





BY JOE FLANAGAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JET LOWE

HARDSCRABBLE

DREAM

*ranching the desert on the rim of
the grand canyon*

Brigham Young's exhortation to his people—to migrate south from the Salt Lake Basin—now seems more like prophecy than appeal. The Mormons, with characteristic efficiency and cohesiveness, thrived in agricultural communities throughout the Southwest. This is how they found themselves on the Arizona Strip, the rugged, arid, and unforgiving northwest corner of a state made up of red rock canyons, sagebrush, and wide open space.

CELEBRATING A DECADE **HALS** Historic American Landscapes Survey

LEFT: *Tassi Ranch, on the remote Arizona Strip.*

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THE REGION HAD LARGE EXPANSES OF GRASSLAND BUT FEW SOURCES OF WATER.

Determined ranchers were able to make a go of it, raising cattle and sheep, but the big Mormon farming communities, dependent on ambitious irrigation projects, were ultimately not able to get a lasting hold. It is the iconic American West—sagebrush and desert—beautiful but seemingly not a place where thousands of cattle could survive. Nonetheless, livestock became big business. When the Mormons left, others came, cattle barons and independents, hard and highly adaptive people whose temperament, one suspects, fed on the stark majesty of the place and the challenging nature of the land. The isolated ranches on the Strip became extremely self-sufficient.

In the far reaches of the Arizona desert, on a gentle slope amid the basin-and-range topography, there is a rare site that recalls this heritage: the remains of Tassi Ranch, which operated in these austere environs for eight decades. The Historic American Landscapes Survey of the National Park

ABOVE: *Panorama of cottonwood trees and the dry-laid stone ranch house.*

Service is in the midst of documenting the ranch and several others located in what is now Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument, one of the first landscape surveys to employ laser scanning, says project manager Chris Stevens. While lasers are commonly used to record buildings, landscapes tend to be a challenge because brush is often an obstacle to attempts to scan the land's contours.

Tassi Ranch is being documented as part of an inventory of the monument's cultural landscapes. Among the products of the documentation is a comprehensive history, which, with photographs and drawings, will become part of the HALS collection at the Library of Congress. Tassi, according to a park cultural landscape inventory, "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a rare surviving vernacular ranch site," its significance tied to its association with the development of cattle ranching on the Strip.



THE NAME HAS MURKY ORIGINS, PERHAPS ASSOCIATED WITH A NATIVE AMERICAN woman who once lived here, but it is not certain. Today, a series of low, stone structures occupy a grove of mature cottonwoods beside a seasonal stream bed known as Pigeon Wash. There is a house, a barn, and a corral. People lived and ranched here as recently as the late '90s. The National

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Park Service, after weighing the options, chose to preserve the cultural remains intact. What distinguishes Tassi amidst the endless miles of arid wilderness is the presence of water. There are several natural springs—a fact long known by Native Americans—frequented by Mormon wagon trains and others. The first sign of an attempt to settle this area was noted

in 1917, when a passerby delivering supplies to survey teams saw a stone house, a pasture, and an alfalfa patch. This was likely evidence of one Ed Thomas, whose story is now lost to history. But others took up sporadic residence at the springs, including Sid and Tyne Hecklethorne, who operated a still during Prohibition, sending their sour mash whiskey off to

Las Vegas for distribution. Cattleman Ed Yates, who arrived in 1929, made the first extensive alterations to the landscape. Yates, who occupied the ranch for nearly 40 years, is responsible for much of the site's character. By the time he arrived, the era of the cattle baron had come and gone, but the independents were still making their mark.





AFTER THE MORMONS' DEPARTURE—HASTENED BY OVERGRAZED GRASSLANDS AND declining profits—cattle barons stepped in vying for control of the water. Preston Nutter, a Utah mogul, eventually won out. By the turn of the century, he was grazing some 25,000 cattle on the Strip.

The vast acreage was federal land, open to grazing. The early 20th century saw over 100,000 head of cattle and over a quarter million sheep. As ranchers fought over the dwindling resources, it was clear something had to be done. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 divided the land into districts with permits limiting the number of range animals.

Nutter died in 1936, and his control over the Strip dissolved not long after Yates arrived. Yates built a house, likely with the stones from Ed Thomas' original structure, and planted cottonwoods for shade and shelter from the wind; in summer, temperatures can hit 120 degrees, with winds up to 25 miles an hour in winter and spring.

He also built spring boxes to collect runoff and protect it from contamination, and created holding ponds and irrigation ditches to water

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fields a short distance from the house. Since building materials could not be trucked in, he used what he could find: logs, native stone, even discarded railroad ties.

The ingenious maximization of the springs is remarkable in its own right, but the very existence of the ranch hints at a larger significance. Paul Dolinsky, chief of the Historic American Landscapes Survey, calls the area “one of the most remote places in the lower 48.” What prompted Yates and his wife to move here and stay for 40 years? It would have taken “practically a survivalist mentality,” Dolinsky says. He adds that the desire to live in a hostile environment is perhaps more significant than the act of taming it. “It represents not just the struggle to survive, but to establish individualism,” he says. “Tassi Ranch embodies the American idea of identity and, in a way, Manifest Destiny.”

The all-transforming properties of water are powerfully evident. According to the HALS report, “The moisture from the spring heads and the dense, layered vegetation they support create a unique microclimate in the ranch core that is cooler by day and warmer by night than the surrounding desert.” Stevens points at a map showing vegetation at the site—arrow weed and Goodding's willow near the water, cat's claw and mesquite in the dry areas. “This,” he says, indicating the ranch core, “is like a large oasis. It's really lush here. You feel like you're on the East Coast . . . and then you walk out and it's the Mojave Desert all around you.” His finger goes to the blank contours that surround the ranch. “It's like a lunar landscape out here.”

Yates' elaborate irrigation took advantage of the gentle incline of the terrain. Gravity carried the water to modest subsistence crops. The slopes that rise up behind the property served as pastureland. The ravines or swales between the irrigated places simply remained filled with the in-

digenous vegetation that thrives in a dry environment. For the most part, this is sweeping open landscape with mountain ranges in the distance. Closer to the house and corral, however, one is enclosed in trees.

IT WAS PROBABLY THE REMOTENESS THAT FOSTERED THE TANGLED STORY OF THE LEGAL rights to the ranch. Perhaps the place didn't get many visitors from the federal government or was simply too obscure to register on any official agenda. "Even now," says Jeff Bradybaugh, superintendent of Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument, "it's three hours to get there after we leave paved roads."

Ten years before Ed Yates arrived, Washington closed the area to homesteading, water, and mineral claims. The government was looking to dam the Colorado River, creating a huge reservoir to make settlement in the West more feasible. These efforts would ultimately result

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in Hoover Dam, but as a result of those early surveys, Tassi Ranch was designated off-limits to homesteading and other claims. In 1930, the area was being considered as part of a national monument and was withdrawn from any land claims under that criterion. The monument was never established but Boulder Canyon Recreation Area was, in 1936 (becoming Lake Mead National Recreation Area in 1964).

Meanwhile, Yates continued along with his ranching. It is not known if he was aware of these developments. In 1936, he approached the state for water rights to Tassi Springs. Whether the state was confused about the location of his ranch or whether it was an act of defiance against the federal government, Arizona granted him the rights. Says Bradybaugh, "It's such an isolated area I don't know that [the government] was paying that much attention, especially back in that era. There wasn't that much follow-up by federal and state agencies on where people were setting up their homesteads or filing water claims." There was probably, he says, a feeling that so far out in the desert one could do what one pleased. "There seemed to be no interest in dealing with the government," he says.

In 1949, Yates made an agreement with the Bureau of Land Management in which he was given a grazing allotment. As now, the BLM controlled vast acreage in the region. The condition for the allotment was control over a source of water, which Yates had, albeit illegally. Access to BLM land gave him plenty of space to range his cattle and the allotment legitimized his presence. It would be decades before anyone checked the records. It is not known how Yates got his cattle to market, though Bradybaugh surmises he took them to St. Thomas, just across the border in Nevada. The town was flooded when the Hoover Dam was built and is now only visible when the water is low.

Yates moved out in 1963 and sold his water rights and grazing allotment to Eldon Smith, who not only defaulted on payments but regularly vio-



RIGHT: Inside the ranch house, with a pass-through to a storehouse on the left of the fireplace.



Mormons began grazing livestock in the area in the 1860s and Preston Nutter had the region largely under his control in the late 19th century. Waring arrived in 1916, secured a homestead, and then proceeded to buy up as much property as he could. In time, he owned a large portion of the Kelly Point Peninsula. Waring established his headquarters at a place called Horse Valley, now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, important as a highly intact remnant of a late frontier cattle ranch. The operation extended over 50,000 acres on the Kelly Point Peninsula and the Shivwits Plateau.

HALS RESEARCHERS ARRIVED IN JUNE TO DOCUMENT A LANDSCAPE THAT, LIKE TASSI Ranch, had been shaped to meet the unique circumstances of ranching on the Strip. According to a National Park Service report, "The placement of the cabins, corrals, fence lines, and water tanks reflects the functional purpose of each area of the ranch and the ingenuity and resourcefulness required for building in such isolation." The fenced pastures and their associated fixtures reflect the profound influence of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, particularly in their juxtaposition with remnants of the bygone days of free-ranging livestock.

A monument history calls it "a rural historic landscape"—primarily open country with scattered groves of ponderosa pine and occasional

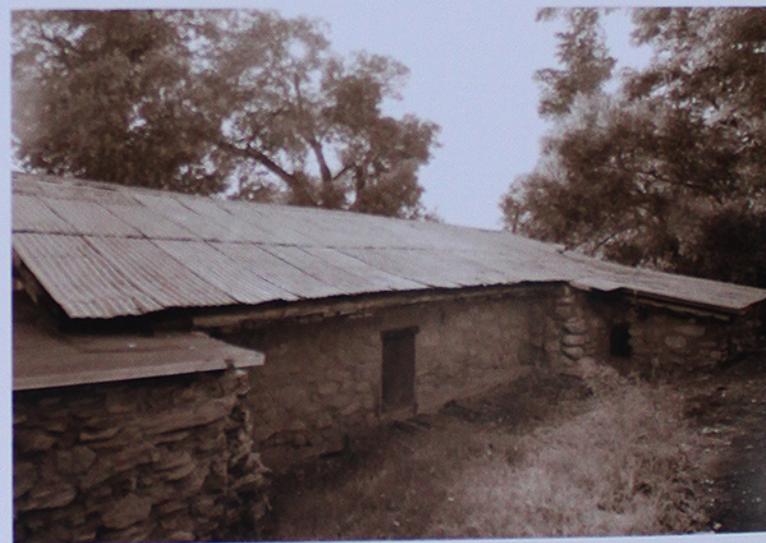
TASSI AND WARING ARE RARE EXAMPLES OF A CULTURE UNTO ITSELF, ON THE FRINGE OF MAINSTREAM RANCHING FAR FROM THE CENTER OF THE BEEF INDUSTRY.

pinyon-juniper woodland. These sources, along with discarded railroad ties, were used to build cabins, corrals, and fence posts. Kerosene was used for light and fuel; electricity never reached the ranch.

HALS documented the six "line camps" that made up Waring's holdings. These were built around reliable water sources and today consist generally of collapsed cabins, old corrals, and scattered debris. "They would march the herd across the peninsula according to water supply," says Stevens, moving from camp to camp. Reservoirs were dug out of the ground near dry washes so that on the rare occasion of a rainstorm, the water would collect.

Cattle were driven a long distance to the railhead at Modena, Utah. "We've done oral histories of people who are now in their 80s, sitting on the backs of pickups listening to their stories," says Bradybaugh. "In the 1940s and '50s they were still doing these long cattle drives. This is hundreds of miles, a month-long process."

Tassi and Waring are rare examples of a culture unto itself, on the fringe of mainstream ranching far from the center of the beef industry. "People had to work extremely hard just to make it out there," Bradybaugh says. What they accomplished took stamina and ingenuity, adds Dolinsky — "plumbing the water supply to meet their needs, taking this hostile environment and making it as kind as it could be." In a way the place is about personal freedom and the greatness of the landscape. "It bespeaks the individuality of the American spirit," Dolinsky says.



ABOVE: Tassi ranch house and additions. LEFT: The landscape from on high.