



## Up Front

*Outclassed by an old man.*

*By C.J. Hadley*

It is dark as I drive south from Harry Bettis' beautiful ranch just south of McCall, Idaho. I am heading to Cascade, to meet a man who has ranched in the area for close to 80 years. It is the day before his 91st birthday, August 29 last year, and I am aiming for the ranch of Tom and Jemima Davis.

It is still dark when I get to the outfit so I wait till the designated meeting time, 7 a.m., to knock on the door. Jemima is preparing Tom's breakfast. He is welcoming

off on a matching machine to his meadows.

He rides across narrow planks that straddle deep ditches. Fortunately, my tires (shakily) follow his, so I do not end up in the water.

I take photos as he moves the water from sopping wet meadows on to new, dry ground. He is precise. He never falters. Wearing tall rubber boots, he drags heavy dams to the appropriate places, often checking to make sure I am okay. At times he loads the contraption onto his little motorbike. The huge orange plastic dam makes him look like he is trying to take off in an antique plane. (See "A Pretty Nice Outfit," page 14.)

By midmorning, he is happy with the condition of the water. We park the bikes and get in an old, noisy truck. He drives me from one end of the ranch to the other. It takes hours. We loiter at the edge of the Jemima K Dam, visit the Tom J Dam, check the area logging and talk about trees and the health of



***CJ and the Honda at the Bar O in Cascade, Idaho, not exactly helping Tom Davis irrigate the meadows.***

and friendly.

"Do you ride a motorbike?" he asks with a big, bright smile.

"Sure," I say.

"Well, you can come irrigate with me this morning!"

During breakfast, we talk about land and family, his ranching ways, the power of Jemima. Tom is sprightly and handsome; blue-eyed with white hair. He is a tightly built, tough little bloke who's irresistible. Jemima is warm, generous and kind, and one heck of a cook. She has a bit of trouble getting around but spoils me, which is pretty much the same way she treats Tom and family all the time. She and Tom have a marriage to covet.

"Do you want to see the dams?" Tom asks.

I want to see everything. And it isn't long before he kick-starts my Honda dirt bike (don't all gentlemen do that?) and leads me

his forest. We look at beaver dams on many creeks, and ride through Cascade to the reservoir, which used to be land owned by his father.

A self-made man, Tom is no chicken when there's something to buy. Even though he didn't set out to be the most impressive rancher in the American West, he ended up as one of the best, simply from grit, honor, integrity, a sense of humor, and a super-sharp mind.

Tom has bought and sold 22 ranches in his long, sweet life in ranching. He asks me to come back for his birthday the next day. Dozens of relatives, friends and dignitaries are coming to share tri-tips and cocktails and celebrate as Tom and Jemima burn the final mortgage on their ranches.

"It only took me a few decades," he says with a grin and a hug for Jemima. "It is a very good day." ■