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# Ruby Valley Treasures

*Generations of Neff families cherish their remote Nevada ranches and caring community.*

*By Dianna Troyer*

**A** 20-year-old bachelor from East Millcreek near Salt Lake City, Emerson Neff, chronicled in his journal the discouragement he felt the first winter he worked at his dad's isolated ranch in northeastern Nevada's Ruby Valley in 1933.

His optimistic father, David Gary Neff, had a successful sheep business in Utah for 20 years and decided to expand to Ruby Valley, where he invested in land, cattle and sheep. At the time, the Bureau of Reclamation was promoting the arid West as a place to grow bountiful crops and raise cattle, relying on snowmelt from the mountains to provide adequate irrigation. Then the Great Depression began eroding the family's fortunes in Utah.

"Emerson's father lost almost all their business interests in Utah, so they moved to Ruby Valley," says Sam Neff, who has his grandfather Emerson's journal. "He described how he went from being one of the richest

became smitten with the valley's beauty. When bank managers began foreclosing on the family's ranches in Nevada, Emerson refused to leave. "He bought the Ruby Valley ranch back at a foreclosure auction," says Sam, a former journalist who worked in Elko and at an NBC station in Las Vegas before returning to the valley to ranch with his brother and father. "My grandfather said, 'Ruby Valley is the only place I ever want to have a ranch. If I can't ranch here, I won't do it at all.'"

A few years later, a cousin introduced Emerson to Beryl Watts, who shared his love for the valley. They married in 1938 and had seven children. The story of how Emerson established a successful ranch east of the snowcapped Ruby



PHOTO BY SAM NEFF

kids in his high school to calving heifers in Ruby Valley. That first winter, he wrote that he would have left a dozen times if he had anywhere else to go."

Then Emerson's attitude shifted. He



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: July 4 picnic at Sharp Ranch in Ruby Valley, Nev., in 1948. Back row: Ronnie Myers, Jack Gardner, Walter Gardner, Raymond Myers, Raymond Gardner, Ray Woolverton, Lewis Sharp Sr., Dave Sharp, Blaine Sharp, Florence Wines Sharp, Emerson Neff, Richard Sharp, Grand Sharp, Don Sharp. Middle row: Shirley Gardner Firsching, Kay Gardner, Esher Gardner Stott, Alice Gardner, Gertrude Gardner Sharp, Agnes Gardner Woolverton, Marguerite Gardner. Front row: Leslie Sharp, Cliff Gardner, Neil Sharp, John Neff, David Neff, Alan Sharp, Julie Sharp (Phillips), Beryl Neff holding Jeannie Neff (Sampson), Paul Neff, Betty Sharp holding Vivian Sharp and Gordon Guldager. OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: The Neffs raise primarily Black and Red Angus cattle with some Simmental crossbreeding.

Mountains during the Depression has become family lore, passed down for generations of Neff families.

Five of their children—John, Wendell, Steve, Jeanne, and Paul—and their descendants also cannot imagine living anywhere else and are devoted to their Ruby Valley ranches that are about a 60-mile drive south of Elko. They raise primarily Black and Red Angus cattle with some Simmental crossbreeding in the central and northern half of the 10-mile-wide, 70-mile-long valley, selling them on video markets or at auctions in Idaho or Fallon. Paul jokingly put up a sign at his ranch calling the area “Neffada.”

Along with raising cattle and equally important to the families, they have cultivated commitment to their community, starting a mill and an ag equipment dealership, establishing a community cemetery, and teaching at the one-room Ruby Valley Rural School.

As a tribute to his father, Emerson named his oldest son David, adding Eugene for his middle name. In January 2017, David Eugene, 77, perished in a blizzard when he went to feed cattle. At his funeral, his daughter, Kimberly Neff Kuta, recalled asking him why he kept ranching despite harsh winters at 6,000 feet, occasional droughts, and unpredictable cattle and hay prices. “Dad was tough, as I guess every Ruby Valley rancher needs to be,” Kimberly says. “He loved waking up every morning in time to see the first rays of sunshine hit the mountains above the ranch. He said seeing that beautiful sight every day was enough for him—it’s what kept him going day after day. My dad was able to see those same beautiful mountains until the last day he walked across his beloved ranch.”



PHOTO BY KIM JACKSON

FROM ABOVE: Sierra Neff Knudsen and husband Lance rope a calf. ▶ Tyrel Neff helps daughter Olivia get ready to ride. ▶ Steve Neff, a brand inspector, works at a recent Birch Creek Angus Bull Sale. His parents, Emerson and Beryl Neff, established a family ranching legacy in an isolated valley in northeastern Nevada.



PHOTO BY KIM JACKSON



PHOTO BY ADRIANE SAMPSON

His siblings and their descendants still treasure the mountains as much as Emerson and David did and look to them as a familiar landmark of their own ranches. To the Shoshones, the captivating 11,000-foot peaks flanking the valley’s western edge are “Duka Doya,” meaning “snowcapped.” During the mid-1800s, gold prospectors named the range after rubies, mistaking garnets they found for the gemstone. To Neff families, the Rubies are the familiar landmark of home, reminding

them of their treasures—their ranches, neighbors, and sense of community.

“The ties we feel to the land and lifestyle, the mountains and our neighbors keep us here,” says Adam Neff, a partner with Sam and their father, John, in the John E. Neff Company. “Seeing newborn calves in March and April reminds us of why we stay. We market about 400 head a year.”

A patent agent who is fluent in Japanese, Adam moved his family from Alexandria, Va.,



back to the valley in 2007. “I came back for a summer to help out, and our seven kids liked it so much we moved here permanently. It’s a great place to raise a family, and I can still work remotely mornings and evenings. The people here make the valley special. They’re really caring and supportive.”

nesses. In 1986, he opened Neff Mill so area ranchers no longer had to drive four hours to Utah or three hours to Idaho to buy mineral and feed mixes.

“We’re here for our neighbors—for us all to be successful,” says John, 83. “I’ve never advertised since I opened the mill 38 years

tomers in Elko County and beyond. “We’re small, handling about 1,000 tons of grain mixes a year, but people are glad we’re here. We offer about a dozen mineral mixes—about 90 percent are standard and three or four are customized. We do a high magnesium mineral mix in spring to prevent grass

PHOTO COURTESY BIRCH CREEK ANGUS



PHOTO BY ADRIANE SAMPSON



FROM LEFT: Aaron and Kylan Tenney, left, and Logan and Adriane Sampson, right, sell their Birch Creek Angus bulls every October. They invite neighboring ranchers to sell their bred heifers. ► The Neffs all help each other out at brandings. Sometimes it’s a bit confusing to know who’s on first. ► Mark and Jeanne Neff Sampson met as teens when he worked on a hay crew for her father, Emerson.

In 1981, when his two-year-old sister drowned, neighbors formed a cemetery association so his parents, John and Kathleen, could fulfill their desire to bury her in the valley. Today the neatly landscaped cemetery behind the meeting house of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints serves the entire community.

John says the valley has always been known for neighbors relying on each other. “Decades ago during some long winters, my dad gave hay to neighbors so they could feed their cattle. Other times, a neighbor would use his D7 Caterpillar crawler to plow everyone out.”

When grain mills in the region were closing in the 1980s, John saw a need and bought equipment inexpensively from those busi-

ago. My motto has always been to give full service. When you take care of customers, they keep coming back. First they buy a sack of grain and then a semitruck load. When neighbors moved away to manage ranches in Oregon and Nebraska, they kept ordering semitruck loads of what they needed. We’ve never lacked for business. People come from outside Ruby Valley, too, as far as Tuscarora and Independence Valley.”

Sam now runs the mill for about 300 cus-

tetany.”

Depending on the weather, they raise most of their hay to feed their cattle during winter for four or five months, relying on one



COURTESY JEANNE NEFF SAMPSON



cutting of grass from the meadows and from alfalfa and rotations of grain hay crops including oats, wheat, barley, triticale, millet, and sorghum sundangrass grown with four pivots.

Customers are willing to drive the distance to Ruby Valley for not only feed from the mill, but also for ag equipment. In 1977, John's brother Paul started Neff Equipment to sell tractors, swathers, balers, rakes, augers, post drivers, and fencing supplies. Since Paul passed away in 2009, his daughter, Nancy, and her husband, Tyler Livingstone, have continued managing it. "Dad's reputation for honesty and fairness, along with his incredible work ethic, won him the admiration and respect of many," Nancy says. "He earned multiple sales awards from equipment companies he represented. I'm really proud of the hard work and sacrifice my grandparents put into establishing this legacy."

John's brother Wendell, owner of Thundereagle Ranching Com-



FROM ABOVE: Sam Neff works at the mill his father, John, started in 1987 so ranchers wouldn't have to drive long distances to buy feed and minerals. ► Spectacular sunrises on the Ruby Mountains are a treasured sight for the Neff families. ► Logan Neff rides with his sons, Cade in front, and Quinn behind his brother.

PHOTO BY ANSON NEFF

Emerson's daughter, Jeanne. After Mark earned degrees in finance and business management from Brigham Young University, he and Jeanne married and lived in Australia while Mark worked for Levi Strauss & Co. When he retired in 1999 as director of global operations support, they moved back to the valley. Their son, Logan, partners with them and also started Birch Creek Angus three years ago to focus on breeding registered Black Angus bulls with genetics suited to the high desert. "Logan has an October bull auction," Mark says. "With buyers coming for bulls, we invited neighbors to sell their bred heifers too."

Logan and his wife, Adriane, send their children to the nearby Ruby Valley Rural School for kindergartners to eighth graders. "This year we have six students," says Adriane, the teacher. "We did an interesting project interviewing grandparents about growing up in the valley. They used to ride their horses to school. Since then, we've had technological advances, but in some ways our



PHOTOS BY ADRIANE SAMPSON



pany, says he appreciates the remoteness and beauty of the valley. "The past two years have been tough with drought and only getting 10 percent of our usual meadow grass hay crop. I had to buy hay at \$300 a ton, about double what it usually is. I usually have about 500 head but had to cut down due to the drought. It's all part of ranching."

Brother Steve retired from the ranch and is a brand inspector in Elko. His son, Tyrel, runs Steve Neff Company, raising about 450 cows. "My dad was a great example of how to work hard. What I love about ranching here is that I get to be with my family every day. It's how I grew up."

At the J Bar M Ranch, their sister, Jeanne, and her husband, Mark Sampson, market about 300 head of beef annually, selling steers in July and heifers in December. "For us, living here is paradise," says Mark, 80. "It's a place a lot of people overlook."

Mark's introduction to Ruby Valley came as a teenager when he was hired to work on a hay crew at Emerson's ranch. "My brother had worked at the nearby Sharp Ranch and told me to write Emerson a letter and see if I could get a job there," Mark says. "As a kid from Ogden, Utah, working on a ranch appealed to me."

He ended up meeting his future wife,

valley is still untouched by time. Logan's grandmother Beryl taught here too."

Every summer the Neff families celebrate their ranching legacy in the valley. "Wherever we lived, we always made sure to come back for our family reunion," says Jeanne, 77. "We love the remoteness and serenity of Ruby Valley and spending time with our family. It's reassuring to know it will continue to be home for future generations of Neffs." ■

*Diana Troyer, a freelance writer based in Pocatello, Idaho, is grateful to write about ranchers making our world better.*