

Foundation receives 7,180-acre Eighteen Mile Ranch from TR Shelby in memory of Emily Stone Shelby



The Eighteen Mile Ranch was just gifted to the Foundation in September 2022 (photo courtesy Brian McDevitt)

This is the 9th in a series of 12 articles about the 50th anniversary of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands.

By Steve Stuebner

Over the 50-year arc of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands’ conservation work, history is repeating itself – or perhaps, rhyming – with the hot-off-the-press news that TR Shelby has donated the Eighteen Mile Ranch, east of Dubois, to the Foundation, in memory of his late wife, Emily Stone Shelby.

Inked on Sept. 21, 2022, the generous gift of land comes with the family’s wishes to preserve the 7,180-acre property as a working ranch while continuing to support more than 20 years of conservation work to restore grazing lands and enhance fish and wildlife habitat on the ranch, said Brian McDevitt, Foundation President who signed the deed with TR Shelby.

“We are very excited and humbled to be receiving this wonderful gift from the Shelby family,” McDevitt said. “Since they’ve taken over the property, they’ve done a great job improving the grazing management and fish

and wildlife habitat. We will continue that work in the future in coordination with the ranch manager.”

In the future, the ranch will be known as the “The TR and Emily Stone Preserve at the Eighteen Mile Ranch.”

“In the tradition of the Harrimans and other generous conservationists, TR Shelby has donated the Eighteen Mile Ranch to the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands,” adds Michael Weber, a longtime friend of the Shelby family in Sheridan, Wyoming. “The contiguous lands of more than 7,180 acres includes over five miles of Camas and Spring Creeks, 1.25 miles of which is open for public access fishing by agreement with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) Access Yes program.”

Two years ago, Emily Shelby died, and TR really wanted to preserve the ranch in her name, McDevitt said. “The whole reason he donated it to the Foundation is that he wanted to protect the ranch for his late wife. He really misses her. And he’s poured his heart and soul into making the ranch the best it can be.”

In this 9th issue of the Foundation newsletter, we will focus on Shelbys’ gift of the Eighteen Mile Ranch to the Foundation, and we’ll learn about two conservation easements donated to the Foundation by the Richard M. and Susan P. Jacobsen Family Trust by in the Teton Valley.

Weber helps us understand the history of the property and the rich fish and wildlife values at the Eighteen Mile Ranch with a written narrative.



Emily and TR Shelby ready for a night on the town.

“Camas Creek has a population of native west-slope cutthroat trout, which are unique to the area. The complete ranch is within the boundaries of the Egin-Hamer Closure, a joint effort of the BLM and State of Idaho, which places nearly 500 square miles of lands off limits to human entry for the protection of wintering deer, elk and moose from January through April,” Weber writes.

“As part of the transaction, TR Shelby has insisted that



TR Shelby worked with conservation professionals to restore the streams on Eighteen Mile Ranch (Courtesy Brian McDevitt)

the Foundation do all it can to ensure that Ranch Manager Andy Niederer continues his cattle grazing operation on the ranch. In addition, he has arranged for the Foundation to work with the Bureau of Land Management, IDFG, Idaho Department of Lands, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the Sagebrush Habitat Conservation Fund to assess, maximize and preserve the historic, cultural and natural aspects of this incredible property.”

TR and Emily Shelby buy Eighteen Mile Ranch in 2000

TR and Emily Shelby spent much of their adult life in Sheridan, Wyoming. TR grew up in Tennessee, but he traveled West to work as an engineer for the Burlington Railroad in Sheridan and made that his home. He was a union guy; he served for many years as the legislative liaison for the United Transportation Union. Emily Stone Shelby worked for more than 20 years as a pharmacist at the V.A. Hospital in Sheridan.

Together, the Shelbys were an entrepreneurial team combining their creative energies and remarkable business instincts to bring all kinds of projects to completion in Sheridan, Weber writes.

- They converted a Texaco gas station into a lively beauty salon, which has been operating for more than 20 years.
- They purchased a former tennis court building and remodeled it into a modern distribution location for Coca Cola.
- They built the Westview Healthcare Center on Big Goose.

“Their vision and commitment resulted in successful businesses with great benefits for the community,” Weber writes.

After the couple retired, the Shelbys moved to Jackson, Wyoming, where Emily, a classically trained pianist, could bask in the peace and serenity at the foot of the Tetons and play the piano. But TR was restless.

By early 2000, TR had learned that there might be some good investment opportunities on ranch property in Idaho. The Shelbys traveled to Dubois, Idaho, to look at a



The ranch preserve is east of Dubois, west of Island Park and south of Kilgore. Hunting and fishing access to the property are possible through the Access Yes program.

ranch for sale.

“The experience was a classic example of how this team worked,” Weber writes. “While TR eagerly checked out the opportunity, Emily demanded to understand the details. As TR remembers, when the seller was less than open with the needed information, “she just blew up,” and that was the end of it. But not of the vision.”

While in Idaho, the Shelbys learned about the Eighteen Mile Ranch, just south of Kilgore and about 65 miles southwest of Yellowstone National Park. It’s fair to say the location lies “in the middle of no where” to the average person, but to TR, the ranch teemed with potential.

And he had arrived just in time – the previous owners had split the original ranch in two. The east half had been sold to the Snarr family, but the west half, with several miles of water frontage along Camas Creek, was available. The Shelbys bought it in September 2000.

“TR remembers it was obviously in bad shape,” Weber writes. “Aggressive grazing practices had taken their toll. Fencing was in need of investment. And the bottomlands had been hit hard.”

The Shelbys worked with Idaho Department of Lands and the Bureau of Land Management to transfer ownership of livestock grazing permits for lands adjacent to the ranch. The ranch came with 4,643 acres of grazing lease lands from those two agencies.

“TR tells how at first, Emily was mad at me,” Weber writes. “She didn’t want to visit the ranch and there were



*TR Shelby, right, with Lisa McDevitt in September.
(Courtesy Brian McDevitt)*

lots of challenges, not to mention getting the neighbors used to a guy from Jackson who spoke funny (Tennessee accent).”

But there was a turning point for Emily. “One day she joined TR to visit the ranch. When he paused while doing chores, he looked over to see Emily leaning against one tree and staring across at another, an aspen. “What are you doing he said”? “I’m waiting for the sun,” she answered. “Well, it’s right there, so what are you waiting

for?”

“I’m waiting for it to hit that tree just right so I can take this picture.”

From that day on, TR and Emily’s love and commitment to the Eighteen Mile Ranch was never in doubt, Weber writes.

Introducing conservation measures to the ranch

Being new to ranching and land management, TR had to learn all about the state and federal conservation assistance programs available via a dizzying array of public agencies – from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

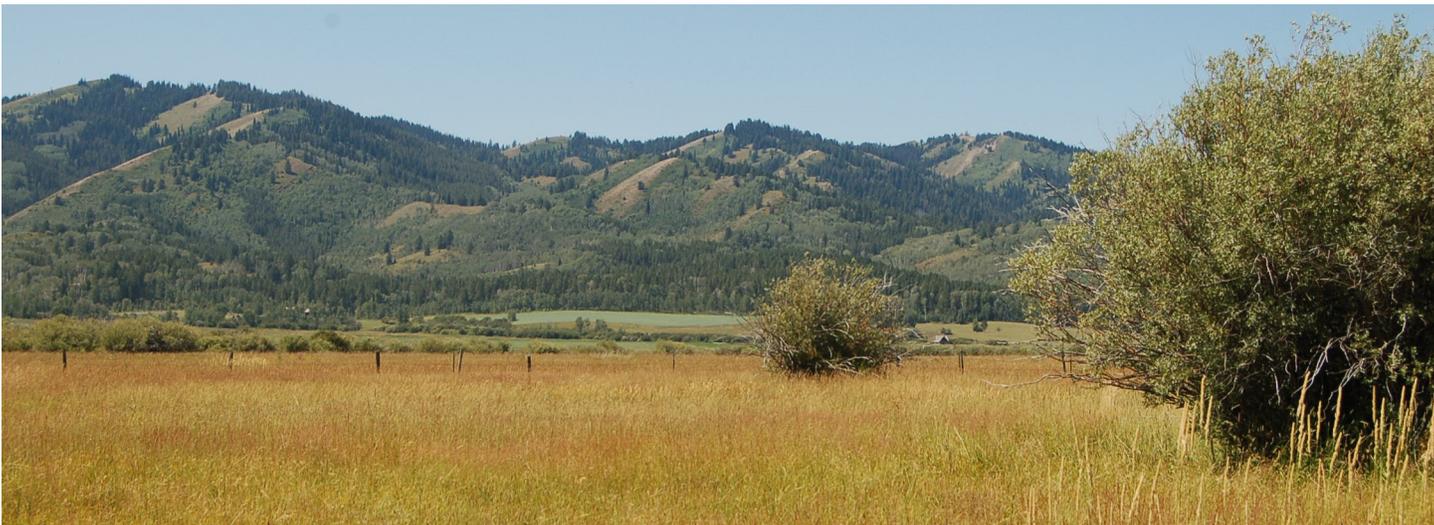
TR met a rancher west of Dubois who had experience with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), administered by FSA. The CRP program helps landowners become better stewards by compensating them for removing marginal farmland/ranchland and environmentally sensitive lands from crop production and livestock grazing.

About the same time, TR’s good friend, John Yeager from Sheridan, attended a talk in Denver given by Jon Marvel, the founder of Western Watersheds Project in Hailey.

“Marvel and Western Watersheds have been devoted to reducing grazing on Western lands, especially the high steppes of sagebrush in Idaho, and preserving critical wildlife habitat, especially for sage grouse,” Weber writes.



Fencing and Conservation Reserves are protecting the riparian areas on the Eighteen Mile Ranch.



Looking out at the mountains from the Eighteen Mile Ranch, located in a very rural, tranquil corner of Idaho. Note tall-grass meadow in foreground has been rested from grazing for environmental benefits.

“At John Yeager’s encouragement, TR got in touch with Marvel. Ultimately, Marvel visited the ranch in person and recommended a number of ways the Shelbys could install conservation practices on the ranch.

“Those initial conversations were the beginning of a friendship of over 20 years. There was a lot of mutual respect between two strong advocates of responsible western lands stewardship,” Weber writes.

Soon afterward, TR met Paul Niederer, an experienced ranch manager who lived in the local area. “TR and Paul connected easily and shared the values of hard work, doing things right the first time and always maintaining respect for the land,” Weber writes.

First, the Shelbys worked with the federal government to implement two conservation reserve contracts to protect more than 135 acres of bottomland along Camas Creek with jack fencing. As time went on, TR extended the amount of protected land to more than 600 acres. He fenced more than 12 miles of the ranch in a way that protected riparian habitat from overgrazing in the past and in the future.

In 2005, Shelbys purchased the eastern half of the original ranch from the Snarr family. And then, more improvements would be needed.

Working with the Idaho Department of Lands, the Shelbys hired contractors to install a power line, drilled a water well more than 700 feet deep, and trenched several miles of underground water pipe to deliver water to cattle-grazing pastures. Eighteen large water troughs were constructed to provide off-stream water for cattle.

Two bridges were rebuilt, across Camas Creek and Spring Creek, and an additional bridge was built across Camas

Creek allowing better public access for anglers. TR remembers discussing the ranch with a county agent who told him, “TR, all the value is in that creek, and you’re taking care of it.”

By 2014, the Idaho Department of Lands combined several grazing leases into one 3,790-acre lease. And then word came that IDL was going to put the grazing lease up for sale through a competitive-bidding process to ensure the state was getting the maximum value for the lease. The state conducted a detailed analysis and concluded that the total valuation of the Shelbys’ improvements was \$134,910.

There were multiple bids for the grazing lease, but fortunately, the Shelbys were the successful bidders. The new lease commenced on Jan. 1, 2015, and it expires on December 31, 2034.

Unfortunately, Niederer had a bad ATV accident, and was able to manage the ranch for only a year before the wreck occurred. “Paul was riding an ATV at the ranch that winter when he struck a large rock concealed by the snow. He was thrown and ended up paralyzed from the waist down. His son Andy, who shares those strong stewardship values, took over. They have continued to improve and maintain the ranch in a way that sets a great example of how to do it right,” Weber writes.

As a result of TR and Andy’s dedication, the ranch has been the beneficiary of a decades-long effort to recover the lands from years of poor grazing practices and lack of investment, Weber writes. Beavers have repopulated the ranch streams, creating beaver ponds, storing water, and spreading out water into the riparian areas.

“The deeper water allows for overflow channels and



Spectacular sunrise over the Teton Mountains, viewed from Sky Mountain Ranch. (Courtesy Dick and Sue Jacobsen)

a widening of the riparian area acts like a sponge, increasing water storage,” he writes. “The grass and shrub species component is replacing shallow rooted species with deeper rooted species and the willow community is developing and maturing.”

A rangeland specialist who has assisted TR with conservation improvements on the ranch says, the last 20 years of conservation work “has shown the forward-looking vision of TR and Emily Shelby, and they have established a legacy landscape in the Eighteen Mile Ranch riparian area that will enhance societal and ecological values in perpetuity,” Weber writes.

Emily Shelby died on Nov. 2, 2020. As TR struggled to come to grips with losing his beloved wife, he explored all the alternatives he could imagine to somehow preserve this beautiful ranch he and Emily had put together. In the fall of 2021, he became aware of the Idaho Foundation for Parks and Lands, the oldest land trust in the state of Idaho. He contacted Foundation officials about the prospect of donating the ranch, and the rest, as they say, is history.

While the Foundation and other land trusts in Idaho receive pressure to establish trails and create recreational opportunities and access to conservation lands, McDevitt said he anticipates the Eighteen Mile Ranch will be preserved for light grazing and protected riparian areas.

“This is why we protect (these lands),” McDevitt told the Sheridan Press. “This ranch is way out there in Dubois and not a lot around it, but in 20 years, people — well, not even in 20 years, in a short period of time — there’s going to be encroachment in more and more places, but yet this ranch will stand as a 7,180-acre island forever.”

Jacobsen family acquires Sky Mountain Ranch

Richard and Sue Jacobsen purchased Sky Mountain Ranch in the Teton Valley in 1988. A friend, Lloyd Bennion, had owned the ranch as a Boys Camp retreat center since 1965. The Jacobsens decided that they would acquire the ranch, continue the Boys Camp operation, and eventually they would expand their programs to include girls, parents and families.

“The purpose of the Quickwater and Sky Mountain Ranches is to bring teens and their families together to strengthen their relationships with each other, with friends and with their Creator and to build their personal strength and open their vision to their own potential,” says an introduction to the retreat programs on the Sky Mountain Ranch web site.

People come from all over the nation to attend the retreat center, said Dick Jacobsen in an interview. “It’s designed to help young men and women and families strengthen their sense of self-worth and do creative things with their

own families to form stronger bonds,” he said. “They cook their own meals, move irrigation pipe and do community service to strengthen their personal roles and connection to their spiritual world.

“It’s been a wonderful experience.”

Twenty years after acquiring the ranch, the Jacobsens decided to purchase some adjacent properties around Sky Mountain Ranch and add conservation easements on the properties to keep them in a natural state for nature and wildlife.

“It’s a beautiful corner of the Teton Valley,” Dick Jacobsen says in an interview. “We watched the tide of development occur throughout the valley. It was happening at a feverish pitch. If we were going to preserve the open space around us, we had to purchase the land and put conservation easements and development restrictions on the adjoining properties to make sure they remained in a natural condition forever.”

In 2008 and 2009, the Jacobsens placed a 155-acre conservation easement on a property they refer to as Willow Springs, which is located one mile east of Victor next to Idaho State Highway 31. Another 207.6 acres were protected as a conservation easement on property situated along the western edge of Little Pine Creek, one of three primary tributary streams that form the Teton River in the headwaters area. The package of properties was part of the Drake Homestead, established in 1889.

The conservation properties are located adjacent to Sky Mountain Ranch or just steps nearby, allowing the Jacobsens to use the natural areas for retreat activities and observe wildlife.

“We have deer, elk, coyotes, foxes, mountain lions, bears, sandhill cranes and all kinds of wildlife that we see year-round,” Jacobsen says.

BYU-Idaho makes use of the retreat center in the fall, winter and spring for seminars, workshops and retreats, he says.

For more information about Quickwater and Sky Mountain Ranch programs, go to <http://www.quickwater.org>.



Participants join in song during an evening program at Sky Mountain Ranch. (Courtesy Dick and Sue Jacobsen).



Girls practice cooking as part of their retreat at Sky Mountain Ranch. (Courtesy Dick and Sue Jacobsen)

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