

CALIFORNIA

Bill Coe, 91

Liking a challenge.

Living and working as a rancher didn't seem likely when Bill Coe was a young man. At 16 he began college at prestigious Stanford University, where he majored in journalism. It was part of his family's tradition. His father and grandfather had been involved writing for, managing and owning newspapers, so it seemed logical that Bill would carry on that family tradition. He broke the mold.

"Since I was a youngster, I was always intrigued by the cattle industry and the cowboy life," explains Bill, 91. He grew up in rural Kansas until age six, when his parents, Morgan and Louise Coe, moved to Santa Paula in Southern California during the Great Depression. "I often blame Will James for that interest because I was an avid reader of his books."

Ranching was delayed when he enlisted in the Navy Aviation Cadet program, where he earned his pilot's license. Serving from 1954 to 1958, just after the Korean War he was stationed in Hawaii, where he was involved in testing nuclear weapons on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The United States and its allies were engaged in a Cold War nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. It was also during his Navy years that Bill married Marilyn Hummel in December 1955. Although they attended high school together, he says, "We never dated until I about finished college."

After his military service, Bill and his family moved to Ventura, Calif., where he worked in a feedlot. It was an auspicious start. While moving a bale of hay a wire broke, struck his face and

blinded an eye. Moving years followed, including the GI Ranch near Brothers, Ore., where he was the assistant foreman and ranch pilot. Then it was on to Fort Jones in far Northern California, to a ranch owned by his wife's father. They lived there from



noting it was a time when ranchers faced economic challenges. But as the economy improved they experienced "more and more difficulty in leasing."

Bill and his family have never owned a ranch, but they still

For years Bill worked side by side with his sons. Ned has since become a field representative for the California Farm Bureau and Modoc County supervisor for a region that includes Surprise Valley, was a partner in the family's

ranching operation, and owns cattle. Tom still lives in Fall River Mills and is a flight paramedic with PHI Inc. The family's cattle operation, which at its peak featured up to 500



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Horses are part of what Bill likes about ranching. > The Coes about 1965, from left: Ruth, Bill, Tom, Marilyn and Ned. > Bill served in the Navy as a pilot from 1954 to 1958. > Branding and working cattle have always been something he's enjoyed. > The Coes in 2020, from left: Tom Coe, Ruth Alexander, Marilyn Coe, Ned Coe and Bill Coe.



PHOTOS COURTESY COE FAMILY

1960 to 1976. "We raised kids and Herefords," Bill laughingly recalls.

Ranching took another hiatus when the couple found "faith in Jesus Christ," and from 1980 to 1985 spent six years in Guatemala as missionaries. Bill, Marilyn and their growing family returned first to Scott Valley and then Fall River Mills, both in Northern California. For more than 30 years they and their sons—Ned, 68, and Tom, 61—leased ranches in the Fall River Mills region that includes Northern California and southeast Oregon.

"People were anxious to lease out their ranches then," Bill says,

made ranching their beloved lifestyle. He tells of years leasing and managing a ranch along the Williamson River near the rural southeastern Oregon community of Silver Lake and friendships with cowboys like Clinton Basey. As always, it was a family operation that included Marilyn and Ruth. "She helped me out quite a bit, every chance she got," Bill says of his wife. Likewise, he cherishes memories of Ruth, now 64, postmistress in the rural eastern Oregon town of Union. "She grew up on horseback," he proudly tells. "She's the apple of my eye."

head of Red Angus, continues on a much smaller scale. "We still find a way to keep a few cows."

Until two years ago, Bill worked cattle horseback—part of his joy in ranching. What does he like about ranching? "Everything. I love being outdoors. I love work and I particularly love working horseback and handling livestock. There's something about livestock that challenges me and appeals to me. I always think I can do a better job."

—Lee Juillerat