

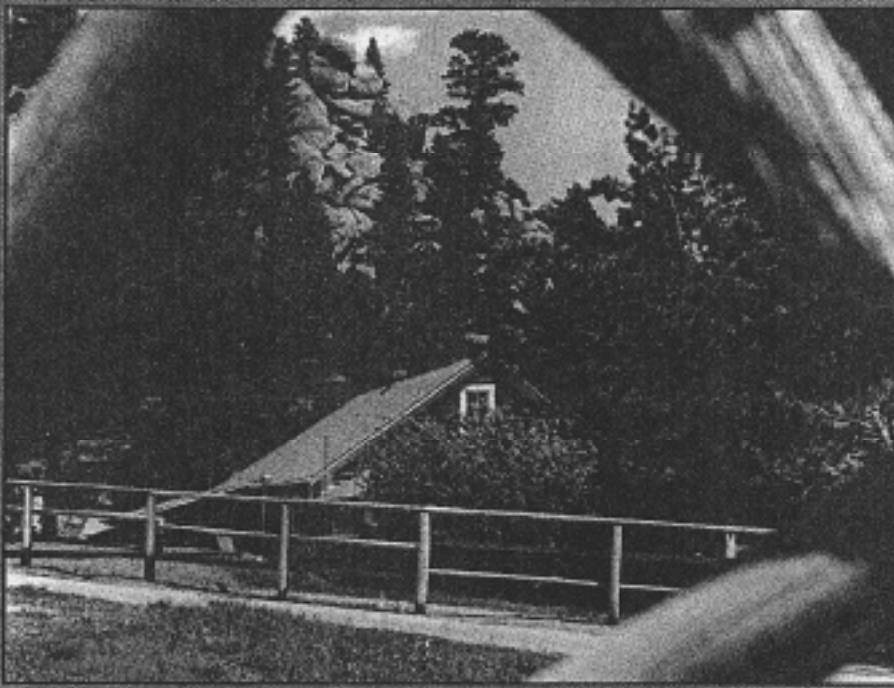


The MacGregor Ranch gather. Angus have dominated since the early 1900s. Photograph by Kent and Donna Dannen

*Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park provides the backdrop for this drama, a return to ranching of the 19th century. Angus play a traditional role at the. . . **MacGregor Ranch Museum***

WHERE ANGUS FORM PART OF THE PAGEANT

By Jim Cotton, Editor



The ranch is now operated as an educational and demonstration facility and administered by a trust.



Chuck Christensen, a retired deputy chief of police from Park Ridge, Ill., is in his second year as executive director of the ranch trust. He's gradually transitioning from a Ford "Bronco" to a sturdy Appaloosa. "This one suits my temperament just fine. No more borrowing someone's horse," relating an episode with another bronco."

Western novelist Louis L'amour should be writing this piece. There are ingredients enough here for his touch: land fraud, homesteader versus European baron, a gentle but determined heroine striving to hold her family's holdings together. And of course, the land, the earthen bosom of a sheltered mountain valley and where Angus cattle thrive on high country meadows.

One visitor claims Angus couldn't be raised in a setting that's any more spectacular than MacGregor's. Buttressed on three sides by the Rocky Mountain National Park (near Estes Park, Colo.), the MacGregor Ranch may so resemble a movie set as to be slightly unbelievable. And, if plans proceed apace, this historic ranch will present its visitors a time warp experience, an authentic re-creation of ranchlife before and after the turn-of-the century.

The MacGregor saga begins Christmas Eve, 1872, with Windham Thomas Wyndham-Quin, Fourth Earl of Dunraven who may be depicted as the villain of sorts. Apparently, his lordship was wining and dining with friends at Denver's Corkscrew Club, when he heard of the wonders of Estes Park. His investigation inspired him to acquire and preserve the territory for himself as a private hunting reserve.

However, a law clerk from

Milwaukee named A.Q. MacGregor also became infatuated with the region during a camping trip that same year. MacGregor eventually was admitted to the Colorado Territorial Bar and the training evidently was helpful in securing his homestead.

These two gentlemen, MacGregor and Lord Dunraven, were both of Scots ancestry but became adversaries in the struggle over the destiny of Estes Park and Black Canyon, site of the future MacGregor Ranch. MacGregor emerged as the winner in a land duel when fictitious claims revealed chicanery by Lord Dunraven and his American representatives.

Accounts of this era were prepared from the diaries of Miss Muriel MacGregor, sole survivor of the clan, opened after her death in 1970. Author and friend of Miss Muriel, Glenn Prosser is an authority on the area's life and times. His book, **The Saga of Black Canyon**, The Story of the MacGregors of Estes Park, is an authoritative and fascinating description of the family's triumphs and struggles spanning a century of Colorado history.

A.Q. MacGregor was killed in a high country thunderstorm in 1896. A new chapter for Black Canyon Ranch began as Widow MacGregor moved the family to Denver and leased the ranch for a number of years at a \$500 annual fee. Never selling the land was deeply instilled in the family code. The

XIX brand still belongs to the ranch.

Donald MacGregor: Miss Muriel's, father, became the rancher of the family when he grew old enough to take on its demands. At first he stocked it with "Polled Red" cattle, then later began selecting Aberdeen-Angus stock.

Prize-winning potatoes were also raised on the ranch until problems with fertilization arose, and spuds became a poor bet. However, the valley continued to produce bountiful hay and oats to feed Donald's cow herd now expanding to 200 head of predominantly Angus cattle as the ranch passed through the era of WWI and into the 1920s.

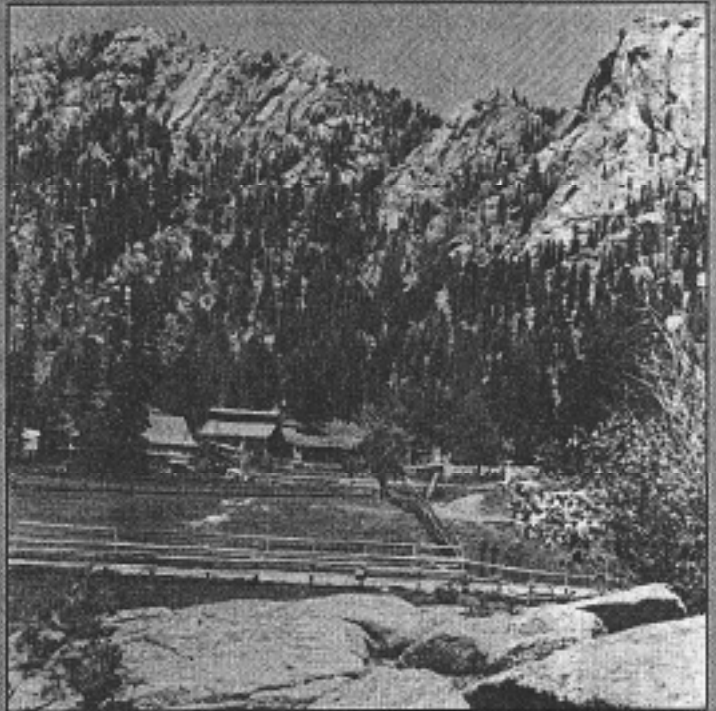


Tourism was established by this time; its potential recognized even in the 1870s. Consequently, homesteaders and businessmen were well-acquainted with catering to those enjoying the scenery of the area. Many farms and

*In the shadow of Twin Owls, the Lumpy Ridge,
a half-mile north on Devil's Gulch Road.*



Mrs. Orpha Kendall is in her 19th year of volunteering at MacGregor. She was friend and confidant of Miss Muriel MacGregor during her final, troubled years.



ranches of the area were in the accommodations business. Bed and breakfast and more elaborate services were commonly offered. Tourism was an important source of income. Rocky Mountain National Park was established in 1915, and Estes Park was growing.

Life at MacGregor's Black Canyon Ranch was hardly glamorous. The hours were long and arduous. Milk, eggs, vegetables, potatoes were sold to tourists and those serving the tourist industry. Winter feed for the cattle was a constant concern as the MacGregors were devoted to make the place self-sufficient and profitable. Life took on a spartan quality as Donald was devoted to paying off his brothers' share of the ranch.

Miss Muriel MacGregor began making her mark on the community in the year 1910, remembered for riding her pony Zephyr, her legs too short to reach the stirrups but supported, by special straps fashioned by her father. Her ranch-inspired fantasies and adventures spun in childhood she later tried to sell as short stories and novelettes.

She became the sole proprietress of the MacGregor holdings in 1950 when both parents died. At that time there were 200 head of Angus and some 6,000 acres of deeded and leased land to administer. The year 1950 also saw Estes Park's greatest growth begin with motels, summer homes, and year-

round subdivisions. Hungry cattle, poor fences, and the green grass of newly planted lawns and golf courses compounded the challenge of defending the MacGregor empire. Prosser states:

"In the earlier days of her sole ranch management, Miss MacGregor could be seen at most any hour of the day or night driving her black charges back to their pasture by horseback. For the past 15 years when hip and wrist injuries wouldn't permit that traditional method of cattle-gathering, Miss MacGregor herded them by car or truck.

"The pace was never hurried, never impatient. Each critter was a personal friend, a personality. . ."

Typical perhaps in any community would be the rumor and myth surrounding this rather shy and unassertive mistress of Black Canyon Ranch. She was eulogized on October 27, 1970, as "a regal and untrammled spirit. . .who has lived by the old fashioned 'code of the hills' and who spoke cultured English with . . . dignity."

Prosser characterizes community lore circulating about Miss Muriel MacGregor as often erroneous and sometimes malicious. She was well-educated and, despite the barbs of popular critics, Muriel did use her law degree earned at the University of Denver to defend landholder's and

grazing rights. She was one of the first two women to be admitted in 1936 to practice before the Colorado Supreme Court. Her legal chores were quiet and unspectacular as befitting her personality, her most celebrated client a daughter of poet Robert Frost for whom she drafted a will. During the 1930s, she worked long hours at the ranch and was the constant



companion of her father and took care of her mentally disturbed mother.

Her spare time was devoted to music and writing. A Mr. A.L. Fierst, New York literary agent, comments on her efforts:

"With your undoubted familiarity with the country of which you write, it is too bad you are so unfamiliar with the Western Fiction Formula.

"Your story fails, mainly, by reason of no plot—although this would be of less consequence if you gave us a bit more action and suspense."

Prosser describes the decades of the mid-1900s as the "golden years of Black Canyon Ranch. . .grinding



Dwight Thorson moved here from Minnesota and is experienced with not only cattle but also the very important facet of teams and workhorses. In contrast with Minnesota winters, Dwight says of Estes Park: "This is pretty mild winter country around here.

"The hay system incorporates an overshot bucket and stacker. It's identical to what they used to use up here, even though it's new."

Around the museum . . .



The mausoleum where three MacGregors rest: Donal, Minnie Maude, and Muriel, their daughter.



Ranch life included time devoted to recreation and wildlife observation. Opportunities for nature study and portraying the surroundings on canvas were family hobbies. Several paintings by unusually gifted members of the MacGregor clan are displayed.



English Spode was set for hired hands in the conviction nothing was too precious to be well used.

inexorably toward the twilight of 1950. . . the year that the heavens fell on Miss Muriel MacGregor." A mentally confused mother, an ailing father, the demands of cattle, pressures of preserving the natural values and environment of Estes Park, encroachment by the townsites and her neighbors were a telling nightmare.

Financial woes and her own failing health, the cattle violating town ordinances and being impounded for "roaming at large" were constant vexations driving the woman toward withdrawal and a general feeling of persecution.

Arsonists burned her barn on July 4, 1969, and threatened the ranch house. So frightened was she of being trapped in the house, she slept for several nights in her car, parked well away from the house.

Miss Muriel never stopped trying to hold Black Canyon Ranch intact. But the deterioration seemed to accelerate. By the mid-Fifties, the meadows were no longer capable of producing the 200-300 tons of hay yearly, the fences

fell into disrepair, the irrigation system was poorly maintained, the machinery and vehicles became increasingly unpredictable, the horses were aging. In May of 1970, Muriel suffered a stroke. In June, a heart attack.



During her hospitalization and the cleaning of her neglected ranch home, silver, rare china, and cherished antiques.

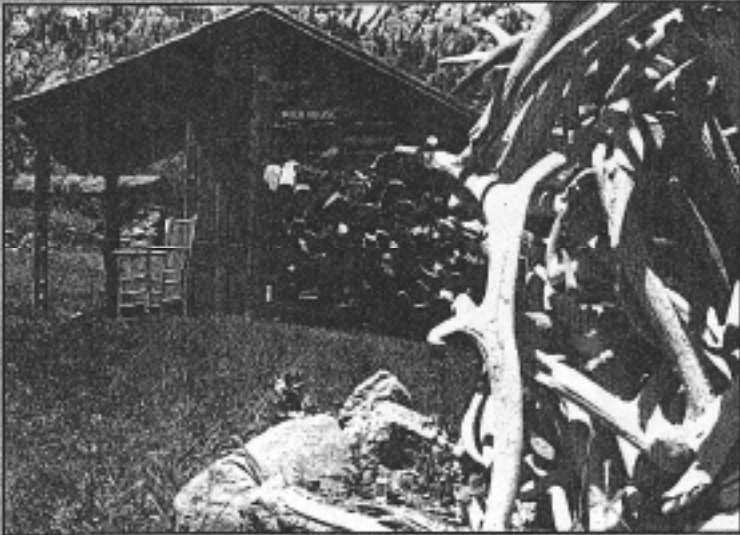
October 9, 1970, the day before returning to the hospital in Denver

and the date of her final will, Miss Muriel expressed her concern to Orpha Kendall, her friend and assistant during these difficult years. The subject was the ranch and its future as recounted by author Glenn Prosser:

"While I was bathing her,' related Mrs. Kendall, 'she said: 'Mrs. Kendall, this is the thing bothering me most about making my will. You know, I have been concerned for several years now, as what to do to insure the ranch being kept intact and to retain the MacGregor name.

"Most city children never have the chance to see a ranch, or a cow even, and many never see this great an expanse of land. It is my honest belief that every boy should have a stream to walk down with his dog beside him. I feel the time is not too far off that the only place this can be done will be in the National Parks, and you can't even walk with your dog there. Much less fish in the streams.

"This is what I want; a place for



The ranch was once self-sufficient, and attempts will be made to convey what life independent of supermarkets and convenience stores was like for visiting school children. Antlers represent the hundreds of venison and elk steaks and roast sustaining the family and guests over the decades.



Ranch Manager Orpha Kendall describes the bulls used at MacGregor as of the Bandomere line predominately. "This is South Plattes John 12. I have bought bulls from Lloyd Rumsey of LaSalle, Colo. for about eight years." As might be predicted, there's no A.I. practiced here.



Stout horsepower is fundamental to the ranch's future. Eventually, there will be little vehicular traffic on the grounds as the return to turn-of-the-century methods continues.

city people to see and enjoy.'

"I agreed with her, and the conversation was ended by the ringing of the telephone."

That, one of the founding principles of what eventually became the MacGregor Ranch Museum.

Executive Director Chuck Christensen points out the ranch is a "working ranch, but it's more or less a demonstration herd. The primary emphasis is toward education of young people." Field trips from the Denver area and the larger Front Range region are common through both the spring and early fall. Schoolkids can witness both spring brandings and the fall work plus enjoy the step back in time giving textbook accounts new meaning. Girl scouts, boy scouts, and mentally retarded classes are among the visitors typically.

"It's amazing, a lot of these kids have live in Denver their whole lives, and this is the first time they've been up here in the mountains," says Christensen.



The ranch is tax-exempt as a charitable, educational trust and closely tied with the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior in its management. The NPS holds a conservation easement administered by the ranch.

"The government said: 'We'll buy a conservation easement. That is, we'll give you so much money, but you have to live by some of our rules. There can't be any development, any building or re-building unless it complies with our stipulations,'" Chuck explains. "Which is what we wanted to do in the first place—to save this natural beauty. They gave us just about \$4 million to save this. They have the right of first refusal if we ever want to sell."

Christensen said the fund was used to pay off accumulated debt. Operations can be conducted from the interest plus a portion is re-invested to build on the base. The fund is reported to be back over the original \$4 million figure now. "It allows us to continue this operation indefinitely."



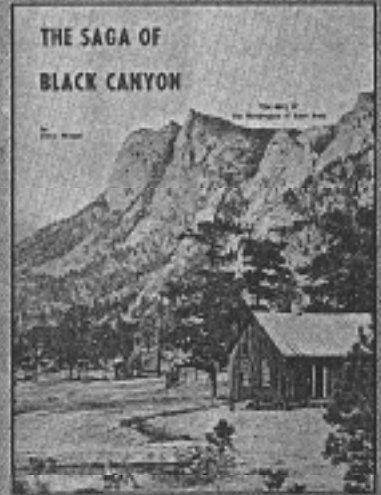
Motorized machinery is being phased out in favor of horse-drawn equipment for haying the mountain meadowland.



The Front Range was once the domain of hunting parties for the Ute, Arapahoe, and Apache tribes in this area.



The ranch was founded in 1872 and is substantially the same as when homesteaded. Papers recognizing the MacGregor claim are signed by three Presidents of the United States, 1876-1885. Contesting claims between MacGregor and Lord of Dunraven revealed attempts to defraud by the latter gentleman.



Copies of *THE SAGA OF BLACK CANYON*, *The story of the MacGregors of Estes Park*, by Glenn Prosser are available from the MacGregor Ranch, 180 MacGregor Lane, Estes Park, Colorado 80517. Please include \$5.00 to cover postage and handling.

The ranch is returning to its former appearance and starting to take on an old-timey character. "I'm really pleased," Chuck says of the progress. "Eventually, I'd like to see 90 percent of our work done with horses, wagons, and such. But that takes time. When folks come into the central core of the ranch, they're not going to see any modern equipment as we continue to 'de-modernize'."

Aside from the 3-4,000 students visiting each year, the ranch also hosts the annual elk migration up and down the Black Canyon draw. Herds of 4-600 elk trek up and down from the high country 'using the ranch as a major thoroughfare.

"They're hard on fences," says Mrs. Kendall, ranch manager.

Another volunteer on the ranch staff, Gladys Thompson, acknowledges wildlife and Angus have some trouble mixing. "We have black bear here, plus mountain lion and bobcat. After a heavy spring snow, we'll find the coyotes will go after a calf—whatever's easiest."

"Being close to the Park like this, they're 'sacred animals,'" Chuck adds.

On coyotes, Gladys Thompson defines some of the unsettled question of rights and the policies of an institution dedicated to preservation:

"Some people say it's all right to shoot if you're protecting the cows. Then others say you have to have a license. Then others say, no, you don't if you're the landowner. But are you really the landowner if you're a volunteer? Then there's the idea that coyotes are part of the natural scheme of things."

Of additional interest to ranching folks is the nature of the winters. Most are surprised to learn cattle can be successfully wintered at this altitude. Although snows may get deep at

decided about 1915, and I've tried to carry out her (Muriel MacGregor's) wishes. I really haven't thought about crossbreeding. We don't have much problem calving this way, with the Angus.

"Yes, being in the public eye does create some restraints," she allows. "but not as much as trying to operate as a 'turn-of-the-century'."

Orpha Kendall has helped nurse the historic MacGregor place through some of its worse times. At least the 1980s present a clearer course. Instead

T · H · I · S L · I · F · E

times, severe winds and blizzards are kept at bay by the sheltering ridges. Summer grazing is pretty much assured, according to Orpha from the first of June through the first of October. "If we're lucky, we'll have a little bit of October. We'll cut hay at home and turn them in on that hay meadow.

"The average age of the herd is about four years," she continues. "It's a young herd. The will states we are to maintain a herd of Aberdeen-Angus. We've stuck with it. The breed was

of trying to force an institution designed for the 19th century into the space age, perhaps the wiser, logical choice—given the scenic qualities and historical significance—is to let the MacGregor Ranch settle back to the gentler serenity of an earlier age,

The experiment may not be all that automatic, but that's where it seems comfortable. And it's also likely most of its visitors feel a greater kinship as well. We need it as it used to be, for our own sakes, and not just to honor the memory of the MacGregors. **AJ**