

FIRST DRAFT

Garmesa Farms briefly sought to make the north desert bloom

Robert Lazear was a callow but ambitious Midwesterner when he arrived in western Colorado in 1913, determined to engage in scientific farming.

For the next seven years, Lazear was manager of Garmesa Farms, 12 miles north of Fruita on 16 Road near the Gafield-Mesa County line, hence the name.

Before he arrived at Garmesa, Lazear “never had been on a farm and didn’t know a field of clover from a sugar beet patch,” according to a Technical World Magazine profile of Lazear in 1915.

The article by T.W. Ross added that Lazear, then 24 years old, “is a young Chicago chap who grew tired of club life in the city.”

During his time in Mesa County, Lazear drew praise from around the state for his enlightened agricultural practices, particularly in raising purebred Holstein dairy cows and Duroc hogs. His animals and their offspring regularly won prizes at agricultural shows statewide.

He and his wife, Helen, were popular in Mesa County, supporting a variety of community activities.

But Lazear couldn’t beat the mud and sand that ran off the Book Cliffs and silted up a reservoir he’d built to provide irrigation water for the farm.

By 1920, Lazear had had enough. He abandoned Garmesa, sold off all of its equipment and livestock and moved to Wyoming.

A native of Illinois, Lazear graduated from the University of Michigan in 1912 with an engineering degree. But he soon set his sights on the West.

He “took a six months course in the Colorado Agricultural College,” Ross wrote, “then went into Western Colorado, where he took up a one-hundred-sixty-acre desert claim.”

Online records at the Mesa County Clerk’s office show that Robert Lazear filed a patent for the land on May 13, 1914.

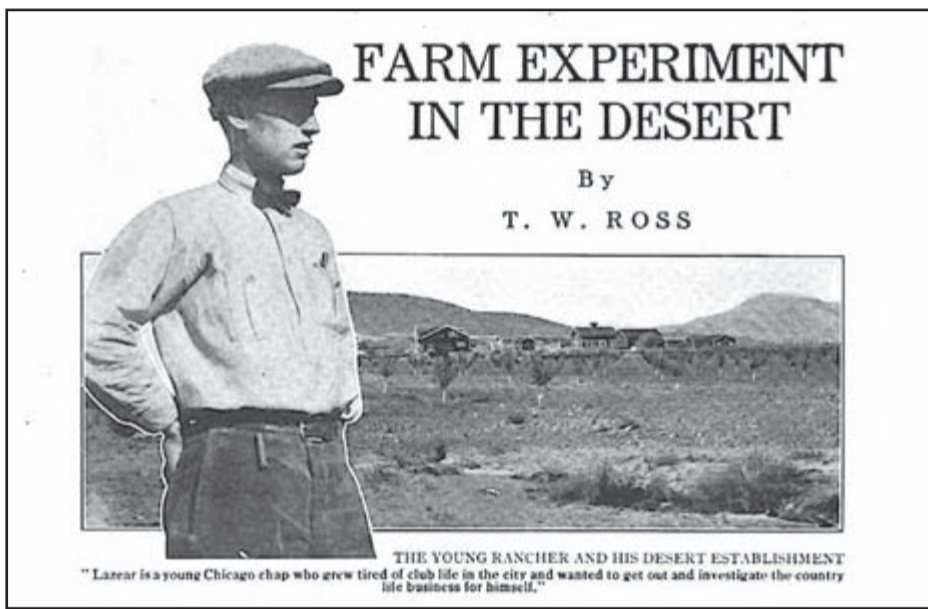
Why he chose such isolated property is unknown. Others had tried to farm in the area, with little success. Lazear had financial backing from his wealthy father, George, a well-known businessman in Evanston, Illinois, and others.

The senior Lazear reportedly “headed a syndicate that took up three thousand acres surrounding the youth’s claim.” One member of that syndicate was Henry Crowell, a friend of George Lazear and the founder of the Quaker Oats Co.

Records at the Clerk’s Office show that in August, 1914, Henry Crowell purchased two parcels of property near Garmesa from existing landowners.

In the spring of 1913, The Daily Sentinel reported, “The Garmesa company begins the cultivation of fine soil on Ruby Lee Mesa northeast of Fruita this week.”

That’s the first printed reference to Garmesa I’ve found, although articles in 1912 told of construction of a reservoir at Ruby Lee Mesa.



Robert Lazear, as he appeared in a 1915 magazine article about him and Garmesa Farms.



Remnants of building foundations and cisterns at Garmesa Farms, as they appeared several decades ago.

MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO

Lazear built Ruby Lee Reservoir, just west of 16 Road, as the main water supply for Garmesa Farms. He later raised the dam on the 21-acre reservoir to provide twice as much water.

Ross wrote that enlarging the reservoir “settled” the farm’s irrigation problem, but that clearly wasn’t the case. Three years later, Lazear and his men were still struggling to clear silt from the reservoir.

Lazear was a busy man during his years at Garmesa. He returned to Illinois in the fall of 1913 to marry Helen Gerould. Meanwhile, he had a stately house constructed at Garmesa for his planned family.

His brother, Edward, moved to Garmesa to join him, and another large house was built for Edward.

Twenty bachelor employees slept in a bunkhouse at the farm, while other employees and families had houses.

One early employee, Charlie Wilson, became the foreman of the farm. He and his wife became caretakers of the property after Lazear left.

In 1914, Lazear worked to make the wagon road from Fruita to Garmesa suitable for automobiles. He also acquired an automobile and a truck, which the Sentinel said would be used “in transporting visitors to and from the Garmesa Orchard.”

Lazear also urged the Mesa County commissioners to construct a proposed new road from Fruita to Rangely up 16 Road and over the Book Cliffs. It was eventually built three miles to the west, on 13 Road.

He consulted experts on farming practices. On their advice, he used dynamite to blast holes for his fruit trees “which loosened the soil for several feet around.”

He constructed his own weather station to predict freezes, although his apple and pear orchards never produced fruit.

Drinking water for the Lazears and their employees came from the reservoir, but he installed a distilling system to

make it fit for human consumption.

He sought advice on the best seed varieties to plant for oats, sugar beets and alfalfa. He compared growth from different seeds and determined which were most drought tolerant.

He maintained detailed data for his livestock, tracking how much food they ate, their weights and daily milk production for his cows. A modern dairy barn was constructed, with the latest in manure handling and milking equipment.

By 1916 he was advertising Holstein cows for sale and touting their milk production in comparison to other dairy breeds.

In 1917, he conducted a series of on-site tours for farmers from Plateau Valley and Delta and Montrose counties, so they could see a modern dairy and hog operation.

That same year, at age 26, Lazear was named president of the newly formed Intermountain Livestock Organization. He and Helen also helped found an organization for schoolchildren interested in livestock. And their farm was a popular spot for Grand Valley residents on weekends.

Then, with little public warning, Lazear gave up on Garmesa. In March 1920, an advertisement appeared in the Sentinel saying, “Garmesa Farms will hold a gigantic sale of stock and farm machinery at its ranch 12 miles north of Fruita, Wednesday March 31st.”

After the sale, Lazear moved to Wyoming. He, his father and brother became officers in Henry Crowell’s newly purchased Wyoming Hereford Ranch, and Robert became ranch manager.

“There were a lot of men out there who had lots of opinions and traditions. But they couldn’t think of new ways to do



The house once occupied by Robert Lazear and family, after it had been sold to Lloyd Olson and moved to the Fruita area.

MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO

things.” Crowell explained later. But Robert Lazear “was eager to try new things.”

Lazear’s association with the Hereford ranch proved far more successful than his time at Garmesa. He was manager there for 37 years.

When he died in 1957, publications around the country extolled Lazear’s reputation as ranch manager and breeder of some of the top purebred Herefords in the country. Some noted that he had lived in western Colorado briefly. Few mentioned Garmesa.

In the meantime, Garmesa had been “abandoned to the coyotes and the ravages of time,” a Montrose paper said.

Farm buildings had been sold and hauled away. The Lazear house was purchased by Lloyd Olsen and moved to Fruita.

There was a decades-long flurry of oil and gas drilling near Garmesa, with limited success. These days, a number of small home plots dot the desert near where Garmesa once operated.

Sources: “Farm Experiment in the Desert,” by T.W. Ross, in *Technical World Magazine*, March 1915, at [www.hathitrust.org/historicnewspapers.org](http://www.hathitrust.org/historicnewspapers); *Cereal Tycoon: Henry Parsons Crowell, Founder of the Quaker Oats Company*, by Joe Musser; *Other assistance — Ike Rakiecki, librarian at Mesa County Libraries and Mesa County Clerk’s Office.*

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Roofing scammer loses appeal case

By CHARLES ASHBY
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A Basalt roofing contractor convicted in Mesa County in 2019 for deceiving clients lost his bid to have his convictions overturned, the Colorado Court of Appeals ruled Thursday.

George John Harris used his business, East West Roofing LLC, to offer clients estimates on roofing repairs.

After accepting down payments, he never completed the projects, using the money instead for personal luxury items, according to the Colorado Attorney General’s Office, which prosecuted the case with the aid of the Mesa County District Attorney’s Office.

Harris, who was convicted on seven counts of theft, operated his scam in multiple Western Slope communities.

On appeal, Harris’ court-appointed attorney argued that District Judge Lance Timbreza erred when he declined to allow defense attorneys to admit handwritten notes attached to a partnership agreement on grounds they lacked foundation.

His attorneys said as a result of Timbreza not admitting that evidence, Harris was denied his constitutional right to present a defense.

A three-judge panel disagreed.

“Harris’ handwritten notes were proffered to purportedly explain what he understood the partnership agreement to be, including the roles for each member of the business,” Judge Michael

Berger wrote in the opinion, joined by Judges Daniel Dailey and Ted Tow.



GEORGE HARRIS

“The notes were irrelevant because they postdated the latest of the charged misconduct. Harris has no constitutional right to present irrelevant evidence.”

Prosecutors showed that between June 2014 and May 2015, Harris scammed 30 mostly elderly victims in Grand Junction, Durango, Montrose and Summit County for more than \$250,000, using the money to buy homes, lavish meals and anti-aging procedures.

In addition to his eight-year sentence, Harris also was ordered to pay restitution to those homeowners, and he was placed on probation for 10 years.

One of his business partners, Amber Burch, pleaded guilty to class 3 felony theft, and was a co-operating witness at trial. She also was ordered to pay restitution.

Under Colorado’s Residential Roofing Bill of Rights Act, companies are required to keep client funds in a trust account either until materials are ordered or a large portion of the project is complete.

“The Constitution requires only that the accused be permitted to introduce all relevant and admissible evidence,” Berger wrote.

Man killed in glider crash ID’d

A Glenwood Springs man, 73, was identified as the person killed Thursday in a glider crash in Garfield County. Shmuel Dimenstein died in the crash reported shortly before 6 p.m. on Thursday, according to the Garfield County Coroner’s Office. Dimenstein was the only occupant in the glider that crashed at the Rifle Garfield County Airport. The crash was witnessed by another pilot in the area.

An autopsy conducted Friday revealed blunt force injuries, and the manner of death is being investigated as an accident.

— Sentinel staff

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