

Unique Range School Works

Brad Anseth

Among the over 50 rangeland related schools and tours happening over Montana every year, the Gallatin Valley Ag-Lenders Range School stands out.

"I'm not aware of any school just like this," says Carl Wambolt, the Extension Service's range specialist who covers the state. "There's a big difference between a school and a tour."

Tours tend to cover range improvements such as sagebrush spraying, spring developments, and seedlings that most ranchers know about. "We're a little more fundamental here. We start with a foundation of plant identification and move into range sites, conditions analysis, forage values, and grazing systems."

The Gallatin Valley Ag-Lenders Range school grew out of the State Ag-Lenders School which Don Ryerson of Montana State University, Bozeman, was asked to organize in 1964. "We Gallatin ag-lenders saw a need for the same kind of program for our customers, the ranchers," explains Wayne Gibson of First Security Bank in Bozeman.

The Gallatin Valley is one of Montana's most productive agricultural areas. Located in Gallatin County, northwest of Yellowstone National Park, the Valley is known for intensive irrigated hay, seed potato, small grain, dairy and beef cattle operations. Rangeland rings the Valley. Bozeman and Belgrade, towns 10 miles apart, form the nucleus for the agricultural community.

As an experiment in 1979, the school moved out of the Valley and into Park County, 40 miles east of Bozeman. The Gallatin Valley ag-lenders wanted to show ag-lenders in neighboring county their school and encourage a similar operation in the future.

A Gallatin Valley rancher whose ranch headquarters are in Belgrade brought the school to his Park County rangeland for two days. Stan Milesnick hosted 25 ranchers, several lenders, and a staff of seven on his summer rangeland in Park County.

Gibson and Milesnick worked together to get the first school going in the Valley four years ago. Basically, the rancher committee suggests areas to concentrate on and the ag-lenders put together the kind of program the ranchers want.

"Carl Wambolt's talk on rest-rotation grazing and pasture management got me thinking about doing something after the first year," Milesnick explains. "The more I looked at the plants on the ranch, the more I realized what potential was there. This school is quite an eye-opener."

The author is information officer, Soil Conservation Service, Bozeman, Montana.

Phil Brug, Bozeman, readily agrees. "Without something like this school, I would be operating in a vacuum. It feeds me information that I wouldn't seek or realize is available."

Unlike Milesnick, who graduated from Montana State



On a tour on the final day of the school, Stan Milesnick explains his rest-rotation grazing system. Two years ago a similar school showed him that he could increase his grass production through a grazing system.

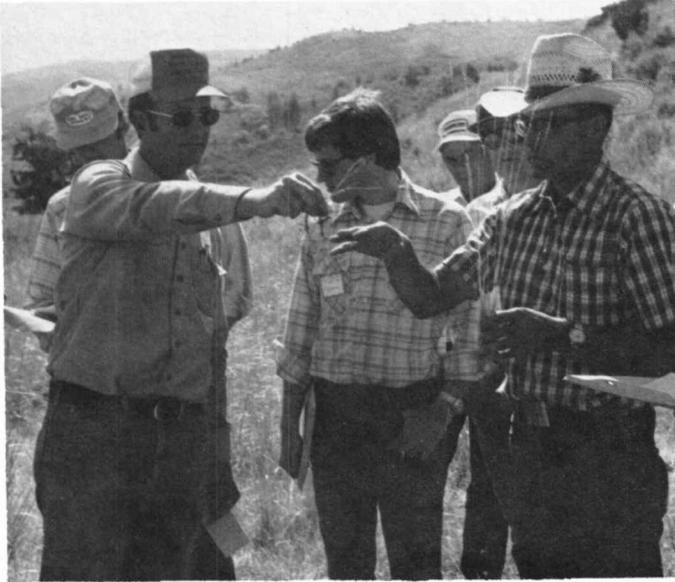
University at Bozeman with a degree in range, Brug didn't have a background in plants. He explains, "It (the school) is waking me up to range utilization. There is more to it than eating grass."

"I'm sold on range schools, especially for the younger guys, because it takes so many years to get the range back into condition once it has been abused," Milesnick stresses.

Explaining how his rest-rotation grazing system works on the last day of school Milesnick says, "We tried to make improvements here. We sprayed for sagebrush and weeds and dropped our herd numbers, but we never made any progress until two years ago when we entered into our rest-rotation grazing system."

He asked each rancher at the school to "go home and fence or find an area you can leave alone for a year. You will find you can produce twice as much forage."

During the school, the ranchers reviewed between 35 and 40 plants. Range specialists from Montana State University and



Carl Wambolt, Extension range specialist, holds a range plant while Gene Handl, Soil Conservation Service range conservationist, explains the different root systems. The two men were instructors at a range school sponsored by agricultural lending institutions around Montana's Gallatin Valley.

the Soil Conservation Service, with the group, discussed whether the plant would decrease or increase under consistent heavy use by livestock.

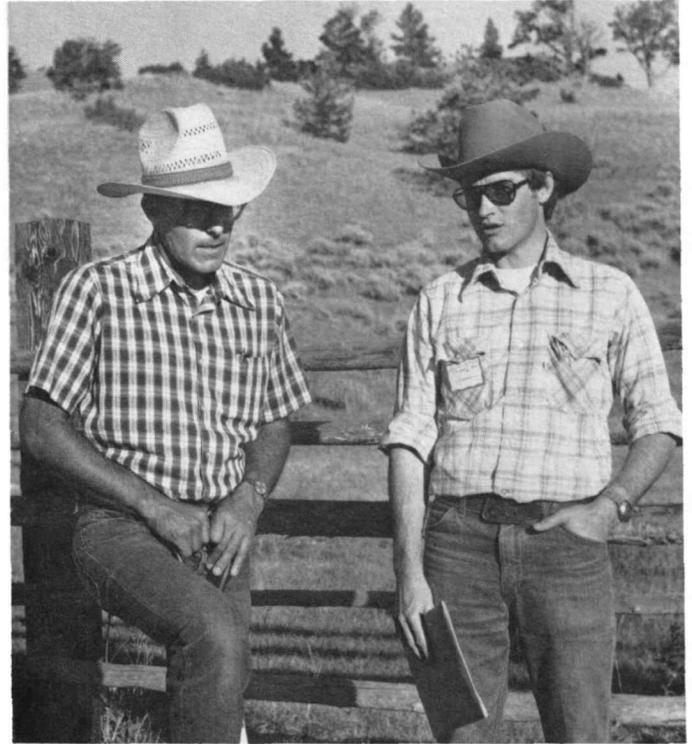
As the plants were discussed, other topics entered into the picture. Gene Handl, SCS range conservationist, explained that soils, climate, and topography will determine what kind of plants should be growing on a specific site. How far the plants have deviated from that potential because of grazing pressure or natural disasters is used to determine the condition of the rangeland.

Another instructor, Dennis Phillippi, SCS state range conservationist, explained the principles behind a grazing system. He said that varying the season a specific pasture is used and deferring its use or resting it for a full year will improve the vigor of the plants and allow the plants which decrease under heavy livestock grazing pressure to return to the site in a given period of time.

"The theory behind any grazing system is to help nature put back plants in the amount that existed originally," Phillippi explains. This is accomplished by regulating the time of year that the important species are grazed.

Gibson isn't sure the school has been established long enough to gauge its success. "Maybe we will be able to judge in 5 years, but right now I can say that we have a lot of ranchers trying a lot of new practices."

Milesnick, however, disagrees. He knows where to attribute his moving out on a rest rotation grazing system. "This school did it. It just brought things to a head; we started doing instead of



One benefit of the school was the chance for ranchers to exchange ideas among themselves and question the instructors and lenders after the school ended for the day. Gene Handl, (left) visits with Dennis McMillan, ag-rep at First National Bank, Bozeman.

just thinking.

"I've noticed a lot of changes. This grazing system, along with an improved breeding program, upped our weaning weights an average of 70 pounds."

Sponsors of the 1979 school include First National Bank, First Security Bank, Montana Bank, Traveler's Insurance Company, Production Credit Association, and Federal Land Bank in Bozeman. Montana Bank in Belgrade and First Security Bank and First National Park Bank in Livingston also sponsor the school. ●

Range Specialist, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, to conduct educational programs in range management with headquarters at College Station. PhD in range management is required as well as 2 years experience in Extension or comparable teaching and the ability and desire to work with people. Contact *Dr. Delbert Block, Personnel Officer, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Rm. 104 K, System, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843.*