

# A Ranching Kind of California Dreaming

*Joys and challenges of cattle ranching in the Golden State.*

*By Rebecca Colnar Mott*

**D**rive west out of Orland (which is 100 miles north of Sacramento) through the mellow gold of the rolling oak savannas, turn at the Newville cemetery and head down a well-maintained gravel road. There you will find a set of older corals, a weathered brown scale house and Tom and Heather Nielsen working two colts—a spunky homebred and a good-looking gelding recently purchased from the High Desert Quarter Horses Sale.

Tom Nielsen Jr., a bearded, blue-eyed cowboy, is part of the fifth generation of Niensens and Beyers to ranch in the California hills. His maternal and paternal lines go back to Danish immigrants who sailed around Cape Horn to settle along the east side of San Francisco Bay. The Beyer family, Tom's maternal line, settled in Livermore in the 1870s. In the 1880s, the Niensens settled in Dublin, and Nielsen cousins still ranch in that area.

His father, Tom Sr., remembers ranching as the youth in that area. "My ancestors ranched in East Bay for 100 years," Tom Sr. says, "but swarms of people and ranching don't go together. It's hard to survive in an area that is increasingly populated."

When housing developments began taking over the East Bay in the 1980s, the family began searching for land farther north, purchasing ranches in Gazelle (Siskiyou County) and Orland (Glenn/Tehama counties). Tom Sr. moved his family to Gazelle in 1984 and his sons, young Tom, Travis and Tim, grew up on that ranch.

All three boys continue to ranch. Tom and Tim are growing their own herds from stock that came from their dad's reputation cow herd, and Travis works for their dad. Young Tom came to the area for college in the early 2000s and worked on the family's Broken Ridge Ranch in Orland. This fostered a love for the area and deepened an already special relationship with his grandfather, Bud Nielsen, who passed away in 2013. The family



PHOTO COURTESY HEATHER NIELSEN

*The intrepid toddler Tillie Nielsen, named after her great-grandmother, is practicing the newly learned skill of stopping cows or halting anyone daring to try to pass.*

ranch was distributed among four siblings.

In 2014 Tom Jr. took a job for the Connelly/Wheeler family and moved onto the Quiet Hills Ranch next door to the Broken Ridge Ranch. At that time, it was leased by Ellington Peek, who owns Shasta Livestock Auction and Western Video Market in Cottonwood. In 2018, with Ellington's blessing, the Toms began leasing Quiet Hills. In 2023, the younger Tom, who had started his own cow herd, took over the lease of Quiet Hills.

Tom and Heather run a fall calving herd to align with his father and Tim as the family sells calves together. They prefer to sell

weaned calves on the July Western Video Market, plus calving in the fall allows for calves to be growing on the strong spring feed. This, coupled with generations of good genetics, weans hearty, healthy calves in May and June. Quiet Hills is ideal for winter grazing and the couple has been seeking more pasture to ideally run cattle on better ground for the summer months.

"It's difficult to find land because people buy these ranches for the lifestyle, not necessarily for the business, and will pay well above market to live the romanticized Western dream," Tom says. "Additionally, people coming from outside areas with other sources of income will pay anything for rent—even numbers that cannot pencil out—which makes it difficult for us to compete for leases or to dream about buying ground in this area."

Although many people think of California as crisscrossed with traffic-clogged highways and subdivisions, the Niensens part of the state has beautiful open land and neighbors who help each other, especially during branding season. The family brands the traditional way with a nod to the old Californio style with straight cantles, stout horns, and bridle horses. Tom notes that they still use 50-foot ropes, big loops, and mule hide.

"When I lived in Gazelle and we were traveling around to help the neighbors," Tom says. "We would brand about 4,500 calves per year from the fall to the spring. That also helped make good horses."

The couple enjoy continuing the time-honored tradition of ending each branding with a big meal as a thank-you to their crew and a time for friends and family to visit. They like the fact that their daughter, Tillie, named after Tom's great-grandmother, will be the 6th generation on his father's side to be in agriculture. The 18-month-old has a good start—she has been either horseback or in a backpack with her parents from the begin-





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ning, loves the horses, cows, and cow dogs, and is fearless in the alley. Tillie has inherited the original family brand and there are already a few cows running around with a TN on the right hip.

Tom has fond memories of a childhood working alongside family and wants to pass on the generational knowledge bestowed upon him by not just his father, but his grandfather, who was both an exceptional cat-

tleman and an exceptional person.

Heather is proud of being a first-generation rancher who brings a fresh perspective. “I know it can get annoying, but I always ask why we do things and ‘because we always have’ doesn’t cut it. I want to know the root of the why. We are challenged to constantly do more with less, to increase our efficiency, and to justify to the general population that we deserve to be here. We need to be sure that we

*Heather and Tom Nielsen are checking the range conditions and cattle at Quiet Hills Ranch, which offers excellent fall calving and winter grazing on the oak savannas. The photo was taken in 2020 during the August Complex fires which burned up a million acres. LEFT: Tom, a fifth-generation cowboy, dotes on his carefully wrapped two-week-old daughter, Tillie, and new rancher mom Heather.*

are being responsible stewards of both the lands and the animals we rely on. I firmly believe that beef is part of a healthy diet and it’s our job to make sure it stays on the food pyramid.”

She grew up in Sonoma County and started riding horses when she was four. She rode show jumping horses through her childhood and later worked for a therapeutic riding program. She attended California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo and worked on a ranch to round out her major in agricultural systems management with a minor in ag business.

Heather admits that she had a lot to learn about ranching on a commercial scale before she met Tom on an Internet dating site four years ago. “Shortly after we met, Tom put me to work on the ranch. He and his dad were gathering cattle. I kept watching to see how things worked.”

The two realized they had a lot in common including a passion for ranching and





ABOVE: Tom branding at friend's ranch in Siskiyou County, Calif. That lease is no longer available because the land dried up when the dams on the Klamath River were pulled out. BELOW LEFT: The original Nielsen homestead in the 1950s, land that today is the interchange of I-580 and I-680 southeast of Oakland, Calif. BELOW RIGHT: With the abundance of almond trees in Northern California, feeding the discarded hulls provides additional fiber for cattle.



cattle and were married on Quiet Hills in February 2022.

“We chose the date because it was the only time of year we wouldn’t have a lot of cow-work if we ever planned an anniversary trip,” Heather said. “Our ‘honeymoon’ was a drive up to Spring Cove to pick up a couple of bulls.”

After Tillie was born, Heather experienced an increase in self-preservation which included cutting back on riding and seeking a solid horse, especially if her daughter was

coming along. She has a newfound appreciation these days for good-minded, born-gentle horses.

“I don’t think you get better values than in ranching with all the hard days and hard moments so that’s great for our daughter. It teaches grit, determination, and that life isn’t always what you want it to be. Tillie already loves it. Ranching is in her blood.”

As Heather walks toward the white pickup hauling a car seat that had been plunked down by the corral, Tillie trailing after her, she

says, “We want Tillie to have a future in ranching. We see the politics in this state and sometimes it is difficult to see that things are going in a direction that could threaten our way of life. We don’t like seeing that. We love California, but sometimes a future here seems impossible.”

Besides serving as a ranch hand and mom, the energetic young woman works full-time as an agricultural land appraiser, and she still finds time to advocate for agriculture: “Agriculture lacks people willing to advocate





*LEFT: Tillie watches her dad, Tom, with his new colt. Tom has been roping since he was eight and riding colts since he was 13. CENTER LEFT: Tom Jr. as a kid on the ranch in Gazelle.*

*CENTER RIGHT: Tom Jr. and brother Travis at the Gazelle Ranch in 1984.*

*BOTTOM: Tom places Tillie's TN brand on a bull. The Nielsens run Black Angus cattle and embryo transfer purebred Wagyu bull embryos in their heifers for Agribeef.*



PHOTOS COURTESY NIELSEN FAMILY



for themselves. It is an industry founded on hard, quiet, honest work. They are used to being private, but today we live in a world where not speaking out is not a choice. People need to know we exist.”

It was Heather’s idea to sell cattle directly to consumers for beef. While the program is still small and their current customers are people who know them, she and Tom are hoping to expand their local beef program to others who can learn from them.

She sees a disconnect between the people growing food and consumers and with their local beef they don’t tout it as being more nutritious than beef at grocery stores because most of that beef also comes from family ranches. The Nielsens even finish their cattle the same way a feedlot does.

“I want to sell directly to consumers so I can tell them what cattle ranching entails and put a face and a story to the food on their plates,” Heather says. “It’s critical to communicate about what we do as ranchers, that we are not a mindless corporation set on making record profits at all costs. I’m an introverted person, not a natural salesperson, but I’m putting myself out there because I believe that is what it will take to make sure there are still ranchers raising beef for my daughter.”

The older Tom tries to keep a positive attitude but ranching in California faces challenges the long-time rancher is sorry to see. “We are fighting the government all the time as they want control of everything we do,” he says. “Now you must get a permit to deepen a well. You think you’ve found the perfect place to ranch, and nothing is going to change, but it does. With the rules California has and what they may come up with next, I don’t know if there is much of a future for the kids in ranching. I worry about my grandkids.” ■

*Rebecca Colnar Mott traveled from Montana to Northern California in August 2024 to visit with ranchers to learn how they are tackling the challenges of raising cattle on the highly populated and often not-ag-friendly West Coast.*