Heil Waters, early ranch business manager, used to tell Jim Shibley, “Back East, they play golf on weekends; here we play cowboys.”

Ghost Ranch, for all its many acres, is not, and never was, a strong cattle ranching operation, even on weekends. Today, after years of experimenting with complete non-use and then selective use of its 21,000 acres, Ghost Ranch has found a way to be both land conservation conscious and helpful to the local cattle raising community.

“For all its many acres,” Jim Hall explains, “Ghost Ranch does not represent a viable land base for cattle. The land here is too marginal; there is not enough grass year in, year out. But Ghost Ranch represents a major land holding in Rio Arriba County, and we felt from the beginning that somehow we should make a difference.”

When Arthur Pack first offered the ranch to the Board of Christian Education in 1955, Hall and others spent several days surveying the property, taking inventory of its facilities and operations. At that time, there were 250 head of cattle, a small herd of horses, various stock tanks, windmills, and antelopes and jackrabbits using the desert pastures of the ranch. At first, it was believed that the stock could remain on the ranch pastures. But after a study by Soil Conservation people, which determined that the ranch had only fair to poor pasture-land, the cattle and horses were removed.

“There had been a drought that year,” Jim Hall remembers, “but the land had been overstocked and overgrazed for years, even before Arthur had it. The land was really suffering. You could look off across the land and see grass, but if you threw down your hat, four out of five times you’d hit sand.”

For the next nine years, the land at Ghost Ranch was left to the antelope and jackrabbits. Jim Shibley joined the resident staff in 1957, and with Jim Hall, and the advice and help of the local Soil Conservation officials, implemented several experimental reseeding pro-
grams and basic soil conservation work. After years of non-use, a decision was made to begin using ranch pastureland in some way again.

"There was a square of ranch land that had been fenced off by Soil Conservation years ago, before Arthur," Jim Hall remembers. "They would do this to gauge what was happening to a pasture, use versus non-use. Well, that land inside was no better than the country outside. We realized total non-use is not necessarily beneficial. The ring grass in that square was just as bad as anywhere."

It became clear to Hall and Shibley that carefully managed grazing would make the ranch's land more productive, and would also make a contribution to the local community. The ranch made an annual cash contribution to the county in lieu of taxes, but opening ranch pastureland to local cattle owners would be directly beneficial to both the ranch and the community. With help from Soil Conservation consultants, early guidelines for winter grazing and summer growing were established. At no time was there to be more than 60% of the available grass consumed, leaving the balance for natural reseeding. The number of cattle allowed to graze the ranch pastures each winter would be decided each year, using a random forage clip, whereby the amount and quality of grasses in a given square yard are translated into so many animal units. (After years of figuring land use versus conservation needs, Jim Shibley often just eyeballs the land and knows how many cows he can take on.)

Because Jim Hall had considerable experience with cattle ranching, but not on a year-round basis, and Jim Shibley's background was in agriculture and dairy cattle, they decided to begin the winter grazing program with a cattleman who knew more about the business than they did. Irwin Crowley was a Chromo, Colorado cattle rancher with a reputation for progressive and conservation-minded ranching. He was also an old friend of the Hall family, and anxious to use ranch land to winter his cattle. In 1964, Jim Hall invited Crowley to bring 250 head to Ghost Ranch for the winter.

"We thought we could bring Irwin on for a few winters, watch him and learn," Jim Hall says. "I knew he wouldn't overuse the land, and he would help us use it well. He was on three years. He knew our eventual objective was to bring local cattle owners into the program. But we had a lot to learn first."

After two winters with only Crowley's stock, several other local ranchers were invited to bring their cattle on to ranch land. Ground rules were established. Cattle would be allowed on selected ranch pastures in November and removed the following May. No more than 40 head of cattle would be accepted from one owner, who was charged a minimal fee per animal per season. Priority would be given to those who attended animal husbandry classes. Thus the Ghost Ranch winter grazing/animal husbandry program officially began.

In 1967, local ranchers were actively recruited to the program. Although Crowley had to limit the numbers of his cattle on the ranch, he continued for several years to teach animal husbandry and range management classes to the ranchers in the program. Guest speakers were brought in and local ranchers learned basic nutrition and medical needs of cows, special care of calves, artificial insemination, pregnancy testing, even tax management for small farmers from Crowley's son, an accountant. Over the next few years, the average calf crop for ranchers in the winter grazing program went from 25% to 80 and even 90%.

Small herd cattle ranching is a way of life in northern New Mexico. While most of the ranchers involved with the Ghost Ranch winter grazing program have other jobs, many are only part time, and they raise cattle as a needed cash supplement to income. They are also carrying on a culturally satisfying tradition that is generations old. Some years cattle are economically feasible, other years they can cost the
rancher money. Most local ranchers do not have the land base necessary to keep even a small herd and depend on grazing permits from the Forest Service, or from the Abiquiu Land Grant. But these grazing rights are usually for the summer months only, and cattle must be moved to other pastures for the winter. With few winter pastures available in Rio Arriba County, many ranchers are forced to get by using the small plots of their own land usually with expensive hay supplements. Others will set their cattle loose along a road, where the cows eat what they can find and local drivers strive to dodge them through another winter.

The opening of Ghost Ranch land for winter grazing represented a major opportunity for local cattle ranchers. Today it is still a valued privilege, with at least twice as many ranchers interested in participating as the ranch can accommodate. Those ranchers from as far away as Parkview, Velarde, Cuba and Canijilo who first enrolled in the program are for the most part still bringing their cattle—or single cow, as the case may be—to winter at the ranch.

The most cattle kept for a winter was 1,200, but Shibley believes the ranch best serves itself and the cows themselves if it has between 400 and 600 head using the pastureland. This year there are only 300 because of a dry summer. Shibley asked some owners to bring their cows later in the season, while others this year will remove their herd before May.

The annual spring round-up is a favored event among the ranchers.

"They always ask when round-up will be," Shibley says. "It's a big social event here. There's not much opportunity to ride horses and chase cattle anymore. When the cows are moved from one pasture to another across the ranch in February, or are ready to be removed in May, we advise the owners and about 45 cowboys come for a day. We spend the morning rounding up all the cattle. We separate the calves and load them into trucks as the five mile or so walk along the highway or around the lake is too much for them. Then we have lunch—Rebecca fixes a big luncheon and serves it out there on the range—and then the herd is moved. We stop traffic on the highway: four hundred head of cattle—well, it's quite a sight!"

Identification of the cows is never a problem. All are branded, but Shibley says most small-herd owners can pick out their cows on sight in the field.

“They walk out there into the pasture and point out their own cows by name—Susie, Annabelle, Ida—just from markings and particular shapes on animals, characteristics most people don't notice. Often they've owned a particular cow for ten years or so.”

For those owners who raise calves to sell at market, the New Mexico Producers and Marketing Cooperative, better known as the Feedlot Co-op, offers a buyer's market each Fall. Located on Ghost Ranch land donated by the church to the cooperative in 1970, the co-op organizes as many as eight sale days in October and November where local ranchers, many in the Ghost Ranch winter grazing program, can sell calves to national beef buying companies. The buyers come from Kansas, Iowa, Colorado, Texas and other plains states. Such a local sale facility, complete with scales, pens and loading chutes, enables Rio Arriba cattle owners to get a good price for their cows without the stressful and often expensive trip to Albuquerque. The New Mexico Producers and Marketing Co-op, since its pens were built in Blackie's Pasture in 1972, has grown to boast more than a million dollars a year in sales.

Although Shibley and his staff do not provide "cowboy service" (daily checking of cows, calving service, etc.,) they do watch over the herd and chop holes in the ice as necessary to provide water. This past winter the severe cold and unusually heavy snow accumulation meant the ranchlands staff had to take hay out to the herd in Tennessee Valley, often with the help of the road grader as roads were rendered impassable overnight. Throughout the winter months, the water and grass supply is carefully monitored by Shibley, with the herd moved when the grass in a particular pasture becomes insufficient or the water supply somehow hindered.
“Around my house,” Shibley explains, “wind chimes are a happy sound: it means the windmills are turning. It means I don’t have to haul water. The windmills are happy, I’m happy, the cows are happy!”

The owners themselves keep close watch over their pregnant cows especially two year old heifers and when one of these is ready to calve, the owner will often come and take her off the ranch, opting to watch her at home.

Because some of the ranch pasture borders the state highway there have been incidents of cattle rustling, 1980s style. On several occasions, cows roaming the fence near the highway were shot and whole or partial carcasses hauled off in trucks. In response to this modern bandito problem, the ranchers organized a night watch program whereby each rancher spent one night a month sitting out near the herd. No one was ever caught trying to rustle additional cattle: the simple presence of a lone pick-up truck near the herd served to scare off would-be beef poachers.

The ranch is divided up into several pastures, each used at alternating times of the year, varying year to year.

“We’ve found we can manage the grazing better with smaller pastures,” Shibley says. “At one time we had 9,000 acres in what we call the Tennessee Valley and Antelope Flats pastures (across the highway from Ghost Ranch headquarters). Now they are divided up, the largest pasture being Antelope Flats’ 5,000 acres.”

The dividing of large rangeland into smaller pastures is the direct result of Shibley’s work with Alan Savory. Savory, a native of Zimbabwe who teaches Wholistic Resource Management to ranchers and farmers throughout the world, believes rangeland can be improved through the careful management of those animals grazing it.

“By carefully managing the time that cattle are allowed to graze a pasture, we can get better utilization of available resources,” Shibley explains. “Savory suggests placing a herd on one smaller pasture for a shorter time, instead of spreading them out over a larger pasture for a long time. Cattle get selective: they hurt some plants and ignore others. A cow will eat certain grasses, and then come back and clip off new growth. That’s overgrazing: the plant is weakened through the reduction of the top of the plant and the reduction of the root sys-tem. The plant loses its ability to respond to drought. Plants need time to recover.

“When cattle are forced to remain in one area, they use more of the plants out there, tramp more seeds into the soil for natural reseeding. Then the herd is removed. The plants are allowed a longer period of rest between grazing time. This management of the range improves the vigor of the plants and makes for better utilization of available resources. We are investigating the application of more wholistic resource management into our program. Many ranchers are impressed by the improved condition of our rangeland. That says something good about what we’re doing. We’re making an impression and the land is benefitting. Others wonder how to make their own ranch work like this.

“The Wholistic Resource Management program applies to much more than just grazing management: it is a way of managing resources of land, plants, people and finances. It has a lot to offer this area. It will be a long educational process. It will take a while.”

Both Ghost ranch and its neighbors have benefitted from the winter grazing program. The ranch’s land has been improved through regulated use, and local ranchers have access to inexpensive winter grazeland. Northern New Mexico retains its heritage of family cattle raising, and Ghost Ranch visitors are treated to the ever-western scene of slow-moving cows crossing a distant ridge en route to water or a new foraging stop. Ghost Ranch may not be a made-to-order cattle operation, but with some help from modern resource management, and enthusiastic cowboys on horseback, it can continue to provide the Chama Valley with a progressive, part-time “working” ranch.