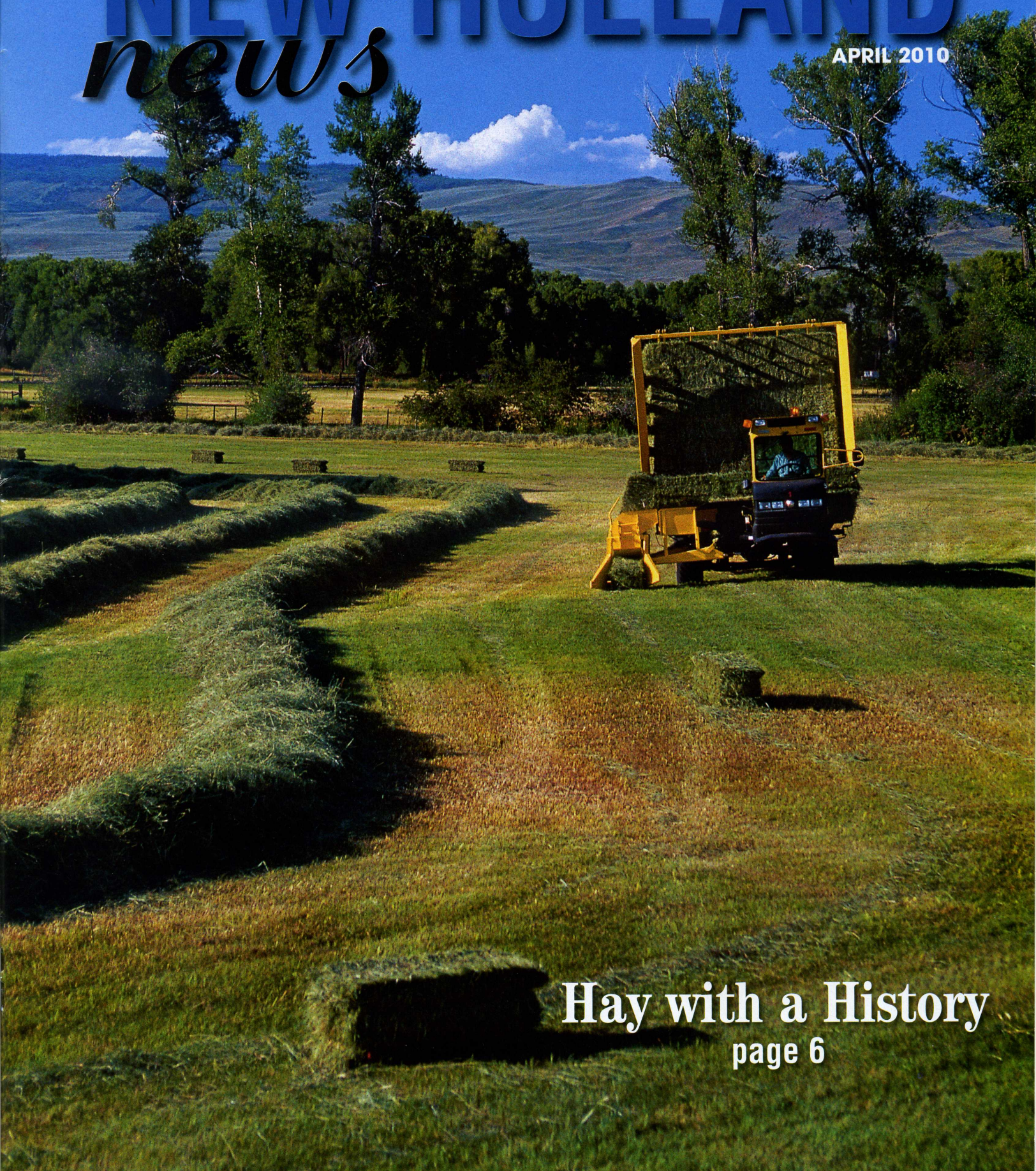


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Hay with a History
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Hay with a History

A lot of high-quality hay is grown at 8,000 feet on this Colorado ranch.

G rass still grows lush and green in the high-mountain meadows of Esty Ranch, just north of Gunnison, Colorado. John Outcalt, who homesteaded the ranch in 1880, would be proud to know that the irrigated meadows continue to grow some of the best hay to be found, and that cattle still graze the mountain pastures near his landmark homestead.

Outcalt once shipped hay from the ranch by the rail carloads. That tradition continues today, but with semis hauling hay from Esty Ranch to horse owners all across Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Texas, Florida, and Oklahoma. Up to 75,000 small square bales of high quality hay are harvested here each year. Hay put up in eight-foot foot long square bales is fed to their own cattle.

The hay meadows and the history of Esty Ranch drew the attention of present owner Mike Clarke. He had come upon the ranch during a visit to Colorado, and he saw the productive potential of its flood-irrigated hay meadows. In 1994 he bought the property from then-owner Vevarelle Esty, born in 1902, the youngest of Outcalt's three daughters

Since Clarke purchased the ranch, he has focused not only on improving the grasses of the meadows, but also on restoring the ranch's historic presence within its community.

"This was one of the first ranches to be homesteaded in the region," he said. "It has one of the first barns and one of the first blacksmith shops to be built in all of western Colorado. It's designated by the state as a Centennial Farm."



To honor the ranch's historic significance, Clarke fully restored the landmark three-story horse barn, along with the blacksmith shop and the original brick calving barn.

"When I acquired the place, the buildings had been neglected for 50 years," he said. "Ranching has historically been a business in which profits are low. So, in restoring the buildings, I did what Vevarelle Esty had not been able to afford to do. I didn't want to see the buildings continue to deteriorate and to be lost to history."

His care of the ranch's history extended also to Vevarelle Esty, who was 92 when she sold the ranch to Clarke. As the new owner, he invited her to remain living in her original ranch home, which she did until shortly before her death in 1999 at the age of 97.

Vevarelle's enduring spirit mirrored that of her pioneering father's. In 1881, just one year after obtaining title to the homestead, John Outcalt convinced the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, which ran through his land, to build a loading spur on the northeast corner of the ranch. Outcalt paid for the rails and built the spur.

He called it Hay Spur. More than 800 carloads of hay were shipped from Hay Spur each year, along with carloads of potatoes and other vegetables grown on area ranches. The hay and produce fed the mules and the miners working in the area of Crested Butte.

By the mid-1930s, both Outcalt and his wife had passed away, and the ranch holdings were divided among their three daughters, with the heart of the ranch going to Vevarelle and her husband, Eugene Esty, parents of three children. Thus, it became known as the Esty Ranch.

Vevarelle's life proved not to be a life of ease. Eugene died in 1947, and Vevarelle assumed the management of the ranch. She was politically active in causes benefiting ranchers, and in 1971, the Gunnison Chamber of Commerce named her Rancher of the Year.

She was still riding horseback at the age of 83, and she continued to manage the ranch until 1994. "She could work as hard or harder than any man, and she even did the branding," said Clarke.

Vevarelle might be pleased then, to see the bustling industry of Esty Ranch today. With day-to-day operations directed by ranch foreman Allen Roper, Esty Ranch annually produces and sells 50,000 to 75,000 small, square bales of hay and runs more than 120

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Ranch foreman Allen Roper, right, and Mike Miller, who is responsible for cattle, look at new cut hay on Esty Ranch.

Simmental-Black Angus beef cows, along with 120 yearlings.

In 1994 the Esty Ranch comprised 448 acres. Two additional ranches purchased by Clarke give the new Esty Ranch a land base of 1,400 deeded acres. Flood-irrigated hayfields account for 1,000 of the deeded acres. When these ranches were acquired, their land bases came with the attachment of permitted grazing rights to nearly 27,000 acres of lands managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service.

"This is mountainous country," says Roper. "Our elevation is 8,000 feet, and we get only 60 to 70 frost-free days in a growing season."

The hay meadows lie in the flat river and creek valleys, making flood irrigation in spring an option. Bordering the meadows of the Esty Ranch is a network of irrigation ditches for diverting water from the Gunnison River. Flood irrigation from the ditching network on the ranch dates back more than 100 years.

Roper and Clarke fine-tuned the old flooding system to increase its efficiency. "We did quite a bit of leveling of the fields," said Roper. "We disked up the meadows and moved the shallow layer of topsoil to the side. Then we graded the underlying gravel so the meadows were more level."

After restoring the layer of topsoil, they reseeded the meadows to new, leafy, short-season varieties of timothy. They let the native strains of meadow grass come back as volunteer growth.

The early variety of timothy grown on the ranch originated from the original variety called Climax, and Roper and Clarke planted new varieties in an effort to produce leafier and more early-maturing timothy.

"In 2003 we began an extensive interseeding with a new variety of timothy grass named Colt," said Clarke. "Colt seed heads are longer than those of Climax, and the plants are significantly leafier. Then in 2009 we began interseeding with another new and improved variety of timothy named Horizon."

Roper added, "The Horizon variety matures six days ahead of Colt. We're hoping that trait will let us get a second cut of hay more often, which would certainly increase the tonnage of hay we produce per acre.

"Because of our short growing season, we usually only get one cutting of hay per year. In only about one year in four are we able to take a second cutting."

Haying typically starts in mid-July. It's the busiest time of year for Roper and his two full-time employees. During this season four or more seasonal workers help with the labor.

The haying process is critical and designed to overcome the challenges of getting the hay to dry in a short period of time. The cool temperatures of the 8,000-foot elevation make the process more difficult.

"We mow the hay with a hay conditioner, and then the next morning we'll tedder it to scatter out the swath," said Roper. "Under the right conditions, the intensity of the sun



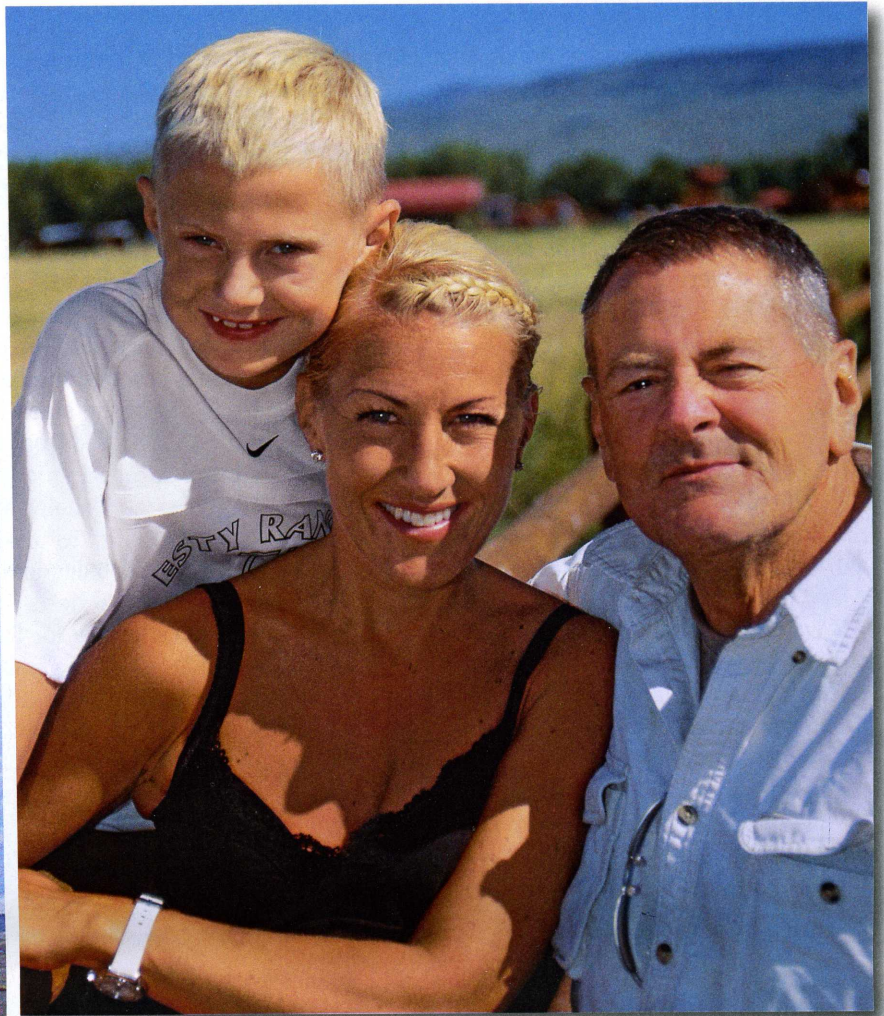
at this high elevation dries the hay quickly. That same day we rake it back into a windrow and bale it.

“Our ground is pretty damp,” he added. “If we leave the hay lying on the ground too long, it draws moisture from the earth.”

The feel of the hay tells Roper when it’s dry enough to bale. “We’ve tried moisture testers and find them to give inconsistent results,” he said. “More than anything else, we go by how the hay feels in deciding whether or not it’s ready to bale. If I can hear a stem of grass crack when I bend it in my fingers, the hay is ready to bale. If I can’t hear the stem crack, the hay is not dry enough.”

It’s not uncommon to get daily showers during the haying season, so a square-bale picker follows close behind the baler. As they’re picked, the bales are hauled to covered hay sheds for storage.

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Esty Ranch owner Mike Clarke with his wife Kichi and son Lukas.



Haying scenes on Colorado’s historic Esty Ranch, left and above.

"We can get 80 pickerloads in each of our main sheds," said Roper. Several smaller sheds round out the storage space for the bales. The hay yield averages 3 to 5 tons to the acre.

Rain invariably damages some hay each year, and Roper bales this and stacks it outside, covering the stacks with tarps. This is the hay he feeds the cows and calves over winter.

For the rest of the year, the cattle graze in the pastures leased from federal agencies. They start calving in mid-March, and the calves are weaned the first of October.

The weaned calves eat only hay over winter and in spring are turned back out to graze. Roper sells the steers directly to feedlots in late October and early November. At marketing, the grass-fed steers weigh 850 to 950 pounds. Heifers are bred as yearlings and sold by private treaty as bred females.

Besides tending the cattle and putting up the hay, Roper and his staff use ranch-owned semis pulling flat-deck trailers to deliver hay to customers. They use a bale

handler attached to the front-end loader of a tractor to place the bales on the trailers.

The bales, averaging 75 pounds, measure 16 inches by 18 inches by 36 to 38 inches. These dimensions are slightly larger than the dimensions of bales produced in earlier years. By increasing the size slightly, the trucks can travel more fully loaded for weight, reducing the per-ton freight cost charged to the customer.

In the loading process, the bale handler lifts the bales out of the stack in flat segments, each made up of 18 bales. As each group of bales is lifted from the stack, Roper and his crew visually inspect the hay for weeds, mold, or discoloration. They remove flawed bales and set them aside to feed to the cow herd.

"Last year we sold hay for \$275 a ton," said Roper. "The price has to be close to that range of \$200 a ton in order to pay us for the extra effort we put into producing the hay. We price it pretty much according to the going market price, with a premium added on since the quality is better than that of most other hay."

"The hay we deliver to our customers is leafy, fine stemmed, and free of mold," he added. "It's truly premium-quality timothy hay."

No doubt, that's the kind of meadow hay that would make John Outcalt and Vevarelle Esty proud.

Visit www.estyranch.com for more information. ♦

Article by Raylene Nickel • Photos by Mike Boyaff



Esty Ranch owner Mike Clarke at an irrigation canal.



An automatic bale wagon equipped to easily pick up bales eight-feet long, both photos, operates on Esty Ranch.