

OUT ON THE RANGE

The Violini's Fatjo Ranch in California's Monterey County.

By Carolyn Fox and Larry Angier.

"You can carry a ham 'n' cheese sandwich on white bread around for about three days before it will go bad—just don't use mayonnaise." SCOTT VIOLINI COWBOY LOGIC



Cattle graze in the eastern foothills of the Sierra de Salinas on the Violini's Fatjo Ranch, formerly part of the old Rancho Guadalupe in the Salinas River valley. This is a far cry from the days of the California missions when up to secularization in 1834 the cattle ran free, without fencing. First brought up from Mexico in the 1700s as scrawny long-horned cattle, by the Gold Rush the price of cattle soared to \$35 a head. If you wore out your horse, you left yours and borrowed another. Same thing if you were hungry. You butchered a steer for yourself. Just leave the hide where it could be found. You really weren't able to steal; a needy person borrowed two steers and tied them together so they'd be easy to lead. They would take the pair home, keep one and let the other go where it made a beeline back to its own corral. This practice was called a "marquerna." It was common for marquernas to be given at the Guadalupe "for beef raised there had the best flavor in the whole valley."

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Rolling hills covered in tall grass, cowboys gathering to eat lunch by the corral. In Central California, it might seem like a scene from the past. But it's today, on the Violini family ranch. Once part of a vast Spanish land grant called Old Rancho Guadalupe given by Governor Alvarado to Juan Malarin a few years before the Gold Rush of 1849, the Violini family's Fatjo Ranch is now one of the few cattle ranches left in the Salinas Valley. The hills, perfect for grazing in this part of Steinbeck Country, are now mostly planted with grapevines and what the locals call "Green Gold"—salad greens.

But the Fatjo remains what the Rancho Guadalupe before it was: a family-run cattle ranch. Its proud vaqueros today are descended from the 94-year-old Violini family patri-



Roundup time for three generations of the Violini ranching family in Monterey County. From left: Family friend Doug Forzani; Jim Violini, 94-year-old father Joe, son Scott, and 91-year-old mother Mary.

arch, Joe. His daughters Joyce and Annette own large tracts of fertile farmland, while Joe's son Jim and his son Scott carry on the ranching tradition. Though still a young man, Scott is president of the Monterey County Cattlemen's Association. Formed after the great drought in 1934, the MCCA members have to deal with traditional ranching problems as well as emerging social and political difficulties, so they get state training on agricultural practices. As Scott says, "Whether we're farming or running cattle, we are agriculture."

Cattle have always been critical in California. Up to the Gold Rush period, a cowhide had a standard trading value of two Yankee dollars, and after the Gold Rush started, the price of cattle soared to \$35 a head, which converts to almost \$750 today. Nobody gets that kind of money anymore, but cowboys still gather strays and care for the herd. This



day, with their own cattle, Scott and Jim Violini and friend Doug Forzani have gathered up five Mexican calves belonging to a cousin on the other side of Mt. Toro. Jim explained, "We had an unusual snow storm in April on the mountain which caused the calves to come through the brush which they normally wouldn't do, and they ended up down here."

The Violinis use high-stepping horses. Asked if they're bred from the Spanish horses of the Californios, Jim says, "No, we just train 'em to do that because of the tall grass!" As they take a break from vaccinating to chow down, Scott uses the opportunity to provide everyone with some cowboy wisdom about food.

"You can carry a ham 'n' cheese sandwich on white bread around for at least three days before it will go bad...if you don't use mayonnaise."

Like most of what counts on the Fatjo, as on all ranches, this bit of cowboy savvy was not a part of any state training. And like as not, here in California as elsewhere, it'll always be that way. ■

Carolyn Fox and Larry Angier (RANGE magazine's Web master) live in Jackson, Calif. For more photos check <www.angier-fox.com>.



ABOVE: Doug Forzani, bullfighter and flying cowboy, on his way to assist Scott with vaccinations. LEFT: Scott Violini (in vest) and his father, Jim, pair up a cow and calf prior to trucking to their summer range in Alturas, Calif. This is spring roundup at the Violinis leased property near Marina, Calif.



Jim works in the corrals and separates Black Angus bulls from the cows at the Sand Hills lease. It's closer to the Pacific Ocean and the salt air has caused the Powder River chute bought in 1970 to rust. How long can they use the chute since each year the cows get bigger and bigger? "With genetic engineering," Jim says, "today's cows will barely fit."

Jim is on the cell phone again. His mother Mary is at the wheel of the Lexus pickup, awaiting word for her next job.