

Hastings first got involved in the 1970s with environmental issues by using his publication *Colorado/Rocky Mountain West* to

homeowner **profile**

The Last

COLORFUL CHARACTER WITH A CAUSE

RANCH OWNER MERRILL HASTINGS AND HIS DOG STAND IN THE GRAVEL DRIVEWAY
BEHIND A RED HORSE TRAILER THAT SAYS SUNNYVALE ANGUS RANCH ON THE SIDE.
BESIDES FOUR HORSES GRAZING BEHIND THE HOUSE, NOTHING BUT ROLLING HILLS,
MOUNTAINS, LAND AND MORE LAND RISES FOR MILES AND MILES

Can you hear that bulldozer?" asks the retired publisher and breeding cattle rancher. He's referring to the barely audible hum coming from his former ranch about a half-mile away. The two ranch houses are located in McCoy between King and Harmony mountains.

"Well I can hear it," he complains.

One of Vail's first homeowners when the ski resort was a rural, relatively unknown mountain community, Hastings flew the area in the mid-1970s in response to the onslaught of developers, whom he later spent much of his life fighting on behalf of environmental causes. He packed up his family, sold his house there and bought 998 acres of land in northern Eagle County. There in the Colorado River Valley, Hastings established a breeding cattle ranch, which his wife, Priscilla, managed when he was away running his magazines, among them *Skiing*, which he founded.

Friends and neighbors thought he was crazy for leaving Vail. "Everybody said what're you goin' down there for?" says Hastings. "Now everybody's coming down 25 years later and saying how do we find some land down here? Well, there isn't any more land available." About 95 percent of the land in the area is government-owned, administered by the Bureau of Land Management, he says.

A mischievous grin washes over the rancher's face right before he asks, "Do you

But he doesn't want to seem too down on Vail. He's really poking fun at the developers, the vultures who've swooped in for the kill. He concedes about Vail: "It's got an extraordinary mountain. There's no doubt it has the finest snow conditions and finest runs in the world as far as the mountain goes, but unfortunately they've got a metropolitan city growing in there. It started out as a sleepy mountain resort. While the mountain's the same, the valley's changing. It's become urban living."

As he says this, his wife of 49 years is now on a weekly grocery shopping trip to the Vail Safeway, about an hour's drive from their ranch, which is so far out it has no street address. If someone wants to send mail to the Hastingses all they need is the Hastings name, McCoy, CO and the zip code.

The community is so rural, the kids get to choose where they want to attend school because the school district encompasses southern Routt and northern Eagle counties, Hastings says.

What brought Hastings to Colorado in the first place was a passion for skiing, the outdoors and wildlife. He built his first Vail home, a townhouse, in 1963, then built a house there five years later, keeping his main home in Denver where he and Priscilla raised their children.

By the 1970s, the town had expanded its limits beyond his residence. A law was passed banning residents from keeping their horses in the town. This was the last straw

That said, Hastings left Vail without looking back. While he kept an apartment in New York City and a place in Denver, his heart was always back on Sunnyvail Angus Ranch where he and Priscilla raised Black Angus registered cattle to be sold to cattle ranchers for breeding purposes.

Although Hastings loved the publishing industry, having founded *Skiing* and eight other magazines between 1948 and 1994, he spent a lot of time on planes so he could be on the ranch on weekends. He accompanied Priscilla to cattle shows in which the couple won state and national titles.

It wasn't until 1994 that Hastings became a full-time resident of Eagle County. He sold all but 30 acres, located at the foot of King Mountain, where he built his present house.

It's hard to decide where to begin detailing Hastings's long, illustrious career as both an environmentalist and a publisher.

He and Priscilla are both from Massachusetts, though they didn't meet there. Both ski instructors, they met in the 1940s on the slopes of Colorado, back before Vail Mountain became a ski resort. Hastings, a college dropout, was running a ski school with Priscilla in the recently reopened Berthoud Ski Resort during the winters and working at a Denver wholesale lumber company during the summers.

"I came home one day, and I said 'Priscilla, I'm tired of unloading freight everyday. Let's start a ski publication. And that's what we did. We cleared off the table and we started it,'" he says.

Skiing began as a little newspaper in 1948 and grew over the years into a slick national magazine. Next came *Winter Sports* in 1960, a trade magazine.

Wanting to move beyond sports, Hastings sold both magazines in 1965, then took the money and started *Colorado/Rocky Mountain West*, an outdoor lifestyle magazine covering Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming and New Mexico. Also at this time, he launched the successful *Colorado Business* magazine.

Bored again, ready to try something new, he sold those in 1978 and started two short-lived magazines dealing with the energy crisis. Both were dissolved by the mid-80s. Inspired by Priscilla's defeat of cancer, Hastings launched two national cancer magazines, *Cope* and *Coping*, the former for medical professionals, the latter for consumers.

Finally, in 1994 Hastings tried to revive *Colorado/Rocky Mountain West* but after one issue decided it was time to retire. It was with

Rancher

story by Connie Mulqueen
photography by Sean Boggs

know what we call Vail? Very Asphalt Infested Living. That's what Vail's an acronym for." He leans over with a penetrating gaze and says it again. "VAIL."

Speaking of Vail's first residents, he says, "We were hoping Vail would become another St. Anton or Klosters." He's talking about the world-renowned ski resorts in Austria and Switzerland, respectively.

for Hastings, a horse owner.

"They told me that someone had remarked that my horses were drawing flies," Hastings says, a mocking glint in his eyes. "I said to them, 'Well they certainly are knowledgeable equestrians. However, it appears to me after being here for 12 years that Vail is bringing in people who could be attracting more flies than my horses!'"

As he says this, his wife of 40 years is now on a weekly grocery shopping trip to the Vail Sawtooth, about an hour's drive from their ranch, which is so far out it has no street address. If someone wants to send mail to the Hastingses all they need is the Hastings name, McCoy, CO and the zip code. It is so rural, the kids get to choose where they want to attend school because the school district encompasses southern Routt and northern Eagle counties.

that magazine in the 1970s that he first got involved with environmental issues, using the publication to expose mistreatment of wildlife and the need to protect federal land from developers and clear cutters.

Hastings helped the undersecretary of Interior for President Richard Nixon to write an Executive Order to ban the poisoning of wildlife animals on federal land after the magazine revealed in a series of investigative stories that livestock ranchers were indeed killing predators with poisons obtained from state and federal government officials. The discovery of about 30 dead American Bald Eagles by local hikers in Wyoming prompted the investigation, which also uncovered that the non-biodegradable poison used on such predators as bears, coyotes and mountain lions was infiltrating seven food chains. As a result, other non-targeted animals and birds were being killed as well.

Hastings says the magazine was instrumental in influencing Congress to require timber companies to engage in the selective cutting of forests. Staff members took photos of the devastation wreaked by a clear cutting process, in which whole forest areas were mowed down to harvest only a small percentage of trees. This wasteful process was intended to save the expense of first selecting which trees to be used, then cutting only those down and leaving the rest in place.

In the late 1970s, Hastings was appointed the federal arbitrator in the dispute over how high the Eagle's Nest Wilderness should begin. At that time, the proposed boundary for the 300,000-acre area was at 10,000 feet, but environmentalists referred to this designation jokingly as "the rock pile" because it was up so high where few trees could flourish.

After a five-day debate at the Denver Federal Center, with Hastings overseeing the discussion between top Washington officials, experts and environmentalists, the boundary was lowered to 8,000 feet, where it remains today, with the northern tip starting at Summit County, running south to I-70, east to Highway 9 and west to the Summit County line.

Hastings points out that because mountains are shaped like pyramids, the extra 2,000 feet

effectively doubled the wilderness area, which can be used only for recreational purposes. "Had we not done that," he says, "most of that land would've been sold in land swaps or cut down by lumber companies. The Forest Service can't trade wilderness areas. They're akin to national parks. These are national treasures."

"Merrill's had some significant influence on issues in this area," says Mike Mottice, the area manager for the Glenwood Springs resource area of the Bureau of Land Management. "Everybody knows Merrill. He's



a consistent player in local issues. He's connected. He knows how to use the process."

Mottice speaks from experience. When the BLM in 1992 acquired 4,200 acres of land on the north side of King Mountain, it was up to Mottice to decide how to manage the land. One of the main objectives of the government in acquiring the land was to make it accessible to the public, including motorists. But after listening to the people on Hastings's coalition and making visits to the area, Mottice changed his mind. Since then, he and Merrill have been good friends.

Says Mottice: "Sometimes administrators like myself dread it when we get a message from someone like Merrill Hastings. But what I like about Merrill is that he will call and compliment the bureau on decisions we make in the field. While he's not shy about asking for things, he's just as likely to call us and compliment us, and that means a lot to me."

Also a few years back, Hastings stirred up the River Valley "folks" to fight the designation of their 35-mile river road into a Scenic Byway, after reading in the paper that county officials had given the green light to federal officials without consulting area residents.

But Scenic Byway Commission federal regulations give residents the right to reject the designations, Hastings says. Sure enough, residents met over the weekend in a one-room schoolhouse and shot down the county decision with a vote of 62-2. "If we wanted all that," Hastings says about public restrooms, scenic overlooks and a paved River Road, "we'd be living on I-70."

"Merrill's not afraid of anybody," says Vail Valley Times reporter Allen Best, who's been reporting on environmental issues in the Vail Valley for 12 years. "He gets up at public meetings and says what the hell. Merrill's not a timid man. I think that's part of his success. He's not timid about his ideas."

In 1974, Hastings founded the creation of the Colorado Trail for hikers and campers that runs from Denver to Durango, for which he received a government plaque. He was the first chairman and a founding director of the Continental Divide Trail Alliance, now building a trail from Mexico to Canada.

Hastings and his wife sold most of their land when they were ready to retire from the rigorous life of maintaining a ranch. But they're still pretty active, moving back and forth between their ranch house and a second home in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Hastings recently took a week-long white river rafting trip, a birthday gift from his 39-year-old daughter, Debbie, a massage therapist in Durango. He also has a 44-year-old son Bill, in the automobile business.

He enjoys showing off his photo collection of wild animals that have visited the ranch, including elk in the winter and a mean-looking badger with shark-like teeth. The Hastingses have seen mountain lions and coyotes, too.

When asked how he can stand being out in the middle of nowhere, Hastings replies, "Vail's nowhere; here's somewhere."

Connie Mulqueen, a former valley resident, recently moved to Savannah, Georgia to pursue a screen-writing career.