OUR TOWN

Fallon is not the same as it was just a decade ago. Very few rural towns are. Words and photos by Tim Findley

If it is more than just a collection of neighborhoods connected by taxes, a small town always feels the character of its best-known families and most-trusted leaders. They don't always like each other and they might not even agree about much beyond it being "our" town, but you can't really know a town like Fallon, Nev., without hearing the names, like the Kents and the Dodges; the Freys and the deBragas; the Gettos and the Tedfords; the Peraldos and the Mills.

You can find them there now, some in the same place their family has been for 80 years and more. Look quickly and gently if you will, though, and understand that some may be weary, maybe even a little bitter. Fallon is not the same as it was just a decade ago. They might not want to show their disappointment, if that's how they feel, and they might not say the best times are gone for them. But a sense of difference, if not change, is settling among the memories in Fallon, and in who knows how many other towns like it all over the West.

It was in part what amounted to a 25-year cold war for survival that brought the town to what seems now a decisive moment. A relentless federal bureaucracy still tries, but has not succeeded, in stripping the region of its irrigation rights along with the more insidious pressures to alter its rural character.

Fallon didn't lose. It will never wind up with the vacant brick shell appearance of a melancholy ore center like Goldfield, Nev. In fact, during its struggle of the last quarter century, Fallon grew as never before, more than doubling the population of Churchill County. A huge new Wal-Mart superstore will open there this year, even before it can be decided what to do with the old Wal-Mart built hardly 10 years ago. The kids just home from college will find new stoplights along Williams Avenue, bringing the number to nine beyond the single one without turn signals that they knew as children.

Joe Frey's grandfather lived in a dugout, an uncle had a crop duster, but Joe contract pilots a Lear jet for a California environmentalist. Even though sitting in a Spanish leather seat, faced with an array of dazzling lights in the cockpit, he says, "I will still work the farm whenever I have time. It's a part of me I would never let go."

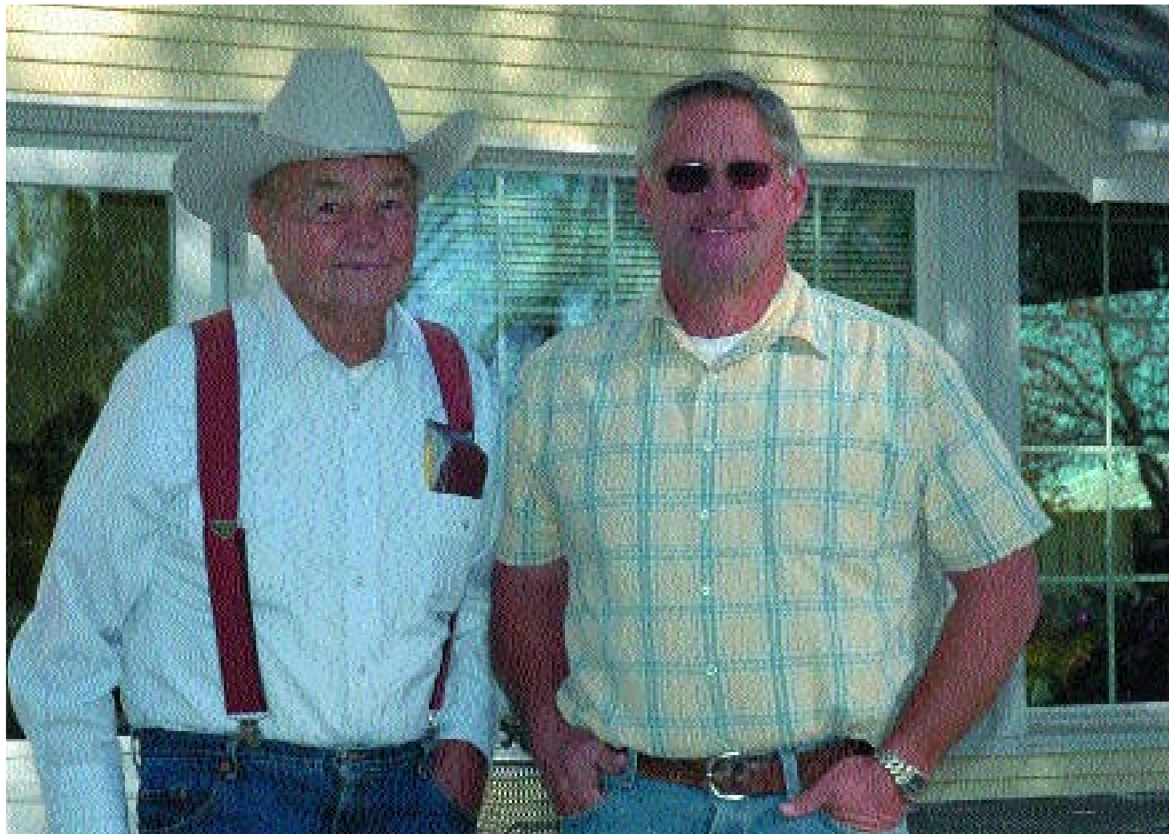
New subdivisions are crowded on former farm fields especially north and west of town, all holiday ablaze with new ownership pride. And there are still working farms in the most familiar places east, past where the old Maine Street center of town has recently been graced with a fountain and curving brick walkways with benches. The attempt to make the old business district more inviting somehow only leaves the empty shop windows looking more lonesome. The annual Christmas tree was lit there again last year, but not many of the old-timers showed up.

Still, a group of eager entrepreneurs has recently announced plans for a shopping mall and restaurant complex with a 1920s style in one of the old brick buildings, and the city has bought the property of a failed print shop nearby without any immediate plans for it. Fallon will not easily give up its sense of heritage. If something's gone, it might be a spirit, a sense of individual character best known among them when it was, more than now, "our" town.

"I think maybe it caught us more by surprise than we wanted to admit," Don Travis

says with that gentle bear smile of his that comforted generations of kids marched into his office when he was principal of the high school. "We never really felt they'd go that far or even that they could. We really just didn't expect that."

In the final hours of the 101st Congress, U.S. Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) had by the mere margin of one vote done what many of them had not expected and what others could not understand. He betrayed part of his own constituency to renounce a near-century-old promise made in writing to those who would invest their lives in the nation's first National Reclamation Project. Reid's bill struck at the heart of it, eliminating irrigation supplies to save a strange sucker fish from extinction and to "restore" wetlands that were never there before the farmers created them. Two main rivers off the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, the Truckee and the Carson, both of which flow into landlocked evaporation in the desert, would be largely denied for use by farmers the senator accused of being thieves. It was a shock beyond reasonable belief.



George and son Norman Frey. George became newspaper editor Anne Pershing's unofficial Howard Stern, writing scathing letters to the editor that made Anne, and some readers, cringe at their combative and often complexly demanding style backed by evidence from years of conflicting federal decrees. Anne told him, '"George, tone it down a little, but he would just keep coming at them." Anne, shown below, says, "We weren't anarchists! People here just weren't raised that way. They always wanted to respect the government and trust in justice. But we fought. The paper fought from the start."

Travis jabs a little at the garnish and watermelon balls alongside his pancakes, unconsciously recognizing the light café touches as being something else out of place in the rapidly changing times. Over those years we had often shared breakfast together in places like Jerry's or the Cock 'n' Bull or even Gallagher's stockyard restaurant. Maybe there were melon and cantaloupe balls before but not likely so carefully arranged on a glass plate in this quietly bright new restaurant. Back then it had been difficult to carry on a long conversation with Travis because of all the former students and old friends stopping by to greet him, not thinking it rude at all to interrupt us.

He remembered not only all of them, but most of their sisters and brothers and sometimes even their children as well as their parents. Lovingly and loving the attention, he would ask about jobs and crops and college plans, wrapping a gentle arm around a welcoming shoulder where he could. The creaking old back-to-back booths, or the tables pulled together in a coffee banquet were always full of first-light conversations, swapping news and trading jokes in a rural custom that in some ways mirrored the social gatherings after work in urban lounges. The waitresses wisecracked through the crowd, knowing them all by name, and the newspaper traded across the tables in gradually scattered sections.

In those first weeks after Reid's act, they talked a lot about the newspaper. They were intensely independent individuals, proud of their own work, but it was in the coffee shops too where they learned of a neighbor about to lose his crop because of illness or disabled machinery and, inevitably, they would quietly form a group to finish the needy friend's fields before the day was out. No one had to ask for help, the word just got around. But now, Travis and others knew they would need the kind of help they had not considered before. People needed to understand their story. Only a great show of support by means they had no practice in could counter the injustice.

"We weren't anarchists!" newspaper editor Anne Pershing admonishes me. "The paper did cover it. I even wrote editorials about it."

But a far more sophisticated propaganda effort had been underway since the mid '70s when U.S. Senate buddies John Tunney (D-CA) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA) took a strange road trip together and prompted national coverage of how farmers were "stealing" water from the Indians. The Fallon irrigators were called "melon pickers," "hayseeds," and "rednecks," and accused of abusing their water rights for "hobby farms."

It was an intensely political and compli-

Charlie Frey and son Colby, a couple of years younger than his cousin Joe, just now following his father's footsteps to finish a business degree at the University of Nevada, Reno. Already, he proudly says, he owns four investment properties of his own. But it was Colby in just that last few months who pleaded and argued with his father not to sell the ranch. Colby wants to run it himself. "I know there's a lot else out there," he says, taking time out from driving a front-end loader for his dad. "But I've decided. There just isn't any better life than farming." BELOW: Jamie Mills, an attractive young legal secretary whose family first brought her to Fallon on military duty, recognized not only the need for leadership, but also the urgency of a cause that still eluded local organization. "People, farmers, still ask, 'Can they still come after me?'" Jamie says. "And of course I have to tell them 'yes,' but it would have been over long ago without the litigation." She became like the pretty and smart older sister to them all, recruiting lawyers, assembling cases and files, staging community events to help finance a costly defense that only slowed the assault. Irrigated land in production during those years has fallen from 74,000 acres to about 49,000.

cated issue centered in Washington, D.C., that "the *Lahontan Valley News* could hardly touch with local objections without being rejected as ignorant and extremist." Anne had learned journalism by the book while a doctor's wife. She was known to be cautious about offending anyone, especially those in power.

"People here just weren't raised that way," she says. "They always wanted to respect the government and trust in justice. But we fought. The paper fought from the start."

Indeed, battles over water rights are at the heart of Nevada history, but it is a tortuously complex issue known to have driven some mad. Anne's paper would win state awards for its coverage of the struggle, but she would never step far from a careful balance that avoided calling anyone a liar.

George Frey never let that bother him. "Some years ago," George wrote in one of his many letters to the editor, "senators Kennedy and Tunney and Jane Fonda stood on the bridge at Nixon [on the

Paiute Reservation] and proclaimed to the people of the United States that 'It will only take a stroke of the pen to restore and preserve Pyramid Lake.' [Since then] we farmers have been driven like sheep to the brink of disaster. Let me tell you, there are a lot of wolves in those sheep's clothing, and we have only begun to fight."

George and his brother, Charley, left their father's homestead in the valley in 1936 to build a place of their own. They constructed a dugout on a bank of the Carson and lived in it while they cleared and planted the land above it, using borrowed mustangs to pull the iron they could scrounge for plows, laboring from dawn well into the night to clear the brush and weeds. It would be three winters of hardship living in that dugout before a couple of good harvests made it possible to raise a house. George still lives there in what grew in increments within feet of the old dugout to be a comfortable and warm ranch-style home. Surrounded

by deeply shading trees and the trim fields he still works, George sometimes experiments with new crops and at other times carries on an epic war with gophers.

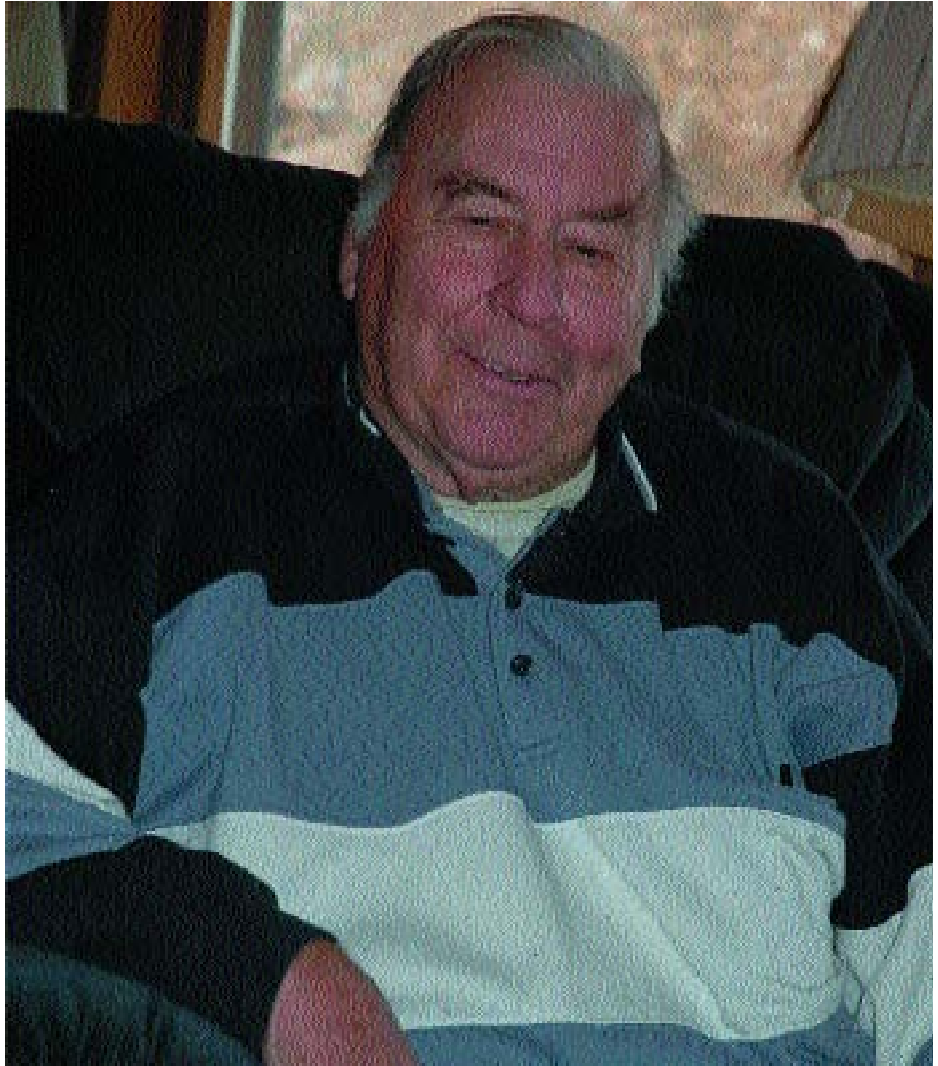
Charley established an even more elaborate place, built like a small mansion, south of town at the end of a cathedral of tall trees lining the driveway to Karl Dodge's place. The Frey brothers were both active in the affairs of the county and city, but George was particularly busy, elected to the state Assembly in 1947 and serving terms on the three-member County Commission while busying himself with practical political matters he handled as neatly as everything else in his life. He is today a rare, muscular man of 88 who seems built to wear a pair of fresh coveralls like it was a tailored suit. When the "war" began, he defended himself, as perhaps only someone who has lived in a bunker can understand.

"Maybe at first, 20 years or so ago, people thought the problem would just go away, or that it wasn't winnable," he says in his clear, organized pace. "But as it went on and Washington involved itself more and more, I was getting angry as all hell."

George became Anne Pershing's unofficial Howard Stern, writing scathing letters to the editor that made Anne, and some readers, cringe at their combative and often complexly demanding style backed by evidence from years of conflicting federal decrees. "I told him, 'George, tone it down a little,'" Anne admits, "but he would just keep coming at them."

"We will fight to the last ditch," George wrote. "I say this not as a threat of violence or malice, but as a statement of determination and courage to preserve that which was rightfully adjudicated to us…." Even the firebrand Frey could not help using the cold sizzle of that word "adjudicated," which would soon be revealed as having little to do with justice. Except as they might further reduce allocations or impose crippling fees, George's carefully vested riverfront land was largely untouchable by the feds. His anger stemmed most from the way they distorted history and mercilessly went after the most vulnerable.

Georgie Sicking, already a western legend for her gritty gumption at continuing to farm and ranch on her own while becoming the 70-year-old darling of western poetry gatherings, could make you pay for using a word like "vulnerable" to describe her top-hand character. But it was the word Nature Conservancy operative and secret U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service agent Graham Chisholm must have whispered to himself after studying the profile of the old lady they could isolate by buying up her neighbor's fields and reminding her gently how difficult it was to drive into town with her failing eyesight.



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"I had no choice," she tells me at last in tears so unlike Georgie. "There was just nothing I could do but sell."

Some of the big guys had already made deals of their own, in legitimate hope that sacrifice of at least some of their land and water rights might begin to pacify the hounds and vultures unleashed by Reid's law. Hammy Kent, bowing at last to retirement among the venerable founders of the town and farming region, sold out. So did Ted deBraga, the president and undisputed leader of the elected irrigation district, who said later that the land he sold was at best only "marginal," and made available only to divert federal resources from feeding on better lands. The message he seemed to send, however, was an uneasy example against the position of the irrigation board not to tell any member what to do with their own property.

No one said, "don't sell." Doren Sorenson, a rancher and junior high music teacher, erected a road sign near his place suggesting that "the last person to leave Fallon, please turn out the lights." But no one said, "don't sell," and the stiletto legal actions of federal prosecutor Fred Disheroon and Pyramid Lake Tribal attorney Robert Pelcyger drove on ruthlessly in the courts at the expense of the farmers themselves, challenging every law and every court decision that had in the past granted the farmers irrigation rights. The predator lawyers were backed secretly by a federal agreement with The Nature Conservancy and the Environmental Defense Fund to act as agents urging the right-holders to sell before the legal actions made it impossible for them to farm. No one said aloud, "extortion." They weren't raised that way in these parts.

Travis had heard of a water education

Mayor Ken Tedford has seen the Fallon population rise from a bare 10,000 in 1970 to nearly 30,000 today, and acknowledges that he may be among the last of the "old families" to hold leadership. "But I don't think it's over," he says. "I hope that new people will adapt to our way of life more than just try to bring their way with them."

program being run by a no-nonsense academic hydrologist named Mary Reid (no relation to the senator) for the agricultural extension service. Mary's program was meant to warn of shallow-well pollution from new growth, but it couldn't help recognize the fact that wells in the county and even the aquifer basin used by the city were ultimately reliant on replenishment from the mud-lined irrigation canals. "There is no end to drought in Churchill County if the canals dry up," she says, using an intriguing model like an ant farm to demonstrate her lesson.

It was the kind of evidence the former principal needed to help educate people about what was happening. Travis began bringing the argument to his meetings with small groups and civic clubs, working with Mary and others to explain that irrigation in the valley had value far beyond crops alone. If Fallon was to save itself, it must save the farmers first. Maybe people could understand that.

Jamie Hilburn, an attractive young legal secretary whose family first brought her to Fallon on military duty, was smart and ever busy in the affairs of women's clubs and parent's organizations. She had come through a painful divorce and was devoting her energy to establish a new identity for herself. From Travis, who made himself available to speak to any civic club that would listen, she recognized not only the need for leadership, but also the urgency of a cause that still eluded local organization.

"People, farmers, still ask, 'Can they still come after me?'" Jamie says. "And of course I have to tell them 'yes,' but it would have been over long ago without the litigation."

She became like the pretty and smart older sister to them all, recruiting lawyers, assembling cases and files, staging community events to help finance a costly defense that only slowed the assault. Irrigated land in production during those years has fallen from 74,000 acres to about 49,000. Much of it, however, was lost in the neighboring region of Fernley, 23 miles to the north and on the border of the Interstate 80 corridor. "Fernley is becoming part of Reno," Jamie says. Meaningfully, it was often Fallon farmers who bought the threatened Fernley pastures and sold them for subdivisions, protecting a water right in the process, encouraging the government to look elsewhere.

It was as if it had all followed Sonya Johnson. Sonya was a relative newcomer to Fallon, arriving with her husband Smokey in the 1950s after being driven out of their old farm in Washoe Valley by the first wave of immigration to Nevada. When Smokey died, she was left with her children to run the ranch on her own, but she had courage and even a model for making it work in her close friend, Georgie Sicking. Sonya volunteered to work with Mary Reid in her "Nevada Gold" program for improvement in wells and septic systems. A choking five-year drought had taken hold in the valley at the beginning of the 1990s, drawing her attention to whatever might help preserve her crops.

"All we wanted was a sense of fairness," Sonya said then, immensely proud of the new concrete lining she added to her irrigation takeouts to make them more efficient. She believed in taking that initiative to show that the farmers would pay their share, but she watched helplessly as others left. "We had faith in government at first," she says. "Now, it seems like there's just no fun in farming anymore."

It was grassroots organization driven by absolute necessity that began, nearly too late, to form Fallon into a more hopeful organized resistance. Nevada Gold merged with a new group called "Lahontan 2000" that stressed the relationship of irrigation to freshwater use, and from that Jamie and Sonya and others established the Lahontan Valley Environmental Alliance, meant to establish the truth about the farmers' relationship in establishing the now richly varied environment of the valley. Jamie's Newlands Water Protective Association served in the center with volunteered funds and no local government help to begin the long court cases that would add up to more than $6 million spent by farmers in their defense.

Not that local government wasn't involved. Many felt that it was the stress of deceit and betrayal revealed especially of The Nature Conservancy and its smarmy front man Graham Chisholm that brought on a fatal heart attack to beloved County Commissioner Jim Reagan, just weeks after he had effectively directed Chisholm to leave town.

Harry Reid, once the unknown son of a southern Nevada miner who committed suicide, has rapidly risen in wealth and power since taking Senate office. Real estate, some say, especially the sweet deals that allowed developer Del Webb to buy "marginal" land around Fallon and trade it for federal properties around Las Vegas in Clark County, made Harry Reid more powerful in Washington now than he might have imagined. He openly calls himself "the devil in Churchill County" and might think he can flick his detractors there away like flies. But he has not defeated Fallon, and perhaps that surprises him.

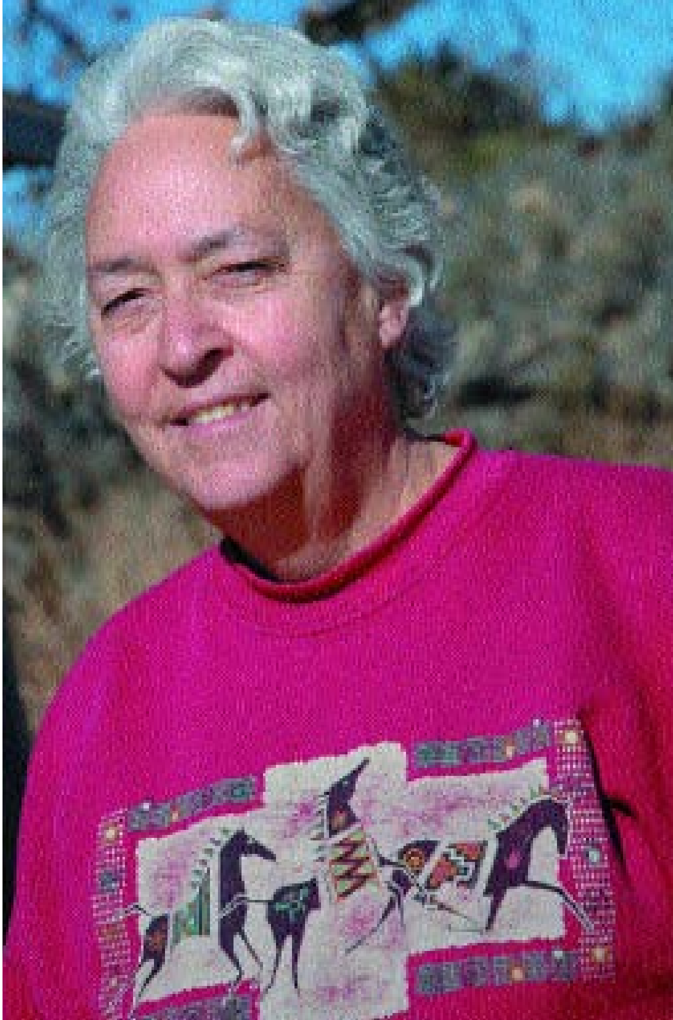
Fallon has changed, and in an ironic way the change wraps back to the tough and determined posture of George Frey, whom Anne Pershing never did succeed in "toning down." George and his brother Charley were both rewarded with success from what George once described as "a steady drop eroding every stone." Both were rewarded with sons, and George kept his close to home. The youngest, Norman, took Jim Reagan's seat on the county commission but still devotes his time to the ranch he acquired on his own, chosen carefully, like that of his father, near the banks of the Carson River.

County Economic Development Director Shirley Walker promotes the "small town ambience," but only to light industry that understands the limitations of water available. She hopes for an economy divided by thirds among agriculture, the Navy base, and retail marketing, but she acknowledges, "our way of life is changing." Below: The annual Christmas tree was lit on Fallon's main street again last year, but not many of the old-timers showed up.

Charley has passed on, but his son, Charles Frey Jr., known as Charlie, returned to pick up management of his father's place in time to preserve it as a showplace seldom seen by most in the county. Young Charlie was away for years, studying accounting and economics and honing his trade in work with major casinos. He was already comfortable back home, but always competitive. With his old friend, Don Travis, he began a contest to search the nation for old farm tractors that now fill both their sheds with antique folly convoys of oddly tracked and fiercely geared machines. But Charlie's obsession is in real estate development that at first converted old post offices into high-return investments. Quietly, the grandson of a dugout-dwelling farmer became the most potent real estate entrepreneur in Fallon. It was Charlie who sold off the old fairground land for construction of the first Wal-Mart on Williams, and Charlie again who owned the decisive portion of land west of that to make the new Super Wal-Mart possible. In fact, combined with other landholdings he had on Williams Avenue, Charlie Frey might be considered the father of franchise business in his old hometown—"Big Mac" to "Taco Bell"—all of it new in just the last 20 years.

He won't like that. Certainly, Charlie might rather be collecting tractors, or at least be recognized for the new wine vineyards he is venturing to replace his alfalfa fields with and that he hopes may even form a decorative border to the big Wal-Mart itself someday.

Travis begrudgingly admires that sort of ingenuity, even though his own energy to get around his ranch has been limited to a golf cart since suffering a stroke some five years ago. He and I don't go to breakfast together so often as we did, not just because most of the old familiar faces aren't really there anymore, or even privately because we know part of the old reason for the coffee gatherings came after predawn tours of the parking lots to pick up day labor, many of whom now say they can make more money in the all-night burger



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joints or even Wal-Mart itself.

The limit to the land development may have been reached by the proposal for a massive 1,900-home subdivision reaching from federal lands east of the city center to the border of Travis's own ranch on the west. He has a recliner chair next to the picture window in his den where he spends time these passing seasons looking across the milking sheds to where his nearby pastures gradually meld from tawny light brown to richly dark green. He has leased the dairy but, despite pressures, he holds on to the bulk of his land as a buffer to that development that may inevitably change the gentle passage of time in his window.

Jamie married rancher Robin Mills in the middle of the "war" and hosted everyone to a memorable reception at the golf course that somehow seemed the height of what gaiety there was in those days. She has done more for more individuals and rightholders than anyone else in the struggle, but she and Robin have planned for a long time, and this year she is certain they will move to a small ranch they have in Oregon. Across the road from their place near Fallon, the bulldozers are tearing up strips for another set of new houses. Mary Reid might warn them about such crowding, but she has gone to Texas, fighting a serious illness.

Anne Pershing lost her job as editor of the *Lahontan Valley News* at the whim of an absentee owner. But she is back as editor of a new weekly funded by corporate investors, giving Fallon two stable competing newspapers for the first time in half a century, though both are owned by outside interests. Anne insists the weekly is even more dedicated to local issues, just recently disclosing that tribal lawyer Robert Pelcyger has neglected even to renew his license to practice law in California, although that seems to mean little in the federal court cases. Anne herself lives in Reno and commutes more than 50 miles each way during the week to her editing job.

All of us get old. Towns like Fallon will change anyway unless there is that character to keep them going. It was young Joe Frey, Norman's son named for George's father, who always seemed to offer the most hope in those battling days. Handsome and unswerving in his dedication to activities with 4-H and Future Farmers of America, Joe at 16 told me with absolute assurance that, even with college, he would never leave the ranch for long. "It's the best life there is," he said then.

He is my own son's age. They were in high school together, and Joe is still in Fallon. But we are a long way from his family's Rambling River Ranch when I find myself sitting on the Spanish-leather lounge seat just behind the flight deck of the Lear jet Joe now flies as a contract pilot for a wealthy California environmentalist.

"I will still work the farm whenever I have time," he tells me. "It's a part of me I would never let go," but he knows I too am dazzled by the array of screens and panel lights and anxious to know how it must feel to commute through the stars at 500 miles an hour. He flies missions on call with the private jet—the only one based in Fallon. It was just something that evolved from enthusiasm he found from his Uncle Jerry's crop-dusting service. Joe spent more than three years earning his ticket as jet jockey, even if it is in some ways a very glorified errand-boy position. A couple of times, he says, in the well-off neighborhood where his employer lives in California, he has seen the neighbor only a couple of houses away, and recognized him even when he was wearing a face mask to mow the lawn. It is Graham Chisholm, the former Nature Conservancy operative hired to eliminate irrigation in the Lahontan Valley and now said to be busy with his own land-trust business.

Young Charlie had a son too, Colby, a couple of years younger than his cousin Joe, just now following his father's footsteps to finish a business degree at the University of Nevada, Reno. Already, he proudly says, he owns four investment properties of his own. But it was Colby in just that last few months who pleaded and argued with his father not to sell the ranch. Colby wants to run it himself.

"I know there's a lot else out there," he says, taking time out from driving a front-end loader for his dad. "But I've decided. There just isn't any better life than farming."

Fallon has already changed, but in five years or less, the town will certainly have begun an unusually seen definite new period in its history, like beginning with a new pack and new dealers. I asked each of the subjects quoted in this piece to choose just one moment of the past 25 years to go back to—not necessarily to change it, maybe only to relive it. Remarkably, without knowing each other's response, every civic leader, including editor Pershing, immediately mentioned the community agony of a leukemia cluster that raised fears of some unknown local cause.

"I'd give anything to be able to face those parents with better news," says Mayor Ken

It was Charlie Frey who sold off the old fairground land for construction of the first Wal-Mart on Williams, and Charlie again who owned the decisive portion of land west of that to make the new Super Wal-Mart possible (above). In fact, combined with other landholdings he had on Williams Avenue, Charlie Frey might be considered the father of franchise business in his old hometown—"Big Mac" to "Taco Bell"—all of it new in just the last 20 years.

Tedford. "Anything to say we could somehow make it better." The origin of the cluster remains a mystery. No new cases have been detected, but Harry Reid, for whatever reason, brought the town to national attention by inviting New York Sen. Hilary Clinton to Fallon to conduct two days of largely meaningless hearings on the cancer cluster.

The mayor is the heir to a family business that in another time put tires on most every car in town and whose grandfather and father were civic leaders in Fallon before him. He has no doubts that politics will soon be changing. "It's time that someone new found their way into the leadership. I only hope we can make them understand who we are and who we have been."

But it was Joe Frey, smiling proudly in that Lear commander's seat with a 21st century dazzle of lights and screens behind him, who pulled it back together again in describing that moment he would choose out of his own lifetime. These are his exact words:

"Maybe an early morning out baling and just seeing my grandpa down by the river right by where the old Ragtown Station used to be; seeing him down there trapping gophers and waiting for my dad to get back from Stan's Donut Land bringing me my apple fritter and chocolate milk, you know? You can't get an apple fritter as good as you could then, and you can't buy the one-percent chocolate milk in those small containers anymore. I don't know, it just feels good to think about that…." ■

Tim Findley had a full 20-year career of journalism behind him when he moved to Fallon in 1991 looking to get away from politics.