

Dickinson Sisters' Family Forestry in the Blues

Columbia County is far from anywhere, yet the Blue Mountains of southeast Washington secretly host some of the most beautiful landscapes in the state. High plateaus connecting ridge tops and confluences of grassy valleys create obvious travel routes, used as routinely by farmers and ranchers today as they have been traveled by the very first inhabitants of the Nez Perce, Cayuse, Walla Walla and Umatilla tribes. From “*the mountain land*,” the Dickinson sisters can see the valley where Lewis and Clark’s expedition passed through in May of 1806.



Ben and Sue Dickinson; (back) Jennie Dickinson, Zena Dickinson Broughton, and Lois Vankat; (front & center) Dallas Dickinson

The forests in the Blue Mountains are similar to those throughout eastern Washington, with shrub-steppe habitats and park-like ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) forests occupying the drier low elevation valleys and mid-elevation south slopes. As one gains elevation and precipitation increases from 10 inches to over 100 inches, tree diversity also increases. Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii* var. *menziesii*), western larch (*Larix occidentalis*), lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* ssp. *contorta*) and grand fir (*Abies grandis*) are major tree species in the Dickinson Land, LLC ownership, what they refer to as “the mountain land.” Minor species



L-R. Jennie Dickinson, Lois Dickinson Vankat, and Dallas Dickinson, recognized for hosting the Forest and Range Owners Field Day, 2017



From a vista on the Dickinson Land, LLC property, pictured is the diversity of ponderosa pine, western larch, Douglas-fir, grand fir, western red cedar, and serviceberry in blooming above limestone.

include Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*) and western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), where the land stays moist near shaded streams.

Like many of the early-settler families in the Blue's, the Dickinson Family raises timber, cattle, and wheat. It all started in 1945 after the liberation of Europe of World War II, when their father Ben returned home to Starbuck, WA, living with his mother who had been saving his military pay until he returned. Thankfully he did, and luckily, he met Susan Harris, a school teacher. Sue and Ben were married and began to purchase "summer pasture" land to support a herd of 30 cow-calves. Today, the fifth generation is cutting Christmas trees and boughs with their matriarch grandmothers—just as the sisters did with their parents. They credit their father for passing along a passion and love for land, and both parents for instilling a work ethic and expectation to become industrious leaders to make family business endeavors successful.

The Dickinson's recognize their responsibility to mentor future generations, stating "our parents knew their roles in the family, in the business, and as owners-- it was true partnership." In 2008, the Dickinson's attended a succession and estate planning workshop called ***Ties to the Land***, held annually around the state by the WSU Extension Forestry Team. This workshop helped them establish their vision for the future which has resulted in the legal creation of the Dickinson Land, LLC. Family meetings are held during the year, and often on the mountain land.



(left) Ben Dickinson, Owner-Operator Thick-N-Thin Lumber Co.

(left middle) Ben called it the Thick-n-Thin Lumber Company because sometimes his boards came out thick at one end and thin on the other.

(right middle) Ben and Bill Broughton Sawmill: Ben Dickinson spent his "free time" on his land in the Blue Mountains felling trees and milling them in his own sawmill for boards to use in his farm and livestock operation. See here with his son-in-law Bill Broughton.

(right) Dallas Dickinson loading freshly sawn boards: Dallas Dickinson, one of the 3 Dickinson sisters, is seen here loading freshly milled boards into a cattle truck to take down to the family farm. Circa 1978

Wildlife is abundant on the ranch, benefiting from the understory food and cover including provided mountain mahogany, bitterbrush (*Pursia tridentata*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*), mock orange (*Philadelphus lewisii*), blue elderberry (*Sambucus caerulea*), chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), bittercherry (*Prunus emarginata*), blue huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicatum*), elk sedge (*Carex geyeri*), arrowleaf balsamroot (*Balsamorhiza sagittata*), lupine (*Lupinus wyethii*), and Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*).



Ken Bevis, DNR Forest Stewardship Program wildlife biologist, discusses bat feeding ecology at the summer field day hosted by the Dickinson family. Bevis explained that bats eat humongous amounts of flying insects such as moths, beetles, and mosquitoes, and that they will also hang from perches where they will catch insects on the fly, crawl across branches and under tree bark to forage.

In August 2006, lightning struck south of the town of Dayton, sending flames burning through open rangeland, wheat fields, and timber. The battery of fires became the Columbia Complex and burned 109,402 acres. Nearly burning Jennie Dickinson's home in the Touchet Valley, the fire moved quickly up Cougar Canyon. This is where the Dickinson's knowledge of forestry and range management paid off. The family manages their timberland on about 20-year entries – meaning that about every 20 years, they have

stands thinned for the purpose of reducing wildfire hazard jeopardy, to improve forest health, open-up the canopy to increase forage production of grasses for livestock grazing, and to enhance the understory shrubs for wildlife. Income is generated of livestock leases annually, and each of the properties that make up the Dickinson Land, LLC, provides a flow of income to the family partnership.



The combination of managed grazing and timber allowed wildfire suppression efforts to strategically anchor fuel breaks on their Cougar Canyon property. Though some timber was lost, and roads, fences, forage seeding, and weeds all required post-fire restoration, damage was minimal and 15 years later, the vegetation is thriving. No salvage logging or replanting was necessary.

“Cougar Canyon (what my dad always called the Eckler Mt. place) is 440 acres total, all but 40 of it contiguous. This property had minimal fire damage. There were a few trunks burned, and some grass of course, but no real damage,” explained Jennie Dickinson.

“The Cottrill Place (on Cottrill Road) is 400 contiguous acres. The difference between this one and Cougar Canyon were the neighboring forest practices. A piece adjacent to us had been clearcut, and had a lot of slash laying on the ground. It was like a chimney - the fire raged through it onto our property. We had about 100 acres next to that property burn really hot and burned everything in its path, but then the fire slowed down as it burned on our property and the firefighters put it out when it reached the fire break and retardant they had laid down. This was really the best testament to our practices making a huge difference.”

The Dickinson’s worked with a consulting forester and a logger to decide what the best choices for management action should take occur. “After surveying the property, we were able to do some salvage logging on the 100 acres that burned. We considered replanting, but because of our joint use of the property - grazing and timber - and the fact we have such a good reseeding rate in our forest, we decided to leave it alone. The grazer is always appreciative of a little more grass! It was amazing how fast the grass grew back, and we now have some little baby trees growing in the burned area.”

“We also lost about 8 miles of fence, which turned out to be a big financial burden. It took a couple of years to get it fully replaced. “

Jennie was just 10-yrs old when her parents began gifting the sisters land. Laughing, she said doubts she will get a sawmill, but she acknowledges that it might be part of the next generations plan. “We think wood and wildlife and horses and a lot of other fun, even profitable, things are yet to come!”

Written by Andy Perleberg, WSU Extension Forester