



"Working Landscape,
Providing for the Future"

LIVING in the LANDSCAPE

BY FREIA HOOPER-BRADFORD

A picture is worth a thousand words. The phrase is more than true with "Working Landscapes, Providing for the Future." The painting, enlarged to an 8-foot by 10-foot mural, draws the eye to a profusion of ways that the land benefits Coloradans of every cloth, including farmers, ranchers, hikers, hunters, city dwellers and forest and range conservationists.

Animals share the prairie and mountains. A sage grouse is cleverly camouflaged in its environment, and mule deer gather among protective brush. Grasses, flora and fauna texture the land with rich colors. A river flows to a reservoir from its origin in the snow-peaked Rocky Mountains. The metropolis of Denver sits at the top of the painting, swallowed up by the multifaceted land. A thousand words are not sufficient to describe “Working Landscapes, Providing for the Future.”

It is just as difficult to describe the essence of the artist behind the painting, to capture who she is. But there is no doubt, especially after a day of riding the backcountry with Barbara East, that this artist is the painting.

“Working Landscapes, Providing for the Future,” a painting commissioned by the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America, is also the essence of these societies. East feels that the commission to paint their theme for the 2010 conference has been one of her greatest honors. Not that “Working Landscapes” is her only piece of artwork. She has painted for 30 years, and her life, philosophy, beliefs and personality shine through with every brush stroke in all of her paintings.

However, the artist side is only one part of East. She is also a cowgirl, a keeper of the land, a woman for all seasons. The seed to become this woman was inherited and nurtured from birth. East’s father instilled toughness, determination and grit as he lived a life as a hard rock miner and construction equipment distributor, while her mother instilled a love for nature and art.

The East family has lived in Boulder for four generations. Barbara spent her childhood and adolescent years in Boulder before urban sprawl had built up tract houses around the city. Horses, ranching and tough work were the life she knew. As a teen, instead of spending time at malls and movies, Barbara operated a tractor and mowing machine during hay-



“Saguache Park Herefords” by Barbara East

ing season and worked her way up the ranching ladder to cowgirl. Today, and for the past 37 years, she single-handedly manages livestock on public land all summer long.

From spring through fall, East rides the mountain backcountry, leading a string of mules carrying salt blocks, checking cattle on grazing permits, doctoring injured or sick mama cows or their calves and moving the herd to prevent overgrazing, always with a watchful eye for “something not right somewhere.” East lives in cow camps most of the season with no electricity or running water. She knows solitary nights when a coyote howl is the only sound in the mountain valley.

Ah, but winters. Winters are for painting the very life she lives.

East’s lifetime experiences contribute to a philosophy translated in her paintings.

“The most humbling experience in my life,” she recalls, “is when I cared for 1,500 steers on the Big Cimarron. The fences were imaginary. The steers were like elk.

I spent all day long, seven days a week, trying to keep the outer edges of the herd at least pointing toward home. On first glance of a horse and rider, the steers vaporized into miles and miles of serviceberry and oak brush canyons with treacherous mud slides, and I was left with only steer tracks in the dust.”

East fondly remembers her old black herding dog, Bud. “After hours and miles of tracking, I would eventually come upon Bud and the steers. Bud was usually sunning himself or happily lying in the shade, depending on the day, with the package of steers chewing their cud and calmly cornered at a fence. Thereafter, the cattle were gentle. I never could see what Bud did because of the brush, but I believe in giving credit where credit is due. Had it not been for this dog’s wisdom, I would not have gathered many of those steers that fall. Bud was amazing. We would start off in all different directions and come back as a team.” Barbara says she learned volumes about low-stress livestock handling [continued on page 18]

Barbara East’s “Working Landscapes, Providing for the Future” mural will be on display at the National Convention of the Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America in Denver, February 7–11, 2010, at the Sheraton Denver Downtown Hotel.



PHOTOS BY FREIA HOOPER-BRADFORD

Barbara East on the range working cattle and checking fences: The work is hard and rewarding for the woman with a passion for the land.

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from that dog. “Aside from livestock handling, Bud also taught me the importance of teamwork and perseverance.”

Patience is another integral part of East’s life. She believes that patience comes from her artist side. “When I create a painting, the first step is to visualize the finished product, then methodically develop the steps it takes to accomplish the end result. The same applies to cattle and range management: Have the desired end result in mind — fat, healthy calves and healthy rangeland — then develop the timing necessary to accomplish the plan.”

There is hardly a moment that art, land stewardship and East’s range life do not intertwine. “I remember when I rode on the Grand Mesa, hearing the haunting calls of sandhill cranes symbolizing the exit of summer.” One memory etched in her mind is the cranes landing around Bonham Lake before a storm, hundreds of them lining the banks. “I saved a feather or two after they were gone the next day,” she recalls.

Thousands of words could not capture East’s special moments of life, the difference between life and art inseparable. “Those completely quiet times, I watch the light of the sun touch the shape of the land, how it defines the landscape differently, changing — like life — with every cloud that passes.”

It is no wonder that East takes great care to paint life into every blade of grama grass, every sagebrush, the eye of a cow — may it be curious, frightened or contented — and every clump of weeds or flowers. She says that riding the range is so much more than riding a horse and looking at cattle. The job description of cowgirl is too simple, because her range and riding life includes being ever watchful of natural resources, preserving them for future generations and intimately learning the plants that inhabit the range.

Over time, East developed a side interest in the kaleidoscope of plants she sees, and she pursued a botanical illustrator’s certificate. Plates of native fauna and flora now reside next to her paintings.

On our ride to the backcountry of Crested Butte, she points toward the precipitous alpine slope just below granite peaks. Sunny yellow patches, pretty enough to paint, stain the soft green of slope. “These yellow patches are yellow toadflax, an introduced weed that we need to control before it crowds out native plants,” she explains. “Some invasive species are Eurasian used in flower gardens and ground cover that people grow as pretty plants. But the same plants are extremely aggressive in their growing habit and quickly take over native wildflowers.”

East, while doing her job with cattle, rides in places where few humans exert the energy to experience the majestic and rough backcountry. She looks forward to using a global positioning system (GPS) for the first time this coming summer to locate invasive plants. They will consequently be managed with an appropriate control program.

“We have tremendous biodiversity.” East points to blue grass, Thurber fescue,



The "For Many Generations to Come" mural is on permanent display at the Gunnison Airport.

patches of mountain brome and legumes. "Preserving biodiversity is one of the major components of our annual grazing plan with the United States Forest Service."

Our ride continues from the lush creek bottom to the steep slopes shaded by aspen

Visit Barbara East's website at www.barbaraeast.com to see more of her incredible paintings. Her paintings can be seen at the Gunnison Gallery, 124 Main, Gunnison — 970-641-6111 and Mountain Valley Floral, Collbran — 970-487-3200.

and littered with fallen trees hiding under foot-high grass. East's mule string follows and takes a break while she unloads salt blocks. The cows have already spotted us. They hurry toward the mules, mooing and slobbering in anticipation. The reason to deposit the blocks high up on the mountain slope is preservation. The blocks entice the cows to move away from the greenery at the creek to avoid overgrazing bottom-land.

Preservation is a natural byproduct of East's profession and interest in botanicals, but it is not at the expense of ranching, hiking and hunting.

East isn't a botanist, researcher or green activist whom we imagine would be involved in range and land conservation. East's bigger picture of conservation includes shared use of the land, as was evident when we met hunters on a rutted forest road. East pointed out

the best area to hunt elk. Wild game, range cattle, hunters, and hikers can share our natural resources, just as in her "Working Landscapes" mural.

As chilly fall winds blow the last leaves from the aspen trees, East's job for the year ends. The mama cows and calves winter at the home ranch in Gunnison's valley. East's job may be over for the year, but her life from the past months continues in her paintings. Other painting projects are created, nurtured and finished throughout East's winter hiatus.

Perhaps just as grandiose as the "Working Landscape" mural is a backlit mural of

local cattlemen that welcomes visitors to the Gunnison Airport. East was commissioned to represent 100 years of the cattle industry in Gunnison. Again, East considered the bigger picture just as she had in "Working Landscapes." Starting with three generations overlooking the backdrop, she painted a cattle drive through time. Far in the background, longhorn cattle are a food source for Ute Indians. The cattle continue through time with beef supplies for coal miners to the modernization of cattle breeds. Local water, wildlife, wilderness, cow camps and landmark mountains along the historic progression bring together history, nature and progress.

Although East has been an artist all of her life, these later works of art have been the most satisfying for her. "Accomplishing something that has a sense of purpose," says East, "is what drives and gives me energy. Creating, building upon what already exists, improving situations that aren't working to make them better — slowly, methodically

— progressing and making things work for everyone." Back to the cowgirl side of life, she compares balancing the interests of grazing associations and land resource management to balancing the elements of a painting. They're not that much different, she notes.

Still home painting for the winter, East will return to cow camp with the mules Motley, Milly Brown, Howard and April come spring. The cow dogs are Bud's offspring. Bert, Wissel, Blue Foot, Goose, Tick, Grippy and Delia will be more than ready to get to work. The mama cows will introduce their new calves to the lush wilderness in the high country. East will be back on Bigroan and Gray Horse, taking care of the land, and gathering experiences for those winter months when there is time to paint. "Perhaps a walk down memory lane," East says as she thinks of next year's art, "a painting that touches people's lives."

It will be another painting worth a thousand words.



Freia Hooper-Bradford

Freia Hooper-Bradford, a horse-woman from Wetmore and contributor to Colorado Country Life, joined Barbara East and a string of mules in the back country to research this article.

 To see more Barbara East paintings, go to our website at www.coloradocountrylife.coop