

Up a Creek

Five generations of Dobsons on Idaho's Hat Bar Ranch.

By Lyn Miller



LEFT: Steve credits the ranch for producing the best in life. Pictured here with grandson, Troy, and dog, Bumble, he enjoys the investment of work and family.

BELOW: Looking to carve out a niche of his own, Len purchased the Hat Bar Ranch in 1926 for a dollar an acre.

Len raised prospects for the U.S. Army's remount program. "They raised nice horses," Steve says. "Long days when I was a kid always involved horses." It was a work-to-learn program for the kids and the colts. "As kids, we broke our own saddle horses. We'd ride colts to fix fence, gather and any other job dad could think of. Mostly, we'd go till the horses got tired and started acting better." Working with horses was a skill set that Steve passed on to the next generation.

Steve met his wife, Leslie, at an Owyhee County Cattlemen's meeting. They married in '75. For a gal unaccustomed to life on a ranch, Leslie says, "It was really lonely at first. But it was hands down the best way to raise kids." The couple has two daughters, Holly and Kelley, who, despite having families of their own, still have a hand in ranch life.

"Ranching really prepared me for life," says Kelley. "We were always around our family. My dad, mom, and grandparents were



PHOTO COURTESY STEVE & LESLIE DOBSON

My great-great-grandfather, William Dobson, came from Tennessee to Idaho in 1864," says Steve Dobson. William Dobson's son, Len, grew up in the Boise Valley, but decided to make his own place in the hills to the north. He ventured to what is now Horseshoe Bend, Idaho, in 1926. Purchasing his own homestead, he founded what is now the Hat Bar Ranch on Shafer Creek.

"It was purchased from a man named Cartwright," Steve explains. "The homestead originally served as a stage stop." The house and barn were already built in 1926 and the main house consisted of six rooms to accommodate travelers on the stage between Horseshoe Bend and Dry Creek. The Hat Bar had good meadows, and once Len purchased the

property, he grew hay and raised livestock. When Len's son, Ben, the second generation on the Hat Bar, took over, he continued operating the ranch. Steve and his two siblings, Joe and Bonnie, Ben's children, grew up in an atmosphere of hard work.

At that time, the Hat Bar operated on horsepower. Steve and brother Joe grew up using draft teams for ranch work. "Everything was done with horses. All our horse-drawn equipment had iron seats. By the end of the summer, Joe and I had blisters from sitting on those seats," Steve laughs. Of the three Dobson siblings, Steve remained within ranching while brother Joe and sister Bonnie both pursued a life beyond the Hat Bar.

The steep range within the ranch produced strong, dependable horses. Early on,

busy 110 percent of the time, but they were always available. It was fantastic."

Having grown from the original 1,500 acres purchased in 1926, the Hat Bar is now a cow-calf operation calving February through March. During the hotter months, cow-calf pairs are turned out on summer range close to home. "We have no transportation costs. Everything is right here summer and winter,"



PHOTO © HOLLY BLACK

explains Steve. One essential thing remains the same, however.

Unlike the first two generations that raised horses, Steve has diversified by developing a gravel pit and excavation business. Diversifying applied to all members of the family, and when Dobson Gravel was established in 2000, Kelley became office manager and bookkeeper. Kelley admits, "I'm not a horseman like the rest of my family, but I've always been able to run equipment. I like the feeling of being capable."

Holly spent plenty of time in the saddle as a kid, much like her father did. "I remember riding with my dad and Grandpa Ben helping out with cow work," she says. Holly now divides her time between the Hat Bar and the ranch she helps operate alongside her husband, Will Black, in Bruneau, Idaho. For most, this would be an overwhelming prospect. The Hat Bar provided the fortitude she'd need as an adult. "Our lifestyle taught me how important it is to have a goal as a family. My folks and grandparents always made holidays special, but you still had to feed cows Christmas morning. The goal was a successful ranch, but taking care of each other came first, then taking care of the ranch was easier and we had more fun." When times get tough, she relies on her roots. "I love our family history. There are so many great stories of hard-working people who persevered. Knowing where I come from has always been a

ABOVE: Holly's Kids. Horses have always been a part of childhood on the Hat Bar. "Long days always involved horses. We'd ride colts and fix fence. I don't ever remember having nothing to do," says Steve Dobson, owner of the Hat Bar. Here, the grandkids prepare for time in the saddle, from left: Marilyn, Ian, Clancey, Troy and Blaine.

BELOW: Branding on the Hat Bar happens in spring. Here, Holly and husband, Will, help their daughter, Marilyn, ride a calf up after being branded and vaccinated. For ranch kids, entertainment can be found everywhere.



PHOTO © LYN MILLER



ABOVE: The fourth and fifth generations of the Dobson family, from left to right: Will Black holds one of his twins, Troy. In front are his three sons: Blaine, Clancey, and second twin, Ian. Next to Will is wife Holly, fourth generation on the Hat Bar with daughter Marilyn in front. Leslie and Steve stand proudly in the middle. Next to Steve is daughter Kelley, along with her son, Gus, her significant other, Shawn, and Kelley's daughter Ellie. RIGHT: Leslie and Steve met at an Owyhee cattlemen's meeting dance and married in '75. For a city girl, it was an adjustment to life on a remote ranch. BELOW: The Hat Bar was built with horsepower. From haying equipment, gathering, starting colts, to winter feeding there was never a slow season. Steve says, "I don't remember ever having nothing to do."



motivator for me." With that confidence, Holly and Will raise their kids to appreciate hard work and what it makes possible.

As the Boise Valley just over the hill grows and expands exponentially, the Hat Bar sees an influx of people making use of national forest land bordering the ranch. "Growing up, my dad constantly reminded us that someone is always watching. When in a draw or out in the sagebrush, you can bet someone can see you. I learned how important it is to do what's right all the time, even when you think no one is looking," Kelley says. This is espe-

cially true now. "We have drones fly over Shafer Creek all the time." That puts to mind what the future holds for the Hat Bar.

At 97 years and five generations deep, the Hat Bar is still thriving. For Steve, he knows what he wants. "I hope it stays in the family as a functioning ranch for only God knows how long." Steve and Leslie agree that their greatest accomplishment has been raising their two daughters.

A changing viewpoint from young bride to seasoned ranch wife causes Leslie to look back and reflect on the journey. "I think the

best lesson learned is that of tolerance and patience. You've got to have tolerance and understanding of other opinions."

Steve agrees. "Telling the truth is the smartest thing you can do. Be fair in your dealings. Make sure you have a common interest."

When it comes to predicting the future for family operations across the country, maybe it's not worrying over what is ahead. Perhaps Kelley says it best. "You have to get up every day and go to work. You have to keep going." It was hard work and determination that built the Hat Bar. It's the same recipe that will keep it strong for the next generation. ■

Lyn Miller lives and writes from the family ranch in Idaho. When she's not helping out, she can be found working on articles and novels. For a look at her work, visit www.authorlynmiller.com.