



Keeping It Together

*The McKay family ranch, eastern Oregon.
By Carolyn Dufurrena*

Southeastern Oregon is big, empty country. Wide valleys filled with playa lakes are bordered by steep volcanic cliffs. This topography gradually gives way to rolling sagebrush steppe, a country of rimrocks and meadows. The mountains are a rumpled blanket as the highway climbs north, then east into the valley of the Malheur River, a blanket striped in the colors of volcanic rocks: cinnamon, ochre, buff, olive.

Black lava poured like tar over ash and lahar, a volcanic mudflow choked with cobbles and glass. Red columns speak of vents where earth's magma punched upward into the sunlight during a violent past. Now juniper fringes hillsides softened by sagebrush; blonde bunchgrass and red willow grow thick along the river as it flows east

into the Snake, toward the Columbia and the Pacific Ocean.

This day, trucks and dusty gooseneck horse trailers gather off the two-lane highway that runs along the river as the McKay family gets ready to work several hundred head of Angus-cross heifers in advance of spring turnout. It's an international-looking crew of brothers and sisters, babies and grandpa. The guys work cows; the moms bounce babies. Clare brings lunch from the McKay Ranch down the road, headquarters of the Walking Box outfit. Crockpots of beans and taco meat, tortillas, diced tomatoes and all the fixings are laid out on the flatbed of one of the trucks. The family gathers for a prayer before lining up to fill their plates. Angelo, Danny and Anna's year-old baby, watches over the gathering from his car seat on the truck bed.

Joe and Joyce McKay had been married 15 years without children when they adopted six babies from the disaster that was Haiti in the mid-1990s. Clare, now 27, Gabe, 28, and Luke, 26, came together in 1994, all under three years of age. Anna Rose came two years later, and Martin and Joan in 1998. It was a full house, by any measure.

Joyce homeschooled the mob through sixth grade. She gave up her nursing profession, but, Gabe says, “She made good use of it keeping us healthy.” Joe took the kids over when lessons were done, and taught them the workings of the ranch and the accomplishments that came with junior rodeo and local horseback play days.

Clare says, “Gabe and I finished seventh and eighth grade at the Juntura School.” Joyce and Joe began looking for the best school options for their brood. They settled on Paisley Charter High School.

Paisley is a bustling town of some 200 souls in Christmas Valley, Ore. It is definitely cowboy country. The massive ZX Ranch lies a few miles north. Twenty years ago, Paisley School District faced the financial constraints that all rural school districts in the West are facing. Reorganizing as a public charter school and distance learning center has helped keep their school, and their community, alive. The one-room school district today is home to some 80 K-12 students. About half are high-school kids; many board in the school’s dorm. It’s also basically an international school, this year hosting students from nine countries, including Taiwan, Ecuador, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, and Montenegro. A student must apply to live in the dorm, but a staff member tells me, “Any student is welcome.” Many exchange students choose to stay and graduate with an American diploma.

When the McKay kids went there, Clare introduced herself this way: “Well, I’m Clare from over the hill. I may look like I’m from a foreign country, and I am, but I’m as American as it gets.”

All six graduated from Paisley High

School. They ran track, played volleyball, and all won scholarships to various colleges, majoring in things like ag business and equine science. Clare went to San Diego and discovered a love of cinematography. Gabe and Luke returned from far-flung colleges to spend a couple of years at Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, polishing up their bronc-riding and team-roping skills.

Luke and Gabe travel together to ride broncs in both PRCA and ranch rodeos during the summer, but spend weekdays working cows, cutting hay and building fence on the ranch. They went to 75 rodeos in 2018, but Gabe says his traveling partner “has slowed down some since he got married.” Luke and his wife, Emilee, have a year-old son, Xavier. Everybody calls him “X.”

Gabe has had his own fencing business for about five years, and fall and spring may find him stringing wire and pounding posts in Nevada or Idaho. Anna Rose, now 25, and her husband, Daniel Pozzi, started out grazing goats to build a stake. Danny and Anna used a short-term intensive rotation, moving the animals regularly to eat higher quality



PHOTOS COURTESY MCKAY FAMILY



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Joe with, from left: Clare, Martin, Gabe, Luke and puppy Pearl, ca. 2007. ▶ Martin crafted the wrought-iron sign at the ranch entrance. ▶ Joyce’s sheep, sheared and ready to lamb at the ranch, recall her Basque heritage. ▶ Gabe and Joe take a break from sorting heifers near the home ranch. They will soon be moved to higher country for the summer, north to the forest, south to sagebrush steppe. ▶ OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: Luke, Xavier, Emilee, Joe, Clare, Gabe, Anna Rose, Angelo and Danny.



feed and water. It got rid of the medusa head, at least for that season.

"We had 100 nanny goats plus the kids," Danny says. It sounds like an unusual dating strategy, but the couple's goat project took them to various places around Vale, Ore., where the goats grazed noxious weeds and helped with fuel control for fire abatement. "I was all set up," he says, "with double-decker trailers and fencing. It was time consuming and a lot of work, but it was cheap. I got 200 goats for the same price I would have paid for 25 heifers. You can make a living on 200 goats, but not on 25 heifers.

"Anna and I worked for an organic dairy for a while. We'd spend seven to 10 hours one day building fence, and the goats would stay for

goal is the same for all of them. Gabe says, "We want to keep the ranch together and pass it down, for all of us."

Joe and Joyce started out on her family place in the late 1970s, with a home place in Juntura and a piece of ground 1,500 feet above the valley, called the Shumway, where cattle winter. Over four decades they leased hay ground, bought more cows, and bought small places until now the outfit is a patchwork of little ranches. BLM and Forest Service permits stretch from the pine forests north of Drewsey to the sagebrush steppe around Shumway, and now west into part of the McKuen Place, which Danny and Anna and Luke and Emilee operate. "I told the boys they could have 100 head each," says Joe. "They've bought another 400, so now each family has about 500 head." That's enough to live on. As other families retire and leave the ranching business, Joe and his band are there to pick up the slack.

Joe lives full time at the Shumway now, haying the pivots they put in several years ago, feeding cattle there through the winter, calving throughout March, and trailing to the summer permit that surrounds the fields. The cattle stay in the high country until September, and they try to have everything in by November. Calves are weaned and sold on a satellite video auction in July, and occasionally to private buyers. After weaning, mother cows are put away for the winter, either on pasture in the valley or on the pivots up at Shumway.

Joe and Joyce have more or less

gone their separate ways, though they remain married. Joyce lives most of the time in Ontario, some miles down the river. She does keep a small flock of Suffolk ewes, which are getting close to lambing. Gabe says, "She'll have to come over when that starts."

After the kids got older and "everyone more or less figured out who they are," says Clare, the time came for Joyce to look at her own life and figure out what she hadn't done. Joyce is a very private person with no interest in being in the public eye. "She should write a cookbook," Clare says. "I'm just sayin'. I would buy that."

When lunch is over and the coolers and crockpots are put away, the family spreads out to bring another bunch of heifers across the highway. Emilee and Anna stop traffic with their pickup trucks,

emergency flashers lit, and Joe and the boys hustle another mob across the road. Although she still day-works on the ranch and helps at branding time, Clare has another mission, one that may make a big difference, not only in her world but in everyone's. She gets ready to head for town. Like the rest of the McKay clan, she has work to do. ■

Carolyn Dufurrena lives and writes from the middle of nowhere in the Great Basin, Nevada. This story benefited greatly from Linda Husa's excellent essay on the McKay family in her 2009 book, "The Family Ranch."



FROM TOP: Joe, Danny Pozzi and Angelo, Luke and Xavier, and Gabe. ► Luke, Emilee and the baby known as "X." ► Clare, left, and Gabe trade horses at the gate while Martin stands on Angel. They love their horses.

a week. Then we'd spend another seven to 10 hours to break the fence down and move the goats to the next place." They had the business for five years. The goats paid all their bills, paid for the stock trailer, and eventually paid for the heifers purchased last year. But if you're going to have 100, you might as well have 1,000. Goats, Danny says, make you appreciate cows.

The two youngest siblings, Martin and Joan, are fully launched. Martin has a welding business in western Oregon (he crafted the sign that marks the McKay Ranch headquarters), and Joan is in the middle of a master's degree in psychology at the University of Dallas. But the

Share the Story

Clare McKay, figuring it out.

By Carolyn Dufurrena

Clare was 13 months old when she made the trip from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to Miami International Airport to meet her adoptive parents. Joe and Joyce McKay had their arms full, with Clare, Gabe, age two-and-a-half, and Luke, who was just seven months old. On the plane ride back to Portland, she was the one who sat alone in the window seat as Joe held the panicking Gabe and Joyce held Luke.

All the children were plagued with malnutrition, giardia, and the diseases born of poverty in a tropical climate.

"We had some behaviors when we first got here," Clare says. "We'd grab a piece of fried chicken and crawl under the table to eat it. Like, 'My chicken! I'll fight you for it.'"

"I don't know what that looks like or feels like as a parent," she says. "It couldn't have been easy." But there was always plenty to eat, and the kids gradually acclimated to what must have seemed like life on a new planet. "We got very, very lucky," Clare says.

Now she's piling refried beans into a tin after lunch back at the McKay Ranch headquarters. The rest of the crew has gone back to working heifers down the road.

"The film was supposed to be about Gabe and Luke rodeoing," she says. The idea germinated when Clare was in film school in Southern California. "Talking with a friend," she says, "I started telling ranch stories. My friend said, 'That's so cool...you should make a movie.' I said, 'No, I'm not going to make a movie about my family.'" But Clare started to think about it and to wonder what it might become.

Even after three years in film school, she says, "The process of actually making a movie has been all new to me." She started with the cinematography, filming rodeo scenes. It seemed logical then to include scenes from the family's ranching life: brandings, days spent working cows, doctoring and trailing cattle.

She interviewed her family and close family friends. Thirteen people. "It's nice having all the footage first, so I can see the parts, where this goes, where that goes." But that's when the story took on a life of its own. "Every time I made a pitch for the film, the questions were all, 'Tell us more about the family.' I had to, ah, adjust."



COURTESY RANDI JOHNSON



"No matter where I go or what I do, I always stay true to my cowgirl life. I grew up on this land and I will be buried in it too, because eventually we all return to our roots."

LEFT: Dummy roping in 2005 at a play day in Vale, Ore.

been initiated. Sponsorships have been suggested.

"This project is my heart and soul. For us to grow up like we did and being black, that's not typical and *that's* the story," she says. "Everyone wants to make it a race thing, and that's not what it is. We're cowboys, we're cowgirls. It's the work that defines us.

"Dad always tells us when we come up against something that we don't know how to do, 'Figure it out.' When we were young it was, 'Dad, how do we do this? How do we do that?' He would explain it once or twice, but by the third time, it would be, 'Figure it out.'" Go get that cow. Change that spark plug. Make that film. Figure it out. ■

To learn more about Clare's film, "Living an American Dream," visit her Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/anamericandream20/>. To contribute, visit the website, <https://anamericandreamfilm.com/>.

It took her about a year to create the movie on paper. She did a lot of research on the process. There were questions about agriculture, about how they're doing what they're doing. "With documentary film," she says, "you just have to let it roll."

It's been a wild ride so far, and she's right in the middle of it. "I *am* the team," she says: cinematographer, scriptwriter, publicist, marketing manager. She's been talking to a couple of different production companies to spread the load, but her primary desire is to remain true to the story. "I don't want it to go off in some weird political direction. I don't want it to be, like, 'If you black, you can do white-people things.' That's not it."

She's fund-raising, writing grants, doing presentations around the West, and answering a lot of questions. She started a Facebook page, which got 600 likes in the first week. People are donating time, space, and equipment.

The budget right now is just under \$12,000. "A production company, if one comes aboard, will change that," she says. "They will have to stay true to who we are as family and as ranchers."

Clare works on the ranch and part-time at a sale yard. She's also got a BLM fire-fighting job for the summer. A GoFundMe account has