

The Empire Ranch: Case Study Transcript

Cultural properties can be used in many ways depending on the kinds of values they have. Properties having interpretive value can be allocated to public use, and in some cases can be developed for the public to visit.

An example of such a property is the Empire Ranch in Arizona. The historic Empire Ranch headquarters forms the centerpiece of the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, located about 45 miles southeast of Tucson, Arizona.

The original ranch house, built around 1873, consisted of a four-room, flat-topped adobe house with packed dirt floors. The rooms were approximately 20' X 20' each, two on either side of a wide breezeway between them.

As shown in this historically researched painting, the north entrance of the breezeway provided the only entry into a corral in the back, where the stock could be protected at night from thieves and animal predators.

By 1880, the original four rooms on the left had been expanded to the 22-room adobe headquarters shown in this photo. This house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

This historic photo was taken a few years later when pitched roofs were being added to the buildings. Its perspective is from a position within the breezeway between the original four rooms, looking south into the rear addition.

This is a view of the Ranch headquarters around the turn of the 20th century, showing the ranch house and surrounding outbuildings. In 1876, the original 160-acre homestead was sold to Walter Vail who, with a partner, continued to acquire neighboring land until the ranch extended about 60 miles north to south and 30 miles east to west.

Most of the ranch hands were Mexican cowboys called *vaqueros*. You can see the adobe construction of the buildings behind them. By the time Vail died in 1906, this legendary spread covered almost a million acres, an area one and one-half times the size of Rhode Island.

The house eventually grew to 4,500 square feet of living space. It progressed through a series of additions including a Victorian wing, shown here, with a bay window and comfortable front porch. This wing was built for Vail's bride, Margaret Newhall, whom he brought out from the East in 1881.

This is Walter's wife, Margaret, sitting in the living room of the ranch house. Although it was a rough, frontier life, Margaret managed to bring a surprising measure of civility, even luxury, to their home.

The ranch was sold to Anamax Mining Company in 1975. Local concerns about a possible copper mine on the property spurred the Federal Government to arrange a land exchange through the Bureau of Land Management that brought the heart of the Empire's old spread, nearly 50,000 acres, under public control in 1988.

BLM began preserving and stabilizing the seven historic-era buildings forming the Ranch Headquarters complex soon after acquiring the land in 1988, first by contracting with the National Park Service to write a Historic Structures Report. This report serves as a guide for stabilizing and eventually restoring the buildings for public and administrative use. This interior photo shows some emergency bracing.

Here you can see some of the deteriorating ceiling beams, called vigas, which support smaller roof members called latillas.

The first step was to install bracing under the sagging roof.

BLM secured a matching grant with the NPS for a Partnership Preservation Training Project in 1994. A team of specialists came from the NPS Preservation Training Center in Williamsport, Maryland, to train and guide 20 participants from the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, NPS and Arizona State Parks.

In addition to shoring up the roof, windows and doors in the Ranch House were dismantled, repaired and reinstalled during the month-long program. A crew of AmeriCorps volunteers replaced a portion of the house roof in 1997 and 1998.

In 1997, a group of private citizens formed the Empire Ranch Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the historic buildings and their history. The Foundation, which now has nearly 500 members, is collaborating with the BLM to determine future uses of the buildings.

It is also actively engaged in raising funds to help pay for preservation and historic interpretation of the ranch, and public education about rural life in southeast Arizona. In a remarkable tie to history, the three main families that have ranched the land over the course of its existence – including descendants of Walter and Margaret Vail – are all involved.

In 2000, BLM secured a \$95,300 Save America's Treasures grant for preservation work on the ranch house roof, improving and installing a drainage system to carry rainwater away from the floor and foundations of the house, and repairing failures in the walls. Here you can see the new roof and new adobe bricks mortared into the base of the walls, replacing the original bricks that were eroded from rainwater.

The Save America's Treasures grant was matched with private funding raised by the Empire Ranch Foundation, including a \$10,000 grant from the Southwestern Foundation for Education and Historical Preservation, a \$25,000 grant from the J.W. Kieckhefer Foundation, and a grant from the Carey Ingram Memorial Fund.

The Foundation also received over 255 individual donations ranging from \$25 to \$5,000. This slide shows some of the new drainage system and bracing installed on another part of the house to stabilize the walls while they were being repaired.

In addition to the grants and donations, funds continue to come in through the Bureau's deferred maintenance program to continue work on the ranch house and the other seven buildings at the headquarters, all of which date between 1873 and the early 1900's. This is the Stone Corral Shelter. And this is the adobe Hay Barn.

This shows restoration and repair work in progress on the adobe Hay Barn in 2004. The adobe bricks, made from mud and sand, erode from rain. Repair work involves replacing the eroded bricks and adobe mortar.

Since September 2000, the Empire Ranch Foundation has sponsored its annual Empire Ranch Round-up, during which artists display their works at a juried exhibition. And sell their works, including paintings like this one, as well as, sculptures.

Writers also come to sign and sell their books on western themes. The artists donate a portion of their earnings to the Foundation, which then uses the funds to pay for preservation work on ranch buildings.

In September 2004, a National Public Lands Day event was held in conjunction with the annual roundup complete with cowboying demonstrations by local ranch hands which were evidently enjoyed by local cowgirls.

Mexican *vaqueros*, displaying riding and roping skills, continued a tradition that has been part of this ranch since the late 1800's. And *senoritas*, also a beautiful part of southern Arizona heritage displayed their own riding skills. Dancers, and food and music completed the scene.

There were special activities for children. These youngsters are rolling mud balls containing seeds that will be planted in the National Conservation Area where vegetation is needed to stabilize eroding soil.

There were all sorts of ranching-related demonstrations, including lessons on livestock branding. This gentleman is Mac Donaldson who holds the current grazing lease on Empire Ranch and continues the ranch's historic use, which dates back to 1876.

The branding wasn't demonstrated on cattle, it was done on boards which are a very popular item at the Roundup. There were also demonstrations on saddle making, horseshoeing, blacksmithing, mule packing, *reata* making, silver smithing, and even how to make rope out of horse hair. Admission was free to the public, but through donations, sponsorships, and art, food and raffle sales, the 2004 Roundup brought \$9,000 into the Foundation preservation and program fund.

Most of this money will be used for preserving the buildings, while a smaller portion will be used for youth outreach and education programs, collecting oral histories, historic

photos, publishing the Foundation's quarterly newsletter, and maintaining the Foundation's website.

A Master Interpretive Plan has been completed that will guide development of the ranch headquarters into a Western Heritage and Education Center in partnership with the Empire Ranch Foundation.

This Master Plan will be used by the BLM and the Foundation to tell a tale of not only the old West, but of the new West as well. The Empire is special because it is not just a ranch museum; it's still a working ranch, as it has been for 130 years. Furthermore, it is an example of a homestead that BLM still manages today.

The Annual Roundup and the 2004 National Public Lands Day event provide just a small glimpse of what is yet to come for this wonderful heritage tourism site.