

Newcomer opens ranching school

By **TIM TRAINOR**
Redmond Spokesman

TERREBONNE — Mark Gross knows he fits the stereotypes.

He grew up in New York, then spent much of his successful career making good money in the Bay Area. He is a progressive, left-wing Jewish man who touched down in Central Oregon just two years ago.

He and his wife snapped up 10 acres outside Terrebonne that offer stunning views of the Cascades. On clear days, you can see all the way to Mount Hood.

“I know we’re lucky,” he said. “I definitely know it.”

Before he moved to the property, Gross had never used a chain saw. He had never attached a plow to an ATV and cleared a snowy driveway. And he’d never had to fix that ATV on a cold, dark morning when the driveway really needed to be cleared. You know — the basic requirements of owning property in Central Oregon.

“I quickly discovered if you don’t know how to learn to do it yourself, you’re going to kill yourself,” he said.

In an attempt to improve safety and knowledge of home and land improvements among new residents of Central Oregon, Gross is starting the School of Ranch. He describes it as a casual, social group that he hopes can be a place where new landowners can talk about problems they’ve encountered and skills they’d like to learn.

He also hopes that longtime residents who hope to pass along their priorities and knowledge show up, as well.

The goal, he says, is to pull together a solutions-focused group made up of both rural newbies and folks who know the Central Oregon landscape like the back of their hands.



Tim Trainor/The Spokesman

Mark Gross drives his ATV on his 10-acre property outside Terrebonne. He is hoping to connect new landowners with old hands who know how to care for rural homes and ranchlands.



Tim Trainor/The Spokesman

Mark Gross throws away an old chain saw blade while laboring outside his Terrebonne home.

Urban upbringing

Gross is a fast learner who has picked up a number of different skills throughout his varied career. He was a professional poker player for a spell, then became a high school teacher and later created an educational software system that made its way into classrooms nationwide.

But learning how to care for of a piece of the High Desert, and become self-sufficient on land outside city services, has been an entirely new challenge.

“In my life it has always been a software problem,” he said. “Out here, it’s a hardware problem.”

The problems — and possible solutions — were innu-

merable and overwhelming.

“The biggest yard I’ve ever had was an eighth of acre. The only question was where to put the plant,” he laughed. “Now I have 80 of those (eighth acres) — it’s more about terraforming and caring for the land than putting in one plant. What’s one plant going to do?”

The old hand

Bob Baker, 74, has a lot more experience on a lot more land.

The Redmond resident grew up on his grandfather’s cattle, horse and sheep ranch near Bakersfield, California. The ranch, older than California itself, sprawled over more than 2,000 acres.

“My riches are all my memories growing up down there,” he said. “I’d take a horse and go out riding and ride all day and never leave the place.”

Baker was drafted and served a year in Vietnam. After he got out of the Army, he took a job as a telegrapher for the Southern Pacific Railway.

“The telegraph was rapidly

disappearing to make way for the telephone,” he said. “But I learned the old way.”

His wife at the time was from Central Oregon, so he lived here for a while. Then he went to train dispatch school and was sent to stations throughout the West, dispatching and scheduling trains from the Canadian border all the way down to Mexico. He retired in 2008 and bought 5 acres of land between Sisters and Redmond.

He says he hates to see all the subdivisions going up around Redmond, and watching the rural character of the area disappear.

“I don’t know why you’d move to an area and want to make it look like the same septic tank you came from,” he said.

A partnership

Despite their many differences, Baker and Gross have become friends. Gross said he consults Baker about how best to treat his property and what kind of equipment to buy. Baker, in turn, has provided advice and technical know-how.

Baker said he is happy to pass along his knowledge and ideas “if somebody is interested in living off the land without scarring the land for eternity.”

He said for most people, his advice is to do nothing. The High Desert is not made for lawns and decorative ponds. Mostly, he wishes people new to the area would learn to love the sage and juniper they bought — instead of trying to turn it into the suburban properties they are often more familiar with.

Those are lessons he has imparted on Gross, who hopes to impart similar ideas on new neighbors who recently bought the lot across the street from him.

“Man, I hope they don’t put in a lawn,” Gross said.

This neighbor-help-

ing-neighbor approach has long been a staple of rural life. But as the culture of Central Oregon changes, Gross said it has become more difficult for people from different backgrounds to get together, find common ground and work together.

“It’s a lot easier to look across some of our differences if we’re all in the same spot, working toward the same end,” he said.

Get together

The group’s first gathering is set for Saturday, May 14 at noon. Get information and register to attend at this link: meetup.com/school-of-ranch.

Gross is calling the first meeting “BBQ and Chainsaws” because he’ll provide some food and attendees can bond over their experience — or total lack thereof — of dropping trees and prepping firewood.

“(Chain saws are) a good first step and a step not everyone has taken yet,” he said.

If all goes well, Gross hopes the group can learn and practice maintaining gravel roads, managing wells and irrigation, building fences, raising chickens, acquiring the right tools and more. He said that if the group gets large enough, they may be able negotiate deals with local retailers and service providers.

Baker said he doesn’t want more people to move to Central Oregon. But he is interested in groups like these, where people who grew up on the land can influence what the next generation does with it. He says it is necessary to stop the deterioration of the area and to conserve the region’s water supply.

He tells most newcomers the same thing: “Don’t destroy what you live in. Nourish it so it will be there after you’re gone.”

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