

Coming Full Circle

The Wood family in Northern California. By Holly Foster



Sometimes I think back and remember the challenges that we faced seemed almost insurmountable. But you just have to keep going with perseverance, hard work and a little bit of confidence and you find you're able to overcome those challenges," says Darrell Wood, who along with his family has created a successful California ranching operation.

"Just like our ancestors, we've had to roll with the flow," adds Darrell's wife Callie, "and take the life that we are given each day and make the most of it."

The Wood family ranching story is a little unconventional, but is still one that brings them right back to their roots. When Callie and Darrell got married in 1981, they only had a few head of cattle between them; they also had a vision of the future they wanted to build. From their modest beginning, they have put together an outfit that takes a new approach to a traditional way of life and offers a brighter future for both them and their two children.

"Like many family operations, the one I grew up in wasn't large enough to support everyone who wanted to be involved, so I went out on my own," says Darrell. "After a stint of college, and working at a couple of ranches, I bounced around from selling cars to being a loan officer for Farm Credit. I went

back to work on a ranch as a manager, but that didn't work out, so I started selling insurance and buying cows again."

Early in their marriage, Callie was working as controller for Shasta Livestock (she still does), but the couple's resourcefulness allowed them to make a start in the cattle business and buy their first piece of ground near Susanville in 1993. From the beginning, Darrell and Callie have had a vision to restore ranches that have been

owned by their forbears.

Starting with essentially no cattle and no land, they were able to put together what is now Leavitt Lake Ranches, which encompass 3,200 deeded acres and more than 30,000 private and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) leases. Winter headquarters are in the rolling annual grasslands of the Vina Plains near Chico; their summer range is near Susanville.

"You can look back and be proud of what



PHOTO COURTESY NCEA

The official photo for the Wood family's environmental stewardship award in 2009. From left, Ramsey, Callie, Darrell and Dallice. TOP: Ramsey moves cows and calves to a fresh pasture near Susanville.

your ancestors accomplished,” Callie says, “but we all have a responsibility to the land. For those families who continue to survive, the current generation has to ask, ‘What can I add?’ and ‘What can I do to make this better?’ There’s always a need to improve the land and the business and I like to think our ancestors were progressive in that way. Hopefully, we’ve learned from that.”

The Woods run approximately 650 registered and commercial Angus cows. They also run yearlings and farm 900 acres of alfalfa and 2,000 acres of irrigated pasture. They do the work with son and daughter, Ramsey and Dallice, who are active partners. “We made a conscious decision to involve our children early on,” says Callie. “Darrell and I wanted to provide them an opportunity to come back to the ranch if that was their choice after college. I didn’t want them to be in their sixties before they had a chance to be equal partners. I feel really fortunate that they wanted

to make ranching their life’s work.”

Darrell knows firsthand the value of every family member: “When Callie and I made the decision to expand,” he says, “our kids were with us every day. We couldn’t have done it without them.”

To help create more opportunities for his family and ranch, about 10 years ago Darrell started exploring the idea of selling grassfed beef. At first, the Woods were supplying a few head to a small grassfed beef business, but interest grew quickly so Darrell and Callie became part of the foundation for what became Panorama Meats Inc. Formerly Western Grassfed Beef, this company sells certified organic beef to Whole Foods Market stores throughout Northern California, Oregon, Nevada, Washington, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico and Utah, and to independent retail grocers. Their product is also sold direct through Abundant Harvest Organics, an alliance of small

family farmers in central California.

If you ask Darrell whether he ever wanted to be in the meat business, his answer is a resounding “no.” But just like the enterprising pioneers who came before them, the Woods have taken what is still a traditional operation and become trendsetters by finding new ways to market their cattle.

As a start-up company that grew quickly, there were only limited resources to procure additional cattle. As a result, much of the family’s entire calf crop began to be marketed through the grassfed program. “I certainly had some reservations,” Darrell says. “We had a reputation to uphold, and I didn’t want to jeopardize those previous relationships we had established, but we were committed to making Panorama work.”

The success of the company has gone hand in hand with the Woods’ work in land conservation. Darrell has worked hard to preserve rangeland through involvement and



Man in apron is Darrell’s great-great-grandfather Denis Wood in Susanville, Calif., early 1900s. The Wood family now sells grassfed beef through Panorama Meats at Whole Foods Markets in eight states. Before Panorama was a mainstream offering in major retail outlets, the grassfed product was mostly imported beef. Darrell says, “We are offering a higher quality, domestically raised product and that’s good for our ranch, the industry, and consumers.”



PHOTO COURTESY NGBA



Darrell is standing in front of the lower Deer Creek water diversion that is located on the family ranch near Vina, Calif. It is part of the Stanford Vina Ranch Irrigation Company. The structure includes a fish ladder to help the annual salmon migration.
FAR LEFT: Benjamin Leavitt in 1900.
BELOW: Dallice moves cattle off BLM land to the irrigated pastures of Petes Valley Ranch.

partnerships with conservation groups.

“When I was working as a loan officer, I saw a lot of ranchers who were really struggling,” he says. “To survive, many of those family operations were carving off pieces of land to meet other financial obligations. As a rancher, and as someone who wants to be an advocate for our industry, I really saw unplanned development as the enemy to our way of life. I wanted to figure out how to preserve land for future generations, not only for our own operation, but for agriculture as a whole.”

Through that interest, Darrell became involved with several conservation initiatives, most notably as a board member and past chairman of the California Rangeland Trust,

which was established by members of the California Cattlemen’s Association. “It wasn’t self-interest that motivated me to spend so much time on this issue, but I felt like we were serving as a role model for others to get involved.”

Some of the ideas the group were exploring included conservation easements and preserving parcels of rangeland in perpetuity. “These were new concepts and there was a lot of criticism even from our peers in the livestock business, but the group persevered, and has done some really good things for the future of ranching in our state. It has set an example for others.”

Just like his ancestors, the ability to persevere served Darrell well when he was working

to get their grassfed beef business off the ground. “When we first started, there was a lot of pushback from others in the industry. That made it very difficult for a while.” The turning point came when Darrell was visiting with an industry leader who said: “I get it. You guys [Panorama] are helping to sell more pounds of beef.”

That’s the way Darrell saw it too. “We are reaching out to entirely different customers who might not eat beef at all—unless they had the choice to buy our product.” He says what kept them going is probably the same attitude that kept their parents and grandparents going. “We try to look out years ahead and get past the short-term and the ‘what does it do for me



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today? The fact that we helped find ways to keep grazing land in production will keep the next generation of young producers in business for years to come. That next generation is my motivation.”

The Woods can trace ranching as a way of life in almost all branches of their family. Jeremiah Wood fled the potato famine in Ireland and made his start in the promised land as an innkeeper in San Francisco. He made his way north, where his oldest son Denis began raising cattle and drove his first herd to Lassen County in northeast California in the 1860s. While success didn't come easily, he persisted and eventually settled in Willow Creek Valley, which is just north of Susanville.

Denis Wood was Darrell's great-great-grandfather who, with his son Frank, first operated Hunsinger & Wood Meat Market and later were part of Susanville Meat Company. That lasted for several decades. The fact that Darrell now finds himself in the meat business shows how easily you can go right back to your roots.

Darrell's mother's family also traces its history back several generations in Lassen County. Benjamin Leavitt, born in 1834 in Maine, was a pioneer rancher and lumberman who settled in the county in 1865. He established several water-conservation projects in the region and engineered the Honey Lake Valley irrigation system, which includes Leavitt Lake. Darrell and Callie have been able to acquire some of Leavitt's original homestead property.

“Darrell had a vision to restore the ranches that we were able to acquire,” says Callie.

COURTESY PEEK FAMILY



Ellington and Betty Peek with their children, from left: Brad, Callie, Laurie, and Andy in 2007. They are at Shasta Livestock pens in Cottonwood, Calif.

“We both believe that improving and preserving these ranches is important and part of our responsibility for the future.”

Callie Peek Wood also hails from a family that has made its mark in the cattle business. Samuel Peek first came to California in the 1850s. Peek and a young man named John Deere married sisters and, as a result, Samuel worked for a while as an implement salesman in the Midwest. He made his way to California in 1859 and ran a livery stable. His son George put together enough of a stake in the Alaska Gold Rush to start raising beef and dairy cattle when he returned to California.

George's son Leroy Ellington Peek grew up in the livestock business and eventually became a cattle buyer, with his own son Ellington following in his footsteps. Young Ellington eventually established his own auction yard in Cottonwood, Calif., and became a major force in the livestock marketing industry in the West.

Callie's mother, Betty Gomes Peek, also hails from early California settlers who emigrated from Portugal to the Golden State in the 1850s. They settled in what is now Calaveras County.

Betty and Ellington Peek still run cattle on the original Gomes Ranch.

All of that history means the entire Wood family can claim a legacy in the cattle industry, but their willingness to embrace new ideas will help their ranching story continue into the future. “Knowing what I know now, there are some things I might have done a little differently, but how you reach your ultimate goals is always going to have to be an evolution,” says Darrell. “Having a vision of where you would like to be in 20 to 30 years helps shape what you do day to day.”

Darrell admits to a character flaw, in that he's always an optimist. “I'm bullish on the cattle industry. There will always be those day-to-day challenges, such as the weather, government regulation and the markets, but those are things we just learn to deal with. Our nation and the world depend on us to raise a safe food product and, in my mind, that equals opportunity.”

Darrell has earned his success and takes pride in knowing that their ranch is going to thrive in perpetuity, not only for his and Callie's kids and grandkids, but for others down the line. He smiles and says, “I feel very good about that.” ■

Holly Foster is a fourth-generation cattle producer and freelance writer based in Northern California.

COURTESY PEEK FAMILY



Callie's great-grandfather George Peek in Alaska in 1898. Second from left, he joined the Gold Rush and made enough money to get into the cattle business back home in California.