Sisters in Fire

Remarkable women from the remote valleys of Northern California.
By Carolyn Dufurrena

THERE ARE A LOT OF REMARKABLE WOMEN OUT THERE IN RANCHING, DOING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE EVERY DAY. SOMETIMES THAT MEANS STEPPING INTO A ROLE THAT'S NOT TYPICAL. SOMETIMES IT MEANS JUST KEEPING THE PLACE RUNNING. THEN THERE ARE MOMENTS THAT RUN RIGHT NEXT TO THE MARGINS OF SURVIVAL THAT TEST EVERYONE'S COURAGE.

Lightning struck in rugged country in the Red Rocks/Clarks Valley area south of Surprise Valley, Calif., in mid-August of 2020. The W-5 Cold Springs Fire would burn until early September, charring some 85,000 acres. That doesn't sound like a big fire by today's standards, but it was the largest on BLM-administered public lands in 2020.

Several ranching families run their cattle "in common" on a huge unfenced piece of land called the Tuledad Allotment. Tuledad is a country of steep canyons, with juniper-fringed rimrocks stepping down into narrow draws. There was plenty of water in the water holes at the beginning of the season, but no rain all summer. However, fire, as scary as it can be, is something folks are ready for out here.

Among the permittees are Christian and Cassie Cockrell Oyarzun (Oy-ar-ZUN), Cassie's sister Ashley Cockrell, John Estill, and Tom and Tiffany Martinez. There were close to 1,800 head of cattle and 3,000 sheep on this range when the fire started.

PHOTOS © DEB COCKRELL

Sisters Cassie and Ashley Cockrell take a break from working cows in 2009 to smile for their mom.

"The fire moved east at first," Ashley says. She and her dad had 400 head in the Red Rocks area; they had mixed with cows from Estill's Bare Ranch at the south end of the valley. Friends and family gathered to help move them north.

"The BLM had the fire under control, had lines around it," says Cassie. But the teams were spread thin, wind overwhelmed the crews and the fire jumped the fire line. "We went to pull the cattle out." It was a long day, but "we thought we were good. We were going to dump them in a field."

Cassie's husband, Christian, and Deb Cockrell, Cassie and Ashley's mom, went back up to check. "There were other ranchers there gathering; we saw the fire coming over the hill. Then we got a call: 'Get the cattle out of that field and put them down in the green meadow.'" They mounted up and pushed hard to get the pairs out of harm's way, moving them from the pasture that had been their destination down to the margin of the lake. "That fire stayed right on our tails the whole way," says Ashley.

Meanwhile, Tiffany Martinez and her kids, 14-year-old Brennan and 13-year-old Adelia, were gathering on the east side of the ridge. The fire was running parallel to them as they moved another 250 head north and east, but they couldn't see it. "We thought it was going up into the high country," says Brennan, "but it didn't. It came down, right on top of us."

They spent the night out there. "The men were up in the hills ahead of us," says Tiffany, "pushing the cattle with four-wheelers down to where the kids and I could pick them up and keep them moving." Back and forth, for hours. The kids also stuck it out all night.

"The fire was in the pine trees, burning in the mountains right above us. We could hear it roaring."

"I just didn't want the cows to die," Adelia says. "Because I love them."

Meanwhile, Deb Cockrell followed the firefighters with the pickup and horse trailer, hauling exhausted mounts and bringing fresh ones. She brought food and water on the four-wheeler. When she wasn't doing that, she was taking care of the grandkids while her daughters rode into the smoke.

By the next day, Ashley and Cassie were helping the neighbors. The sisters, born 14 months apart, have always been close. "We played sports together, rodeoed together," says Cassie. They went to Chico State together, but then Cassie came home and Ashley went to the University of California-Davis for vet school. This time, they fought fire together.

The fire had moved north into the Warner Mountains. "John Estill had a lot of cattle in front of the fire," says Cassie, "and they were short of help." The sisters started at seven that morning, climbing into the high country. They followed tracks from Sworinger Reservoir into a narrow, juniper-lined canyon, hoping to find nearly 200 head of baby pairs (mother cows with very young calves).

"We rode back in there about three miles toward the south, toward the fire, looking for these cows. Ashley and I were riding with one of Estill's Peruvian cowboys. He had minimal English—and we had just a little Spanish." Communication was basic.

The further they went, the hairier it got. "We were down in a hole. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up." They found the cows, 180 head of pasture-raised cattle from Southern California. "They don't like to move and they don't like to stay mothered up." They were supposed to turn south and trail down-canyon to the Bare Ranch. But "the fire was in the pine trees, burning in the mountains right above us. We could hear it roaring."

They gathered into the meadow above the reservoir.

"We had to go north," says Ashley. The cows did not want to travel. "We pushed those poor babies so hard." One cow had calved maybe 30 minutes before. Cassie says, "We had to leave her back."

As they drove the herd north, "a BLM helicopter came and circled around us. That didn't really help, them just going around and around above us." But the helo had been sent by Estill, trying to find the women who had gone after his cattle. "We hadn't gone the way he'd told us," says Cassie, "but of course he didn't know that then."

Adding to their difficulty, soon after the helicopter left them, they ran into a Forest Service exclosure, a patch of meadow fenced off to measure what the landscape would look

(Continued on next page)

RIGHT: Ashley in the lead, moving cattle just days before the W-5 Cold Springs Fire. ABOVE: The crew takes a break: water for the horses and cattle, snacks for the humans. Left to right: Adelia Martinez, Ashley Cockrell, Cassie Oyarzun, Tom and Brennan Martinez.

On the Road: Ashley Cockrell, DVM

It's three a.m. on a ranch in the Nevada desert. A small light winks on. The smell of fresh coffee wafts through the dark house. Then the light winks off, the back door closes quietly and a big diesel pickup creeps out of the yard, lights off. Ashley Cockrell, DVM, is on the road. She's due in the next valley at daylight.

"When I first started, I was running pretty hard," she says. Her brilliant blue eyes sparkle over strong cheekbones sprinkled with freckles. She's got working duds on, warm coveralls and a jacket sprinkled with mud and something organic. She's due to preg check in Fort Bidwell in 20 minutes, but she stops for coffee at the Country Hearth, a warm, wood-paneled breakfast place in Cedarville, Calif.

"I'd leave here, head for Winnemucca, doctoring sick animals and working ranch jobs along the way. Then I'd go south to Yerington and come back through Gerlach. It'd be a four- or five-day circle." A circle of some 700 miles, a good percentage of it dirt roads. She'd stay in ranch bunkhouses, or simply drive through the night to get to her next clients, preg testing, vaccinating cows for brucellosis (called "bangs"), testing bulls, all the things a large-animal vet routinely does.

She was still an undergraduate at Chico State, trying to decide whether or not to try for vet school when she took an internship at Lucy Snyder's feedlot in Yerington, Nev. (*RANGE* covered Lucy's operation in "Easy-Going Outfit," Summer 2018.)

It was there that Ashley met the infamous Randy Walstrum, a Baxter Black-like large-animal vet who practices all over northern Nevada with an endless knowledge of animal biology and veterinary medicine and the energy to match. "I wasn't too wild about the prospect of veterinary clinic work, but when I started traveling with Randy, I thought, 'I can do that!' It was hook, line and sinker."

Ten years into it, Ashley tries to stay a little closer to her home in Surprise Valley. She still has clients in nearby Oregon and northern Nevada and makes the swing through Yerington periodically. She's leased a little hay ranch near Lake City, Calif., to support a growing herd of registered Ultrablacks, and recently bought a place of her own, "just a little house on eight acres near Mom and Dad's," at the south end of Surprise Valley. She runs a commercial herd of some 400 head on the Tuledad permit at the south end of the valley. It's not easy to find her sitting down. ■

PHOTOS © DEB COCKRELL

LEFT: Cattle typically mix in the unfenced allotment. Neighbors gather everything and move them out of Tuledad Cabin Meadow on the fire's first day. RIGHT: Adelia Martinez, age 13, pushes cattle in front of the fire on the first horse she took over from her mom.

like without grazing. Frequently an exclosure will block access to a stream. Some exclosures are no longer maintained, so the fences are partly down. They are always impossible to move animals through.

"We had calves going everywhere, lost in the willows," says Ashley. "We cut fences, but we couldn't cut enough. We were on our horses, off our horses, roping calves, dragging them out. My two dogs were just exhausted." Their horses had given them everything they had.

"We lost track of a whole bunch of calves there," says Cassie. "We pushed and pushed and pushed. Then we came to Barber Creek, a steep canyon. The cows were pooped. They weren't going to cross it." They had to drive the exhausted young mothers and their babies back to the west, uphill, to where they could get on a road that would finally lead them out of danger. Finally, 12 hours later, they got the mob down to the valley floor. Almost all the country the sisters had gathered that morning was on fire.

The fire didn't burn too hot in the Martinez family's portion of the allotment. Regular grazing had kept the fine fuels under control; still the fire crept, meandering here and there. There was no one to fight it in the high country, so eventually it burned a good share of their permit. But it burned slowly enough that the cattle could get out ahead of it.

The community spent not quite a week moving cattle. After the first days, the fire moved into the high rims and the animals were out of danger. At the end of the day, everyone—the sisters, the moms, the grand-

Watching the Horizon: Martha Lely Soeth

Summer, 1957. Twelve-year-old Martha Lely (LAY-lee) watches the converted crop duster circle the rural airport at Willows, Calif. The little Stearman biplane makes its final approach to the dirt airstrip, the pilot holding his own against a strong north wind. She watches him set down, watches as the men drag a heavy hose from the retardant tank and connect it to his plane. A plume of white smoke billows over the Mendocino Forest, building in the wind.

Martha's father, Wim Lely, has been part of this scene since its inception. A mechanical genius, Wim left school at age 13 when his father died. Wim was an inventor, creating solutions to the problems of agriculture: he converted the family Model T into a garden tractor; invented the first headers for corn harvesters; as well as a radio-controlled rain and snow gauge; and bought his first airplane in 1937, about the time he graduated from high school. He invented the machinery and the chemical mix called Fire-Trol, the retardant slurry that was pumped into airplanes for aerial firefighters to drop on fires that could not be reached from the ground. It was a practical solution to an immediate problem, and that's what Wim did. Fix stuff.

He taught his sister to drive when she was eight, and he taught Martha to fly in a Cessna 172 when she was 14.

"I guess I was three or four when I first got into an airplane," she says. Her dad flew everywhere; pretty much everybody in the family flew. "So I had to fly," she smiles.

PHOTOS COURTESY LELY FAMILY

ABOVE: Wim Lely, Martha's dad, pumps retardant into a Stearman biplane in the late '50s. He developed Fire-Trol, the early retardant mixture, as well as the locking valves that attach the pressurized hose to the plane. LEFT: Gary and Martha Soeth on their wedding day, 1965. Dad would call within days to pull them from their honeymoon to load retardant for a fire in Beckwourth, Calif.

Wim did most of the teaching, "although I did have an instructor there at the tail end." At that time in California you could get your student pilot solo before you could drive, and Martha had to get somebody to take her to the airport so she could fly.

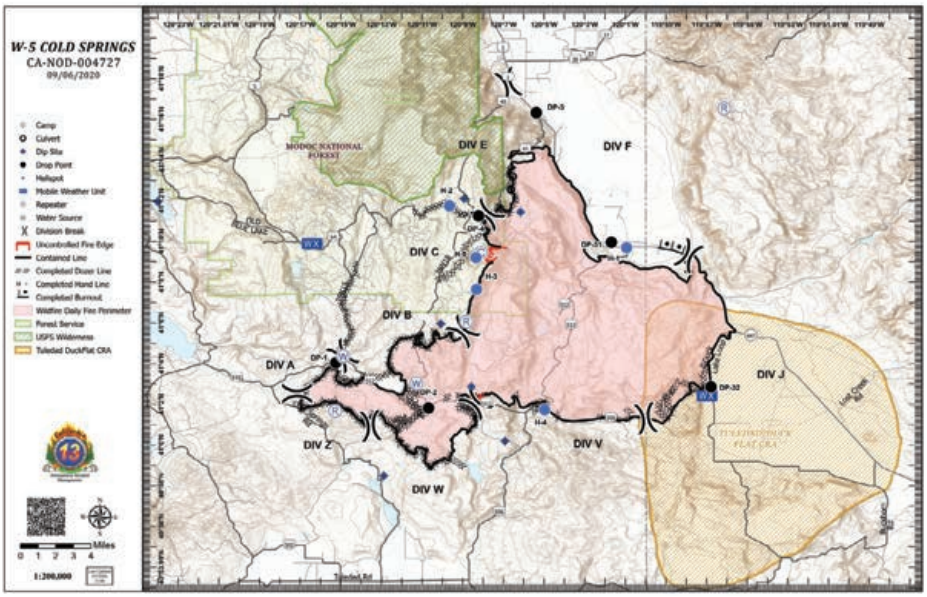
Her dad's little company, Orland Manufacturing, was the first to supply aerial firefighters with Fire-Trol. Martha ran the plant that mixed those chemicals at the airfield. "Fires back then were small, compared to what there is now—a few hundred acres. Between regular grazing and logging, the fine fuels and downed timber were eliminated." And aerial firefighting had begun to contribute to keeping those fires under control.

"I watched air tankers evolve," Martha says, "from little crop dusters like the Stearman into World War II bombers and fighter planes. The coolest one was the F7F," the Grumman Tigercat, although she watched her Fire-Trol load into B-17s, B-29s and later the nimble AF-SEAT, similar to the single engine planes that fly today. Lely's air tanker bases expanded from the first one in Willows to include bases in Elko and Minden in Nevada and Redding and Grass Valley in California.

Throughout the '50s and '60s, Lely's air service fought fires all over the West. It seems fitting that Martha would meet her husband, Gary Soeth (SOWTH), through flying.

mas and the kids—fought that fire. They helped their neighbors survive. "That's what Surprise Valley people do," says Tiffany. Fire makes sisters of us all. ■

Carolyn Dufurrena wrote about her experience in fire in the award-winning "Quiet, Except for the Wind." See page 47.



MAP COURTESY BLM

The W-5 Cold Springs Fire
From mid-August until early September, 85,000 acres burned, about half of the Tuledad Allotment's 7,100 AUMs. The BLM manages the land in animal unit months, focused on the condition of the rangeland, so while there are areas that will probably be grazeable next summer, livestock numbers will be reduced.

"A sheep ranch up in Clark Valley was having trouble with coyotes," she says. "The rancher called my dad to come up and see if they could spot any from the air." Martha was home for spring break from San Jose State, where she was slogging her way through a degree in industrial arts. The city was not her cup of tea, and neither was staying on the ground. So she flew up to the place in the hills with her dad, landed on the dirt strip at the ranch, and there was Gary, just her age. "Gary started going to ground school to learn to fly and I thought, 'Well, I'll go too,'" though of course she already knew how to fly. She just hadn't done the stay-on-the-ground part.

They met in May and were married in August. Gary adds that on day two of their honeymoon Wim called them and said: "You guys have a job to do. We've got a fire in Beckwourth." Their partnership as summertime firefighters was in full swing.

Martha takes a break from cooking in hunting camp, October 2020.

Of course, it wasn't all firefighting. Since the 1880s, the Soeth family has run sheep in the Mendocino foothills and in the Central Valley below. A couple of thousand ewes lambed at the home ranch in the fall in the long sheds. Gary admits, "I stole her from the fire business, and she was the best shed-lamber I ever had." ("We never had Thanksgiving," Martha says.) The sheep would stay close to the home ranch through the winter. In the early days, before the U.S. Forest Service eliminated grazing in the forest, the herd trailed there in the summer, but in later years they'd head to the valley, grazing on the aftermath of wheat and barley and, later, alfalfa, "until the rains came."

In 1977, Gary's dad passed, and though they kept the sheep for a few years afterward, it was a labor-intensive proposition. "We didn't want to hire anybody else, so eventually we transitioned into cattle." Later still, they sold their herd and now take outside cattle into their pastures. Gary still works in fire, as an equipment contractor. Martha tends her farm flock—"Nine sheep and a one-eyed buck. But he's pretty cute!" she maintains—and raises pomegranates. "I have 12 trees. Some of them are 50 years old." They run an occasional guide service for hunters, and Martha can be found in October over an outdoor stove, cooking prime rib and chile rellenos for a crowd.

Fifty-five years after that first meeting on the dirt airstrip in the California foothills, Martha and Gary stand on a rim on the remote Diamond A ranch in northeastern Nevada, watching BLM firefighters work a fire they had called in from their hunting camp. "My brother took over Orland Manufacturing after my dad passed away. That was years ago now, but Gary took me up on this little divide to watch." The BLM AF-SEATs flew the retardant onto the fire, "just like a swarm of hornets."

"Then here came this DC-10 tanker, dropping its load right in front of us. I just started crying. If my dad could see what's evolved from the first crop duster that dropped 150 gallons of borate...it was just neat to get to see it. The business has come a long way."

And even though she would never admit it, Martha Lely Soeth had her part in that aerial firefighting business, right from the get-go. ■