

# Paradise on the North Umpqua

*A perfect place for women, men, sheep and other critters.*

*Words & photos by Larry Turner.*

Every time that I come home—which is every week—I step back into paradise on this land and with the people and the critters that I love. It is therapy for my body, heart and soul,” says Samantha “Sam” Brown as she checks the newborn crop of lambs for 2024 at the beautiful Crane Creek Ranch in Douglas County, Ore. Sam, 33, is with her father, Eric Pettibone (ranch manager), her uncle Larry Simonson (Eric’s right-hand man) and her two children, Sawyer, eight, and Jacoby, six. Every week she drives from Eugene (where her husband, Nick, is a chiropractor) to the



ABOVE: Morning fog lifts above the verdant, picturesque Crane Creek Ranch as ewes with their newborns graze or rest in pastures near the ranch’s main barn. LEFT: Eric Pettibone and Sam Brown, father and daughter. BELOW LEFT: Ranch owner Jane Ratzlaff. She and Jim were married for 54 years. She says, “Our best years by far were on this ranch.” BELOW RIGHT: Eight-year-old Sawyer Brown pets one of the ranch’s guard donkeys. OPPOSITE: A ewe licks her freshly birthed second lamb while the firstborn twin scrambles to get up.

ranch outside Roseburg, where she was born, raised and wed. “My spirit soars like the bald eagle when I am here. I’m grounded and the richness and beauty of life and family is ever present.” She also watches bald eagles in trees along the North Umpqua River, which are on the property during lambing, waiting to consume the afterbirths.

Eric is driving the side-by-side, checking out the sheep and wildlife on the verdant 1,400-acre property, owned by Jane Ratzlaff and her late husband, Jim. Jane has a ranch home just above the river, known worldwide in steelhead, salmon and trout fly-fishing circles, a favorite of Zane Grey, Jack Hemingway (Papa Hemingway’s son) and a plethora of American presidents.



It is late winter. The grass is high and all but 40 of 450 ewes are content with their lambs, twins and triplets. “This has been a great lamb crop,” says Eric. “The mild weather and the abundance of grass has been a godsend. Some years we are not so lucky.”

## First-Generation Ranchers

The Crane Creek Ranch was carved from the large Mont Alto Ranch (headquartered in



nearby Glide). The 400-acre property sold to the Ratzlaffs was called the Upper South 55. Jim and Jane grew that to 1,400 acres. “There was nothing here when we first came except for a few old barns,” recalls 81-year-old Jane. Her husband, Jim, passed at 84 in 2018.

“It was two years after we made the pur-

chase that we renamed the ranch after a creek on the property. As time went by," she laughs, "we found out that the creek was named something else, but it was too late to change the ranch's name."

They were first-generation ranchers, coming to it in their middle age. "We had been living in Los Angeles for 30 years because of Jim's job in upper management at the Capital Group, an investment and mutual fund company. In the beginning (1969) California was wonderful as the climate was perfect, the countryside was filled with orange groves and natural beauty, and then it changed with overdevelopment, crime, drive-by shootings, earthquakes and poor air, diminishing the quality of life. We found paradise when we first saw the South 55 ranch property," she adds. "We wanted a change in lifestyle, and immediately we found it here. Basically, we purchased the ranch and Jim slowly retired."

### **Eric & Jill Pettibone**

When the Ratzlaffs arrived, cattle grazed the land, but as time moved on, they found the land more suitable for sheep. They needed a caretaker because Jim still traveled on business. Soon after they met newlyweds, Eric and Jill Pettibone. "Eric and Jill changed our lives as we became best friends, and Eric became our one and only ranch manager. Their children Sam and KC were born and raised on the ranch. I was there for both of their births. Our two children, Susan and Jim Junior, were already raised and lived elsewhere when we purchased the ranch."

Jane was born in Rhode Island and Jim in Kansas. She lived in many states as her dad was a medical doctor in the Navy, including stints at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., and in Oahu, Hawaii. After high school in Hawaii, that's where she met Jim Ratzlaff in 1962, which led to marriage and 54 years together. "Our best years by far were on this ranch."

Eric Pettibone and his wife, Jill, met in the Willamette Valley, home to Oregon State University. They met at Hill Farm Stables in Corvallis and came to the ranch with two horses and two dogs. Eric was a farrier, Jill a horse trainer and marathon runner. Eric was also a

rodeo-circuit bull rider from age 16 to 34. "It was my side hustle," he laughs.

The Ratzlaffs and Pettibones initially lived in a couple of trailers and soon installed wells, a barn, a house for Eric and Jill, and a guest house. Later they added a beautiful home for the Ratzlaffs, more livestock buildings, corrals, ponds, shop, a vineyard with 400 pinot noir and Syrah grapes, a wine room, two golf putting greens, sheep pens, and a large open-air recreation building pavilion which they enjoy every Thanksgiving, along with other



special events especially connected to youth.

"Jim and Jane (and we, too)," Eric says, "have always been generous philanthropically in educating and helping youth with ranch events such as the Special Olympics Equestrian Team, Pony Club, Umpqua Valley Arts, 4-H sheep groups and the Roseburg High School cross country team."

They most recently added more sheep pens and corrals with lumber coming from the Archie Creek Fire that raged through North Umpqua a few years ago. A friend of Eric's set up a portable sawmill and milled all the red cedar for the project. The fire destroyed the home of Keith and Pat Lee, who were co-owners with the Van Loans of the famous Steamboat Inn from 1978 to 2017. Pat was also a well-known fly-fishing guide on the North Umpqua. Good friend Jane offered part of her property to the Lees, who are now putting the finishing touches on their new home.

### **Paint Horses to Sheep**

With the Pettibones' horse skills, the ranch initiated a paint horse breeding program which lasted from 1995 to 2006. "Luckily," Jane says,

"we got out before the 2008 market crash." Eric adds: "We learned that it was a good way to lose money. You gross a lot of money, but not a lot of net. You make a million, but it takes two million to make it!"

The Crane Creek Ranch kept around 50 horses, including three breeding stallions and 20 broodmares. It was a member of the American Paint Horse Association and participated in dressage, jumping and cross-country. Sam, Jill and Eric would go on the road, too, for competitions. "My claim to fame," laughs 33-year-old Sam, "was in beating Terry Bradshaw's daughter Erin [a world class equestrian] once in an APHA World Show."

With the horse business out of the mix, in 2010 Crane Creek Ranch went into the sheep business. "We had to find something to make money on the ranch," says Eric. "Douglas County was a large producer of market sheep. It is perfect grazing country for sheep, aided by mild weather throughout the year."

Jane was happy: "I've always loved sheep. A friend, Ernie, once gave me two bummer lambs to take home and raise. I was in heaven with those lambs! Later I got a blind lamb which I named Helen and nourished back to a

full robust life." Crane Creek currently has 550 ewes, with a goal of 750 permanent ewes.

### **Lambing Season**

Lambing comes in the winter and autumn. The spring ewes often drop twins and triplets. "If a ewe births but one lamb and she has two milk-producing teats, we will graft a bummer lamb onto her from one with triplets," explains Eric. "To get the ewe to take it, we smear some of her afterbirth on the bummer lamb. The goal is two teats, two lambs."

During lambing season, Sam and her kids head to the ranch every weekend and sometimes during the week. "Sam is an integral part of our sheep business," Eric says, "not only in lending a helpful physical hand, but she does all of the marketing via social media and other outlets."

A typical lambing season day starts at 5 a.m. Jugs (term for pens) are checked for lambs that have been grafted to another ewe (the watch jug). To make sure that they are doing okay, birthing ewes are assisted if they need lambs pulled, newborn lambs' umbilical cords are treated with iodine, rubber bands are





FROM TOP: The sun shines through the fog at the entry to the Crane Creek Ranch outside Roseburg, Ore. ▶ Inside the lambing barn, Sam embraces her children Jacoby and Sawyer who hold two newborn lambs. ▶ Newborn lambs play in a Crane Creek pasture in waning light under a ewe's watchful eye.

placed on tails and testes for docking, shots are given for tetanus and sore mouth and ewes are dewormed. After that, lambs and ewes are assigned a pasture with no more than 125 total per pasture.

In autumn 350 ewes lamb. “We choose our new ewes from the autumn crop,” says Eric. “It is an easier lambing time as ground and surface temps are warmer.”

### Predation

Predation is always a problem for sheep ranchers. “Last year, we lost 50 head,” Sam says. “This year, 10.” Coyotes, bobcats, bear, and large birds of prey can sink their teeth and claws into sheep, especially young and vulnerable newborns. Crane Creek Ranch uses a variety of techniques to control predators, including guard donkeys, guard dogs, rotational moving of sheep and the development of hair breeds (known for high meat quality but not wool) that are more mobile and have a perseverance instinct. According to Eric: “Hair sheep know when to hold them, fold them or get out of harm’s way. Hair sheep are known to be wilder and crazier as opposed to our more docile Dorsets.” They try to keep predation rates under five percent.

### Marketing

Sam is Crane Creek’s marketer. “I love to educate the public as to where our food comes



from,” she says. “Most of our lamb is sold locally in Oregon, but we are trying to be innovative and diverse. Our customer base includes a large buyer who sells to a variety of grocery stores and restaurants in the Pacific Northwest and we sell locker lamb and cuts under our own USDA Crane Creek Ranch label. It’s pasture-raised, grass-fed delicious lamb. Local

marketing is where I am putting more energy as shipping costs are much lower. I’m always posting lamb recipes and pics from the ranch. Currently, lamb market prices are robust. More so, the public wants to know where their lamb comes from and how they are treated. Free-range lamb is appealing to buyers. We sell the beauty of the ranch and the family lifestyle as much as anything. Growing up, my brother and I were constantly with our parents, and my kids are the same with me. They love working with the animals and being around Jane and their grandparents. Sawyer and Jacoby adore doing chores with my dad.”

Sam uses a lot of free marketing tools, including social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. With no prior marketing education, she’s learned how to market meat through courses from Oregon Pasture Network and the Good Meat Project (organizations that offer free/low-cost courses for meat products that are useful, as is YouTube). Sam and others at the ranch have also found a generosity among other meat growers. “If I have a question,” she says, “I ask a local or regional sheep grower and they have always been free with their knowledge.”

Crane Creek Ranch has been experimenting with its breeding program, grass variety and pasture rotation. “We believe in a lot less can’t and a lot more try,” Eric says. The ranch has reduced fertilizer use by 70 percent and its pasture rotation system is similar to Allan Savory’s Holistic Management. They have developed a pasture feed called Haylage. “That’s basically green pasture hay baled small to be fed in late summer and early autumn, proving maximum nutrition.”

When Jane lost her husband, some of her acquaintances wondered what she would do and where she would go. “I’m going nowhere,” she told them. “Why would I leave and give up paradise? And the dear people who have become my family?” ■

Larry Turner lives in Malin, Ore. A frequent RANGE contributor, he is co-owner of [www.highonadventure.com](http://www.highonadventure.com). For more info on Crane Ranch go to [cranecreekoregon.com](http://cranecreekoregon.com).