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The Castos of Unaweep

Seven generations in Unaweep Canyon have given the Casto family the grit and savvy needed to survive in the 21st century Colorado. By Marjorie Haun

Even as a young couple with kids in the nest, Bryce and Lisa Casto have faced adversity in all forms, from wildfires to attempted takeovers of their lands, to the human and canid wolves of Colorado's deluded ruling class. But with the seventh generation working its way into full-blown ranching life, the Castos have no intention of leaving the harsh, enchanted beauty of Unaweep Canyon.

135 Years in Unaweep

John Casto was born in Nauvoo, Ill., in 1835 and traveled westward with the Mormon pioneers around 1850. He met and married Betsy Corbett in Salt Lake City. They lived in Idaho, then Arizona's Blue River Valley for a time. John's children were the first generation of Castos to settle in western Colorado's remote Unaweep Canyon and they arrived between 1890 and 1895. Matt, heir fourth-oldest son, was the first to move to Colorado in 1890 when he took up with a placer mining company and helped build the famous "hanging flume" on the cliffs above the Dolores River. After a few years in mining camps, Matt

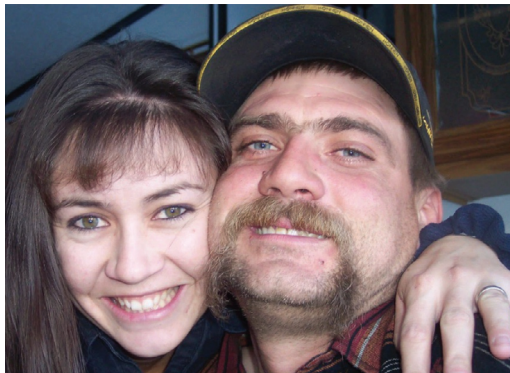
became a ranch hand for the Utah-Colorado Cattle Company. Just a few years into his ranching career, Matt made history when he bought the Unaweep Hereford Ranch from George Hazell and became the

first rancher in the canyon to raise purebred Hereford cattle.

The third of John Casto's children to come to the Unaweep was Jack Casto, Bryce's direct ancestor. Jack and his wife, Mabel Johnson, acquired a ranch belonging to Pate and Jim Smith and stayed on until Jack's death in 1949.

The Masseys, another family whose name is synonymous with ranching in Unaweep Canyon, are cousins to Bryce. Lloyd, Bryce's dad, and Janice Massey are brother and sister, and both branches of

the family are direct descendants of John Casto. The Masseys continue to farm and ranch in Unaweep about 15 miles to the east of the Casto ranch. The Castos and Masseys run roughly 1,400 head on several shared BLM allotments. With a growing brood of grandchildren, the Masseys have added an eighth generation to their family ranching legacy.



Bryce and Lisa met while attending the Gateway School. “When I was 14 and he was a freshman,” Lisa says, “Bryce borrowed a pen from me. When he returned it at the end of the day there was a note asking if I liked him and would like to date. We dated on and off since then. His blue eyes and those Wrangler jeans got me!” Greatly understating Lisa’s prettiness and easy charm, Bryce says, “I liked the fact that in Gateway she wasn’t related to me.” They married in 1999 while Lisa was still in high school and began a shared life of hard work. Children followed a few years later. After several years of hauling logs, cattle, hay and gravel, Bryce took the ranch over

The elites want to use NCAs and monuments to lock up the lands so there is no multiple use. They’re doing this to destroy our ability to use public lands for our purposes.” Most locals on the West End continue to oppose a new NCA.

Intensely energetic, Lisa manages the ranch and is a mama bear advocate and protector. “I love riding my horse and working the cows.

I don’t enjoy paperwork, but I take care of taxes, things like that.” Lisa’s childhood experi-



PHOTOS COURTESY CASTO FAMILY



TOP LEFT: The Castos’ mixed herd grazes on Colorado’s Uncompaghe Plateau.

TOP RIGHT: Delanie rides her horse Tabbikeith as she pushes cows up Unaweep Canyon.

BELOW: Having migrated from Illinois in 1850, John Casto married Betsy Corbett in Salt Lake City and gave rise to the first generation of Castos in the Unaweep.

OPPOSITE TOP, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Lisa, Tyrel, Elijah, Delanie, Laylah and Bryce Casto in Gateway, Colo.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Lisa and Bryce Casto have been married for 26 years.

from his grandparents, Beeman and Jessie Casto, who are both now 92 and live in Grand Junction.

Champions for the Cause

The Castos exude a red-blooded proclivity to take up any challenge or foe that threatens their family or their way of life. Bryce dove into local politics during the West End’s recent battle against a huge national monument targeted for lands historically used for grazing, hunting and mining. [See “West End Bulwark,” Summer 2025.] He says: “If we don’t do something they’re going to push us out. Public lands are for multiple uses. We are the ones doing fire mitigation when we graze our animals and clear trails. It’s the boots-on-the-ground people like us who know these lands and how to keep them healthy and productive. The Dolores Monument failed, but we never needed a national monument. It’s pristine and beautiful here because people who live here have kept it this way.”

Unfortunately, local politicians and some ranchers sought a compromise with the belief that creating the Dolores National Conservation Area would sate the land-grabbers’ hunger. Bryce continues: “An NCA is worse than a monument because with the monument you have a set of rules, but with the NCA the rules never stop changing.



ences with 4-H fostered skills she now uses as a ranch wife and mom. She says: “Those experiences gave me the confidence to get into raising pigs. 4-H has been a big part of our lives. I’ve been a leader in our Gateway club for 12 years.” The Castos donate beef and whole hogs for the yearly 4-H fundraisers in Gateway. “4-H is a great program that really helps young people get into the world of agriculture. It creates responsible leaders with compassion and grit.” Lisa also finds time to serve on the parent advisory boards of the middle school and high school attended by Tyrel (15) and Delanie (13). “When I need to take time off the

ranch to participate in these other activities, the kids are happy to fill in for me.”

Elijah (20) now lives in the small city of Grand Junction and is a certified coffee expert at a local coffee shop. He also serves as tech support for the ranch. Living in an urban environment, Elijah says: “It’s an opportunity to be in a setting with people who think differently than us and who’ve lived different experiences than we have. People who have always had a grocery store within a mile don’t understand what we do. They haven’t seen the reality of what it takes to survive out here. I want to make that conversation personal.”

Laylah (19) recently moved to Monte Vista to work at the sale barn and see a little of life outside the canyon. “I’ve done this my whole life,” she says. “My family for generations back worked hard so my generation could have this way of life. It’s in my heart. It’s what I love to do

most. Everything I do in my life revolves around this ranch.” She warns, however: “There is evil in this world, and I want to protect what I love and what my family loves and what they’ve worked for all their lives. I’ll stop at nothing to make sure we have that.”

Raising Ranch Kids

Someone very wise once said, “The ultimate goal of ranching is not the raising of livestock, but the cultivation and perfection of men and women.” The Castos don’t feign perfection, but they sure seem to have a lot of fun.

Delanie earned her ranching skills fast and hard. She says: “We had two young horses, Scarlet and Pickles. Laylah put me on Pickles and she got on Scarlet who wouldn’t go at all. When I got on Pickles he took off at full speed and wouldn’t stop. But I didn’t fall off. We did



PHOTOS COURTESY CASTO FAMILY

that for five days in a row. I’ve never ridden bronco horses, but I have never fallen off. That’s how I learned to ride.”

Laylah’s favorite times growing up on the ranch were when she would take her best friend, Mila Wilkinson, to cow camp each year. “We would ride in and out of the long prong of Little Creek where our cabin is,” Laylah says. “I loved riding and working the cows all day long, then at the end of the day riding home in the silence, and at dusk we would get back to the cabin and it was like the old days. It was just perfect.”

Tyrel is outgoing and confident, but his favorite story about growing up in the canyon verges on the bizarre. He says: “We were out riding looking for cows and I was behind my dad in the cedars when I saw a horned lizard on the ground. I picked it up and stuck it in my coat pocket. My dad was riding along and saw a coyote, so he took after it. I didn’t want to get left behind, so I followed Dad, jumping over logs and through trees, and I told that lizard to hold on with its life. I almost fell off six or seven times, but we lost the coyote. When we got back to the road, I checked my pocket. That horned lizard had five babies in my pocket and an afterbirth. They were no bigger than my pinky nail.” Before riding back to the corrals, Tyrel released the lizard and its offspring into the desert.

The Turner Gulch Fire

Marked by sheer sandstone escarpments, vivid colors and lush green bottomlands, Unaweep Canyon could be mistaken for a valley in the Swiss Alps. It divides the Colorado Plateau to the west from the Uncompaghre Plateau to the east. Unaweep is as unusual in its geology

as it is ideal in its qualities for raising and containing livestock, but none of its majesty could spare it from the West’s brutal wildfire season of 2025.

The Turner Gulch Fire ignited on July 12, and by early August had destroyed nearly 32,000 acres within the canyon and on the plateaus. Bryce says: “It started small and a neighbor who wanted to put it out could have done so easily. But it was on BLM land so they wouldn’t let



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The Castos run a Charolais mix of cattle. ► On August 14, the Turner Gulch Fire climbed up the canyon and over the top to burn the Castos’ historic cow camp, corrals and countless miles of fencing and acres of forage. ► This fire left nothing but scorched land, tangled fences and charred wood where the upper cow camp had stood for decades. ► Bryce and Laylah work cows on a blustery winter day. OPPOSITE TOP: Cowgirls to the core, Laylah and Delanie are doing what they love most. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Bryce’s grandparents, Beeman and Jessie Casto, turned the ranch over to him and Lisa in 2016.



him do it. Everyone knew that one helicopter load of water could have put it

out and we could have stopped this fire, but they allowed it to fester for two days.” He explains: “This was not the fault of the firefighters. Once they arrived they had a well-oiled working unit. But there was something or someone above them saying ‘no.’ If someone higher up hadn’t been controlling them, they would have put it out when it first started.”

Lisa says: “It started on Saturday and spread really slow. On Sunday there was almost no smoke, but it was creeping down the canyon. By Monday they still hadn’t put it out and that’s when it swept through Unaweep.”

Bryce continues: “By the time they got serious about putting it out it had climbed five miles up the canyon, climbed over a ridge and burned the cabin and corrals in our cow camp. It didn’t burn our cows, but it burned our feed, so we’ve spent 10 days to this point moving 850 cows. There’s nothing left.”

Although much sympathy and aid has been offered by various agencies and political bodies, to date little has come to bear. “There seems to be a lot of paperwork to fill out,” Lisa says. “They want to know exactly the mileage of fence that was lost, all the details if we need something replaced. We don’t have time to jump through the hoops now because we’re busy moving cows that don’t have any feed.”

Every family in the canyon was impacted by the fire. “It got all of our neighbors, burned all of our fences out,” Bryce says. “It hurt all of us. It tore us all up. Granddad once had to sell his calves for 63 cents a pound and that was pretty devastating, but this could be as bad.”

Wolves in the Unaweep

With Colorado’s rampantly growing wolf population, it’s a matter of time before they start denning and killing in Unaweep Canyon. Past generations of Castos struggled to eliminate wolves, and that was when the government awarded bounties for dead wolves instead of affording the dangerous predators full, taxpayer-funded protections. It is said that over time the families in Unaweep eliminated hundreds of wolves.

Laylah relates a family story: “My ancestors caught the last wolf that lived in this canyon, and they had a way of trapping wolves that lived in the rock caves along the creek. They set a steel-jaw trap to catch them by the foot, and they had caught all of them that way. When there was only one wolf left, they set the trap, covered it with leaves and sticks and waited. But the last wolf was the smartest, and when it came upon the trap, it flipped it over with its paw. The old-timers figured out what the wolf was doing, and the next time they set the trap, they put it on the ground upside down. When that old wolf came along the last time, he flipped the trap over like he had always done, but this time he got caught. Up until now, he was the last wolf in Unaweep.”

Bryce worries: “The wolf is going to be devastating to everybody who hunts, everybody who raises livestock. The wolf is killing everything. They’re a wasteful animal and they kill for sport. We’re pretty grateful to our Wyoming neighbors for how they’ve handled the wolf problem, but wolves are absolutely tearing up the states that protect them. This is a terrible deal for the western states. The government is using them as a tool to destroy our private property, and they will put us behind bars if we try to defend ourselves.”

Although range cows can be tough and resilient, even their best defenses won’t deter wolves. “Everyone says, ‘let the horns grow on your cows.’ Well, that bull elk out there has horns. Horns on a cow aren’t going to do any good because wolves attack and eat from behind. My granddad can remember when wolves were here before, and mind you, those were not the big wolves they’re bringing here from Canada. He said the wolves would chase down a cow until she was exhausted, eat the bag out of her then just go on to the next cow,” says Bryce.

Lisa says: “There are studies that show when wolves are near an elk

herd, it stops cow elk from using whistles and squeaking sounds to communicate with their babies. How is that balancing the ecosystem when a mother elk can’t even communicate with her baby? I don’t think anyone in their right mind would want to witness what happens when a baby animal is taken down by wolves. I told the wildlife commission that my children will witness it. They will see the animal being ripped apart. They will hear the sounds of the dying animal because we live where we live. When I was explaining this, the officers wouldn’t even look at me. They didn’t hear us.”

For Laylah, the wolf problem is personal. “My little sister trains for track by running up the road to do chores. Once wolves are in the area, how can any of the kids feel safe? This is our home. It should be safe for her, but it’s not.”

This Is Our Home

The Casto children are wise and discerning. They haven’t been shielded from the dangers of the world, but through good parenting Bryce and Lisa have taught them how to do dangerous things and face dangerous situations with foresight and care. As young people, they have all decided to follow in the footsteps of previous generations, and to fight for their family legacy.

Lisa’s first loves are her family and husband. “He’s the calm to my storm, that’s for sure. Where I would be wild and anxious, he would be quiet and patient. He balances me out. We’ve been married 26 years.” But she expects their future will be no less challenging than their past. “We’re sticking it out and we’ll keep going, but those of us in rural areas just want to be heard. We want people on the outside to be open-minded and have some respect for people here willing to do the kind of hard work they wouldn’t do.”

Elijah also wants to clear up misunderstandings about rural folks. “If you’re seeking information, talk to families directly. We’re the people living out here and experiencing it. People can stand there and say, ‘we represent agriculture’ or

‘we represent the community,’ when the majority of our lands are burned. We’re not standing on a podium talking about how much we care. We’re out there gathering our cows. We’re working to stay alive.”

Delanie’s best teacher has been the ranch. She says: “In my experience I’ve learned more on the ranch than I ever have at a school desk. Most of my common sense has come from being on the ranch. It’s different reading something out of a book than living and experiencing what it’s like.”

And Laylah, a born fighter, says: “Gateway and the Unaweep Canyon, this is my home. This is where I feel safe and I can’t have that in a city. I will fight for this. Ranching is what I love the most. We have a good crew here and we will never stop fighting to protect it.” ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist who specializes in ranching, agriculture and natural resources policy. During a brief stint many years ago as a teacher at Gateway School, she had the privilege of seeing the Casto and Massey kids and their shoats in action in the Fall Festival greased pig contest.

