

1. WE BUY THE TIBBITS HOME PLACE (aka the Aldrich Homestead)

I think it must have been 1973...anyway, it was love at first sight.

My wife, Jeanne, and I had recently taken over operation of the farm I grew up on at Wellington and I was prowling the farm auctions looking for used equipment.

This particular auction took me to Livermore and the Tibbits Place, nestled in an old grove of cottonwoods at the confluence of the North Fork of the Cache la Poudre River and Stonewall Creek. I had not seen it before.

It was summer, an unusual time of year for a farm auction. Farm auctions are usually held in the winter, between fall harvest and spring planting.

I don't think I bought anything. If I did, it must have been something small. The only piece of equipment that stuck out in my mind was a little self-propelled New Holland stackwagon with no cab – a curiosity and cute as a bug's ear, but not something we could use.

I don't remember much, but I remember best the little irrigation system in the yard with its tiny cement ditch. A gunny sack with some sand in it was being used to check the water in the ditch and make it spill out over the lawn. The luxuriant shade from the big cottonwoods that spangled across the yard is the background of my memory.

There would have been the usual din and chaos of a farm auction, but what I recall is a sense of peace and repose. I know I relayed my enthusiasm to Jeanne when I got home.

August 2, 1976, the day after the Big Thompson Flood, we flew over the Tibbits place with a pilot friend to see the flood damage. We could see water in the corrals and the willows along the edges of the North Fork and Stonewall Creek were flattened from

the high flood water the night before, but the buildings looked fine.¹

A few weeks later we learned that the place was for sale. Jeanne and I didn't hesitate to sign a contract for the homestead and 342 acres. We decided to make it our home. I'm still here after more than forty years.

We purchased from a "35-acre" syndicate² that had acquired the ~5300 acre Tibbits Ranch.³ These speculators were in the process of breaking the ranch up. Selling the 342 acre 'home place' was part of the process

We were scheduled to close March 1, 1977. My father died February 1. The place already felt so right that we made the spontaneous decision to bury him on Grayback Ridge east of the house and the sellers agreed to the burial in advance of the closing

My father had been a rancher and farmer all his life, but because he had been an Army Reserve officer and served in both World Wars, there was an Army burial contingent with a three-volley salute and ceremonial flag. It was a cold and windy day

If I had any second thoughts, they were occasioned by the wind.

The house appears to face squarely into the teeth of the northwest wind. I remember thinking as I looked down upon our future home from the grave site (there were still tenants in the house) that we were going to get blown off the map. Not so, it turned out

The Aldrich family that settled here in 1882 knew a thing or two. The house sits in a quiet eddy. You can hear howling in the tops of the big cottonwood trees⁴ as the wind sweeps up and over the ridge to the east, above and behind the house. Fifty yards in any direction gets the full blast, but not the house.

While we are pretty well protected from the wind, cold is another matter. Frigid air settles down along the North Fork and Stonewall Creek. We routinely measure 20 to 25 degrees below zero in the winter.

I recall milking the cow⁵ at 32 below. Alan Morris, one of our ranch hands, told me years later that he had measured 50 below at our house in January 1983 while Jeanne and I were staying down at the Stock Show. Alan said that was the time Slim lit a fire under our propane tank to try to unfreeze it (it's just as well I didn't know about that at the time)...but that's another story.⁶

¹ Although the storm cell from which the historic 1976 Big Thompson flood emanated was located over the little community of Drake, near Estes Park, the flooding in the foothills was extensive up and down the Front Range. I was baling hay for a neighbor at Wellington the night of the flood. As my tractor crawled back and forth through the night, the mountains were illuminated continuously by lightning as far as I could see north to south (we weren't getting rain at Wellington). The next morning, a pilot friend staying with us, suggested that he rent a plane and take us up to survey the flood damage we were hearing about on the radio. Once in the air, we learned that the area over the Big Thompson Canyon had become restricted airspace, so I suggested we head north to see how Livermore had fared.

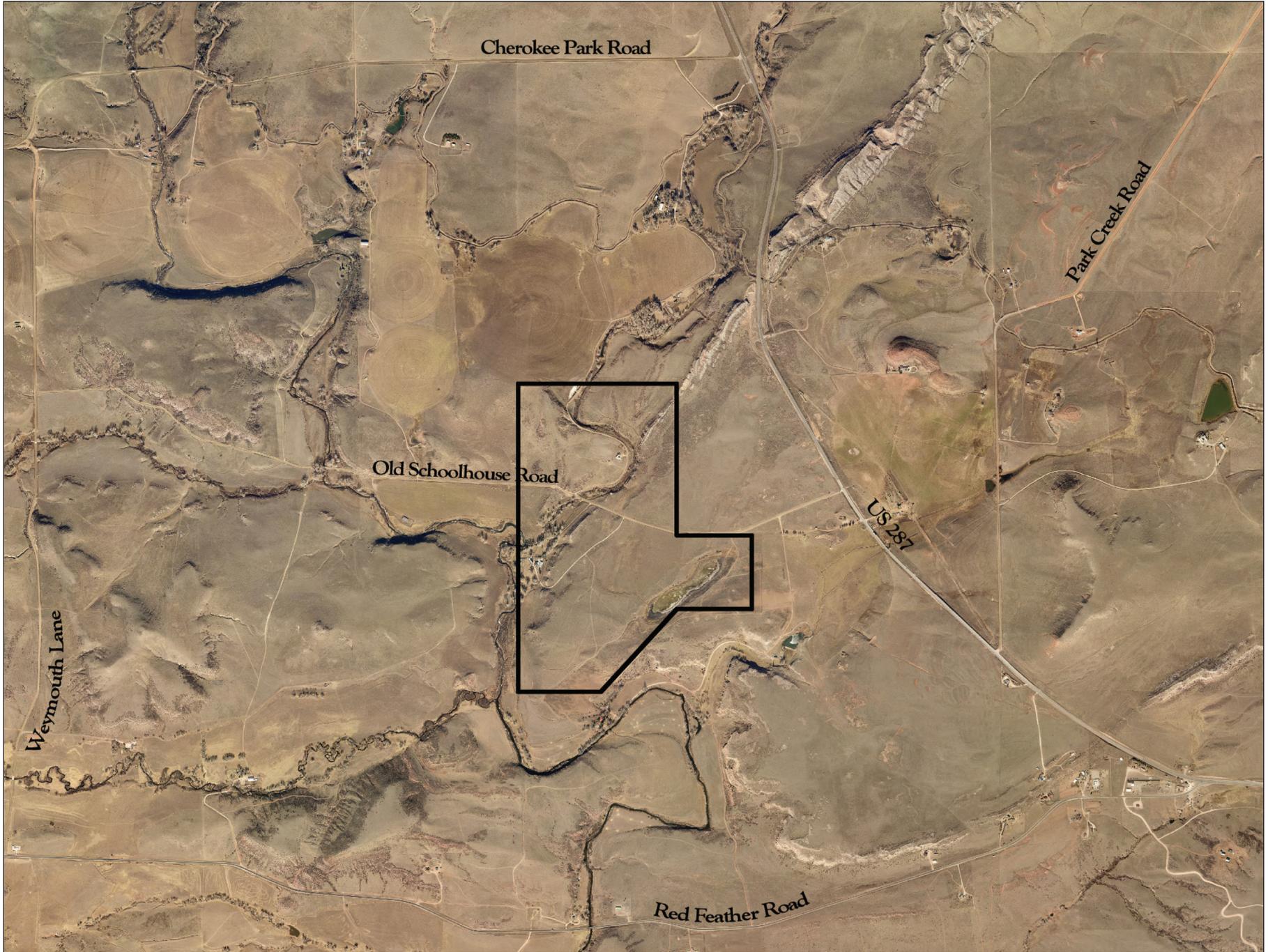
² (more about 35-acre development later)

³ (more about the Tibbits Ranch later)

⁴ There were no cottonwood trees in 1882. The big cottonwoods we have now were probably planted around the turn of the Century.

⁵ We had one or two family milk cows for 35 years.

⁶ (more about Slim later)



Tibbits Home Place