

## Ranch Profile The Bair Ranch, Martinsdale, Montana

By Sarah Hamblen, County Agent, Meagher County



Charles M. Bair first brought his sheep operation to Martinsdale, MT in 1913. After losing his leases on the Crow Reservation in 1910, Bair, a prominent sheep man and entrepreneur, recognized the potential of the land along the Musselshell River. Ninety-three years after his initial investment on the Musselshell, the ranch continues to support a vibrant livestock operation. However, the day-to-day management of the operation has changed dramatically.

Charlie Bair amassed a significant fortune through both his ranching and entrepreneurial endeavors. His death in 1943 left operations of the ranch in the hands of his

daughters, Marguerite and Alberta. Alberta, known for her business sense, managed the livestock operation until her death in 1993. At that time, the Bair Trust, managed by US Bank in Billings, MT, was charged with overseeing the operations.

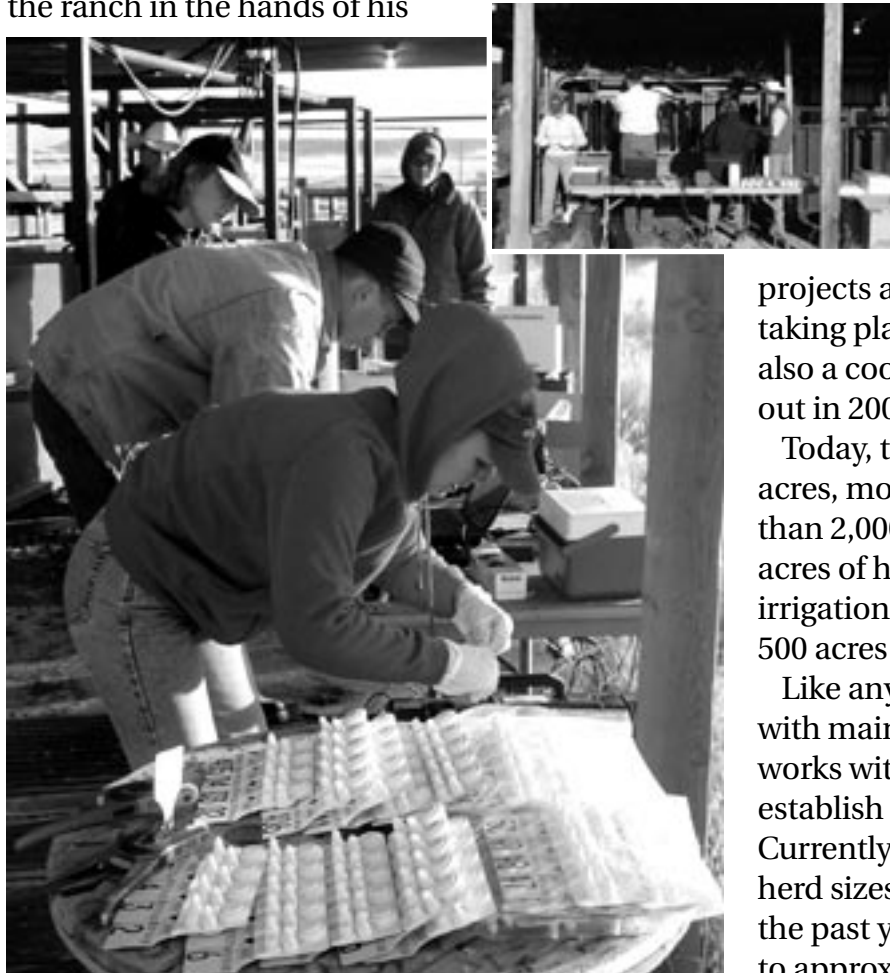
Jim Murphy, who began working for Alberta Bair in 1991, was named ranch manager. In 1998, the Trust formed The Bair Ranch Foundation, an educational research foundation, with the intent of partnering with universities to conduct applied research projects on a working ranch. The universities originally involved in research projects on the Bair Ranch include Montana

State University (livestock and range), University of Montana (timber), and Rocky Mountain College (geology, ornithology, and ecology). However, the Bair Ranch Foundation does not prohibit other educational institutions from coming forward with proposed

projects as demonstrated by a current feeding trial taking place at the University of Illinois. There was also a cooperative E. Coli research project carried out in 2005 with the University of Nebraska.

Today, the Bair Ranch consists of about 60,000 acres, more than 850 head of cattle, and more than 2,000 sheep. The ranch also produces 1,500 acres of hay per year with 500 acres of center pivot irrigation, 500 acres of flood irrigation and roughly 500 acres of sub irrigated hay ground.

Like any ranch manager, Murphy is charged with maintaining a balanced operation. He works with his counter-part in US Bank to establish ranch budgets and financial objectives. Currently, his goals are focused on increasing herd sizes. In addition to increased moisture in the past year, Murphy applied Spike, a herbicide, to approximately 2,000 acres of sagebrush. The



Graduate students collecting samples as part of an E. coli experiment



*The Bair Ranch*

sagebrush reduction and overall increased grass production resulted in a current grass surplus. Murphy estimates that the ranch should support 1,000 head of cattle and approximately 2,400 sheep. By holding back animals, he estimates he will come close to reaching those herd numbers this year.

However, for Murphy, the complex structure of the ranch means being open to constant change and new challenges. Because the ranch is structured as a research foundation, Murphy occasionally has to compromise his visions for the ranch to accommodate new projects and perspectives. As an example, Murphy spent several years building an Angus herd on the Bair Ranch. This year, research being conducted by Montana State University resulted in artificially inseminating the heifers and part of the cowherd to Simmental. Notes Murphy, “As a semi-cross, Angus/Simmental makes sense. But it’s hard to do when I’ve wanted to build exclusively Angus bloodlines in the herd.”

Murphy is joined on the ranch by full-time MSU research associate Harv VanWagoner. In addition to focusing on ranch operations, Murphy and VanWagoner must ensure that the ranch is safe for university students and researchers. The MSU College of Agriculture calving management class brings undergraduate students to the ranch each year to assist in the heifer calving operations. Harv manages the students and provides the educational components, but a lot of work is

completed prior to their arrival. For instance, the ranch recently erected state-of-the-art corral systems to minimize injuries when working animals and calving. Also, Murphy notes that, in addition to productivity, disposition of cows must also be considered when culling. Because students are helping to calve, aggressive animals present risks to both the students and the ranch.

While occasionally challenging, Murphy recognizes the value of research being conducted on the ranch. A former agronomist and researcher himself, no one could be better suited for balancing the everyday demands of the ranch against the research requests by various universities. Murphy notes that several successful research projects on the Bair Ranch continue to benefit producers today. One of the most notable is the MSU weaning pellet, developed by John Paterson through research conducted at the Bair Ranch.

Overall, Murphy is optimistic about the future of both the ranch and the respective livestock industries. He views continued population growth as a key driver in long-term beef demand, and while he recognizes the cyclical nature of the industry, he is bullish in his long-term outlook for beef prices. Similarly, he anticipates higher sheep prices going forward as increasing ethnic populations in the United States drive demand for meat products. He anticipates steady wool prices.

The Bair Ranch provided significant contributions to the history of ranching in Montana. Now, coordinating ranch interests with applied research projects, the Bair Ranch promises a future of ranching and education for Montana unlike any other facility in the state.

Some of the current projects on the ranch include: 1) evaluation of various electronic ear tags; 2) evaluation of a production software program to determine profitability of the cowherd; 3) a new method of removing pine tree encroachment; 4) comparison of different bull progeny to determine genetic basis for improved feed conversions; and 5) comparison of high marbling vs. high yield grading sires on reproduction and carcass traits.