

THE ASPEN TIMES

Preserving a prize

By Scott Condon
Aspen Times Staff Writer
 December 29, 2003

Mike and Kit Strang look out their kitchen window after morning chores at their ranch on Missouri Heights and see most of their 453 acres unfold before them.

A couple dozen horses munch in the brown pasture on the left. Big clumps of black earth remain from fall plowing in the middle distance. Past the plowed ground another pasture gives way to a sagebrush-covered hillside where the remains of a potato cellar poke the surface.

To the right are vast, frost-covered pastures where huge automated sprinkler systems sit parked for the winter. Hereford cattle and a special breed of smaller Angus graze in the distance.

It's a view the Strangs know will be preserved for their four kids.

Now that Mike and Kit are in their 70s, they decided that estate issues needed to be addressed. They inked a deal last week to place a conservation easement on 84 acres.

"It allows us to keep ranching that ground — and I can fix the potato cellar — but no houses can be built on it," said Mike, a man with a booming voice and quick laugh.

The Strangs are the kind of folks who don't have to fake hospitality. They not only offer a visitor a cup of coffee but also a clementine and a piece of Kit's coffee cake. They also make it clear, if they like you, that you can visit any time.

While they did the giving this holiday season by preserving a piece of a working ranch, they said they feel like they're receiving. Mike said he can rest assured that his worst nightmare won't occur.

"We certainly didn't want the place encumbered with the type of development that's all over Missouri Heights," he said.

'Misery Heights'

They've witnessed big changes since moving to the ranch in April 1965. They could let their cattle graze at will then. There were no other ranches

surrounding them.

"You couldn't see a light," Mike said. "Nobody wanted to live up here."

Their ranch is now surrounded by homes and, in some cases, subdivisions.

"When we first bought it, we just heard 'Misery Heights,'" said Kit. The name came from the perception that



[Print Friendly](#)



[Email This Story](#)



there is

no water.

But the Strangs' land had some of the best water rights of the high, parched heights. Water comes from Cattle Creek via the Needham Ditch, established in 1884. They've supplemented those rights by acquiring access to more during

spring run-off.

It hasn't been easy, but the ranch has flourished. They've got about 50 cows and 15 ewes. The sheep were a result "of a 4H project gone wild," according to their daughter, Bridget.

They board horses and host national riding shows. Bridget offers riding lessons.

About 35 acres of the ranch was converted more than 25 years ago to a sod farm. The timing couldn't have been worse, according to Mike. He planted seed in the middle of a severe drought. The grass wouldn't grow. He stuck with it, and now it's a vital part of the ranch.

When asked what it takes to operate a successful ranch, Mike flashed his quick wit and said, "Have all the things you do work somewhat."

When asked how many people work on the ranch, he responded, "About half of them."

The cattle factor

Cattle have always been a risky proposition, he said. Nevertheless, he can't keep them off the ranch. "I'm obsessed. We've always had cattle."

Cattle prices were at their highest point ever this year, thanks to a short supply due to many ranchers in the West selling their herds in 2002 and 2003 due to the drought. The report of mad cow disease in Washington state sent prices plummeting.

The Strangs have always gone for specialty niches anyway. A breed that Mike is intrigued with is a Lowline Angus, developed in Australia. They are smaller and utilize forage better on less ground. The idea is a rancher can put more of the cattle on less ground. They aren't corn fed, and they don't receive hormones. Best of all, according to the Strangs, they are very tasty.

The Strang Ranch is busy year-round because of all the livestock. But it's particularly hectic in April, May and June when the lambs, calves and foals are born, said Kit with a gleam in her eye.

"It was a wonderful place to raise the kids," said Kit. "I love livestock. I love to see the fields change color through the seasons."

Mike cringes at the thought of left-leaning politics and activities. He served as a Republican in the Colorado House from 1970 to 1974 and in the U.S. House in 1985-86.

But conservation of agricultural lands isn't a liberal idea to him nor are innovative land-use tools. While in the state Legislature he

proposed allowing transferable development rights. That would allow a rancher, for example, to sell development rights to a developer on the fringe of a town. The legislation wasn't approved.

The Strangs didn't have to look far for help establishing their conservation easement. Kit is past president of

the Western Colorado Agricultural Heritage Fund, a Carbondale-based organization that had a mission to preserve ranch and farm lands. It merged this year with Aspen Valley Land Trust, the oldest land trust in Colorado. Kit remains on the board of the merged organization.

The conservation easement on the Strangs' 84 acres will be held by AVLTL. They keep the land but surrender the development potential and value. In return they receive

tax benefits.

The 84 acres under conservation are highly visible next to Missouri Heights Road. "Hopefully it will inspire other people to look into it as well," said Kit.

Kit and Mike are exploring additional steps to help hand the ranch over to their children — Lathrop and Bridget, who both live in the valley; and twins Laurie Cunningham, who lives in Indio, Calif., and Scott, who lives in the mountains

of Virginia.

"The conservation easement is huge to me because I was born on this ranch," said Bridget. She recalled there were tough times when there was talk of selling the ranch — which gave her nightmares. "It was like nuclear war to me," she said.

The kids all wanted to see the ranch preserved, so that makes estate planning easier, said Mike.

Kit and Mike have no plans to leave the ranch they love anytime soon. Mike's got to get that old potato cellar fixed. And there's all that livestock to tend to.

"As long as I can get Kit and Bridget to do all the work, I'll stick around," chuckled Mike.

Scott Condon's e-mail address is scondon@aspentimes.com

[BACK](#) 