

Back to the White Grass

By Frances Moody | Posted: Wednesday, September 10, 2014 4:30 am

Deborah Lopez remembers the first summer she spent at White Grass Ranch in Grand Teton National Park. The year was 1959 and she was 7, going on 8.

“It was the most magical place in my life,” she said. “When I was 7, we were bouncing along Teton Village Road in the back of a station wagon. I remember an inner voice said to me, ‘This is your home.’”

Years passed and the memories of that time came flooding back when Lopez was in Kuwait watching television and the station interrupted the programming for the Islamic call to prayer.

During intermission the TV flashed what Lopez called “heavenly images,” and one of the pictures that popped up was of the Tetons. At that moment the 20-something-year-old knew what her call to prayer was: Lopez knew she had to return to the dude ranch. From then on she spent most of her summer vacations at the ranch until it closed in 1985.

Lopez’s story is similar to the other dude ranchers who returned this weekend for a White Grass Ranch reunion. For the three-day celebration, Lopez and about 75 other people shared stories over picnics, dinners and campfires. There was a recurring theme as the visitors recalled their time at the White Grass: There was something about the place and its setting that brought back the same people year after year, both guests and employees.

Homesteaded in 1913, White Grass Ranch began herding dudes instead of cows in 1919.

“It was the longest operating dude ranch in the valley,” said Katherine Wonson, cultural resources specialist for Grand Teton National Park.

Twenty-nine years have passed since White Grass Ranch shut down, but the area keeps pulling people back. It may not be a ranch any more, but park employees are working to preserve its history — a history that ended with the death of Frank Galey, the last person to own and operate the ranch.

Galey owned the place till 1956, when he sold it to the National Park Service. But under the terms of a life lease he was able to stay on the property until his death in 1985.

No longer a ranch, the land now acts as a historical preservation hub. Tucked away in a small room in the main cabin is an office. Hidden in the office are recorded interviews and shared memories of White Grass Ranch’s past employees and visitors.

This weekend for the 101st anniversary of the place's homesteading, reunion attendees added to that pile of records. Former White Grass Ranch employee Fred Herbel summoned some memories.

"I found my wife here," he said. "She was a kids wrangler here. We got connected at the ranch. We got married and had a reception right here."

Jackson resident Dine Dellenback also explained what the place meant to her and her family. She brought up something her youngest daughter, Martha, always talks about.

Dellenback said the ranch used to have a dump that attracted bears. Every day after dinner, kids would go to the dump in hope of spotting a bear. Dellenback asked Martha, who was 3 years old at the time, to stay with the adults, but she didn't listen.

"She ended up going down there. One day a bear was there, probably not interested in her, but interested in the food in the dump. She will never forget that the others ran off and left her all by herself."

While accounts of the past were a main part of the reunion, park employees were able to share White Grass Ranch's present purpose. They did so Friday afternoon with a series of speeches by park employees and former White Grass Ranch employees.

The plans shared at Friday's event started in 2005 when Grand Teton National Park and the National Trust for Historic Preservation decided to raise money to restore the ranch's historical cabins.

Still a work-in-progress, the partnership has raised more than \$950,000 and has turned the ranch into the Western Center for Historic Preservation.

"What we do here is bring in trainees from all over the Park Service and from other agencies," Wonson said. "We train them in traditional home building and preservation skills. In addition, we are able to use the building we are working on as training opportunities."

From documenting the ranch's stories to preserving its buildings, Grand Teton National Park proved to reunion goers that history is embedded in White Grass Ranch's roots.