



The Wright Stuff

Starting from scratch, becoming a rancher and spokesman in Modoc County, California.

Words & photos by Larry Turner.

Each time Gary Wright looks through his living room window, he pinches himself, thankful that he lives in country that he loves with big, bold, strikingly beautiful landforms in open spaces far from the madding crowd of humanity. He and his wife of 17 years, Verna Johnson Wright, open and close their days with stellar views of 14,179-foot Mount Shasta that dominate the far northern landscape of California.

Southwest of them is Lava Beds National Monument and Tulelake National Waterfowl Refuge. Protruding volcanic landforms frame their property: Horse Mountain, Little Horse Mountain, The Peninsula, Petroglyph Point. A flat fertile valley—drained and reclaimed from ancient Tulelake—unfolds below their rimrock home on the valley’s edge. The first settlers came to this valley by wagon train in 1846 along the nearby Applegate Trail. Through hard work and vision, Gary Wright earned this view.

Wright had always dreamed about becoming a cowboy and purchasing his own ranch. His dad was a Modoc County, Calif., ag commissioner. The Wright family lived in the country—a long stone’s throw from his current residence—with limited land. “Though we weren’t ranchers or farmers, the

rural life suited our family well. Domestic animals were a mainstay on our property, allowing my younger brother and I to have 4-H and FFA projects, including registered Hampshires and Yorkshires.”

After graduation from Tulelake High School in 1973 (and serving as student-body president his senior year), Wright made his

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way to college at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, Calif., to play football. However, he got injured, and some medical tests revealed a rare tumor attached to his spinal cord. “I kept losing control of my right leg and arm.”

In a very technical surgery (one of the first of its kind in the world), Redding surgeon George Stevenson removed the tumor. “Had the surgery not been successful, I risked becoming paralyzed. The success of the

surgery led me to a career in ranching, which is what I always wanted to do.”

He went back home to Tulelake and in 1975 got married (two children came from that marriage, Tara and Heath) and started working for the Ackley Ranch, just down the road from where he was born and raised.

“While working for Ray and Kathy Ackley, I gained a lot of knowledge about ranching and irrigating and I was able to purchase cattle from them with part of my wages, running them with their herd. As time moved on, I was able to purchase the Horse Mountain property in 1985.”

Wright didn’t inherit a ranch. He earned and purchased one. Gary’s love for ranching is in many ways poetic. “I love being able to walk out my front or back door, saddle up and ride in these big open spaces. I like it in a pickup or four-wheeler, too. I’m close to nature and it satisfies my soul. And there is nothing better than being your own boss.”

In addition to continually building the cattle herd, Wright also farmed. He experimented and did well with some row crops in the fertile Tulelake/Klamath Basin where he has always lived, raising potatoes, grain, sugar beets, mint and alfalfa. While farming he continued to add to his cattle herd. Things were

going well until 2001.

“Our main ranching/farming challenge came from bureaucracy, the federal water cutoff to Klamath and Tulelake Basin farmers and ranchers in 2001, purportedly to protect the threatened Lost River and short-nose suckers by keeping artificially high-water levels in Klamath Lake,” bristles Wright. “Little do the feds and Klamath tribes (the main advocates for the water cutoff) know about history. Parts of Klamath Lake would always go dry in the summertime and at times there were just trickles of water going down Link River to Klamath River. The reclamation project by the U.S. government brought about the building of a dam on Link River that allowed the possibility of higher water in Klamath Lake. The suckers did quite well in the low-water periods historically. The traditional summer Indian camps along the banks of the Klamath are now under five to 10 feet of

Vets from WWI had drawn homesteads initially. The outrage from the water takeover led to national headlines and the Bucket Brigade and Protest Encampment at the dam’s headgates. Federal troops were sent in to monitor the situation. Klamath County’s local sheriff, Tim Evinger, instructed his personnel not to help the feds. Eventually the G.W. Bush administration allowed some water to flow to farmers and ranchers, later on in the summer; however, the damage was already done. [RANGE covered the happenings in a Fall 2001 special edition called, “Water in the West, betrayed by the Feds.” That blockbuster can be found via rangedex.com.]

Gary says, “The water cutoff made me into an activist and one of the spokesmen for ag, as it did to many ag-oriented folks on both sides of the Oregon border, especially the WWII vets who were promised water in per-

and derision that we are facing today.” Wright was disappointed that Oregon representative Greg Walden was unable to convince his fellow House members to pass the bill.

“The water issue in the Klamath Basin is a fine example of what is wrong with bureaucracy in the American West. It has nothing to do with what is right and fair; it is all about power and control. The 2024 sucker spawning in high water results are in and they are the worst numbers ever!”

In 2019, the Bureau of Reclamation stopped the water flow to the Klamath Reclamation Project and Tulelake and Lower Klamath National Waterfowl refuges to preserve unhistorical high-water levels in Klamath Lake. Lower Klamath was the nation’s first waterfowl refuge, formed during Teddy Roosevelt’s administration in 1908. The canal system at Link River first flows to farmers and ranchers and then to the wildlife refuges.



Tara and Gary head home from checking cattle on their Horse Mountain Allotment. The Tulelake Basin and Mount Shasta are in the background. OPPOSITE: The Wright family take a break, posing for a photo (along with some of their ranch dogs) on their Modoc County, Calif., property near Horse Mountain and the Clear Lake Hills. Left to right: Tara Wright-Baley, Bob Baley, Verna Johnson-Wright, Gary Wright, Jackie Bland (Heath's fiancée) and Heath Wright.

water! Go figure.”

The Link River dam was built in 1921 by the Bureau of Reclamation, providing water storage for Klamath and Tulelake Basin farmers and ranchers via canals. As one of the world’s shortest rivers at two miles, it would often run dry.

The year 2001 offered a silent spring and summer for those who depended on water for their already planted crops. A fair share of the farmers/ranchers were World War II vets who had drawn homesteads for that purpose.

petuity.” Leadership skills from his high school and FFA days came into play as he eventually became president of the Klamath Water Users Association, making a half-dozen trips to Washington, D.C.

“We had an agreement put together at the federal government’s encouragement that took a lot of time for all parties of interest called the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement in 2010, but Congress would not fund it. There were 28 stakeholders. Had that bill passed we would not be facing the problems

“It was an abomination what the feds did (with the tribes’ blessing) in cutting off water to the Everglades of the American West, the heart of the Pacific Flyway,” Wright says. “For the first time in a million years, Tulelake [one of the world’s ancient lakes] and Lower Klamath went dry, and nearly all the waterfowl disappeared. Additionally, all the sucker fish in these two refuges died. You would think that the tribes would have raised a stink about that since they are trying to increase the sucker fish population, but they didn’t.”

The water was returned to canals, farms, ranches, and wildlife refuges in 2024. “We had an above-average water year and in the tearing down [a process currently going on, the largest in the world] of four dams on the Klamath River, this dynamic has temporarily brought more water, but the future supply is not guaranteed. The ideal system is similar to what it was before this area was settled: a percolation system where water is basically recycled. Ranchers and farmers would receive water for their crops, which in turn would run off to the wildlife refuges—including unused water going directly to the refuges—followed by percolating back to the Klamath River watershed. Klamath Basin ranchers and farmers would gladly accept the warm summer Klamath Lake water that is no good for downriver fish, including salmon. The percolated water would be cooler water feeding the river.”

Because of uncertain and fluctuating water years, Wright long ago had to put in his own wells. “The banker wouldn’t loan us money until we did, and the wells guarantee us water for cattle and some crops.”

Wright’s first marriage ended after 29 years not long after the 2001 water cutoff, which created a lot of angst and stress in the basin and some farms and ranches went under. Then Wright met and married Verna Johnson, who grew up in nearby Merrill but had never ranched before.

“I was terrified at first working horseback but as time went on, I got the knack of it and loved it,” she says. “When you are horseback a month gathering, you quickly learn.”

Gary and Verna call their outfit the G-V Wright Ranch and have built their herd of Angus and Angus-cross up to 200. In the summer they run 50 to 100 on the home ranch which includes a 5,000-acre federal grazing allotment on Horse Mountain, a prominent remnant of the region’s robust volcanic past. They run 100-plus head on their summer range, the East Grizzly Allotment southwest of Lakeview, Ore., and Goose Lake, Calif. Cattle stay there until the end of September. Gary and Verna gather the cattle over a two-week span in autumn, with holding pens in the Boles Meadow area.

“Each day we head in a different direction, meeting at day’s end with what we’ve gathered,” Verna says. “We live in our fifth-wheel trailer.” When all are gathered, they truck the stock home 100 miles.

“We’re a small family ranch,” Gary says. “We haven’t made a ton of money, but we are rich in doing what we love. I’ve found that all ranch people are good folks, no matter how large their herd or their pocketbooks.”

Gary is ambivalent about ranching’s future. “Right now, beef prices are the highest

“I’m not doing that,” Wright chuckles. “Verna and I want to do some traveling, seeing parts of the good ole U.S.A. that we haven’t seen and revisiting parts that we’ve seen and enjoyed.” He gave daughter, Tara, and her husband, Bob Baley, and son, Heath, first choice on purchasing the cattle and ranch.

They mulled it over and decided yes. They purchased the cattle first and the land and allotments are in escrow. The G-V Wright Ranch will become the Horse Mountain Family Ranch. Heath is the ranch manager and boots-on-the-ground cowboy. Tara will keep her regular job as a Tulelake High School counselor and since she and Bob live on the property, she will use her cowgirl horse skills when necessary. Bob will continue to farm and help where and when needed.

Tara and Heath grew up ranching in ag. “I’ve been horseback since I was five years old,” Tara says. “That is one of my greatest life joys, especially when working with my dogs.” Then she laughs and adds, “My border collie is smarter than I am.” Ten horses and 10 dogs are on the ranch and, just like her father, she prefers working stock horseback.

Heath prefers ranching over farming. “It is much more relaxing to be out on the range. When you are farming, you are kinda watched by others to see if your rows are straight enough!”

Sometimes he is horseback a couple of weeks straight, then he is off for a while. In the summer he delivers salt and minerals to the allotment. “I love being out there, working with cattle. You basically have it all to yourself and there are three lovely reservoirs nearby: Everly, Greensprings and Householder. I take the side-by-side to access the range, 42 miles distant.” Heath lives in Klamath Falls, Ore., and drives to the ranch nearly every day.

Gary and Heath often work side by side. “One of the joys of ranching is that it is a family enterprise,” Gary says. “You get to be with your kids a lot. You instruct them, but they also instruct you. The ranch will be in good hands with Heath and Tara.” ■

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Tara (with help from her canine buddies) drives a small herd of cattle to a new pasture. BELOW: G-V Wright Ranch owners Gary and Verna Johnson.



ever and they have been on the upswing for a number of years now. Unfortunately, it seems that family ranchers are constantly under assault by certain environmentalists and feds. We are lucky because we work with a great Forest Service range conservationist, Jenny Jayo, who is excellent at managing our 35,000-acre allotment! And study after study has proven that proper management of cattle leads to a healthier range and is a major deterrent to catastrophic fires. Allan Savory’s grazing methods are indisputable and lead to healthier range and grasslands, period!” [See page 42 for more on Savory.]

Some ranchers retire only when they die.