



Ewing-Snell Ranch

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

The Bighorn Canyon Research Center at Ewing-Snell Historic Ranch is in the heart of Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. This four-season, 1,300-square-foot facility includes dormitory space for visiting researchers (with full kitchen, bath, and dining area), office space, and a conference room. This historic ranch is on the National Register of Historic Places, borders the 33,000-acre Pryor Mountain National Wild Horse Range (BLM, NPS, and USFS), and is next to the Pretty Creek Archeological Site (also on the National Register of Historic Places), making it ideal for research access to study sites.



The Ewing-Snell house.

History

Ewing-Snell Ranch is one of four historic 1890s ranches that are being restored at Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (NRA). Located north of the Montana-Wyoming border, it was one of the first ranches in the area and is typical of Dryhead Country ranches from the 1890s to the 1940s. Erastus T. Ewing came to the area searching for gold, but stayed on as a cattle rancher and constructed what was then called Layout Creek Ranch in 1896. By 1898, there were enough prospectors and squatters in the area to establish a post office on the ranch and a mail route. Ewing and his son served as postmasters for the Ewing, Montana, post office while it remained on the ranch until 1906. After Erastus Ewing died in 1910, his family sold the ranch.

In 1920, Philip Snell purchased the ranch, which he expanded to 640 acres in 1929 and 1941 under the Homestead Act of 1862. The Snell family ran cattle and planted wheat, oats, hay, an orchard, and a garden. Water from Layout Creek was used for irrigation. As the Dryhead



Philip and Alma Snell (front), who purchased the ranch in 1920.

Country population declined, the Snell family requested that the school be relocated to their ranch. During 1945–1947, school was conducted in the log shop which had been converted into a school house. The family remained on the ranch until Snell’s death in 1950.

Newell Sorenson, whose family had been tenants on the ranch since the late 1950s, bought it in 1964. The Sorensens spent two years improving the ranch prior to moving in. Renovations included repartitioning the house and installing a wrought iron fence around part of the yard, a bridge over Layout Creek, and a cement porch on the south side of the house. In 1968, the Bureau of Reclamation purchased the ranch from the Sorensens for inclusion in Bighorn Canyon NRA.

Current Use

The Ewing-Snell ranch house, school house, and barn were listed on the National Register in 1977. The house interior has been remodeled several times in the past 100 years, including a 1975 conversion for use as employee housing for Bighorn Canyon NRA. In 2003, the interior was remodeled so that the building could serve as a science center with camp facilities and a classroom, but the exterior has been restored to preserve its historic integrity. A gravity flow irrigation and fire system has been installed and natural resource personnel are completing revegetation work. Electrical power is provided by an off-grid photovoltaic and wind generation system. The Ewing-Snell Ranch facilities are now used to host field schools, training sessions, and interagency meetings, and to house researchers. Cultural landscape restoration now underway at Ewing-Snell includes the reestablishment of the Snell apple orchard, building repair, and preparing the school house to potentially be used as an interpretive center. For information on the availability of Bighorn Canyon Research Center facilities, call 307-548-2251.

