

Making Change

**A Conversation with Ty & Hollie Henricks
Owners of Cottonwood Ranch
Fields, Oregon**

**by
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When driving through Oregon's high desert, in the distance you might spot a cluster of tall, woody skeletons standing in the middle of an otherwise treeless nowhere. Mirage-like, these desiccated poplars or cottonwoods signal a place that once held promise, the ghost trees an indicator there was once live water here—a creek, a spring. They are signs of a place a homesteading family decided to settle, plant trees for protection from the sun and wind, and proclaim that draw, between those cradling hills, as home. For some, though, the water dried up, the soil proved rocky, the weeds rank, the work too hard, the wind and sun too strong, and the hapless homesteaders left, the withered windbreak the only record of their effort.



But for others, those homesteads became the nucleus of what eventually grew into thriving ranches—the water stayed true, the soil fertile, the meadow and bunch grasses abundant. That’s the case with Ty and Hollie Henricks’ Cottonwood Ranch nestled at the foot of the golden-mantled Trout Creek Mountains. Ty first arrived as a kid in 1968. He and Hollie assumed ownership of the ranch twelve years ago. The ranch has survived because it still has reliable ground water and good soil, high range and low meadow. And, with Ty and Hollie at the helm, it has thrived thanks to their conscientious animal husbandry and stewardship of the land; their love of the place they call and have made home; and their willingness to change...sometimes.

Lauded over by towering, homestead-era cottonwood trees, the ranch house, encircled by a split rail fence, sits at the center of a larger complex of barns, outbuildings, and corrals. Nearby, two newer modular homes house their sons and their families. Cattle dot the distant hills, horses pasture nearby. That morning, the only sounds are gusts of wind xylophoning through the brittle autumn leaves, the contented croon of a cow, Hollie’s chickens boasting about their latest egg, the whistle of a redtail hawk...a sweet symphony. Places in the high desert or in the world, for that matter, where the chorus of nature claims the stage and doesn’t have to compete with the din of life in towns and cities, are becoming more precious than gold. Hollie knows this. She often takes her two young grandchildren, fourth generation on the ranch, up into the Trout Creeks. “I tell them to stop their chatter, sit for a minute, take it all in, listen. ‘What do you hear?’ Those,” she tells them, “are the most beautiful sounds.”



The Cottonwood Ranch has been here “since forever” says Ty. He’s right, as far as ranching history in the Trout Creeks goes. During the height of what was referred to as the “last rush for free land” in southeastern Oregon between 1905 and 1914, the homestead-turned-ranch house that Ty and Hollie now occupy originally served as both home and schoolhouse with the schoolroom upstairs and family (including the matriarch as schoolmarm) down. Four walls of the Henricks’ home are the original sod brick, a building material favored by settlers in areas where trees were at higher elevations and in short supply, such as in the Trout Creek and Pueblo mountains. Sod proved a low-cost and fast way to build a house. Homesteaders harvested meadow and bunchgrass turf whose densely packed roots held the soil together. The sod was cut by hand, one brick at a time, until the 1880s’ invention of a “breaking” or “grasshopper” plow that harvested the sod in strips. Three-foot bricks were cut from these long strips and were laid length- and cross-wise to insure solid construction. The Henricks’ 100-year-old walls are evidence that what worked then can still work now and that a good idea made better (hand spade to grasshopper plow) gets us where we’re going more efficiently. The old can inform the new, and vice versa. Adaptation and change are good.

“Sometimes,” cautions Ty. Certain things simply aren’t candidates for change in Ty and Hollie’s world: the importance of family, of faith, keeping trips to town to a minimum, keeping the freezer filled with game, looking out for your neighbors. What about taking a break from the work of ranching? “We’ll slip off when something breaks down. Run to town for parts. That’s our vacation,” jokes Ty. Hollie adds that they do go to Newport, Oregon each year to fish, but it’s clear the ranch is where they’d both rather be. “Can’t never get back home fast enough,” observes Ty. His favorite place “is on top of Trout Creek Mountain.” For Hollie, it’s a grove of mountain mahogany nesting in a certain high meadow above Trout Creek. “Hits my soul to the core.”



Pressed on his position regarding change, Ty gets more specific. “I resist changes to the use of land; I’m open to change as to the ways to manage land for ranching.” A valley full of mega-farms, no thank you. Small family ranches bought up by absentee owners, no thank you. Big solar or wind installations, no thank you. “We got wind here but not for windmills,” states Ty dryly. When a relatively unknown conservation organization first showed up, Ty wondered out loud to Hollie “What are we in for now?” But he has come to see that the Oregon Desert Land Trust (ODLT) is an advocate for established family ranches. “ODLT is not against cows,” he states.

Ty’s initial skepticism was no doubt tempered by Hollie, his wife, ranch partner, right hand and biggest fan. She saw that the arrival of ODLT provided access to expertise and scientific information they wouldn’t have had otherwise. She also saw that the area’s ranchers had something to offer ODLT... knowledge of the land, the traditions, and the culture of ranching. “We all require each other,” observes Hollie quietly. For the Henricks, adjusting traditional ways of doing business while staying open to new opportunities is paying off. One major example they cite is access, thanks to ODLT, to a grazing allocation in the Trout Creek Mountains which ODLT acquired from the previous owner. “First time in 40 years our cows have been up there,” says Ty. The Henricks’ cows had spent the previous four decades summer grazing an allotment on the hot and dry valley floor. Not ideal for bred cows. Thanks to their collaboration with

ODLT, the Henricks now have access to upper range summer pasture in the Trout Creeks at a higher, and 20 degrees cooler, altitude. “The cows are grinning from ear to ear,” says Ty.



Hollie cites how much she has already learned from the rangeland scientists involved with ODLT and the perspectives from other collaborators. Her hope is that she, Ty, and their sons “remain interested in all the new ideas, learn all we can. For us, for our kids, it’s crucial to make things better. Everyone has to bring their A-game.” Their 30-year-old son Cody, taking a break from repairing the horse trailer, chimes in. “I’m in it for the long haul,” he says. “In 50 years, I hope it’s goin’ just like it is now.”

There’s a middle ground between insistence on change and resistance to change. The Henricks family and the Oregon Desert Land Trust are defining where that ground is as together they address the challenges and embrace the opportunities that preserving wild and working lands present.

Photos of Cottonwood Ranch provided by Hollie Henricks

-Interview from 2022