



## Field school for cultural documentation: Jackson Hole dude ranching traditions

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**Abstract** A two-week field school in cultural documentation and folklife provided training in ethnographic methods, with a focus on researching dude ranching traditions in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Eleven students and five faculty worked with the Triangle X Ranch in Grand Teton National Park to conduct 24 interviews with members of the Turner family (who founded and manage the ranch), employees, and guests, and to document buildings, landscapes, and activities on the ranch. Guests and employees value the genuine hospitality of the Turners, and the fact that the Triangle X is one of the few remaining old-style dude ranches that used to be numerous in the valley.

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### Introduction

This project was a two-week ethnographic field school on cultural documentation focusing on dude ranching traditions in Grand Teton National Park and Jackson Hole, Wyoming; it was held from July 30 to August 11, 2017. The purpose of the field school was to train students in interviewing and photography best practices, and other ethnographic documentation techniques, and to create a record of the contemporary culture, folklife, and traditions of dude ranching, specifically on the Triangle X Ranch, the last operating dude ranch in GTNP (Fig. 1). The field school was jointly organized and sponsored by the University of Wyoming, Utah State University, and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress; eleven graduate and undergraduate students from UW and USU attended.

All folklore research is based in fieldwork, and learning the skills and philosophy of ethnographic work is fundamental to success in the discipline. Observation, participant-observation, interviewing and audio recording, documentary photography, ethics, writ-

ing field notes, and organizing materials for archival deposit are all aspects of fieldwork that were taught in this course. Combining readings and classroom instruction with hands-on training, students learned best practices and use of documentary equipment, practiced interviews, and took field trips to cultural sites, including the Craig Thomas Visitor Center in the park, attended presentations by GTNP Cultural Resources Branch staff, toured the Bar BC Dude Ranch property, toured the Triangle X Ranch with Harold Turner, and visited the White Grass Ranch to see a presentation on its history and engage in conversations with an oral history class being held there.

In addition to training a new generation of folklore fieldworkers, the intensive two-week course also resulted in documentation of an important aspect of traditional life in Jackson Hole—dude ranching, also known as guest ranching—and provided the GTNP Cultural Resources Branch with information to enhance their interpretive programs on dude ranching in the park and the valley. Our focus was on contemporary aspects of dude ranching, which will expand and



**Figure 1.** Triangle X corrals (photo by Andrea Graham)

enrich the already well-documented history of ranching and guest ranching in the region (Borne, 1983; Clayton, 2014). It also deepened our understanding of the intangible aspects of culture (work skills, stories, family traditions, language) that are tied to tangible buildings and landscape features of dude ranching and that are an important part of Grand Teton's heritage.

## Methods

The eleven students were divided up into four teams, three with three members and one with two, who worked together conducting interviews and fieldwork, taking turns in the roles of interviewer, recordist, and photographer. Two of the teams interviewed members of the extended Turner family, one interviewed employees of the Triangle X, and one interviewed guests. On Thursday of the first week, after several days of classroom training, each group was given names and phone numbers of people to contact to set up interviews, and by Friday morning most of them had several meetings scheduled. From Friday through the following Wednesday students and faculty were busy with interviews, downloading digital recordings and photos, creating logs and metadata for the archive, doing transcriptions, and writing field notes.

The schedule for the field school was disrupted somewhat by the fact that the building we stayed in at the AMK Research Station was discovered to be home to a large colony of bats. We had to find alter-



**Figure 2.** Randy Williams interviewing Harold Turner (photo by Jeannie Thomas)

nate housing, and most of the students and faculty had to get a series of rabies shots, which consumed valuable time originally planned for class sessions and fieldwork, and made communication and coordination difficult. Nevertheless, the students continued with their research and fieldwork, and accomplished almost everything the faculty had set out as goals and products for the field school. Some elements had to be cut short, and we had to cancel the public presentation at the AMK Ranch scheduled for the final day, but the faculty members were extremely pleased with the students' enthusiasm for and commitment to field research.

Students and faculty completed 24 interviews, with digital audio recordings and accompanying photographs. These included twelve members of the Turner family (Harold Turner was interviewed twice; Fig. 2), six guests (two were joint interviews with married couples), and seven employees (Fig. 3). Students attended and documented three regular events at the Triangle X—the Sunday evening welcome barbecue for incoming guests, the Monday night square dance, and the Tuesday evening talk on the history of the ranch. Several students and faculty also documented the early-morning running of the ranch



**Figure 3.** CJ Guadarrama and Bethany Budge setting up to interview head wrangler William Dunn (photo by Amelia Mathews-Pett)

horses from their overnight pasture near the Snake River up to the corrals, and the arrival of trail riders after their morning and afternoon rides. The buildings and landscapes of the ranch were also photographed.

Because the originally scheduled public presentation of our field results at the AMK Ranch had to be cancelled, we arranged for a presentation on November 18 at the Teton County Library in Jackson. Lisa Gabbert, Randy Williams, and student Amelia Mathews-Pett from Utah State presented a summary of the research and the findings from the field school, and Harold Turner added his reflections; Andrea Graham and Rebekah Westrup were also scheduled to attend but snowy weather and closed roads prevented them from driving from Laramie. There were about 25 people in attendance, including members of the Turner family.

All of the digital audio interviews, transcripts, and photographs from the field school are available through an online archive hosted at Utah State University (Utah State University, 2017) (<http://digital.lib.usu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16944coll34>).

## Preliminary Results & Conclusions

Jackson Hole was settled fairly late in the history of the West, because it was difficult to access and the climate could be harsh. Early homesteaders soon learned that making a living by farming and ranch-

ing was extremely difficult, given the elevation and the long winters, and the lack of access to markets. But the scenery, hunting and fishing, and other outdoor recreation opportunities began attracting their friends, first of all, and then other visitors, and the idea of charging for accommodations, food, and guiding soon took hold. The first dude ranch in Jackson was the JY, founded in 1908. It was soon followed by the Bar BC in 1912, the White Grass, and many more, including the Triangle X in 1926, founded by the Turner family from Utah (Clayton, 2014; Daugherty, 1999; Righter, 2008; Triangle X Ranch, 2016).

The heyday of dude ranching was the 1920s and 30s, when wealthy Easterners would take the train out and spend the whole summer enjoying the scenery and weather, and the rustic but comfortable and relaxed hospitality (Burt, 1924; Rees, 2005). After a slowdown during World War II, dude ranching saw a resurgence in the 1950s as automobile and airline travel became easier and more affordable, and middle-class clientele could travel out West, although stays were usually just a week, instead of several months. Dude ranchers in general supported the establishment and expansion of Grand Teton National Park, because they knew that unspoiled scenery was the best hope for the future of the region and its economy. The business has seen a steady decline since the middle of the last century, as well as a shift to more resort-style amenities and less of a focus on horseback riding as the primary attraction. The Triangle X, however, has kept up the traditions of dude ranching with a focus on horseback riding, and the guests we interviewed all commented that this was the major attraction for them (Durkin and Durkin, 2017).

A number of the old ranches that were absorbed into Grand Teton Park were closed when the original owners' leases ran out. Some of them were demolished, and some buildings were moved to other locations in the park (Righter, 2014). Two of them, the White Grass and the Bar BC, are still in existence, and the White Grass has been restored as a training facility. There are hopes that the Bar BC can be restored as well.



**Figure 4.** Rebecca Goodson and Shelley Jones interviewing Amanda Turner (photo by Ross Garner)

The primary finding from our research is that the Turner family and the Triangle X are inextricably entwined, and no one can imagine one without the other. The Turners founded the ranch and have been managing it for 91 years, and their generous and genuine hospitality is the reason for its continuing success. The ranch was founded in 1926 by John S. and Maytie Turner, who came from Morgan, Utah, and bought several homesteads as the foundation of the Triangle X. Their son John Charles Turner, and his wife Louise Mapes Turner, built the ranch into the thriving business it remains today. Their three sons, Harold, John F., and Donald were the third generation on the ranch, and Harold and John are the managing partners today; Donald passed away in 2016. John lived in Washington D.C. for many years and served as director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under president George H.W. Bush. Harold has always lived on and managed the ranch (Triangle X Ranch, 2016).

The three Turner men had eight children between them, and all of the fourth generation of the family were raised on the ranch, helping with chores, guests, horses, and pack trips. Two of them—Harold’s son Robert and Donald’s son Lucas—are now the active managers of the operation. There are also members of the fifth generation of Turners, in their teens and twenties, working on the ranch today (Turner, 2017b).

Harold and John were born when horses were still

commonly used, and there was no electricity in the northern end of the valley; it took them two days to get to Jackson, and for several years they attended school at the ranch. The Triangle X was quite isolated, especially in winter, but it was also connected to the wider world through its guests. Kathryn Turner, John’s daughter and a visual artist living in Jackson, says of growing up on the ranch with her fourth-generation siblings and cousins, “It was very special and very unique. I think I didn’t realize how unique it was to grow up around all your cousins, and aunts and uncles, and grandparents. But I loved it. I loved it, loved it, loved it. For that reason, understandably, we are all really close” (Turner, 2017c). Other members of the fourth generation recalled the group of eight cousins building forts, playing in the creeks, working with horses and leading rides with guests, and occasionally getting into trouble with their escapades. Even in the 1970s they were fairly isolated, and attended school until high school in Moran.

During the summer season the ranch has about 70 employees on staff, many of whom are former guests. College-age men and women work as wranglers, housekeepers, dining room servers, and float guides, and many first came to the ranch as children with their families. Year-round employees include cooks, office staff, and some wranglers. As Harold Turner explains, “We’re typically a guest ranch. Dude ranch, I’d prefer. And we don’t open until the end of May, the last week in May, because of the weather. We close the ranch the tenth of October, because of the weather, even though we hunt until the end of November. And so it’s a very seasonal operation. However, to get key employees anymore, you have to have year-round work. So we started a winter business back in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s. And so we’re open from the day after Christmas until about the middle of March” (Turner, 2017b). There are also family members, such as Robert’s wife Amanda (Fig. 4) and Lucas’s wife Lauren, who work in the business end of the operation. Both of them originally came as guests, came back as summer workers, and eventually married into the family.

Summertime stays at the ranch are for a week, and include all meals, daily horseback rides, barbecues, a



**Figure 5.** Triangle X horses and the Teton Range (photo by Jeannie Thomas)

square dance, and other activities. Guests stay in private cabins, and have access to the common spaces at the main house. Many ranch guests have been coming for decades, and most book their stays for the following year before they leave. The guests that we interviewed all said that the horseback riding was the main attraction for them, and that they liked the fact that the Triangle X remained unchanged from year to year, and preserved the traditions of dude ranching in the valley. There are no TVs in the cabins, no wireless internet, and no spa-like amenities such as swimming pools and massages, which some former dude ranches have adopted.

Long-time guest Bob Durkin from Vermont says, “I found a totally different ranch that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the country, or the world. There’s no other ranch like this, not just because it’s in the park, the National Park Service, but this is really a living history museum. You get to come and live it. You don’t ride a horse for two hours. Or a day. You live it, and you live it the way it used to be” (Durkin and Durkin, 2017). Guests also commented that the ranch provided unique experiences for children, who quickly make friends and are allowed to explore and play with little supervision. They also have their own horseback rides, separate from their parents, and a full program of activities that was founded by John Turner’s wife Mary Kay.

All of the guests also said it was the warm hospitality of the Turner family that makes the Triangle X special, and that it would not be the same experience without the feeling of being welcomed into someone’s home.

One of the characteristics of dude ranches in general is that the owners live on the property. Kathryn Turner says, “That’s an enduring part of the Triangle X. I would say it’s probably true about most dude ranches, you know. At a dude ranch you really are opening your home to people, and they become family. That’s absolutely true” (Turner, 2017c).

In addition to hosting guests at the ranch, the Triangle X has always had a brisk business in pack trips and guiding hunters in the fall. They have horses and mules used for those trips, in addition to the 150 or so horses used for trail rides at the home ranch. They also raise hay for winter feed at a ranch in Pavilion, and move most of their horses there for the winter months when the weather in Jackson is harshest. A separate float trip business is now a major part of the Triangle X operation as well.

The founder of the Triangle X, John S. Turner, sold the property to the Snake River Land Company in the late 1920s, unaware that it was backed by John D. Rockefeller with the intent of donating land to the Park Service. The Turner family kept a lease on the land and continued to operate the dude ranch. The property became part of the Jackson Hole National Monument in 1943, and an expanded Grand Teton National Park in 1950, with the understanding that any Turner family members living at the time could continue to operate the business—that included Harold and John. In 2011 the National Park Service opened the Triangle X concession to bid, and the Turner family sued them, claiming that the 1950 agreement meant the family had rights to continue running the dude ranch. They

also submitted a bid, and received the new contract, but it expires in 2025 and they are concerned that another concessionaire could take over at that time.

The Turners and their guests are of the opinion that the family should have special consideration in the bidding process because of their long history on the ranch, and the personal nature of dude ranching—it is more than just a business, it is a home and a way of life. As Harold Turner explains, “There’s very, very few ranches that are really successful, that aren’t being run by a generation of dude ranchers. A ranch—any dude ranch—takes on the persona of the managers; so that’s why every ranch is different” (Turner, 2017*b*).

## Future Work

We realized that while Western ranching culture in general has been well-documented and celebrated, there has been very little documentation of contemporary dude ranching traditions and occupational skills. Dude ranching has been an important part of Wyoming’s culture and economy since the turn of the nineteenth century, but the number of traditional old-style ranches is decreasing every year; where there used to be over 30 dude ranches in Jackson Hole, now there are only about half a dozen.

An ongoing series of interviews, and documentation of ranch activities and landscapes, would be very important in understanding how dude ranching has changed, and how it continues to work in the twenty-first century. There are more interviews to be done at the Triangle X with family members, employees, and guests, since it is unique in being the only operating dude ranch in a national park. The Moosehead Ranch, which is an inholding in Grand Teton Park, and still operates as a traditional dude ranch, would be another rich research site. An even more ambitious project would include all the dude ranches in the state.

Another topic we have discussed with GTNP Cultural Resources staff is nominating the Triangle X to the National Register of Historic Places. The ranch has been surveyed in the past, and currently only the barn is listed on the National Register (Gabriel et al., 2014). Other buildings have been moved in

from other locations, or were considered to have been altered too much to retain their integrity as original structures. However, the ranch as a whole could be considered for nomination as a historic district, a cultural landscape, or a traditional cultural property.

According to the National Park Service, which manages the National Register, “A historic district possesses a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development.” A cultural landscape is “a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.” And a traditional cultural property is eligible for listing “based on its associations with the cultural practices, traditions, beliefs, lifeways, arts, crafts, or social institutions of a living community” (NPS, 1995, 1990).

In fact, a survey and report done in 2014 does recommend that the ranch is eligible for nomination as a historic district, and that since “the practice of relocating and repurposing buildings was part of the development of dude ranching and tourism within the park, the practice does not detract from the setting and design of the ranch.” Such a designation could possibly provide support for keeping management of the Triangle X in the Turner family, instead of opening it to competitive bidding from concessionaires.

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**Figure 6.** Field School students, faculty, and guests at the Bar BC Ranch, Grand Teton National Park (photo by Betsy Engle)

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