

Free



ON THE HIGH PLAINS OF COLORADO, YOU CAN
LIVE OUT YOUR COWBOY FANTASIES BY MOVING HERDS, ROPING
CALVES, AND MENDING FENCES WHILE ALSO MAYBE
DOING YOUR PART TO SAVE THE AMERICAN WEST—AND YOURSELF

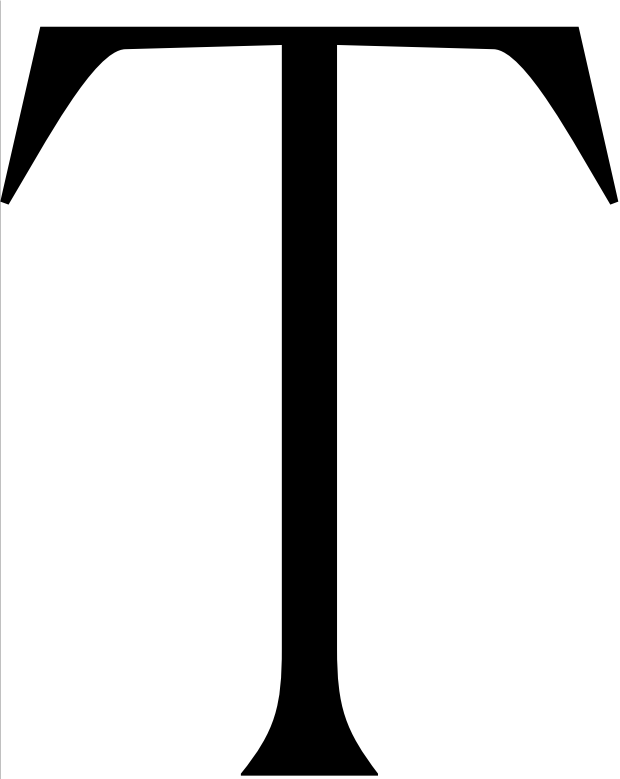
|
by Candice Rainey photographs by Christopher Churchill



Range



©
PREVIOUS SPREAD: THE TENT
CAMP UNDER THE PRAIRIE NIGHT
SKY AT CHICO BASIN RANCH.
THIS PAGE: WRANGLING
HORSES IS A MORNING RITUAL
AT ZAPATA RANCH.



The first day I meet Maryanne, I am told she has some “personal space issues.” Apparently, she doesn’t like anyone sneaking up behind her, so it’s best to keep a hand on her ass while futzing with the saddle so she knows where the hell you are. I place my palm on the 1,000-pound American paint horse’s backside as I reflexively whisper, “Good girl,” like I would while scratching my dog behind her ears. Maryanne hardly registers my existence, staring straight ahead like a teenager I just asked to teach me how to dab.

I have always thought of myself as a pretty athletic person, but as I struggle to hoist my foot into the stirrup on this cloudless morning at Chico Basin Ranch in southeastern Colorado, I am quickly identified as someone who will need an ass lift to get this show on the road. Kate—a strawberry-blond Brit who resembles Gwyneth Paltrow if Gwyneth Paltrow mended literal broken fences, drove a pickup, only wore Levi’s, and ate gas-station ice cream bars—has offered to help me out. She is the head of marketing for Ranchlands, a conservation-minded management company that operates Chico and three other ranches, two of which you can stay at. This week she’s handling our group of five, who’ve come to camp out here among the cholla, where the very same horses we’re riding graze and run bareback alongside the cattle. “She seems so sweet,” I say to Kate as she heaves me onto Maryanne’s back. “Yeah, she is,” she says in her cheerful accent, smiling under her white Sunbody cowboy hat. “Until someone stands behind her.”

Unlike other dude ranches in the western United States, where visitors might follow up their leisurely trail ride by playing 18 holes or dozing off on a massage table, Chico Basin, an 87,000-acre ranch owned by the state of Colorado, makes money primarily from selling cattle for beef. Guests come here for a legit immersive experience moving and sorting cattle,

welding, even branding calves. Ranchlands’ goal with Chico and its other hospitality-driven property, Zapata (which also raises and sells bison), is to educate the public about ranching in the 21st century in hopes of preserving this western tradition, as well as to care for the land through progressive—albeit somewhat controversial—grazing practices. All to say, an Ayurvedic spa menu there is not.

What I know about relying on the land for your livelihood I learned from my grandfather, who lived in Star Valley, Wyoming, always wore a Stetson, and let me ride in the bed of his cream-colored pickup before the term “helicopter parenting” existed. Growing up in Salt Lake City, I’d go stay with my grandparents for a week and eat biscuits and gravy, watch real live cowboys at the local rodeo with my cousins, pet the bison through the wire fence at a farm down the street, and help my grandfather drown the gophers digging up his yard by flooding their intricate tunnel system with a hose. (“One of the reasons the western has maintained its hold on our imagination is because it offers an acceptable orientation to violence,” Larry McMurtry once wrote.)

I didn’t ride horses, nor was I expected to contribute all that much physical labor on these trips. Still, despite my own sanitized version of frontier life, I pride myself on growing up in the West. I dig rugged individualism, can cast a fishing rod, and kind of get where libertarians are coming from. The more years I spend in New York (going on 18 now), the more a part of me misses this geography and that feeling of belonging to it.

This week, Chico is hosting a horsemanship clinic led by Cam Schryver, a two-time world-champion extreme cowboy and the recently retired horse-program director at the esteemed private Thacher School in Ojai, California. Cam is maybe sixtysomething and a case study in capableness. Every day we’re with him he wears basically the same thing—a cowboy hat, faded jeans, leather chaps, and dust-covered boots with spurs. Watching him on a horse, you instantly understand why parents didn’t blink when he took their children on horseback into the Sespe Wilderness for a few days. When Cam talks, everyone listens, as if he’s not telling us how to turn our horse but instructing us on how to split the atom.

“Let’s head out to the Rose Pasture,” Cam says to our motley group, referring to a nice patch of land about 10 minutes from the corrals where we can stretch out and practice jumping over fences. Today, Cam’s student body could double as the cast from a friendlier Quentin Tarantino movie. There’s Bonney, a professor of literature at West Texas A&M, who also hosts seminars on women in western literature for Ranchlands; Christine, a tattooed large-animal vet from North Carolina; two older gentlemen from the Midwest who immediately buddy up; a Brooklyn-based actress and the only New Yorker I’ve ever met who actually owns a horse; a twentysomething ranch intern named Alden, who drives us around in a giant pickup; and Kate. Everyone except for me starts to confidently

trot out into the open prairie, where we'll try to fluidly execute Cam's teachings on turning—or, in my case, do it at all. Maryanne starts to pick up the pace, then stops and lowers her neck to eat the grass. "Don't let her do that," Kate says as she rides up next to me. "It's considered rude, and she'll do it all day. Give her a kick." I lamely do some kind of squeeze-tap combo. Maryanne takes a few steps, then leans over for some more grass, and I am instantly aware of two things: One, I am not riding a Disney creature who will gladly do whatever I ask of it in the exaggerated sotto I reserve for young children and rescue dogs; and two, all the yoga classes in Brooklyn couldn't prepare me for the dull ache that will surely overcome my sad city slicker ass two hours from now.

Chico looks like a working cattle ranch because it is. When you pull up its dirt road, all you see are a few well-worn houses in need of a paint job, a dusty pickup the interns motor around in, and vast, seemingly endless grassland under a vast, seemingly endless sky. You're staying at the May Camp, a historic adobe building with two rooms, each with a double bed and a pair of bunks, or camping out in Pinterest-worthy tents kitted out with Filson furniture (the company is a partner). You'll move cattle not because the wranglers are giving you a dog and pony show but because those cows actually need to get somewhere else to eat. The word "authentic" is tossed around a lot when describing Chico. But that doesn't really get at what it is to visually digest all this land. Its overwhelming flatness tricks you into thinking this spread of wilderness must be infinite, and in turn imbues you with an immediate urge to become a more capable human being, someone who knows how to rope a calf or make a leather satchel, both of which you can learn here. An infinity pool would certainly harsh all of that.

To unpack Ranchlands' loftier objectives, you need to talk to Duke Phillips, the company's founder and CEO. He's been described to me as "kind of a hippie" and bears an almost implausible resemblance to the actor Sam Elliott, salt-and-pepper mustache and all. Phillips, or Big Duke, as he's called, is a third-generation rancher born in Venezuela, where his dad ran a ranch for Nelson Rockefeller. But he mostly grew up in Mexico, where the closest town was five hours away. "It was a place where people would make their own paintbrushes, their own soap, whitewash for buildings," says Phillips, who joins our group for a dinner of skillet-baked corn bread and barbecued bison. "People really lived off the land."

At its core, Ranchlands handles operations on ranches owned by conservation entities—Chico belongs to the Colorado State Land Board—and raises a few thousand Beefmaster cattle on them, while minding the ecological future of the land. In traditional ranching, a herd is moved from one pasture to another

seasonally, not allowing any plot to fully recover. But Duke is a big believer in planned grazing, a technique that's considered progressive (or old-school, depending on whom you talk to). It's modeled on the way that bison herds used to roam the American high plains, eating everything in their path but not returning to any one spot for two to three years, leaving behind a lush savanna. Ranchlands has also partnered with wilderness saviors like the Nature Conservancy and the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, hosting banding stations and using cattle to manage invasive plant species, which makes the plains more inviting to wild herds. The way Phillips sees it, mindful ranching is the best way forward for managing and protecting large swaths of the American West. This, of course, drives cattle-loathing environmentalists nuts.

But Phillips probably has more in common with said tree huggers than they'd like to believe. Even matcha-sipping urbanites know this is a not a stellar time for the American farmer, and that poverty, job stagnation, and drug use plague rural America. (Nearly three-quarters of farmers and farmworkers claim that opioids are easy to access illegally, according to a 2017 survey.) What's less well known is the 45 percent drop in net farm income since 2013, according to Farm Aid, and the steady decline of cattle prices since 2014. Even when beef prices are up, ranches cost a fortune to maintain and can be decimated if disease or drought plague the herd. Phillips believes that the only way ranchers can thrive economically, or survive at all, is by diversifying their income. In addition to its lodging, Ranchlands offers ecotouristic activities like painting workshops, as well as a rather hip leather-goods mercantile, where I dropped way too much cash. The challenge is finding enough like-minded partners—landowners, ranchers, investors—to scale this vision. "It's an education process," he says.

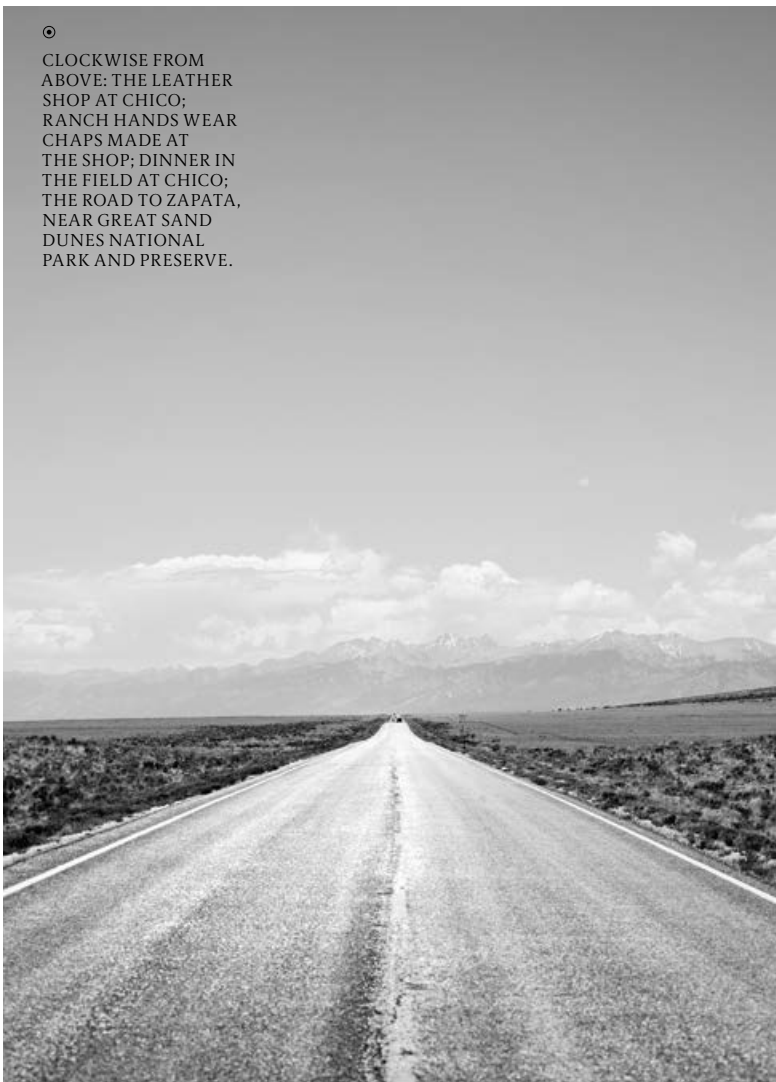
"Education process" is a nice way of saying getting your ass handed to you, as I do when we are introduced to cattle sorting at Chico. My backside is numb as we finally bring a herd of cattle into the pens on a cloudy afternoon. I assume at this point that it is Miller Time back at the tents, and that Cam and Jake, a 26-year-old ranch manager in training, will take it from here, ushering all the cows that need to be weighed into tight chutes and spaces they make quite clear they'd rather not be in. "Okay, who wants to go first?" Jake asks.

Wait, what?

Jake gives me instructions, which I promptly tune out because I'm quite frankly scared shitless. Yes, for the most part, these cows seem about as dangerous as mastiff puppies when they are out in the prairie chewing cud and batting their 12-inch eyelashes. But when these half-ton animals are separated from their young or feel pressured, they can turn into



©
CLOCKWISE FROM
ABOVE: THE LEATHER
SHOP AT CHICO;
RANCH HANDS WEAR
CHAPS MADE AT
THE SHOP; DINNER
IN THE FIELD AT
CHICO; THE ROAD
TO ZAPATA,
NEAR GREAT SAND
DUNES NATIONAL
PARK AND PRESERVE.







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what someone here referred to as “beef missiles.” I feel like I’m having a kind of combined adult-mare, in which all my teeth fall out and I’m naked taking a final exam I haven’t studied for, as everyone watches me have my go. But somehow, after a few awkward turns, we (and by “we,” I mean mostly Jake) steer our cow into the chute, and Cam closes the gate behind him like he’s done a million times. It goes on like this for another hour, us switching positions, everyone working in tandem, or trying to. By the end, I am wrung out physically, in a good way, and relieved I haven’t quit, because then I’d have missed out on that distinctive afterglow that only washes over you when you feel you are, well, necessary.

Back at camp, I inarticulately try to explain it to Bonney and Cam, but can only come up with this: As an adult, it’s easy to forget you’re capable of doing shit beyond banging on a keyboard until you do said shit and are jolted back into remembering we are meant to do more than stare at tiny screens all day. Bonney, in her western shirt, brown Stetson, and faded blue Wranglers, attempts to make a little more sense of what I am trying to get at. “Wallace Stegner said an American is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild. I mean, the story of American wilderness has been, you know, that’s what we got. We ain’t got no kings, and we ain’t got no dukes. But we got beautiful, beautiful wilderness. And so that’s much of our national story, and our notion of a national character is built out of that renewal that comes when you experience a place like this. The West is part of our origin story.”

Cam sums it up a bit more succinctly. “I think Duke’s idea is if you have an intelligent person, you can show them how to do something, and they can do it.”

Zapata, around three hours southwest of Chico, is a little less rough around the edges. Which makes sense, since at one point it was a golf course owned by Japanese investors who wanted to capitalize on all the nature porn in Colorado’s San Luis Valley. Luckily for fauna lovers, the Nature Conservancy bought Zapata in 1999 and partnered with Ranchlands to run the cattle operation and guest services; the long-term aim is to restore the land with prescriptive grazing and to manage herds of conservation bison. Not to say this 103,000-acre ranch, which borders the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in the Sangre De Cristo Mountains, telegraphs country club. There’s something very Bob Ross-on-molly about it all, especially when you’re out on the Medano dunes, where 2,000 bison run as a wild herd.

Having camped out for four nights, I am ready for an indoor shower and a commode I do not have to share or put my boots on to walk to. The lodge at Zapata, which dates from the 1800s, gives off that nostalgic cabin vibe with its rustic blond-wood furniture, woven rugs on the walls, fur pillows tossed casually on overstuffed couches. For dinner and breakfast, everyone eats at long wooden tables, sampling some of everything from

©
OPPOSITE:
COWS RUNNING
PAST CHICO’S
FISHING HOLE.
ABOVE: A GUEST
LOOKS OUT
FOR RABBITS
AT CHICO.



© THIS PAGE: A TENT AND A HAMMOCK AT CHICO. OPPOSITE: DINNER AT CHICO. YOU CAN BOOK WORKING RANCH VACATIONS YEAR ROUND AT [CHICO BASIN RANCH](#), WHICH IS ABOUT 50 MINUTES SOUTHEAST OF COLORADO SPRINGS, AND FROM MAY THROUGH OCTOBER AT [ZAPATA RANCH](#). IN THE SPRING, CHICO HOLDS WORKSHOPS LIKE BRANDING CAMP AND CAM SCHRYVER'S HORSEMANSHIP CLINIC. BOTH CAMPS HOLD PHOTOGRAPHY, PAINTING, AND WRITING RETREATS ALL YEAR LONG. [STAY@ RANCLANDS.COM](#)

the farm spread—fresh-baked buttermilk biscuits in a skillet, roasted potatoes, bison steak, berry pies with ice cream. This is the Americana road trip hotel all urban-dwelling parents who want to show their iPhone-infatuated teenagers the great outdoors dream of.

You could take your pissy teen on a cattle drive here, or bring your little one on a van tour of the bison, but Zapata is also built for outdoorsy pleasures that vary in physical-limits pushing, from geeking out on the fauna with the ranch's on-site naturalist to rock climbing in Penitente Canyon or taking a two-hour jaunt on horseback into the Medano to spy the bison up close. Zapata specializes in the scenic trail ride that does not restrict guests to the bored-to-tears, nose-to-tail-style group outing. One couple I met, from North Carolina, who had ridden horses in North Africa, Saudi Arabia, and Botswana, said they'd never experienced the freedom that Zapata allows its guests to ride side by side in all this open country.

Today I am hell-bent on loping. I tell this to my cherub-faced guide, Claire, a redhead from Maine who is going to take me horseback riding through the dunes on this sun-drenched morning. "There's a great place to try it out in the riverbed," she says, adjusting my cinch on the saddle. I have a new horse, Speedy, and wonder what kind of mood she's in before we ride into the ponderosa pine forest.

Some benevolent tech billionaire itching to make up for hijacking our attention with his or her products should put together a trust to financially allow every human being on earth to experience this particular natural oddity on horseback. The dunes are nearly half a million years old, and to be sinking into the sand and trying to catch a whiff of that ancient aura is to find yourself smiling like a dope, amazed that this place isn't filled with selfie-stick-wielding jerks.

"Let's try to lope here," Claire says, gesturing to a flat creek bed. She gets the camera ready (many of the interns and wranglers can lope and take pictures at the same time—it's no wonder so many of Ranchlands' bookings come from Instagram). I give Speedy a calf squeeze, and she's off in a slow trot. As she picks up the pace into a full-on run, the cool, pilot-blue water sprays up and hits my back. The feeling is like falling but not falling—controlled serendipity—and a particular kind of rush you can't find in a gym. "That was awesome," Claire says, grinning. "Want to try again?"

We do it three or four more times. Experiencing speed like that is addictive. But so is figuring out how to actually talk to a horse. I think about something Cam said when I asked him what he loved most about teaching: "The more people understand not so much how to do a bunch of things on a horse but how do we get through to 'em, then things start to happen. The light bulb goes on. That makes me real happy." ♦

