

FIRST DRAFT

W.P. Ela was a pioneer rancher, leader in community, adventurer

The Palisade Land and Cattle Co. ranch on the Little Dolores River was a scenic place. One visitor described it as “a rancher’s paradise and a cowboy’s delight.”

But there was nothing easy about operating a cattle ranch in an isolated part of Mesa County during the 1880s and 1890s. Consider 1895.

That year, ranch owner Wendell Phillips Ela, better known as “W.P.,” handled the death

of one of his cowboys — unfortunately nicknamed “Calamity Bill” — who was killed after being thrown from his horse while chasing a steer.

Also in 1895, a young man died when his wagon full of timber overturned on the main wagon road from Piñon Mesa, Glade Park and the Little Dolores.

The road was called Jacob’s Ladder because it was so rough, and W.P. Ela helped pioneer it. Today’s smoother version is known as Little Park Road.

Not all the dangers were in the remote country, however. That autumn, four of Ela’s cows, part of a 250-head herd being driven to the stockyards in Grand Junction, jumped off the Fifth Street Bridge and drowned.

Ela was lucky to escape injury himself in 1895 when a train he was on while shipping cattle derailed east of Pueblo. The engineer and brakeman were killed and several others injured.

Beyond ranching, in 1895 W.P. Ela also was president of the Grand Junction school board. And he helped assess the possibility of building a railroad up Plateau Valley.

Two years later, Ela was elected mayor of Grand Junction, where he and his wife Lucy had a home when not at the ranch. W.P. also was president of the Mesa County Bank.

In addition, he was a member of the Grand Junction Camera Club, the local Academy of Science and president of the Library Board.

Despite his busy schedule, W.P. remained actively involved in management of the ranch until the turn of the century.

He took cattle east to sell, rounded up “wild and woolly” horses at the ranch, and took a Grand Junction News correspondent on an 1897 tour of the ranch.

“The Ela ranch is as fine a natural site for stock raising as can be found anywhere in America,” the unnamed correspondent reported.

He was less enthusiastic about galloping after Ela down a steep hillside. The correspondent was “practically helpless” on one of Ela’s “bronchos,” he said, “but by hanging close to the saddle we managed to get along without any serious injury.”

W.P. Ela was born in 1849 in New Hampshire to Jacob H. and Abigail Ela.

His father had been a printer, state legislator and congressman before becoming auditor for the U.S. Treasury.

As a young man, W.P. Ela worked as a shipping clerk for a Hudson River steamship. But things changed in 1883 when his



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ELA FAMILY.

A man believed to be W.P. Ela overlooks the 2V Ranch on the Little Dolores River, circa 1890.



Portrait of a young W.P. Ela, displaying his famous mustache.

brother, Charles S. Ela, invested in the Colorado ranch, then died.

W.P. was drafted as temporary ranch manager. His “temporary” sojourn in the West lasted 46 years, until his death in 1929.

W.P. Ela acted first as agent for the Palisade Land and Cattle Co., then later as owner of what was also known as the 2V Ranch because of its “VV” brand.

In addition to land on the Little Dolores, the 2V Ranch had summer range along West Creek in Unaweep Canyon and on Piñon Mesa. Miracle Rock stands at the ranch boundary.

Other than Jacob’s Ladder, the main early route to get to the ranch was called the Billy Goat Trail, which “went up No Thoroughfare Canyon (now in Colorado National Monument) and went through the Rim ... right where the tunnel goes through now,” said W.P. Ela’s grandson, the late Bill Ela, who was a district judge in Mesa County.

The trail apparently lived up to its name. It was steep and treacherous. Cattle and horses frequently slipped on it.

W.P. had a close call when a horse he was riding refused to turn on one of the switchbacks of the Billy Goat Trail and instead jumped off a 15-foot ledge. Horse and rider were uninjured.

At some point, a man named John Gordon widened the Billy Goat Trail and operated a toll road on it.

But according to Lucy Feril Ela, daughter-in-law of W.P., the cattle ranchers on Piñon Mesa didn’t think much of Gordon’s “terrible road” and the high fees he charged.

So, W.P. “helped survey out the present road to Little Park.”

Even so, Lucy Feril Ela said her mother-in-law, known as Lucy Drake Ela, once had to use Gordon’s road to get from the ranch to Grand Junction quickly while suffering from a toothache. Despite



An older W.P. Ela riding his prized thoroughbred, Bourbon.

the shorter route, the trip still took nine hours.

In the early years of ranch operation, Ute Indians were frequent visitors to the 2V Ranch.

On one occasion, W.P. told Lucy “the Indians camped for thirty days right up behind them and that they would come every day but they didn’t give them any trouble.”

In May of 1901, Ela sold the Little Dolores ranch to Frank Sleeper and Sam Pollock. But he apparently maintained summer range on Piñon Mesa, which the family visited regularly.

Always interested in good horses, W.P. joined several other men in November 1903 on a trip to

the opportunity to visit ancient cliff dwellings along the Green River and for Ela to photograph them.

Lucy Ela died in 1925, and W.P. died four years later. But his considerable legacy lives on.

Much of the former 2V Ranch is now protected in permanent conservation easements.

Ela Family Orchards continues to operate near Hotchkiss, under the direction of Steve Ela, one of W.P.’s great-grandsons.

The former Ela family home at 1006 Main St. in Grand Junction is now the headquarters of Colorado West Land Trust, which oversees conservation easements for both

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the old 2V Ranch and the Ela Family Orchards.

Shirley Ela, Bill Ela’s widow, lives on the Hotchkiss property and is involved in the orchard management.

Dan Schultz-Ela, a retired Colorado Mesa University professor and a son of Shirley, lives on an adjacent property with his wife.

Tom Ela, another son of Shirley and Bill, lives in Grand Junction.

Sources: Shirley Ela and Tom Ela; Oral history interviews with Lucy Feril Ela and William (Bill) Ela, conducted for the Museums of Western Colorado; historic editions of The Daily Sentinel at www.newspapers.com; “Log of the City of Moab,” by W.P. Ela.

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SCOTT CRABTREE/The Daily Sentinel

The old Palisade High School is being torn down to make way for a new medical clinic.

Palisade finalizes its medical clinic design

By SAM KLOMHAUS
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The town of Palisade has finalized the design for the new medical clinic to be built on the site of the old high school.

Town Manager Janet Hawkinson said officials are looking at an October start for construction, and an eight-month build-out for the clinic.

Hawkinson said town officials are working with Community Hospital on clinic costs and lease options.

Palisade has employed FCI Constructors as the project manager-general contractor for the clinic.

The clinic was originally estimated to cost \$3.2 million, but inflation and other factors are raising the price, Hawkinson said. “It is costing more, so we are looking for donations and additional grant funding,” she said.

So far, Palisade has raised \$1 million from the federal government, \$750,000 from Community Hospital and \$1.5 million

from Mesa County.

Through the design process, the clinic has also been made bigger, from 6,000 square feet to 6,900 square feet, by the addition of an imaging room, which will add imaging capacities to the clinic’s primary and urgent care functions, Hawkinson said.

DYING TREES

Some Palisade residents have noted some of the trees planted along the town’s new U.S. Highway 6 project appear to be dying.

Hawkinson said this is a normal part of landscaping projects and can happen for a number of reasons.

“That’s what makes landscaping hard; some plants just don’t like being transplanted,” Hawkinson said.

The affected trees are under warranty, and the town is working on replacing them, she said.

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