



**Cherokee Ranch
and Castle**
JAMES HOLMES

**FACES OF
WHIPPLEWOOD**

A PRODUCT OF



The unpaved road — flanked by a forest of pines, craggy rocks and grassland — winds gradually uphill for two miles, passing a small corral of white goats, golden hay bales, wild turkeys and deer in the shade and small, wooden birdhouses staked in the ground at regular intervals.

A final curve opens the view to the Scottish-style stone castle at the top, seemingly perched on the edge of a cliff, overlooking an expansive, majestic 200-mile vista that takes in the Front Range from Pikes Peak to Long's Peak.

This is Cherokee Ranch and Castle.

And this is where James Holmes, a cowboy hat on his head and cowboy boots on his feet, comes to work each day.

"It's hard to have a bad day here," he says. "Every day, I fall more deeply in love with this place."

Holmes is executive director of the Cherokee Ranch & Castle Foundation, which oversees the historic property in Sedalia that sits off Daniels Park Road, about seven miles

north of Castle Rock and 20 miles south of Denver.

Made famous by the late and uniquely distinctive Tweet Kimball — who owned the property from 1954 until her death in 1999 — the 3,400 acres is home to an operating cattle ranch, a petrified tree grove 55 million years old, a raptor educational organization and wildlife that includes mountain lions, bears and porcupines.

The castle, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, hosts more than 100 events a year from concerts to corporate functions to tours. It also has become a popular wedding and community event venue.

"Her vision for Cherokee Ranch remains intact," Holmes says of Tweet. "She had faith that people would come along and not deviate from that."

One of those people is Holmes, 54, a Parker resident and mortgage banker who took the job as executive director in August 2015.

As a boy in middle school, he first glimpsed the castle from a school bus on



Santa Fe Drive on his way to a sporting event in Castle Rock from his home in Sheridan.

"I remember to this day the day that I saw that because I couldn't believe I saw what I saw," Holmes recalls. "That was my first awareness that it existed."

In his early 30s, he boarded and rode horses next door at Castle Cliff Farm, where a close friend of his would sometimes get approval from Tweet to ride on Cherokee Ranch. Holmes didn't know anything about "Ms. Kimball" then. But he had heard the stories of the woman who — if she saw you riding on her land without permission — would grab her shotgun, jump in her truck and confront you.

"A lot of locals in Sedalia . . . tell me stories



Cherokee Castle sits atop a bluff overlooking a majestic 200-mile vista stretching from Pike's Peak to Long's Peak. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

Stories by Ann Macari Healey • Photos by Paul DiSalvo

about being run off the property by a woman in a jeep with a shotgun when they were kids,” Holmes says, smiling.

The land that is now Cherokee Ranch & Castle was originally comprised of two homesteads totaling more than 3,000 acres bought in 1954 by Tweet. In 1996, she worked with Douglas County and the Douglas County Open Lands Coalition to create a conservation easement — the county’s first and a visionary move — to protect her land from development. The nonprofit Cherokee Ranch & Castle Foundation that she also created that year purchased an adjacent 300 acres in 2010.

Today, the land is an integral segment of a 12-mile-long corridor that allows wildlife, primarily elk and deer, to migrate from the Pike National Forest southwest of Douglas County to conservation land south of Highlands Ranch.

The conservation easement also restricts what can be done to the property, preserving it as a natural landscape.

“We are allowed to build on this property for our own purposes . . . but what we can’t do is strike a deal and build a golf course,” Holmes says. “It was brilliant on her part.”

Although Tweet died in 1999, her presence remains vivid through her legacy and the foundation’s mission to become a world-class education center, which Holmes has wholeheartedly embraced as his own.

He met her once, in 1996, at a horse show at Colorado Horse Park in Parker. She was in her 80s then.

“I was a little intimidated by her presence,” Holmes remembers. “Her stature, manner and dress drew my immediate attention. She struck me as very nice and the conversation was something to the effect of thanking her for allowing me to ride on the property — and how beautiful it was.”

In 2002, he hosted a fundraising brunch — a professor Holmes knew performed a



James Holmes comes to work with his cowboy hat and boots. He shares a love of horses with Tweet Kimball and rides every week. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

one-man act as Winston Churchill, Tweet’s favorite historical figure. And through the years, Holmes occasionally attended the parties that celebrate Tweet’s birthday.

As his understanding of Cherokee Ranch evolved, so did his feeling that he and Tweet were kindred spirits. “I think,” he says, “if I had gotten to know her, we would have gotten along really well.”

They shared several passions:

An abiding interest in Churchill. At one time, Holmes had the third largest collection in North America of Churchill first editions. He brought two of the nation’s foremost Churchill authorities to see Tweet’s impressive book collection on the late English prime minister.

A love for horses. Tweet was an avid equestrian; Holmes began riding when he was 32 and has three Quarter horses he rides every week.

An appreciation for art and history. The castle is filled with priceless art collections and furniture. Holmes had served for years on numerous nonprofit boards, including the Denver Art Museum.

“This job,” Holmes says, “is the perfect intersection between my professional career

and the philanthropic part of my life . . . I feel like it was meant to be.”

Cherokee Ranch & Castle is run by the foundation Tweet created. A challenge to developing a renowned education center, Holmes says, is doing so on a nonprofit’s generally modest budget.

But that’s where creativity, innovation and vision come into play — much of it was set in motion by Tweet herself when she started a cattle breeding operation and committed to conserving the natural environment and historic buildings on her property for future generations.

Her wishes are listed in a four-page covenant to the foundation that essentially forms the basis for the principal components of daily life at the castle: The working cattle ranch. The house museum. Events. Historic preservation and land management.

“Tweet had this big idea — ‘I want Cherokee Ranch to become a world-class education center,’” Holmes says. “She was a real planner. She was very smart — she really could look into the future, which was one of the traits that she had throughout her lifetime.”



Vet technician students from Colorado State University spend a day conducting pregnancy tests on some of the ranch's cattle. In the foreground, from left, are Johanna Josephson, a third-year veterinary student, and Anneke Johnson, a fourth-year veterinary student. In the back, from left, are Amy Kunkel, a DVM Livestock Field Service resident, and third-year veterinary student Diana Pastrana. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

The Cattle Ranch

“If there are no cattle, there is no castle.”

Those were Tweet's words, underlying her dream to start a cattle ranch. And not just with any cattle.

“The bottom line is she didn't want the cattle to be no longer existent here,” Holmes says.

Bucking conventional wisdom and critics who said Santa Gertrudis cattle couldn't withstand Colorado's cold weather, Tweet brought the breed from Texas in 1954. The first rancher to introduce the cattle to the state, she also changed cattle ranching here with that decision.

The ranching operation is smaller today — with about 150 to 200 cattle that

produce about 125 to 150 calves a year — but still vital to Cherokee Ranch's mission. The same ranch manager, Rafael Miranda, oversees operations. The ranch sells seed stock and registered purebreds — known for their genetics — to other breeders. It is thinking about offering to the public grass-fed, custom-cut cattle shares from the steers. And it manages the herd the old-fashioned way — on horseback.

The ranch also has 10 burros that protect calves from the coyotes, a surplus flock of peacocks from the Denver Zoo and goats that provide natural control of noxious weeds and scrub oak.

“Everything we do here, we want to be sustainable,” Holmes says.



Longtime ranch manager Rafael Miranda oversees operations at Cherokee Ranch. Photo by Paul DiSalvo



James Holmes sits in the Winston Churchill room, a small alcove with busts and drawings of the late British prime minister. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

The House Museum

Cherokee Castle, built in the style of a 15th century Scottish castle, sits atop a rock formation on a mesa overlooking the ranch and the Front Range. Originally called Charlsford Castle, it has 24 rooms, circular stone stairways, four towers, turrets, tall chimneys, gargoyles and Vermont slate gabled roofs. Much of the rock for the walls was quarried from a nearby bluff.

Throughout the inside of the castle are paintings and furniture from 15th century Italy and 17th and 18th century England. There are Waterford and Bohemian glass and fine porcelain collections. The artwork includes paintings by such renowned artists as Sir Peter Paul Rubens and Sir Christopher Wren.

Some of the library's publications come

from the 17th century. Also on the shelves: two sets of first editions of Sir Winston Churchill's works.

"We have some things here that should be in museums," Holmes says, "so we have the responsibility from the curatorial standpoint to be caretakers of these items."

Regularly scheduled tours welcome the public to the castle's secrets and stories. One of Holmes' favorite spaces is the Churchill room, a small alcove with busts and drawings of the prime minister.

Here, Tweet would entertain political figures and community leaders looking for her support or opinions — with a glass of Scotch if it were after noon. "She was," Holmes says, "one of those influencers."

"We have some things here that should be in museums, so we have the responsibility from the curatorial standpoint to be caretakers of these items."

-James Holmes



The main room at Cherokee Castle is decorated and ready to host a one of its popular Holiday Teas, which sell out quickly. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

Events

A significant portion of the foundation's revenue comes from the more than 100 events supporting culture, education and community that are hosted at the castle each year. They range from teas to concerts, to guided hikes to brunches and films, to lectures and art exhibits.

About 45 weddings are held each year in the castle and outside courtyards with panoramic vistas.

The foundation is working to develop a role as a driver of community by hosting events unrelated to the castle, such as a recent fundraiser for Douglas County Sheriff's Deputy Dan Brite, who is recover-

ing from serious injuries incurred in a shooting in Parker in 2016. The fundraiser brought in more than \$11,000 that went directly to help the family with expenses.

The Douglas County Emergency Management Force trains annually on the land.

And the castle also rents space for functions to corporations, such as Nissan,



A food service associate sets up a table for one of the Holiday Teas. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

which held an event that included driving it's four-wheel models down Rattlesnake Road below the castle.

"It's great for building relationships with the corporate community," Holmes says.



Cherokee Ranch Dairy, which is no longer in use, sits just north of the main ranch entrance on Santa Fe Drive. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

Historic preservation and land management

Tweet created her nonprofit foundation with a single purpose: to preserve the natural landscape, protect the plentiful wildlife and preserve the property's 22 historic structures for the enjoyment of Coloradans. The cultural, educational and conservation programs would deepen their knowledge and broaden horizons.

"We're going to teach things here, not just show them to people," she said in 1996. "With this foundation, I'm not giving anything up. I'm guaranteeing its future. Now its natural beauty will be here forever for all to enjoy."

That means there are black bear, mountain lions, bobcats, wild turkeys, golden eagles and many more kinds of wildlife roaming the land. Some 320 bluebird boxes

are scattered throughout as part of Cornell University's national bluebird project. There are about 30 petrified laurel trees, 55 million years old, carried there by flood waters long ago. Archaeological artifacts have been found in several rock shelters. Although the land is not open to public hikes — to protect the wildlife — guided hikes are offered.

And last October, a nonprofit raptor rescue organization moved onto a 340-acre parcel with the intent to convert a farm building there into a nature center.

"The whole idea is we can do educational programming together," Holmes says.

All of this converges into Tweet's vision of creating an education center of the highest caliber, one that will not only ensure Cherokee Ranch's future and legacy, but also,

hopefully, instill in others that same passion for preserving and understanding history and the natural environment.

For Holmes, walking in Tweet's footsteps keeps her vision right in front of him.

His job has become a labor of love.

It's not unusual to find him on horseback, riding across the land: "In the summer . . . that's usually where I end up . . . I love being around the cattle."

Or stealing a moment on the back terrace: "It's such a beautiful setting and it's so quiet and peaceful."

It's simple, really.

"I love the Ranch . . . everything about it." A smile spreads across his face. "It just totally recharges my battery."

WhippleWood CPAs go the extra mile

In March 2016, Cherokee Ranch Executive Director James Holmes persuaded his board to step out of the box: Instead of hiring a Chief Financial Officer for the ranch and castle operations, why not contract with WhippleWood CPAs for that service?

“One of the challenges of a nonprofit,” Holmes explains, “is how do you get the level of expertise you need with a very modest budget” in a highly competitive and recruited field.

And in Cherokee Ranch’s case, there’s also the complexity of an operation that merges cattle and agricultural ranching with nonprofit and events business.



Tweet Kimball changed ranching in Colorado when she brought the Santa Gertrudis cattle to Cherokee Ranch from Texas. Photo by Paul DiSalvo

Enter Wendy Ciancio, WhippleWood’s director of accounting and advisory services, and her team of five. Together, they form a virtual, turnkey CFO service.

“We support everything from bill payments to deposit processing to preparing the annual budget to presenting financial statements to their board of directors,” Ciancio says. “We do all of their back office.”

Ciancio’s team supports companies all across the country with similar work. Like an a la carte service, many pick and choose the services they need. Some, for instance, do their own payroll and invoicing, but want WhippleWood to reconcile their accounts on a monthly basis or conduct a quarterly review.

For Cherokee Ranch, a sophisticated board of directors expects comprehensive financial and performance analysis and more — all the services of an in-house accounting department.

“As a nonprofit, they don’t have money to hire an accounting department,” Ciancio says. So “they get a piece of me, a piece of the comptroller, a piece of the bookkeeper — at a price that they can afford.”

Ciancio even joined a road trip to Hereford, Texas, with Holmes and Cherokee Ranch manager Rafael Miranda to check on some of the ranch’s Santa Gertrudis steers. Then, they headed to a New Mexico ranch to talk about genetics and cows at a Santa Gertrudis cattle operation there.

“When I work with a company it’s important for me if it’s important for them,” Ciancio says about walking among the cows. “For Cherokee, when you think about Tweet and the pillars of her organization, the cattle are really a big piece of that . . . It’s important that I understand it a little more than just numbers on a page.”

Diving deeper into her clients’ businesses isn’t unusual for Ciancio.

“When you’re a consultant building that relationship with the CEO or the executive director, it’s important to be a trusted adviser,” she says. “You have to be someone that they know and feel comfortable with. It was a terrific way to get to know James and Rafael and understand what’s important to them — and establish myself as a resource for them beyond just the basic financial statement.”

For Holmes, the relationship has been much more than he expected.

Yes, he trusts the expertise and knowledge Wendy and her team bring to the table.

But, even more, he appreciates the commitment WhippleWood has to helping Cherokee Ranch grow and succeed. He knows he can pick up the phone with any question — whether about leadership or business — for advice or a sounding board.

“We got the person we need with the level of expertise we need to address the CFO role,” Holmes says. But “this is an accounting firm with such a high level of servant leadership mentality . . . they’ve really added a lot to what we are able to do.”



Wendy Ciancio