

Ag Salute

Sheepman earns prestigious honor

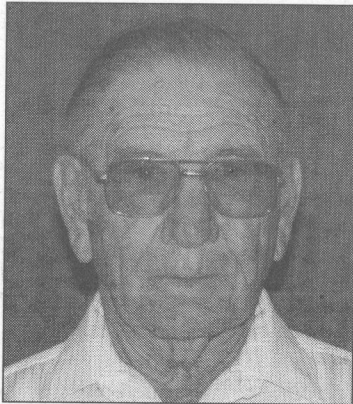


Photo by Jan Murawski Evans

Nick Theos was awarded the Honorary Lifetime Membership award from CCA.

By Jan Murawski Evans,
Regional Correspondent

MEEKER, Colo. — “I felt like John Elway in the Hall of Fame when they called my name,” said Nick Theos. At the June Colorado Cattlemen’s Convention, Theos was awarded an Honorary Lifetime Membership award.

“A sheepman to get an award from the Cattlemen, now that’s something,” Theos is still in awe of the great honor bestowed on him. The CCA honorary lifetime mem-

bership has been awarded to fewer than 20 people in its 138 year history.

Born to Greek immigrant parents in 1920 in Utah, Theos has been involved in sheep ranching his whole life. The ranch land that his parents bought in northwestern Colorado for \$8 an acre is now worth over \$2400 per acre. The only thing that hasn’t changed is that the land is still producing forage for sheep.

After graduating from Grand Junction High School in 1938, Theos attended CSU for one year and came home

to work the ranch at Meeker. In those days, they summered in the White River Forest and wintered the sheep in Utah.

By 1951 he bought part of the ranch, the grazing permits and 900 head of sheep from his parents. He built the operation up to 3500 head and acquired more land and three National Forest permits for a total of 4,000 acres of spring, fall and winter ranges.

Because sheep ranching relies so heavily on BLM and National Forest permits, Theos became involved in the management of those entities.

Since 1950 he has served on local, state and national BLM governing boards and still serves the local BLM boards for District 8 in Utah and District 1 in Colorado.

As a young man, Theos toured different grazing areas with the Western States Public Land Advisory Board. In New Mexico, Senator Floyd Lee took two days to show the board the nearly two counties of private and federal land where he ran his stock. After the tour of what he thought was some pretty

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poor grazing land, young Theos asked the Senator, "When is your growing season here?"

Senator Lee replied, "It's the same as Colorado, Idaho, Montana or any place in the West—any time you have a helluva good rain." Theos thought that made sense and still uses it to determine pasture growth.

Until the 1970's there was a Grazing Advisory Board for all federal lands that settled disputes between the government and permittees. This group also locally determined the boundaries of grazing allotments and the number of animals that could feed there. When the advisory board was disbanded and grazing fees were arbitrarily raised, Theos with Dave Rice, Secretary of CCA, formed the 13 Western States Public Land Council, PLC, to form a voice for cattle and sheep grazing permit holders.

Theos served as president in 1975-1976 of the PLC, testifying before the U.S. Congressional committee about grazing rights on Federal Lands. There he explained to the Senators the "Theos Plan." The plan was simple and succinct and holds true 30 years later: "It doesn't take just good feed, but animals also need good bed grounds. If animals are left in the windy plains even if they're well fed, it's like the difference between eating a sandwich and going to a warm bed and sleeping comfortably or eating a beefsteak and sleeping without a bed and freezing all night."

Theos has witnessed many changes in ranching in the West over the years with the

major one being fewer livestock and more wildlife. Deer, elk, antelope and wild horse numbers have risen while sheep and cattle have dwindled. The Wild Horse and Burro Act prevents ranchers from capturing and selling feral horses. Keeping the unadopted horses in sanctuaries costs the federal government about \$500 per horse per year, and it's no secret that Theos believes this is a waste of government funds.

Regarding the recent loss of 6,000 acres of federal grazing lands, Theos is adamant that sheep are not the culprit in the lower numbers of sage grouse. The people who blame sheep grazing sage brush for loss of habitat don't take into account that many predators, including muskrat and beaver, eat eggs as part of their regular diet. At this summer's Club 20 meeting in Lake City and at the BLM District 1 Grazing Board meeting in Craig, individuals came to speak about how grazing is causing loss of sage grouse habitat and that the bird should be on the endangered species list. After listening for hours, Theos asked for permission to speak and said, "Any time you talk, you're taking up all of our time, and you're not telling the truth."

Whether addressing sheepmen or Senators, Nick Theos is a plain talker who values ranching and the West. He doesn't mince words and "as long as it is the truth" he gladly shares his knowledge and opinions.

At 84 years young, Theos is currently running 3,800 head of sheep in northwestern Colorado. He is negotiating to buy one more grazing permit to get his herd up to 4,000 head, but that's his limit.

From serving as representative for District 49 in the Colorado Legislature in 1978-1980 and with over 40 years of membership in the CCA and CWGA (CWGA President 1969-1971) Nick Theos has been a champion for cattle and sheep producers in Colorado and the West.

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