just weren't coming up. They had no income, no people were using the course. At that time, it was 90 acres. To try to pay some of their debts, they had torn down the clubhouse. Have any of you ever seen the golf course way back then, when it had a clubhouse and gate houses and all of that? Well, anyway it did. And it was on the road that just got paved last summer ... the Dowdy Lake Road. That was the golf course that had gone bankrupt. And they had torn down the clubhouse to sell the materials to people who might be willing to buy them, to try to pay their debt.

So what was left at this particular point in 1944 was 90 acres and a big hole in the ground, which is where the foundation of the old clubhouse was. And a beautiful fireplace — stone and moss rock — which went up two or three stories. My dad was a dreamer and a visionary and he figured that, most importantly, we'd have 90 acres for those crazy horses we had. But we'd also have a fireplace around which

we could build a log cabin. And the log cabin, of course, wouldn't require the whole foundation of the clubhouse, so we just took a little section of it that was near the fireplace and eventually built the log cabin there.

What he did then, that winter, was to come up with one of his drivers, who drove a truck. And at that time, back in 1944, the government through the federal Forest Service would allow you to cut free, at no cost whatsoever, standing dead timber. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's the story that my dad told. So they came up and they cut down enough logs and took them down and dumped them around the foundation on the golf course, so that next summer, the day school was out, he and I could come up to Red Feather and try to build a log cabin around the fireplace. My job was mostly to peel the logs and to keep busy. We started at sunup, worked 'til sundown (because there's still no electricity; you can't have lights at night).

In those days also, in the 1940s, other people, friends from Omaha, would say My dad would tell them about the project that we were going to do. And one was an electrician, and he said, "Well, I'll be glad to come up and help you with your electrical work." And another was a sheet-metal worker and he said, "I'll be glad to come up and help you with the furnace stuff." And another was a plumber and he would come up and help. So by the end of the summer, we had built a nice little log cabin. It was going to last us, actually from 1944 'til about 1960. This would've probably gone on and on forever, but I'll interrupt it and put something else in.

After the war was over, we were living in that little log cabin. And we had the 90 acres. The horses had multiplied now to three or four or five. My dad is having a great time, and my sister and I are enjoying it a little bit more. That, by the way, was the second serendipity — that a golf course had to go bankrupt. And what I forgot to tell you was that they wanted \$2,125 for the 90 acres and the clubhouse (which wasn't anymore). And by that time, because we had fixed up the other house, we sold it for \$2,125. So financially — because the logs were free, the labor was free — really, this is the [amazing] part of the story: There's not much expense in having what we had at that particular point.

Then, when the war was over, by 1946, people started coming back. In '45, the war was still going on through the summer. So in the summer of '46, people started coming back up to Red Feather, interested in finding property or building or buying something so that they could vacation again. And they started making cars all over again and so forth. So anyway, my dad took ten one-acre sites on the far west end of the 90 acres, which kind of rolled up into the trees — it really didn't

have grass anyway, and what we wanted was grass for the horses. So he sold ten one-acre sites to these people who were looking for sites to build a cabin, at \$1000 each. So that made \$10,000, which — if there had been any expenses in building whatever we had built or doing whatever we had done — would still put us ahead financially, whatever the cost might have been.

Anyway, then things would have gone on fine forever — probably. And there are other stories we could tell about how the horses got out every winter [when we would go home], but I won't tell you that either. But there was water on the land. There's still that spring, that's right on the north side of the Red Feather Road as you come up on that particular place. And also the irrigation ditch that goes to West Lake would come though. So there was always water for the horses.

But the bad thing now — and this is probably another serendipity, number three — was that the road in front (which was finally paved last summer) was the dustiest road in Red Feather. It had lots of traffic on it, people going on vacation and to Dowdy. And all that dust just poured right into our house, which was right on the road, and drove my mother absolutely insane.

By the way, when you go along that road, tomorrow or whenever it might be, that foundation of the old clubhouse is still there. The fireplace is still there too. But if you look on the back side, the west side of the clubhouse, you'll see that old foundation.

Okay, the third serendipity now is that my mom couldn't stand the dust and she convinced my dad that we should sell that cabin, which we did. And from the money we got from that, my dad paid a professional builder to build a nicer cabin, which was a little bit bigger. It was settled back behind some trees and rocks on that now-80 acres, so that it was not very visible from the road nor was it susceptible to dust. And the reason that becomes the third serendipity is that just a year or two after we did that, the log cabin burned down. So if we had stayed in the log cabin, we probably wouldn't have had a house at all — the one that we had built. That's sad, too, that somebody — whoever bought that, I'm not sure — lost the house. But it has been rebuilt now.

Then — we're getting awfully close now! My story's about to end.

About four or five years later ... we didn't stay in that professionally-built house very long, because — unlike this summer in which we've had *so* much moisture, we had the driest summer that I think Red Feather has ever experienced. It was

1964 and no rain hardly at all; the little spring dried up; there was no water coming through the irrigation ditch. And there was no way we could go home at the end of the summer and leave the horses, which now probably numbered about seven or eight, in the pasture. And as a result, my dad went down to the ranch that we were talking about, the ranch that we now have, where Greg Rath was living. It was just before we were going back to Omaha. And he said, “Greg, can I lease some grazing rights from you this winter so that the horses can have water, because I can’t go off and leave them up there on that 80 acres.” And Greg blurted out, “Hell no.” Then he said, “My wife and I just decided last night to get divorced. And we’re going to sell this place and we’re going to get out of here.”

And that became the fourth serendipity — because that, again, is a tragic, negative situation. Nobody wanted to hear that or have that happen in Greg’s life. But the serendipity was that my dad just happened to be the very first person to hear it. And as a result, after saying all the appropriate things about being sorry and so forth, he said, “How much do you want for the ranch?” And Greg said “\$100,000.” Actually, it was two ranches. It’s our ranch, which was about 500 acres, and it’s the ranch to the east that I’ve already told you about — which now is owned by the Monfort family and which was also about 500 acres. At that time actually, it was owned by Ben Scott, but Greg had just bought him out the year before. So anyway, he said he wanted \$100,000 for the ranch — ranches, actually — which doesn’t seem like very much. But that back in the days, in the 1960s, when one popular program on television was *The \$64,000 Question* — didn’t that seem like an enormous amount of money, \$64,000? And when Joe Namath was the first professional athlete ever to get a salary of \$100,000 a year, and everybody thought the world was going to come to an end because that was such a big salary.

But anyway, it was \$100,000. So my dad went back up to Ted Dunning — that wonderful Ted Dunning — and they talked about it that day. And they figured that they could probably sell the 80 acres and the nice house on the golf course for a pretty good price. And that my dad surely — the guy from Omaha whose wife wanted to live in the middle of downtown Omaha — certainly didn’t need two ranches, let alone one, but it’d be nice to have that ranch. So they figured they would sell the second ranch. But before they sold the second ranch, they figured they could take about anywhere from eight to ten sites — right along the Red Feather Road, looking at Parvin Lake as you’re coming up the hill (Parvin on the right — that three-fingered lake) and sell those, which they did. Mostly, they were two-and-a-half acre lots for about \$5000 each. So that’s going to be, let’s say, \$40,000-\$50,000 that they’re going to make there. And for the other ranch, for

\$50,000, and they sold the 80 acres for \$60,000. So that's the end of the story and the unbelievable

The High Country Restaurant now — that was part of the deal too, when they sold the property. But anyway, the total income almost doubled the amount what the ranch cost, for a small town businessman. And for the kids — like, I'm a teacher and my wife's a teacher, almost all of our kids are teachers — we don't have a lot of money. But unbelievably we have this ranch, which has just been the greatest thing in the world. The greatest blessing in the world.

Now, the final serendipity is that — unlike the young Byron Swanson, who hated and cussed and fumed about having to come to Red Feather — finally — during all this process, we have come to realize that I wouldn't want property in Estes Park if you gave it to me. There's no place to me more beautiful and wonderful than Red Feather. And if we can just keep it that way, as pristine and open and uncluttered and unpopulated as possible

But the last serendipity also has its negative because the negative is: Why do you have to get so old to get even a little bit of smarts? It took me all my life — well not all of it — but *so long* to realize that nothing could be finer than what we're doing tonight. And what we would like to do with the ranch, too, is to keep it as unpopulated and as pristine as possible. But anyway, that's the unlikely story of a family from Omaha.