

THE CAIN CATTLE COMPANY

From the Ground Up

For this New Mexico family, it's been quite a ride.

Words & photos by Julie Carter.

In the heart of central New Mexico the Cain family carries on a ranching tradition founded on many generations putting the land first and continuously making improvements. David Cain is the fourth generation in his family to raise cattle in New Mexico, and the third to be on the land where he stands today. He and his wife, Brenda, are raising a fifth generation—daughters Dalli Von, 17, and Macklee, 12—to carry these traditions forward.

In December 2022, Macklee was awarded the New Mexico Cattle Growers Association Heritage Award for an essay she wrote for the contest. She already knows she's part of some-

thing much bigger than herself and is building her dreams on that very thing. In her essay, she was quite clear about what she believes is her responsibility to continue what her ancestors built. "The legacy of New Mexico agriculture is very personal to me," she wrote. "It is also my legacy. I will continue to build the industry by making sure everybody knows where their meat comes from."

Dalli's nod to her heritage comes in a unique fashion. At a young age she began to play fiddle, an instrument her great-grandfather played avidly both at home and at various gatherings. With lessons since she was five and a natural ability to play by ear, she's had

many opportunities to perform at public functions, most notably playing the National Anthem at National High School Rodeo Finals each year she's attended.

The family ranch, Cain Cattle Company, is a cow-calf operation located south of Mountainair. The Cain daughters are active participants in ranch work, from spring branding to fall shipping and all tasks including building fences, checking water, pulling wells, feeding cattle and tending to daily chores.

Brenda Mack Cain (Dr. Mack, by trade) is a 25-plus-year veterinarian who commutes to her clinic 55 miles away in Belen. The hour-



long drive twice a day often creates a rushed sense of living while she strives to fulfill her ranch wife tasks and stay involved with two very academically and extracurricular-involved daughters.

Dalli attended high school locally, graduating in May 2023 before leaving for New Mexico State University to study biochemistry. She hopes to apply to medical school to become an anesthesiologist. Macklee attends junior high in Belen, so doing homework at the clinic while waiting for her mom is the norm, as well as helping to hold animals, wrap surgical packs and clean pens.

Both girls participate in 4-H with projects ranging from baking and sewing to livestock showing, primarily market goats and swine. They also are members of the New Mexico High School and Junior High Rodeo Association. For five years Dalli has qualified for the national finals in shooting sports—light rifle and shotgun—as well as pole bending for two years. Macklee competes in roping, goat tying, barrels and poles.

Macklee's Heritage Award essay came from the heart of a girl deeply rooted in her rural lifestyle. She took great pride in learning to drive the pickup to feed this past winter, and in the dark cold months of winter has used her dad's welder in the shop. She actually started welding when she was seven and now it's a side business for her. At Christmas she took orders and built horseshoe wine racks to sell. She needed a nightstand in her bedroom, so after digging through the iron scrap pile to come up with enough material, she designed and built herself one.

Macklee's winning essay outlined her understanding of how very few people know the difficulty of feeding America. "We often work in rain and snow, weekends and holidays," she wrote. "It is my goal to meet these people and show them how passionate we are about taking care of the animals and the land. Building New Mexico agriculture is important to my dad and to my ancestors. I love this industry and will do my part to protect it."

David recalls: "My great-grandfather lived and ran cattle in the Hobbs, New Mexico,



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Macklee, Brenda, David and Dalli. BELOW: Dalli, left, and Macklee flank a calf during a recent branding. OPPOSITE: Cain Cattle Company is the epitome of a small family ranch where everyone helps with the work. Macklee, left, and her mother, Brenda, bring in part of the fall gather to begin the weaning and shipping process.

area and was the sheriff there for a time. My grandfather Von Cain worked in Engle [east of Truth or Consequences] when he started buying up the land where we live today. He started with that first parcel and then added to it one piece at a time. It was in 1938 and the area was full of dryland pinto bean homestead farms that were droughted out. As those homesteaders left, he bought their farms. Then they herded cattle horseback from Engle to here, about 150 miles, and he ranched here until his death in 1992."

Von Cain amassed what at one time was a

100,000-acre spread, half of which was deeded with the remainder state and federal lease land. He and his wife, Roy Lee, created a partnership for their three children. Sadly, after Von's death, family disputes began with suits and countersuits that lasted years and fractured the holdings into smaller, separately held parcels.

As one of nine heirs, in spring 2000 David was apportioned a piece of his grandfather's ranch. It came with no housing, corrals, wells, interior fencing or a needed perimeter fence. But the land was his and over time, like his grandfather, he has added to it, one piece at a time.

"We had nothing," says Brenda. "No cattle, no money, no credit. Nothing. We weren't a good risk and we were absolutely not willing to risk mortgaging the land." For the first year, they leased their pastures to outside cattle. Brenda's dad owned a well-drilling business, so his wedding present to the couple was drilling their first well, a blessed beginning. It was 900 feet deep and produced a gallon a minute.

That first well was the water source for everything on the ranch for years. Over time, miles of pipeline and storage tanks put in place took water to pastures





ABOVE: David Cain prepares to move some cows out to pasture after the calves have been stripped away. RIGHT: Winter feeding time brings in the herd and there is always a pet that wants a personal serving. BELOW: Macklee and Dalli Cain, born and raised to be the next generation on the family ranch.

farther to the west. Along the way, four more wells were drilled, all within a half mile of power lines so electric pumps could be used. In 2022, a new well and solar pumping system was installed—the furthest from headquarters, a 40-minute round-trip. Installing a camera on the storage tank so he could check it with his cell phone brought David into the digital age, which both he and Brenda laugh about. “He wasn’t at all interested in technology,” Brenda says. “But now he can check the water levels on his little ‘dot com machine’ every morning over his first cup of coffee.”

David adds: “So finally we bought some cows. Well, my father-in-law bought them, and we paid him back over time. We tried, but nobody would loan us money without putting the land up, so that help gave us a start.” With not enough cattle yet to make a living, Brenda worked as a veterinarian and David contracted fence-building jobs. In 2001, Brenda was able to purchase



her own veterinary clinic, where she remains today.

In 2008, they upgraded from the very old single-wide trailer they’d bought to live in to a new home they built. In 2010, a nice set of corrals was added to complete “headquarters.” But three years later, all that hard work was stunted by a bad drought. “It was so dry and I was so tired of feeding,” recalls David. “That spring we branded all the calves. They looked terrible, terrible, so I decided to sell everything. I think we sold on like the 15th of June. Well, about the 18th of July it came in here and rained. Oh my gosh, best year we’d ever had and I had sold them on a low market! I think I got \$1,200 for the pairs and that fall everything went sky high. The market was \$2,000-plus for a bred cow.”

“Ranching,” says Brenda. “Buy high, sell low.”

Working with what he could afford, David bought some old cows that fall and kept them for two or three years. He also bought some yearling Hereford heifers. “And that’s how I got into the Hereford business. I bought more the next year.” For a few years, David ran straight Herefords, and then added some black bulls for the black baldie calves.

Another major improvement on the ranch has been brush-control projects. Using a loader to push and stack (and seasonally burn) the dense growth of piñon and juniper brush, David has been able to increase the carrying capacity of the ranch by 30 percent. Fencing and new gates have come along with the ongoing improvements.

Brenda frequently writes about their life ranching, working and raising a family in a blog she calls “Raizin’ Cain.” Her pragmatic and often humorous outlook of living their dream can be found at raizincain.com.

Starting with only the land, the Cains have spent two decades building their own family heritage, a legacy, literally, from the ground up. ■

Julie Carter lives in Mountainair, N.M., where she writes and photographs the working ranch families of the Southwest.