

The Right Place, the Right Time

Cooper Brothers' ranches in New Mexico produce award-winning people and livestock.
Words & photos by Deanna Dickinson McCall. Historic photos courtesy Cooper family.



Punk Cooper, left, and brother Jim at the Arabela/Hondo, N.M., ranch headquarters. Jim lives on this historic ranch while Punk lives on a ranch near Mayhill. ▶ Three of the oldest Cooper brothers—Jud, Punk and Joe. Being involved with the family ranch came at an early age for the Cooper children. ▶ Ewes cross Blackwater Draw near Arabela, N.M.



Punk, aka John W. Cooper, was named Sheepman of the Year by New Mexico Woolgrowers at its annual meeting in Ruidoso last June. Raised on the family ranch near Arabela, Punk grew up learning to be a sheep and cattle rancher and steward of the land from his father, John A. Cooper, and his grandfather, T.J. McKnight. With their guidance, he developed his own 4-H flock of champion fine-wool ewes.

Punk was an Eagle Scout, attending the National Boy Scout Jamboree in 1964. He was a 4-H member for nine years and showed sheep at county and state fairs, won an all-expense-paid trip to the National 4-H Congress in Chicago, Ill., for 4-H Record Book competition and was selected winner of the New Mexico Santa Fe Award.

He received a degree in animal science from NMSU and met his wife, Charlanne “Charlie” Atwell, there. He was a member of the wool and livestock judging teams and competed at the national level in both, winning the livestock competition. He spent a year in Brazil as part of the International Farm Youth Exchange, an agricultural program that teaches people modern agricultural practices. While there he learned Portuguese.

Punk was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps and served as a helicopter pilot in Korea. After active duty, he and Charlie returned to the family ranching business to raise their daughter, Jenny. They now have a granddaughter, Alicia Briggs, and a great-granddaughter, Aubrey. Jenny and her family live in Taos where she is a ski instructor.

“The Cooper family ranches were established by T.J. McKnight, who came to New Mexico in 1906 and homesteaded west of Roswell,” Punk says. “He was my maternal grandfather. T.J.’s children and many grand-

children were in the livestock business. My father got his start in ranching from there. My siblings and I were brought into the Cooper Brothers' partnership while I was in high school. I am the oldest of six, followed by Joe, Jud and Jim Cooper, Carol Gutierrez, and Ginger Shafer."

The Coopers have always had the family's future in mind, so ranching is more than just a business or occupation. "We look at ranching as a calling and we are blessed to be

"My hope is to be able to see another generation have the same opportunities we have had in ranching."



allowed to do this," Punk says. He believes that with growing pressures on property rights, this generational plan may cease at some point. "My hope is to be able to see another generation have the same opportunities we have had in ranching."

John A. and Joyce Cooper bought the ranch in Blackwater Draw near the Capitan Mountains in 1946. That was the same year Punk was born. "It was purchased from my grandfather T.J. and my uncle, Wade McKnight. Wade was killed in World War II."

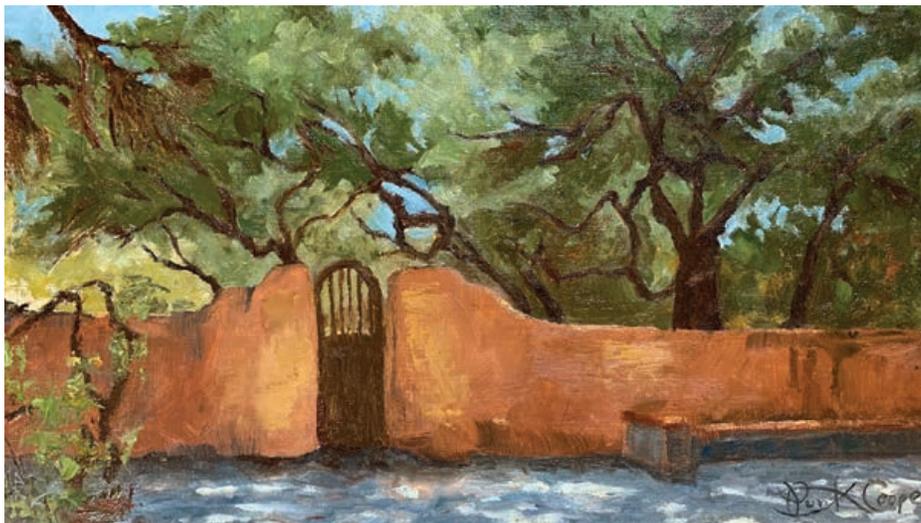
The Penasco Valley ranch near Cloudcroft was added in 1964 while Punk was a senior in high school.

Punk, Charlie and Jenny moved from the Hondo sheep ranch to the Penasco ranch in 1984.

Cooper Brothers' ranches have collected many trophies and awards for their livestock and wool production, among them Grand Champion Fleece (twice) at the National Western Stock Show in Denver. The families are well-known for producing quality livestock and for being quality people. Punk, whose Sheepman of the Year honor is just the most recent, served as president of New



FROM TOP: Centered in this picture is T.J. McKnight and his wife, Nanny. They are surrounded by, from left to right, sons and daughters Buela and Judy McKnight, Joyce and John A. Cooper, Joe and Angie McKnight, and Minnie and Clyde Marley. It was taken at T.J.'s first ranch south of Picacho, N.M. ▶ Working sheep at the Upper Ranch around 1956. ▶ J.A. Cooper with prize ram imported from Australia around the early 1950s.



FROM TOP: "The Courtyard" by Punk Cooper, 10"x18" oil on linen board. ► Grandpa T.J. McKnight, the founder of Cooper Brothers Ranches. Pictured, from left, are Punk, 5, and twins Joe and Jud, 4. ► Punk and brother Jim look over freshly weaned lambs held at the Arabela, N.M., ranch. OPPOSITE: Money clip made by Jim Cooper. All of the Cooper siblings are talented artists in various fields.



Mexico Wool Growers and represented the sheep industry in Washington, D.C., where he shared its concerns with members of Congress.

It seems there is always something coming against the food supply. Punk believes things would be much worse if food and fiber producers did not take a proactive approach. "Historically, the difficulties for the livestock industry are being compounded by bad governmental decisions at an alarming rate. I suppose it would be worse if it wasn't for the many food and fiber businesses at all levels continuing to represent our concerns. Hope-

fully, our efforts make a difference."

Punk finds it hard to say what the most difficult part of ranching is. "Markets are unpredictable, especially with today's speed of communication. It makes the risk higher and the opportunity for manipulation greater than in the past." The Coopers market mainly through contracts and retained ownership, rather than selling their animals before they reach a feedlot or similar system. Retaining ownership allows them to follow their animals' progress all the way through before retail sales and helps eliminate middlemen. They also market directly to consumers due

to a demand for local food. Punk feels this is an opportunity with potential growth.

The sheep industry played a large part in Texas and New Mexico history. From Alpine, Texas, to Santa Fe, throughout the central mountain chain and into the eastern plains of New Mexico was all sheep country. In recent decades the flocks have dwindled, giving way to cattle production, and the sheep and wool industries have changed, marked by smaller inventories, declining production, shrinking revenues, and fewer operations. Predators are always a serious problem with trapping and predator control made much more difficult and causing more hardship. Wool was the main product, with lamb and mutton secondary, even though wool



receipts actually accounted for a smaller sum. Due to wool revenues declining, producers have turned their attention to meat production and the possibility of other byproducts such as sheep leather.

Punk is also an artist whose work has been on the covers of the National Wool Growers and the *New Mexico Stockman* magazines in addition to *Livestock Weekly*. "My artwork started at an early age and was only taken seriously by my teachers who saw it as a huge distraction from the subjects they thought I should be interested in. Growing up in New Mexico exposed me to abundant high-quality artworks. After my military service and returning to the home ranch, I tried my hand at bronze sculptures."

Most of Punk's sculptures were limited editions and are sold out. "My first piece was the ewe and lamb which is probably still my favorite." He is now involved with Plein Air Artists, working with oils. He was represented in a Santa Fe gallery for several years before COVID. Punk prefers plein air work. "There is something about the discipline of direct painting, the merging of a place and a moment of time that breathes life and excitement into a landscape painting. This response to my surroundings, even the sounds and smells, seems to become as much a part of the



process as light and color. The inspiration of scene gives me opportunity to paint vibrancy and composition that I don't think I could otherwise achieve."

According to experts the most important single

industry for the future will be production agriculture. "It offers not only the greatest challenges, but also the most lucrative opportunities. Evidence that this is probably a fact, Bill Gates is buying production agricultural properties all over the country," says Punk. "I think we have moved out of an era where production land will pay for itself in a timely manner. As a result, outside investment income is making it increasingly more difficult for startup agriculturists."

Punk hopes that future generations in his family will realize ranching and agricultural opportunities exist and that keeping them interested in the lifestyle can and will lead them into an appreciation and understanding of what the family does.

Despite his numerous accomplishments, Punk is most proud of his family and his heritage. They are faithful churchgoers too. "It takes faith to believe you are where you are supposed to be, doing what you were called to do, especially when your livelihood is agriculturally based."

Punk and his family represent much of what is best in ranching, in agriculture, and in people. His awards and accolades are remarkable, as is his willingness to lead and make things better for everyone involved in ranching and agriculture. Cooper Brothers has been able to not only preserve its own family legacy, but is also instrumental in preserving the culture and heritage of ranching in New Mexico and beyond. As Punk says, "I thank God for who I am and where He has placed me." ■

Deanna Dickinson McCall is an award-winning western writer and cowboy poet who ranches in New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains with her husband. For more of her writing and performances check out www.deannadickinsonmccall.com or go to Deanna Dickinson McCall Author on Facebook. Punk's artwork can be found at punkcooper.com and in Ruidoso.