



White Grass Ranch

OVERVIEW

After starting as a cattle ranch in 1913, White Grass Ranch went on to become one of the longest-operating dude ranches in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It helped set the standards for dude ranching in Jackson Hole as part of the growing western tourism industry in the early 20th century. Most of White Grass operated as a dude ranch through 1985, when property ownership transferred to Grand Teton National Park (GTNP). In 1990, the White Grass Dude Ranch Historic District, which includes 30 acres and 13 log buildings, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places because it exemplifies the local development of dude ranches from cattle ranches and the construction of rustic log buildings by settlers.

Although it is considered the most intact historical dude ranch in Jackson Hole, the structures at White Grass had deteriorated during 20 years of disuse. In 2006, historical preservation crews began stabilizing the buildings to prevent further deterioration and, through a partnership with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, workers hope to eventually rehabilitate all the structures so that they can be used as a center for the preservation and rehabilitation of other historic park structures in Greater Yellowstone.

After originating in the 1880s as slang for city slicker, the term “dude” became associated with Easterners who vacationed in the West, and then with the men who worked at the ranches where the Eastern city slickers stayed. Although the Homestead Act of 1862 enabled settlers to claim 160-acre parcels of unoccupied land, financial considerations caused many homesteaders to turn from raising cattle and crops to dude ranching. The first dude ranch in Jackson Hole was probably the JY, where Burt and Louis Joy began boarding visitors in 1908. Four years later, Burt Joy broke off and formed the Bar BC ranch with Horace Carncross.

In 1913, wrangler Harold Hammond and a Bar BC dude, George Tucker Bispham, merged their adjacent 160-acre homesteads. They chose the location three miles west of Moose because of the natural meadow located on the western base of Buck Mountain at an elevation of 6,720 feet (2,048 m). Hammond and Bispham cleared sagebrush from the meadow to graze cattle, but in 1919 they began operating White Grass as a dude ranch, the third in Jackson Hole, and began using the pasture for horses, too. Lodgepole pines from the surrounding area were used to construct log buildings on the property.

More than 60 dude ranches were operating in Wyoming and Montana in 1926, when the Dude Ranchers’ Association was founded in Cody, Wyoming, to

standardize the practices of the growing industry. Financial difficulties compelled the sale of the White Grass Ranch to the Bar BC in 1924, but Hammond continued to manage White Grass and made many improvements, including the construction of a concrete-lined swimming pool and expansion of the facilities to accommodate 25 guests. For a daily rate of \$11, guests could hunt, fish, go horseback riding, and participate in pack trips. The relaxed dress code, if any, appealed to many guests who were accustomed to the formal atmosphere of hotels.

In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge began signing a series of executive orders that withdrew thousands of acres of public land from settlement by homesteaders, including some of the land that would later become part of the National Elk Refuge and Grand Teton National Park. In 1928, Hammond regained ownership of White Grass and further developed the property to accommodate 35 guests. In 1936, private baths were added to many of the cabins, though some guests continued to use outdoor privies and tin bathtubs requiring hand-delivered hot water. The main residence more than doubled in size when the front porch was enclosed and several wings were added to the house, increasing its capacity to 55 guests. The ranch had electricity, telephone service, and a rudimentary sewage system.

Dude ranches remained a significant part of the tourist industry in Jackson Hole until auto camps and hotels became more popular in the 1950s. In 1956, the NPS purchased nearly all of the 320-acre ranch from Hammond’s son-in-law, Frank Galey, for \$165,000 and a life estate. The White Grass continued to be managed as a dude ranch until Galey’s death in 1985, after which the remaining property became part of GTNP.

The buildings in the historic district—the main lodge, the Hammond cabin, 10 guest cabins, and a building that was used for showers and laundry—were built in a style referred to as dude ranch vernacular and situated in an oval. These 13 log structures have not been used since 1985 and were seriously deteriorated and structurally unsafe. The utilities that were used when the dude ranch was in operation (electricity, telephone service, a water catchment system, and a rudimentary sewage system) are no longer functional.

Roofs and porches have been shored up in recent years to prevent collapse. Plastic has been placed on roofs to prevent further water damage to the interiors, and doors and windows have been boarded to deter people and animals from entering. Rehabilitation began in 2006 with the stabilizing of the walls and roofs of the main lodge and



the Hammond cabin by historical preservation crews.

Lodgepole pine, subalpine fir, aspen, western serviceberry, forbs and graminoids such as elk sedge, sulfur buckwheat, low sage, and some nonnative plants are growing around the buildings. Except for a large sagebrush-free pasture, the landscape features that defined where the horses were kept and characterized the land as a dude ranch are no longer extant. These include a barn, buck and rail fencing, corral and gates, post and rail fencing, and cattle guards. Slight, grass-filled depressions are the only remaining evidence of the irrigation ditches used to flood the pastures. Social trails between the buildings are slightly visible, but mostly revegetated. On the property, but outside of the historic district, is a small cemetery with three markers. The ranch can be accessed by a gated dirt road from Death Canyon Road. The other two original access roads, including the main road used by ranch employees and guests, have naturally revegetated with lodgepole pines and other plants.

Grand Teton has at least 320 historic structures that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Many of them may become irreparable within the next few years, while only some of the more than 1,000 historic structures in Yellowstone National Park are considered to be in even fair condition. However, few people in these parks and the surrounding communities have the technical knowledge and skills needed to preserve, rehabilitate, and maintain historic structures. To develop the capacity to reduce this backlog, GTNP managers are working with the National Trust for Historic Preservation to rehabilitate the White Grass Ranch so that it can serve as part of the Western Center for Historic Preservation (WCHP). The National Trust for Historic Preservation is a private, nonprofit membership organization chartered by Congress in 1949 to provide leadership, education, advocacy, and resources to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize communities.

The WCHP will provide opportunities for NPS employees, volunteers, students, contractors, and other federal agency personnel to work with the WCHP crew on the White Grass buildings, learn how to restore historical rustic architecture that is characteristic of the northern Rocky Mountains, and provide preservation and construction services for National Historic Landmark buildings and other significant historical structures in Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks. To help disseminate information about historical preservation techniques and technology, the WCHP will also build partnerships with university-based Cooperative Ecosystem Studies Units (CESUs) and with the University of Wyoming-NPS Research Station at AMK Ranch, which has supported basic and problem-driven scientific field research in Greater Yellowstone since 1946. Field schools facilitated by CESUs or the University of Wyoming-NPS Research Station can provide assistance in conducting hands-on

preservation work and cultural resource studies, such as the completion of National Register nominations, historic structure reports, condition assessments, Historic American Building Survey (HABS) drawings, and archeological surveys.

All historic White Grass structures will be stabilized by historical preservation crews. The main carpentry and masonry shop and most of the preservation crew work, especially in the winter, will take place at the maintenance area of the park headquarters in Moose. The former shop building from the JY Ranch, which was donated to the National Park Service by the Rockefeller family in 2006, has been relocated to Moose, where it has been modified to serve as the base of operations for the WCHP.

Plans call for the main lodge at White Grass to be used for meeting space and the Hammond cabin to house a seasonal volunteer caretaker, community kitchen, and library. The former guest cabins will be rehabilitated to provide seasonal lodging for historical preservation workers or, potentially, researchers and students. The 2005 estimated cost of rehabilitating these buildings and bringing utilities to the site was \$1.7 million, of which the National Trust for Historic Preservation has pledged to raise \$950,000.

The White Grass facilities are expected to be open seasonally for up to seven months a year, with most activities taking place between late April and September. The ranch could initially accommodate 15 to 30 daytime users and may eventually support 12 to 15 overnight users, including a site manager. The facilities could also serve as a small, limited-use conference center for historical preservation topics. Care is also being taken to preserve habitat use by wildlife on the land surrounding the White Grass Ranch. Elk, which calve and migrate throughout the area, frequent the meadows in front of the ranch each autumn and provide impressive displays as they bugle and spar for mates.

Borne, L. R. 1983. *Dude Ranching: A Complete History*.

Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Daugherty, J. 1999. *A Place Called Jackson Hole: A Historic Resource Study of Grand Teton National Park*. Moose, Wyoming: Grand Teton Natural History Association. Also available online at http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/grte2/hrs.htm.

Western Center for Historic Preservation, White Grass Fact Sheet, April 17, 2006. https://www.nationaltrust.org/public_lands/White_Grass_Revised_Fact_Sheet_4_17_06.pdf

