

The rise of the Sagebrush sheriffs

By Jonathan Thompson, High Country News

On the morning of May 10, 2014, San Juan County Sheriff Rick Eldredge waited on horseback in the sagebrush of Recapture Canyon in southeastern Utah. In his faded jeans, boots and white cowboy hat, he looked as if he were out for a casual ride in the cool spring air. But what appeared to be a bulletproof vest underneath his shirt and the 30-odd deputies scattered amid the canyon's scrub oak and sandstone hinted at a different story.

Eldredge and his deputies were braced for a mass act of motorized civil disobedience. Frustrated by "unconscionable acts by the Bureau of Land Management," including the 2007 closure to motorized vehicles of the trail down Recapture Canyon, San Juan County Commissioner Phil Lyman and 40 to 50 followers were driving their ATVs toward the closed section of the canyon. They were there to defy federal regulations to protest what they consider the BLM's heavy-handed management of the public lands that comprise so much of their county.

In promoting the ride, Lyman, soft-spoken with a boyish face and salt-and-pepper hair, invoked one of America's favorite civil disobeyers, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, however, seemed an unlikely role model: Several of the protesters carried firearms, including a clean-cut guy with a "Regulator" neck tattoo and a semi-automatic Glock on his hip. A young man wearing an "American Venom" T-shirt had an assault rifle in one hand, his finger never leaving the trigger, while he piloted his four-wheeler with the other. Others carried signs: "Transfer (sic) Federal Lands to Western States" and "Stop BLM Agenda 21 Road Closings." Ryan Bundy, the son of scofflaw rancher Cliven Bundy, rode a four-wheeler down the canyon, as

did a handful of self-professed militiamen who, just weeks earlier, had supported Bundy in his heavily armed standoff with BLM agents in Southern Nevada.

Read the whole story