

## Dixie Meadow Company (DMC), 1888 - 2023

### A Quick Look at the Past to Understand What We See Today

Come along as we "hike" around the ranch, peer into the past, and relate that to what we see and do today. "Why is the fence there? Was a spring over there? Why did the ranch switch from sheep to purebred Herefords? What did Grandmother grow in her garden across from the Home Place?" We believe that if we know more about the way the land was, we will better manage **Dixie Meadow Company (DMC)**, our ranch of timber and rangelands.

The 1862 Homestead Act was created to relieve the labor pressure in the cities. People filed for a piece of land, usually 160 acres. They had to "prove up" on their homestead by living on and cultivating the land before receiving the homestead patent that signaled ownership. In 1888, John's great-grandparents homesteaded a valley they called **Gravy Gulch**. Food was scarce but they made gravy from home-grown wheat and milk from the family cow. Our ranch name comes from **Dixie Meadow**, the large upland meadow above Gravy Gulch. All grazing animals (cows, deer, elk, antelope) like Dixie Meadow. **Pilot Butte**, at 5778 feet, watches over all DMC lands. Visible from all directions, Pilot Butte was a landmark for early travelers. (Don't confuse this with the 4139-foot Pilot Butte near Bend!)

**Dixie Meadow** was the 1900 homestead of a Kentucky dairy family, hence the name "Dixie". Their cross-fenced meadow was like a giant wagon wheel with the spokes creating paddocks. We believe they rotated their cows around the paddocks just as ranchers today do rotational grazing through fenced rangeland pastures. Research has shown that a sturdy stand of native bunch grass is created when many cows concentrate in a small space for only a few days, at the right stage of the grass growth.

A favorite ranch site is the **Mitchell Place**, high on the SW flank of Pilot Butte. John Mitchell grew prize-winning pumpkins while he "summered" to obtain his homestead "patent" in the 1920's. During the winter, he stayed in lower country with the Breese family, doing chores for room and board. Alas, 1928 was a tick year. Mr. Mitchell and one of the Breese shepherds were bitten -- and died from Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

The **Vanina Place** is a turn-of-the-century homestead of a Swiss family. John's family lived in the old Vanina house until the well dried in the late 40's. The Vanina Place and the **Horse Pasture** (once home to 35 work horses) are on a landslide mass from the Prineville Caldera, 29m years ago. Our quest to manage the invasive native water-guzzling juniper began in 1987 and continues today. Initially, we cut juniper and Gus, a retired truck driver (now deceased) spread the brush. Selling over 2000 cords of firewood, Gus earned every stick by spreading all the limbs to allow the protected grass a chance to grow under the harsh summer sun and dry wind. This gradually allows the soil to "**capture, store & safely release water**" (*Hugh Barrett*). The Horse Pasture has Ponderosa pine woodland, which we manage with pine thinning and juniper removal. (Pine & juniper encroach on meadows!)

Managing the ranch forests is a challenge, both financially AND "what to do with what we remove". Regular "cut & thin" must be done. When we returned to the ranch in 1987, Prineville had 5 working lumber mills. Today, none. We took the last load of logs to Ochoco Mill on its last day; the ground crew was in tears. **This is happening in all of eastern Oregon, but the private and federal forests still need to be managed and thinned. How???**

**Mamie's Cabin** is where John's great-aunt filed for a piece of land. Her cabin was about 10' by 15'. John's father and aunt, Eldred and Lyrle, often stayed with Mamie, then walked the short distance to Combs Flat School. When Mamie "proved up her 160", the **Home Place** ranch (purchased in 1900) and the original **Gravy Gulch** homestead were tied together. Hard work "bought" the land.

At the **Home Place**, John's Dad was a teen-ager in the 1920's. First one up in the morning, he lit the fire in the kitchen wood stove, then went to the out-door cooler where a frozen side of beef was hanging, and chopped steaks for the family and hired crew. He put steaks by the stove to thaw, then joined the hired hands for the morning chores. Work and saddle horses were rounded up, curried, harnessed, and ready for the day. Firewood was stacked at the house and bunkhouse. Inside, Grandmother made breakfast of fresh biscuits, gravy, steaks, and home-canned fruit. The men came in, washed-up, and sat down for their first meal of the day. Dad, his younger sister and brother usually walked to school 1 1/2 mile away. They took a rifle in case they met rabid coyotes.

This Central Oregon land would not support a family on 160 acres, but by working as an extended family, viable ranches were put together. DMC is a blend of 9 original homesteads. Our bluebird trail begins at **Mamie's Cabin**. Over 100 boxes provide nest sites for **Bluebirds** and anything else that can modify the box to its specifications! It is a challenge to remember where they are for the annual house cleaning! Stream erosion and "head cutting" (now repaired) on the Mamie's Cabin meadow was accelerated by juniper invasion. Our streams run with the rush of spring rains and snow-melt, so it is hard to get plantings to establish an upward trend. Positive results are slow.

In **1995**, friends and an Access & Habitat Grant from **Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)**, helped us fence the Mitchell spring. Using gravity, PVC pipe and old skidder tires, we established three new watering troughs for wildlife and cattle. This successful watering system is repeated throughout the ranch on nine sites.

In July **1998**, a 100-year flood tore through upland **Dixie Meadow**, turning a trickle into a torrent 100 feet wide and 5 feet deep. Woody material, new streamside native plants, an elk fence protecting aspen groves, and a culvert were swept downstream. Friends with willing hands, plus expertise in engineering and hydrology, helped install a rock gabion stream crossing and reset the elk fence.

In **2011**, a **Soil and Water Conservation District** grant helped restore the water flow in Dixie Meadow and Lawson Creek. This included cutting 300 acres of juniper uplands above the meadow. In **2012** we were awarded an **Open Fields Grant from ODFW**. We did once-in-a-lifetime ranch improvements while allowing controlled public hunting for the next few years. Each project looked simple on paper, but took full time effort by multiple folks. Coordination was tight as we worked through adverse weather, fire season, and intermittent manpower to finish on time and on budget. We drilled a well to deliver pasture water, rebuilt 16 miles of 100 year-old fences, removed junipers, improved meadow stream flows and rocked part of our main ranch road. We have done prescribed burns, and plan more. In **2013 & 2016** we installed 2 solar wells which allow us to put well water into fourteen of our twenty-nine pastures. One, on the flanks of Pilot Butte uses gravity to pipe water from 4000 feet down to four pastures. This allows better pasture management through rotational grazing.

**Wildlife are happy too!!**

**2021 - 2022:** The **Deschutes Land Trust** asked us for 1500 fully branched junipers. We were cutting in the **Buck Pasture** and were able to deliver; ODOT laughed as the log truck "dragged" the trees through town. As juniper cutting continued in the Buck Pasture, a young man with a portable sawmill "moved" in and is successfully cutting lumber. With support from **Sustainable Northwest**, he delivers lumber bundles to the **Prineville Train Depot**, where the bundles are loaded then delivered to eager buyers in Portland. Still in the Buck Pasture, John moves juniper logs to the log deck, then uses the Bobcat to mow the branches spreading mulch on the ground to protect emerging grass. We're not there yet, but Buck Pasture is beginning to look like it did before juniper invasion. see 1930 photo

We are all "students", whether in school, or out working the land. We walk our land with professionals from OSU, Society for Range Management, Society of American Foresters, National Tree Farm, USFS, BLM, ODF and ODFW. We walk it with students from OSU, Linfield, C. Oregon & Mt. Hood C. Colleges, AmeriCorps, Master Naturalists and high schools. Together, we look, question, and explore on-the-ground management. Every day brings an "a-ha" moment, and we learn that we don't know it all.

**Our goal? For us to stay on our ranch and pass it on to the next generation, the land has to function economically and ecologically at its potential.** With the aid of hindsight and science, we are gradually moving in that direction. We are always evolving in knowledge and practices.

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**Removing Ticks:** *This by a School Nurse is especially great because it works in places difficult to get to with tweezers: between toes, in middle of a head full of dark hair, etc. Apply a glob of liquid soap to a cotton ball. Cover the tick with the soap-soaked cotton ball and let it stay for 15-20 seconds; the tick will come out on its own and be stuck to the cotton ball when you lift it away.*