

# Crail Ranch North

## *Conservators Connect with A. F. Crail's 1870s Ranch*

By Anne Marie Mistretta

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David Coffin, a furniture maker by trade and an old home restorer by hobby, bought a rural property parcel in the Bridgers in 2009.

Standing on 13 acres beneath majestic Sacajawea and Hardscrabble peaks are five structures. The main home appears to be modern. The four other

*Coffin poses next to a barn originally built by Frank Crail in the Bridger Mountains*

buildings are relics of the Homestead Era, dating back to the 1870s, and beneath the updated exterior of the main home lies another log structure. Little did Coffin know that this property was homesteaded by a young man named Frank Crail, who left Indiana in 1865 while he was in his 20s.

“After a few years of work on the buildings, I decided I wanted to know more about their history. I started with a land records search and discovered the original owner was a man named Augustus Franklin Crail,” recounts Coffin. “I obtained sketchy info on the Crails from various local sources. Then I decided to do an online search. Up came all of this information about the Crail Ranch – except it was in Big Sky!”



*Coffin examines the  
On his pr*

The Historic Crail Ranch Museum website lured Coffin to Big Sky in December 2014, where he



encountered a snow-bound ranch campus. But David Coffin is persistent, and he tracked down a Crail Ranch Conservator. After 5 months of correspondence, Coffin toured the Crail Ranch Museum this spring, and Conservators have visited Coffin's Crail Ranch North.

“There is a reason Crail's buildings continue to survive the rigors of time and the ravages of Montana winters. Crail constructed his buildings with unique joinery that reduces movement. It's called a double dovetail.”

Close examination of the buildings on both Crail Ranches in the Bridgers and in Big Sky reveals that they are nearly mirror images. “The buildings' joints look like twins. And Crail replicated many features 30 years later at his second ranch in Big Sky.”

*Coffin finds the same unique joints at the Historic Crail Ranch in Big Sky*



Coffin scoured local museums and the Internet to obtain Crail historical documents and photos to display in his home and in what was most likely the very first Crail cabin, which Coffin is renovating into a guest house. “I found so much information at the Crail Ranch Museum. Big Sky is fortunate to have Crail Homestead structures on public land. But possibly the most fortunate thing is all of the documents, photos, and information about the family. It all conveys clearly a way of life back in homestead times.”

Conservators were able to help Coffin fill some of the informational void about his ranch. They shared

*Coffin speaks to Conservators and others at the Crail Ranch in July 2015*

he owned appreciated the kids,

copies of letters that Crail wrote when the spread in the Bridgers. “I really the formal portrait photos of Sallie and taken when they lived in the Bridgers.”

“I'll be working on this ranch for decades. It's a labor of love.” The vistas from the foothills of the Bridger Mountains are as dramatic as the ones from the Meadow in Big Sky. Frank Crail knew how to select outstanding landscapes in which to undertake his love of ranching.