

2012 nomination for the Leopold Conservation Award



The Sommers Ranch

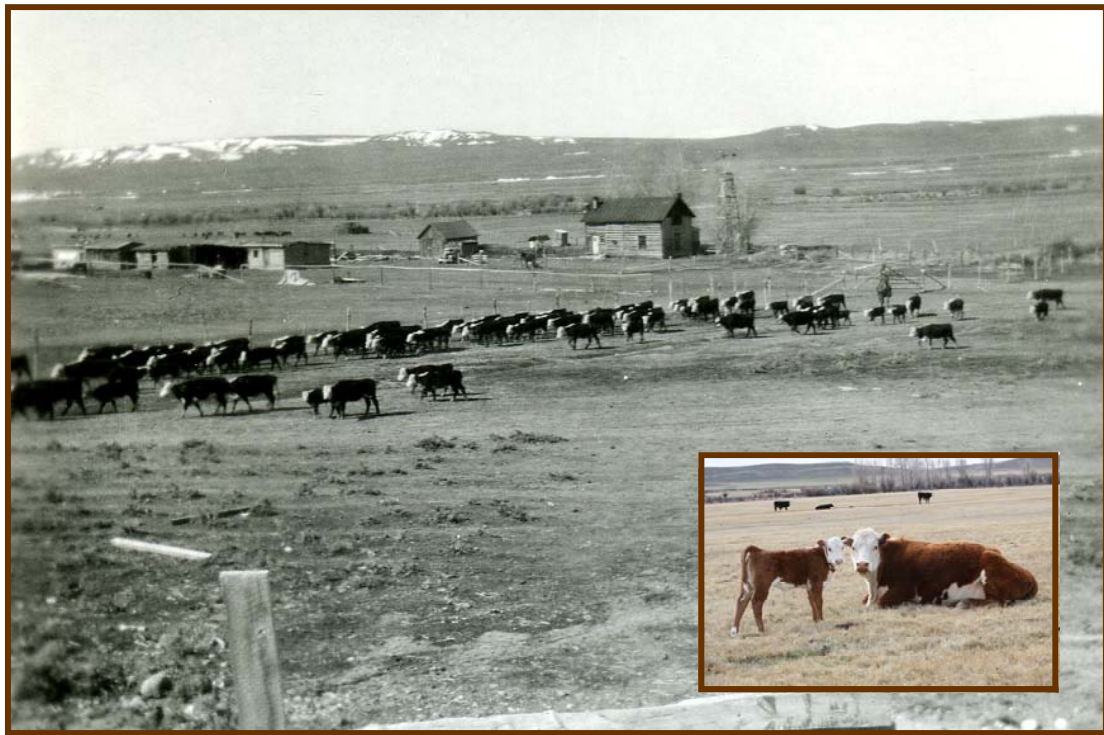
more than just a legacy



Does the cattle business provide the primary source of income?

A Commitment Three Generations Deep

Drive into the Sommers Ranch yard, and it is apparent that you've just arrived at a family cattle ranch. Cattle have been the main source of income for this family since the ranch was homesteaded in the early 20th century. Passed down through the third generation, the ranch is now operated by Albert Sommers and his sister, Jonita. While many changes have come to the Green River Valley, this ranch continues as one of the places that folks throughout the valley will quickly name as a working family ranch. Not a large ranch, and one which hasn't had "deep pockets", this ranch is a wonderful example of what good people, sound management, and a deep sense of commitment to the resources, the industry, family, friends and neighbors can accomplish. The ranch's legacy won't



be evident in a grand exhibition of what capital investment can accomplish. Instead, this nomination is recognition of a combination of stewardship, business sense, commitment to history, service and leadership in the community. The Sommers' Ranch is a working cattle ranch committed to the future.



Verla



Sommers Bridge, built in 1905

Provide an overall description of the ranch. Please include the date it was established, the type and number of livestock, and the names of any family members actively involved in the business.

Making It All Work

Ranching is not an easy undertaking in Sublette County. The elevation at this ranch's front porch is 7060 feet. The growing season is, optimistically, 45 days. Winter is long. Precipitation is around 12 inches – mostly in the form of winter's snows. The Green River is the reason this ranch was established and a testament to the monumental changes its waters can make in this desert environment. In such a harsh setting, the families who settled the valley relied on each other as a community to make their living. The Sommers' continue this long tradition and are exemplary stewards working the land and cattle in coordination with many other ranchers.

The Sommers' family established this ranch in 1907 by Albert "Prof" Sommers and his brother, Pearl V. Sommers. Jim McAlister, homesteaded the Cabin Field, located on the property. Jim's daughter, Ida May McAlister married Prof Sommers. Today's boundaries are not very different from when the land was first homesteaded. In fact, the last changes date back to the 1960's when a few 40-acre BLM tracts were purchased, consolidating the private land acreage. The ranch is comprised of 1,000 acres of rangeland, 200 acres of irrigated pasture, and 30 acres of wetlands to complement the 827 acres of hay-



land which provide just over 900 tons of grass hay.

The Sommers Ranch cattle operation is a commercial herd of 300 mother cows in a cow/calf/yearling operation. A 45 head registered Hereford cattle enterprise rounds out the operation, selling some high elevation bulls as well as providing some bull power and replacement heifers to the their commercial cow herd. Commercial cows are bred while grazing on the common grazing allotments, and so the number of bulls contributed by any one ranch is based on cattle numbers. Bulls undergo strict veterinary and visual inspections before being approved to be turned out. Albert has been one of the trusted officers responsible for making

those inspections.

The native grass hay raised on the irrigated haylands between the river and the irrigation ditches feeds cattle for five to six months through the winter and spring. In mid June, the registered cattle are moved to the Soaphole Common BLM allotment and then to leased grass while the commercial herd is turned out to the "Mesa" BLM allotment. The herd uses those 56,000 acres until mid-June when "The Drift" begins. The Drift is a two week trek from the BLM allotments to the high country for summer and

fall pasture. The Upper Green River Allotment is immense in size. A common (shared) allotment, it consists of 12 pastures divided into 4 grazing systems. The allotment permits over 7,500 cattle on 132,000 acres, making it the largest allotment in the National Forest System. October brings snows, triggering the return "drift". The cattle trail from the forest, drifting 30 or 40 miles back to the cutting grounds a few miles north of the ranch where neighbors gather to sort cattle and return them back to the home ranch, generally by the third week in October signaling the beginning of fall cattle work.



Making It All Work

Siblings, Albert and Jonita, work together and consult on all major decisions regarding the ranch. Their partnership was formed with their parents in 1996, as the ranch was being passed down to their current generation. Their father, Bud Sommers, was a master horsemen and actively involved in BLM Grazing and Multiple use advisory Boards, a Forest Advisory Board, and was Secretary of the Grazing Association for a long time. Verla Sommers, their mother, was an active ranchwoman who assisted with all the chores in addition to raising the children. She was passionate about the land and about the history of the area. Verla was involved in the Green River Valley Cowbelles, Sublette County Historical Society, Green River Valley Museum, and the Wyoming State Historical Society. Bud passed away in 2000, while Verla passed away in 2006. Their legacy and vision for the land lives on in their children today.

Jonita has been involved in working the cattle since she was old enough to handle a horse. She assisted in all items needed on the ranch and has spent many hours riding “The Drift” and can describe every knoll and bend on the trail. Jonita graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Arts from the University of Wyoming in 1977 and completed her Masters Degree in Behavioral Disabilities in 1982 at the University of Wisconsin.

During 1990, Jonita developed some health problems which precluded her from rigorous activity but still cooks branding meals and ensures that the creditors are paid. Like many families, Jonita worked off the ranch

teaching in Rock Springs, Big Piney and La Barge for 26 years. The subjects were varied and included: elementary and special education, middle school reading, math, language, reading of all grade levels, Title 1 teacher and English Language Learners in High School. Jonita’s extracurricular activities in the school district included being the History Day Coach from 1985-2011, when she recently retired. She has enabled 40 young adults to attend and compete in National History Day and has been a judge for the national competition three times.

Albert Pomeroy Sommers, III, generally known as Albert, handles the day to day operations of the ranch. He calves the cows, bottle feeds those who need it, moves the herd, irrigates, coordinates with federal agencies, fixes fence, maintains equipment, harvests hay, and all other ranch duties as assigned. He tallies the records at the end of the year and monitors the financial health of the operation. Albert received his degree from the University of Wyoming with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering with an emphasis in bioengineering in 1981. Albert remained a bachelor until he met Sue at a local BLM meeting in the 1990’s. Albert has the federal government to thank for meeting his wife. Sue helps with various aspects of the ranch too, though is not a partner in the operation as she is an artist running a full-time business out of their home. The ranch employs one full-time employee for assistance in the myriad of things that have to be done.



Albert and Jonita, Tosi Creek, 1981



Albert, Jonita, Sue and Verla

Describe three innovative stewardship practices that have had the most impact on the ranch.

Doing More

Perpetual Stewardship

Albert and Jonita believe the key to their current stewardship is the continuation of their family’s stewardship that was present long before they were born. They honor this heritage by using the resource wisely, providing periods of rest while taking care not to push the resource past its’ limit.

Albert and Jonita have no heirs to continue their family’s rich ranching history and attendant to that fact is a deep concern for the future of the lands which have been their life. With the desire to preserve the land as their family has known it, Albert and Jonita enrolled their land into a Perpetual Conservation Easement with the Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Trust Fund in 2010. They conserved over 1,700 acres of land along the Green River in conjunction with their friend and neighbor, Maggie Miller of Grindstone Cattle Company. This combined easement, totaling 19,000 acres, was historic in nature, at the time being the largest private land easement completed in Wyoming.

The conservation easement was made possible by and a response to Sublette County’s rapid change in population and gas development over the past 15 years. Many historic agriculture lands succumbed to subdivision – a financial decision on the part of past owners. Albert and Jonita selected an easement as the tool to provide enough security for the family so that they could continue the ranching operation without having to consider the option of subdividing portions of the ranch. The choice has allowed them to eventually turn the land over to the next generation, secure in the knowledge that others with a commitment to ranching and land stewardship will follow.

In addition, the Sommers’ wanted to continue the practice of allowing the public to enjoy the Green River. In partnership with the Grindstone Cattle Company, they have granted five miles of a walk-in fishing easement that all people can enjoy for now and into the future. They have also contributed to the preservation of historic ranch buildings through donation of easement, buildings, and the dollars it takes to return them to a condition illustrating a historic era. Teepee rings and a medicine wheel that occupy a place on their ranch have also been preserved. Also, they boast the Sommers Bridge that is listed in the national historical register that spans the Green River near the headquarters, which is the only one constructed this way in the entire state. Connection with the land, its’ history and rich natural resources are important for many, and this ranch is able to provide that experience now and into the future.

Informed Stewardship

A quick evaluation of the Sommers ranch private lands will quickly reveal that the ranch is long on hay and short on pasture. BLM and USFS summer grazing is an integral part of the ranch forage base. The cattle are run on



the grazing allotments “in common” meaning that cattle from several ranches are pooled together within an association to graze the allotment. Since the Sommers Ranch depends upon these summer grazing lands, the ranch is closely tied to the association. Whatever impacts those on the association, impacts the ranch. Albert, being a proactive steward and active member of the Upper Green River Cattle Association, initiated and leads a cooperative permittee range monitoring program on the expansive Upper Green River forest allotment. This voluntary program, while a considerable time investment for Albert, has documented the stewardship maintained on the allotment for generations. Monitoring has highlighted the improvements made to the land and allowed this group to address issues that have arisen threatening the Association and the Sommers ranch. The program aids in making decisions with the Forest Service on what will improve the range, cattle distribution or tuning the grazing system. Through monitoring, they have a proactive means of managing grazing that allows a look at landscape in a scientific manner. The monitoring program has been able to solidify and provide the necessary documentation of the positive impacts resulting from the management strategies the ranchers are employing and ensuring access to federal lands for grazing activity. While monitoring they are always asking, are things being done to benefit the land and the cattle? Albert acknowledges learning a tremendous amount about rangeland

management through this process. Wistfully, Albert shares his wish that 50 years ago, before the development of the extensive pasture system, the Forest Service would have had the quality and volume of data he has now. Certainly that land management decision and subsequent management has made a positive impact on these systems, but no one can prove it!

Recognizing the benefits of the monitoring program on the forest, Albert has extended the monitoring programs to encompass the BLM and private lands he grazes. The current sage-grouse issues prompted Albert to initiate cooperative permittee monitoring on the Mesa Common BLM grazing allotment in 2010. The impact of sage-grouse conservation has a large influence on how our public land is operated and is of large importance to the ranching community as a whole. Albert is interested in documenting how grazing can fit with the sage-grouse and their habitat needs and is less concerned about public perception. At the recommendation of NRCS and as a component of his conservation easement, Albert initiated a formal monitoring system on his private lands in 2010. With these additions, Albert is the driving force behind the monitoring of over 190,000 acres which equate to 6% of Sublette County.

The success of the monitoring programs Albert is involved in, the suc-

cess of other Cooperative Permittee Monitoring programs, and the fact that Albert was a member of the team who initially conceived and developed the program led to Albert sharing the honor of receiving the National Rangeland Management Award for Cooperative Permittee Monitoring from the US Forest Service in 2007.

Community Stewardship

To invest in one's community is noble, to dedicate much of your life to outside interests is admirable. Albert and Jonita have both been dedicated to organizations that promote their local and state interests. Jonita has a passion for history and is known widely for her knowledge about the Upper Green River Valley and its' past. She has authored over 20 articles and has collaborated on seven books about the rich history of this valley. She has worked on projects with the Green River Valley Museum that includes the Coal Mine, the Halfway Post Office and numerous others in the Green River Valley, the Brand Project, and the Green River Valley Chuckwagon and has provided many pictures in the Museum located in Big Piney. Jonita saved a desk out of the original schoolhouse on the Price property where fisherman had been removing them for years. When the schoolhouse was donated and restored to the Green River Valley Museum, Jonita provided the desk that she had saved years before. Her passion for and her work documenting this valley's history has incredible impact. They say that, “To understand the present and look toward the future, you must understand the past.” Jonita uses this as a guiding principle for the family decisions and she won't let you forget it!

Albert's leadership and respect in the local as well as statewide community is well established and recognized. Sought after for his thoughtfulness, value set, and proven leadership, Albert currently serves on the Wyoming Livestock Board, the Governor's Brucellosis Coordination Team, the local Sage-Grouse Working Group and is president of the Upper Green River Cattle Association. These simply add to the bottom of a long listing of community service. The time he shares with others promoting the ranching way of life is immense and well-received. Both siblings' investment in other people strengthens their community and sense of purpose. This passion not only benefits the Som-

mers' legacy but touches and assists a large swath of the Wyoming population.

The Sommers Ranch commitment to history and historic preservation is apparent and it is clear that it has been Jonita's passion. Another proud accomplishment is the ranch's contribution to and involvement in the Green River Valley Cattleman's Association's “Catch a Calf Program”. The program is designed to partner a rancher with a young person to establish a relationship as well as educate and support Sublette County youth. The ranch has sponsored five calves to local teens, four of which earned the title of Grand Champion at the Sublette County Fair. The ranch was one of the first donors the year the program was established. Verla Sommers, Albert and Jonita's mother was always on the willing donor list and an ardent supporter – one more example of the family's commitment to community service.



Left: Albert and Association member, Garley Swain, Tepee Creek, 1998



Sharing the Land

The Sommers’ ancestors’ guiding principles laid the foundation deep for their future generations. Albert and Jonita’s father was fond of repeating, “If you take care of the land, it will take care of you”. This ranch takes that motto to heart. Their respect and desire to provide for various habitats on their property benefit a multitude of wildlife species including mule deer, sage-grouse, moose, pronghorn and migrating waterfowl. Their land also provides the open space needed to run a healthy livestock herd and provide for some of the many niches less glamorous wildlife species need. Albert was one of the first participants in the Brucellosis Risk Reduction program in Sublette County under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program in 2007. This program promotes practices to aid producers in reducing their risk of transmitting brucellosis from elk to cattle. Albert was instrumental in supporting the program and encouraging other ranchers to apply. Sommers Ranch Partnership has been involved in the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to replace a fence that was problematic to wildlife to cross with a fence that is designed to allow for large ungulate movement.

Sage-grouse are a species that promotes an intense response in Wyoming today and Albert believes that of all the sensitive species the ranch works with and around, the

“If you take care of the land, it will take care of you.”
-Bud Sommers



Rita Donham photo

Sage-grouse has been the most perplexing issue. This species happens to have been one of Albert’s favorites long before they were subject to so much attention. Albert will confess to being a scientist at heart, believing the best way to handle information and work with sensitive species is to have credible, scientific information. He is concerned about the species’ status across the range, noting there are many factors contributing to this, some of which humans can’t control. Private land owners have the closest connection to the lands in their operation, and Albert recognizes the need to work with federal land management agencies and others to provide as much information as possible.

Albert is always willing to listen to another’s point of view and is open to ideas. He is contemplative as he learns new information and is consistently striving to become an informed member of the public. Albert was approached by the Game and Fish during the winter of 2010 to assess whether his property could help somehow with the recent mule deer decline of the Mesa Herd. Albert listened to the concerns and elected to implement a legume seedling adjacent to a ditch to provide feed for both mule deer and sage-grouse. He is in the process of working with the Game and Fish and NRCS on determining the species selection along with timing of planting. The Conservation Plan developed by Albert in 2009 with the assistance of

The Sommers Ranch Partnership Goals are:

- Maintain an economically viable agricultural operating unit as a working ranch
- Maintain/enhance sage-grouse and ungulate habitat using livestock as a tool while identifying benefits of their ranching operation to wildlife habitat
- Balance wildlife needs with the need for economic sustainability
- Preserve open space and prevent any conversion of upland range to cropland
- Work with WY Game and Fish and NRCS on any future sagebrush treatments to ensure that the design is completed to benefit sage-grouse
- Ensure that all new fence construction will be done with wildlife in mind



the NRCS process “allowed me to take a closer look at the operation and get a succinct document and area maps within a voluntary setting. You can gain a better handle of your operation when you get a different viewpoint of your land.” Albert believes ranchers need to understand that they have a resource that is not just for cattle, but also for wildlife. While the agriculture industry should capitalize on the abundant wildlife resource we have today in order to continue ranching, care must be taken to not let wildlife overshadow the livelihood of a cattle producer. Wildlife and livestock production can be integrated for economic viability and sustained ecosystems.

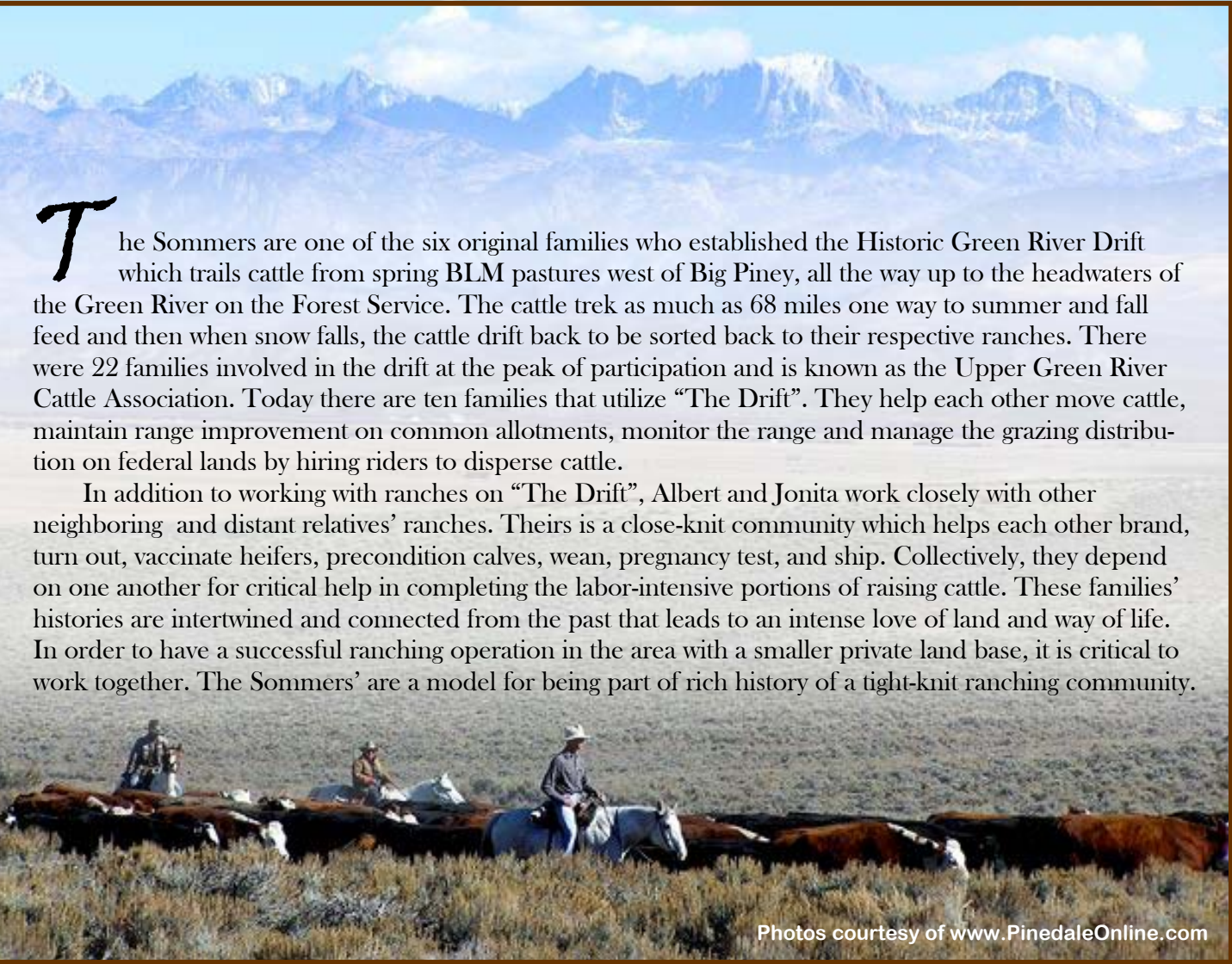
Never far from some species of concern, the Sommers Ranch cattle co-exist on the forest allotment with gray wolves and grizzly bears. Albert is proud that he and other ranchers successfully published an article in the prestigious Journal of Wildlife Management, documenting the financial costs Upper Green River ranchers incur as result of large carnivore reintroduction. It is very rare that lay people would manage that feat. Coordination with different agencies and timely communication is essential in caring for herds and responding to large predators that become accustomed to livestock as a food source. The issues involving sensitive species are complex, requiring time and patience to work through, but these issues add another chapter in the history of “The Drift”. Bud Sommers, Albert and Jonita’s father, would gently remind the kids that, “Those deer were here before us.” when a perceived conflict with wildlife arose. Maintenance of a healthy ranch means an appreciation and responsibility for stewardship of the species that have existed long before the area was settled. The Sommers’ actions demonstrate that they’ve integrated ecosystem goals into their management while maintaining a cow-calf operation.

“Those deer were here before us.”
-Bud Sommers



Describe any unique or extraordinary information concerning the family or business that the media or other interest groups would enjoy learning about.

The Drift



Give the criteria listed above, describe any other factors the review panel should take into consideration.

Accomplishments To Be Proud Of

Sommers Ranch Partnership was awarded the Centennial Ranch Award in 2007, marking one hundred years of operation in the Upper Green River Valley. In 2009, the ranch headquarters was listed on the Federal Register of Historic Places as a Historic Ranch Site. The Sommers’ have donated an easement to Sublette County Historical Society to accompany the donation of five buildings (with a potential for two more) and they have provided the funds to restore the original house of their grandparents. Plans for the homestead include an open house for Labor Day Weekend 2011 and then open to the public daily starting in the summer 2012.

In addition, Jonita has worked with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to nominate the Green River Drift Trail for a place on the National Historic Register. This process was started in 2009 with a site visit scheduled in September of this year to evaluate the merits of the application by SHPO. If SHPO concurs, they will forward on the nomination to the National Level for consideration. The history of The Drift and the settling of the area are integral to each of the private ranches in the Upper Green River Valley. By establishing this route as a historic property, they are further documenting part of this area’s history for all to learn about it.

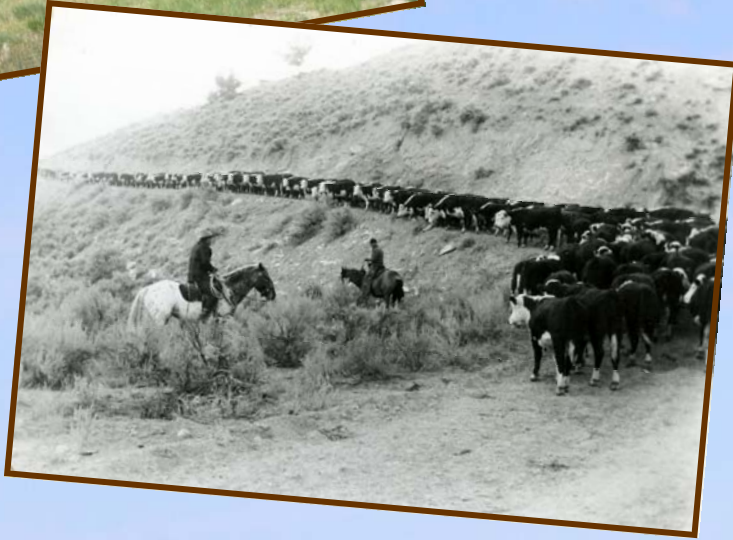


- Albert:**
- Board of Directors, Wyoming Stock Growers Association (2007- present)
 - Upper Green River Basin Sage-Grouse Local Work Group
 - Brucellosis Coordination Team (2003 – present)
 - Sublette County Planning and Zoning Board - 6 years as Chairman (2002-2011)
 - Wyoming Stockgrowers’ Executive Committee
 - Invasives Task Force founding member
 - BLM District V Multiple Use Advisory Board
 - President of the Upper Green River Valley Cattle Association since 1994
 - The Governor’s Tri-state Grizzly Bear Committee for Development of the Conservation Strategy
 - WY State Sage-Grouse Working Group
 - Green River Cattlemen’s Association – Served as President, Secretary, Treasurer and Board Member (1981-2000)
 - Extension Advisory Committee member for county and area
 - Original participant in the Green River Basin Advisory Group Organizational Meetings
 - Ranchland Succession Program Steering Committee, Wyoming Stock Growers Agricultural Land Trust
 - Committee member to develop initial protocol for permittee monitoring on the Bridger National Forest
 - Landowner of the Year - Wyoming Game and Fish – Pinedale Region - 2001

- Jonita:**
- Green River Valley Museum – Founding Member
 - Sublette County Historical Society Board (2 years)
 - Sublette County Artists Guild (1988-present)
 - District History Day Coordinator for 10 years
 - National History Day Judge - 3 occasions
 - Green River Cowbells – Vice President for many years, member since a teen.
 - Sublette County Sporting Association – Treasurer (1981-1985)
 - Sublette County Barrel Racing Club – Instructor 1980-1985
 - Assisted with High School Rodeos
 - Treasurer – University of Wyoming Rodeo Club - 3 years
 - Wyoming and National Cattlewomens’ Association
 - Wyoming State Historical Society
 - Wyoming Stockgrowers Association
 - Green River Valley Cattlemen’s Association, scholarship committee
 - Big Piney Library Board
 - BLM Pinedale Anticline Working Group Historical/Cultural Task Force Member
 - Wyoming History Day Teacher of Merit – 2008
 - WY State Historical Society – Historic Award for Green River Drift Book published in 1994
 - Mathematics Teacher Award (1992)
 - Association for Direct Instruction Excellence in Education Award in 1996 (National Award)
 - Wyoming Council for Social Studies – Wyoming Coordination for National History Day 1990



Sommers Ranch Partnership
P.O. Box 266
Pinedale, WY 82941
307-367-4756
albert@sommersranch.com



Nominated by:
Sublette County Conservation District
and Pinedale NRCS Field Office
P.O. Box 647
Pinedale, WY 82941
307-367-2257 sccd@sublettecd.com

