

# THE ASPEN TIMES

## A rancher's resolve

McNulty family determined to preserve Missouri Heights ranch

By **Scott Condon**  
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So many ranches in the Roaring Fork Valley have been sold for development that it's difficult for some people to comprehend why a handful of families stubbornly cling to their spreads.

Ranchers who constantly struggle with ornery cows, low beef prices, unpredictable weather and changing times in Colorado become instant millionaires if they decide to sell. But for Wendy McNulty and her daughters Katy and Meg, cashing out would come at too great of price.

Their ranch on the Eagle-Garfield county line in Missouri Heights isn't a commodity to them. They love their piece of ground like most people love a family member.

"Selling land is just awful to us. Some people don't understand that," said Wendy, a high-spirited native of Northern Ireland who came to the United States in 1966, landed in Aspen but soon drifted downvalley because it reminded her of her rural roots.

She met rancher Gary McNulty in the 1970s. They were married, had two children and were perfectly content dealing with the struggles inherent to ranching.

"I find it gratifying," said Wendy. "You either have that feeling about ranching or you don't."

The McNulty family's roots on Missouri Heights reach back to the 1880s. Gary's grandparents emigrated from Ireland and settled for a time in Leadville before heading to the Roaring Fork Valley. They operated two ranches, one at the base of Cottonwood Pass and another along the banks of the Roaring Fork River.

The original McNultys had three sons. Gary's father John acquired a ranch along Cattle Creek in the 1920s. Gary worked with his dad but also accumulated adjacent land on his own. Together, their holdings topped 2,500 acres at one point.

### A way of life

Katy, 26, has known no life except ranching. "I was a little tomboy," she said. "I was on a horse before I could

Wendy McNulty captures a couple of horses to help roundup cattle on her Missouri Heights ranch. (Jim Paussa)



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Wendy and Katy McNulty hope to sell conservation easements to prevent their Missouri Heights ranch from being developed. (Jim Paussa)  
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almost walk."

She tried working in the office of a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying firm for a couple of weeks, only to discover her heart remained at the family ranch. She lives within the 900-plus acre heart of the ranch in a house built by homesteaders in the 1880s, not far from the collapsing old house where her dad was raised. (The McNultys own an additional 300 acres not contiguous to the heart of the ranch.)

It's easy to see why to see why the McNultys are so attached to their land. There are a bunch of ramshackle old buildings that turn a walking tour into an adventure. An old stone potato cellar burrows into a dirt embankment. Exotic chicken breeds pop in and out of their coops. A wide-eyed owl sits in the upper rafters of a barn.



Wendy McNulty knows well the challenges maintaining a ranch in the Roaring Fork Valley. Her husband's roots on Missouri Heights reach back to the 1880s. (Jim Paussa)  
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Cattle Creek meanders through the lowers meadows and feeds irrigation ditches that sustain the thirsty ground. Their cattle were recently driven down from grazing allotments in the White River National Forest and now hang out in upper pastures with drop-dead views from McClure Pass to the Continental Divide. Developers would salivate over the opportunity to slap down a few McMansions in those high pastures where the cows roam.

The ranch is nothing fancy. It fits the mold of what Roaring Fork Valley ranching was really like before gentlemen ranchers and hobbyist started snatching up all the land.

"We love it for what it is," said Katy.

### Dealt some tough cards

In addition to the normal challenges ranchers face, the McNultys have been dealt some tough cards. Gary was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease in 1987. His condition deteriorated to the point where home care wasn't an option in the 1990s. He remains on life support systems in a Denver hospital room.

It's so unusual for a victim of the disease to live 19 years after diagnosis, Wendy said, that Gary's case has been analyzed and written up in medical journals.

In addition to the heartbreaking disease there have been family troubles. Gary's mother and sister turned to litigation to gain control of some of the land John owned.

Gary's absence combined with medical bills, legal bills and family debt incurred during a particularly tough time for farming and ranching in the late 1970s and early '80s have created a constant struggle for Wendy and her daughters. The ranch's future is somewhat cloudy. Wendy has sold 300 acres over the years to raise money to pay off bills. "Every time we sell, it's like we lose another limb," she said.

Katy said she shares a sense of loss and dread with her sister and mom over what's happened to ranches on Missouri Heights and elsewhere around the Roaring Fork Valley. Subdivisions creep closer to their own ground.

"We've lived in fear of the whole place getting developed," Katy said. "We just hope it stays a ranch."



Katy McNulty, 26, has ranching in her blood. She's spent her entire life on the family ranch and hopes to continue running cattle. (Jim Pausa)  
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### Seeking conservation easements

Wendy's friendship with a nearby ranching woman, Kit Strang, sparked her interest in conservation easements. Wendy has worked with Shannon Meyer, associate director of the Aspen Valley Land Trust, on a plan to keep the McNultys on the land without selling out to developers.

The McNultys, with the support of AVLT, proposed to sell conservation easements on 753 acres of the ranch to the Eagle County open space program for \$1.9 million.

The family would surrender their development rights on the 753 acres. In return they would be allowed to remain on the ranch and run their cattle operation for as long as they want.

While the Eagle County Open Space Advisory Board unanimously recommended approving the deal, its fate is uncertain with the Eagle County commissioners, who control the open space purse strings. AVLT's Meyer said the status of the proposal is "tenuous." A decision by the commissioners is expected before the end of the year.

AVLT and the McNultys suffered another setback Thursday when the ranch wasn't selected for a purchase of conservation easements by the Colorado Division of Wildlife. AVLT and the family had proposed selling conservation easements for the part of the ranch in Garfield County to the wildlife division for \$1.4 million.

Meyer said the McNulty ranch didn't make the cut. The Division of Wildlife received 83 applications for a total of \$153 million in projects. The state agency had only \$20 million to spend through a conservation program.

Wendy McNulty discusses the challenges facing her ranch with a steely nerve. She is determined to find a way to keep the ranch in the family rather than sell out. However, selling off chunks of land piecemeal is no longer a viable option. A working ranch needs a certain number of acres to support cows with calves, Katy said, and their ranch is nearing that threshold.

So the McNultys keep searching for answers.

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[BACK](#) ←