

# ROUGH RANGE



**WORKING CABINS:** Alfredo Herrera, 10, left, and his family have used several cabins to stay in while they work cattle on their 320-acre ranch high in the Jemez Mountains.

*Drought and loss of grazing permits leave small ranchers watching lifestyle slip away*

**BY BRENDAN SMITH**  
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In 1878, Isidore Ferran built a homestead in northern New Mexico and started a family ranching tradition that has lasted more than a century — but perhaps for not much longer.

Elsie Hays, Ferran's granddaughter, still raises 20 head of cattle on her property in Llaves in Rio Arriba County and on a grazing allotment in the Santa Fe National Forest. But her five brothers and sisters no longer ranch, and her two grown daughters have no interest in raising cattle.

"I'm 71 years old, and I'm still kicking it for how many years, I don't know, having to fight the environmentalists, the Forest Service and anything else that comes along," Hays said. "I stay in it only because I love it."

Faced with the worst drought to hit New Mexico in 50 years, many ranchers have been forced to liquidate all or part of their herds this year.



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**VANISHING WAY OF LIFE:** Cornelio Salazar checks on his cattle as he rides part of the Santa Fe National Forest.



The U.S. Forest Service has ordered most of the 275 grazing permit holders in the Santa Fe forest to remove some or all of their cattle from about 40 grazing allotments. Forest officials say drought-stricken forage has been overgrazed, threatening next year's range and riparian areas near rivers and streams.

Hays may have to sell the 13 cows she keeps on the Jarosa allotment in the Santa Fe forest because she cannot afford to feed them hay or find alternate pasture for the rest of the year.

"If I sold everything, I doubt I would get back in it. It would just be another rancher down the drain," she said. "(Ranching) was still a traditional, cultural thing with me. I would like to keep it alive."

### Cattle country

For many ranchers in northern New Mexico, cattle are part of the family. The calves born each spring are the physical embodiment of an ongoing struggle to eke out an existence in a harsh but beautiful land, a land where the unrelenting sun and lack of life-giving moisture can kill both plant and animal and the hopes of man.

Ranching has been shaped here by the climate and topography of the arid high country, forcing small herds of cattle onto pockets of suitable grazing land. The culture of Hispanic settlers has created a ranching tradition stretching back 400 years, but it is a dying tradition in some families.

Even before the drought struck, more than half of the roughly 14,000 ranches and farms in New Mexico were failing, losing an average of \$7,500 a year, according to the federal Census of Agriculture from 1997, the latest year available.

Net losses from all failing ranches and farms in New Mexico totaled more than \$57 million in 1997.

Ranchers point to many culprits for their plight, but the final arbiter of success or failure is a force no one can control — Mother Nature.

While farmers can use acequias or other means to water their crops, ranchers cannot irrigate large expanses of range land. Cowboys and cowgirls depend on Mother Earth for green grasses and Father Sky for rain and snow to replenish creeks and springs.

Recent monsoon rains have helped, but New Mexico, like most of the West, is still in the grip of a severe drought.

### Raised on the range

Hays learned to ride when she was 5 or 6 years old, practicing first on burros and then with an old, gentle horse before moving up to more spirited steeds.

When her family went to town, Hays stayed behind to help her father, Isidore Ferran Jr., manage about 100 head of cattle.

"We didn't have a lot. My dad was land-rich and money-poor," she said. "Most of us grew up during the depressive years, but it was a good life. We all grew up without ever going to jail or getting in any serious trouble."

Hays said her mother, Flossie Cortez of Santa Fe, traced her Hispanic ancestry back to Juan de Oñate's group of settlers who colonized New Mexico for Spain in 1498.

French Mesa in the northwestern corner of the Santa Fe forest is named for Hays' grandfather, who grew up on farmland in France before moving to California and then New Mexico, she said. He raised about 200 steers on the mesa until his death in 1927, when Hays' father took over the business.

As each generation passes, the number of cattle dwindles because siblings sell off their share of the herd. Now Hays is the last one ranching.

"To understand it, you have to grow up in it," she said. "That's as close as I can come to tell you why we do it because it certainly doesn't pay."

Hays sold 10 cows at a reduced price this year because her husband, Howard Hays, had surgery and couldn't help with the cattle. She said her cows and chickens "eat before I do," but she checks on her herd in the Santa Fe forest now by vehicle rather than horseback.

"Once I got on a horse, it took me three days to recover," she said. "I'm not a young chicken anymore."

Hays believes the Forest Service has been heavy-handed with the grazing closures in the 1.6-million acre Santa Fe forest.

"Only because they have the authority does not give them the moral authority to do this to people," she said. "It's not going to affect me as hard as a lot of people (with more cattle)."

Some grazing closures still could be lifted or modified

based on an independent evaluation of range conditions by the New Mexico Range Improvement Task Force. But that report, which was supposed to be completed July 26, still hasn't been released.

Forest officials did not return phone calls Friday seeking their comment.

### The U.S.A. Ranch

The closures have created a dilemma for the U.S.A. Ranch in Cañones. With 270 head of Hereford cows on two grazing allotments, ranch foreman Cornelio Salazar is struggling to find enough alternate pasture. He hasn't moved his family's herd yet because he is waiting for the results of the task force report.

"(Forest officials) are not giving a damn about who they get off this forest," he said. "They have you up against the wall any which way."

Salazar believes his family's 320-acre homestead, which is surrounded by the Santa Fe forest high in the Jemez Mountains, could support the herd for about a month. The pasture is usually used later in the year before the Salazar family drives their cattle down from the high country to their 3,000-acre ranch near Cañones.

At the homestead off F.R. 100 south of Abiquiu Lake, a one-room tin cabin, a wooden outhouse and a corral fashioned from ponderosa pine logs border a large meadow fringed with pine and aspen.

Severiana Salazar — the 84-year-old matriarch of a family

of seven sons and five daughters — fried diced potatoes on a cast-iron stove in the cabin Thursday with pans of beans, ground beef and red chile. Her husband, Jacovo Salazar, died 22 years ago.

The entire family is still involved in ranching, although Cornelio is the only one who works the ranch full time. The branding of calves in late August serves as a family reunion at the homestead. The ranch was named the U.S.A. Ranch because the family's brand is comprised of those three intertwined letters.

### Elk problem

Cornelio saddled a horse and strapped on a pair of leather chaps Thursday before riding with his 10-year-old nephew to check on some cows. In good years, grass grows as high as the stirrup on a saddled horse, but this year "has been drier than hell" and the forage is stunted, he said.

"One season (of drought) I think you can handle. You can't handle two," he said. "If the rains keep on, at least there's hope. There's more and more hope."

Cornelio Salazar, Hays and many other ranchers blame an

overpopulation of elk for overgrazing. Under state law, Cornelio could shoot any elk that damage his family's homestead, but he believes that would be a waste of meat. He sometimes fires a rifle in the air to scare elk away, but they return and often damage fences.

"Anything you try to save, the elk are there first," he said.

### Fewer ranches

More ranches existed in New Mexico in the 1960s than today. In 1964, 8,908 ranches or farms sold cattle, compared with 8,094 in 1997.

Economies of scale and small profit margins make it difficult for small ranchers to succeed, said Dennis Braden, general manager of the 600-cow El Sueño del Corazón Ranch in Abiquiu. The ranch was bought from local operators in 1994 by a Texas woman.

In New Mexico, large ranching and farming operations account for most of the state's agricultural market. Only 6 percent of the state's farms and ranches had sales of more than \$250,000 in 1997, but they accounted for 82 percent of the total market.

By contrast, 61 percent of the ranches and farms in New Mexico sold less than \$10,000 worth of agricultural products, counting for only 1.4 percent of the market.

Hays fears small ranchers "will be choked out, just like the loggers." Her two daughters have no interest in ranching because they have their own jobs or families.

"They have actually told me, 'Mom, I will never work as hard as you,'" she said. "Unfortunately, as farmers and ranchers get older, the children find they can work for a salaried job and not work as hard as their parents did. Little by little, the ranching becomes a sideline."

## Loss of land grants

Grazing on public lands has been at the center of a land-grant controversy in New Mexico dating to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War.

The treaty — which ceded New Mexico and large parts of the Southwest to the United States — promised to recognize community land

grants already deeded by the Mexican or Spanish governments. But land-grant heirs across New Mexico say they have lost much of their holdings through questionable court rulings in the late 1800s, bogus surveys, unscrupulous land deals or outright seizure by the U.S. government.

In Rio Arriba County, about 70 percent of the land is now under federal control. The Census of Agriculture lists 265 Forest Service grazing permits in Rio Arriba, more than four times the total for any other county in New Mexico.

If the U.S. government hadn't seized community land grants, "these people would be managing their own (grazing) allotments" instead of depending on the Forest Service, Hays said.

Rio Arriba County Commissioner Moises Morales, a rancher born and raised in Canjilón, traces the area's high rates of poverty, unemployment and substance abuse to the loss of land.

When he was 20 years old, Morales joined 19 other armed land-grant activists who raided the Tierra Amarilla courthouse in 1967. The men shot and injured a jailer and a State Police officer and took two men hostage who later escaped.

Morales said he didn't shoot anybody, but he was jailed for about six months for his part in the raid, which he admits "got a little bit out of hand."

Morales and some other ranchers still resent the Forest Service because much of the land in the Santa Fe and Carson national forests used to be part of land grants. Morales now grazes 84 cattle in the Carson.

At a meeting of ranchers last month in Abiquiu, Morales said the closure of grazing allotments in the Santa Fe forest "is going to be our last battle."

Morales' prediction may prove true for Hays and some other small ranchers. Hays said she might liquidate her herd this year or continue to raise a few head on her own property next year.

"I really don't see myself keeping it going," she said. "It's a from morning-'til-night job. I find even with the few head I have, it's very difficult."