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rescuing the range

The recent halt of urbanization is buying time in the struggle to maintain Nevada's ranching heritage.

BY DAVID BUNKER | JULY/AUGUST 2009

Sitting in a west Reno coffeehouse, Devere Dressler pauses in mid-conversation. The fifth-generation cowboy is talking ranching—the changes and challenges—when he turns toward the window. Pointing across four lanes of asphalt, he locates the old Caughlin Ranch house. The homestead, once the center of an expansive cattle operation, is now corralled by suburban development. The 19th-century dwelling is a small island of the past besieged by the progress of the future.

That juxtaposition of old and new is a tableau Dressler knows intimately. The Dressler Ranch at one time covered several thousand acres from Gardnerville south along the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada. As a fifth-generation heir, he has seen his family's holdings dwindle to a couple hundred acres. The majority of the Dressler land now furnishes housing developments or has been sold off.

The origins of the slow splintering of the Dressler Ranch are a microcosm of the changing nature of ranching in Nevada. It's a tale with its share of heartbreak and nostalgia. But it's also a story people like Dressler are working hard to punctuate with a happy ending. For ranchers across the state, that happy ending depends on finding the means to maintain a way of life that is as Nevada as sagebrush.

Dressler is a player in this drama. While his inheritance has been fractured, sold, and consumed by homes or other owners, Dressler and others are still working to protect the land that embodies the heritage and heart of a state that has changed significantly in recent years.

Two Nevadas

In Carson Valley, a cluster of Black Angus cows snort behind a barbed-wire fence near Genoa. With each cow bellow, a small cloud blossoms in the cold spring air. The brown carpet of Carson Valley spreads out behind them to the western edge of the valley, where the teeth of the Carson Range jut skyward. Cows are scattered like spots on dice across the valley floor. This is old Nevada.

Across U.S. Highway 395, two golfers carefully line up a putt on a course that snakes around newly constructed homes—all enclosed by wrought-iron fences and gates. Alongside the golf course, an oval pond ringed by pavers sprouts a fountain. Flags and real estate signs herald the Saratoga Springs development. The homes and golf course sit in the middle of an open expanse of sage, a rectangle of new residences enveloped by the open vistas of Carson Valley. This is new Nevada.

The state's contrasts are stark and almost incompatible. Cows roam near months-old stucco homes. Towering casinos shimmer just miles away from the rumble and crush of a hard rock mine. But this is modern Nevada's identity—a delicate balance of heritage and progress.

Trace the history of Nevada, and you'll see that there is one commodity that is prized more than the minerals that spurred the settlement of the state in the mid-1800s. "Water is essential in the desert," says Guy Rocha, former Nevada archivist and historian. "Water can be more valuable than gold."

Water's worth is tied to its scarcity. It graces Nevada only in spots, and each precious oasis has spawned a population. Where water was present, agriculture and mining often followed. Therein lies the irony of Nevada—one of the nation's least-densely populated but fastest-growing states. The people, cattle, housing, strip malls, casinos, and mines are being squeezed into the slivers of green across Nevada's vast brown aridity. And that is where the state's two disparate identities often compete for precious space. "In Carson Valley, you still have a lot of multigenerational ranching," Rocha says. "In western Nevada they are the last frontier."

The use of the word "frontier" also is ironic. Nevada was once part of the frontier of the great westward push spurred by the discovery of gold and silver. Now, like a rebounding wave headed back eastward, the reverse migration is creating a new frontier where housing and development are pushing out from urbanized California into rural Nevada.

Many Nevadans who have seen the push and pull of the state's halves know an equilibrium is needed. But the delicate balance is thrown off by a



Photo: Ruth Anne Kocour, Dave Quandt (middle), & Charlie Johnston (bottom)

set of unstable factors. Ranches change hands from generation to generation, the prices of minerals and metals fluctuate, and the state's hunger for new housing has gone from boom to bust in a matter of months.

Eternal Open Space

River Fork Ranch sits at the historical epicenter of modern Nevada. Just down the road, the Genoa Bar's faded wood sign reads "Nevada's Oldest Thirst Parlor." The neighboring ranch is "Ranch One," purportedly the first land claim in the state. The ranch is a wetland-rich pasture split by two forks of the Carson River.

Despite the uncertainty that surrounds Carson Valley's future, one thing is assured: River Fork Ranch will never be developed. Duane Petite, the Carson River project manager with The Nature Conservancy, points down the languid winter waters of the Carson River across the ranch to the snow-cloaked peaks of the Carson Iceberg Wilderness in the distance. "We're looking at the headwaters of the east and west forks of the Carson River here," he says.

A gentle westward tilting of Carson Valley's floor has blessed the ranch with a rare wealth—a jackpot of streams and sloughs abnormal for Nevada. The water makes the property coveted by Nevada newcomers who have moved to the area for the open expanses and mountain views. But The Nature Conservancy assures that the current residents of the River Fork Ranch—red-tailed hawks, northern leopard frogs, western pond turtles, and cranes—are not displaced. "The Nature Conservancy considers inappropriate real-estate development in the floodplain the number-one threat to the health of the river and riparian, wetland, and wet-meadow habitat," Petite says.

The Nature Conservancy purchased the River Fork Ranch in 2000, and the Bureau of Land Management holds an easement on the property that ensures it will remain open space. But the purchase doesn't mean the ranch has become just a nature preserve. It is still a working cattle ranch, grazed by Carson Valley's Bently Agrowdynamics. "Our goal is to show that progressive agriculture techniques and preservation can go together," Petite says. The ranch is, and will always be, a nature-ranching preserve—805 acres of Carson Valley virtually guaranteed to remain unchanged.

Farming in a Fishbowl

Fred Stodieck's great-grandfather bought the piece of land Stodieck calls home for \$2,800 in gold coins. The deed on the property bears the signature of Abraham Lincoln. His house dates to 1899, and a log cabin on the property dates to the 1860s. But 140 years later, the ranch and farm is not the money maker it once was. "We're all hobby farmers here in Carson Valley; all but two or three," Stodieck says. "But my roots are here, so I would probably be the last one to sell this land."

As he looks over to the cars humming by on State Route 88 across from his pasture, uncertainty enters his voice. "Who knows what will happen? It's getting to where it's almost too much for me," he says. "I've contemplated selling off the cows and just renting the pasture."

Ranching and farming have become more and more of a curiosity in Carson Valley, he says. The new homes and residents have changed the valley's character. "It's like trying to farm in a fishbowl," he says. "Everyone in the country is watching you." After a car accident left him with lingering health effects, early mornings in the pasture and heavy lifting around the ranch are taking a toll. While selling off his land is still something he's not strongly considering, Stodieck says something has to give. "We can't survive at the rate we are going forever," he says.

Stodieck's farm runs all the way to the banks of the Carson River outside Minden. The nearby water is a boon to the farm for irrigation, but it also has its drawbacks. With more and more building, Carson Valley has lost undeveloped land that acts as flood protection. Now ranchers with floodplain land, like Stodieck, are expected to keep the land as is in order to benefit the community, he says. The floodplain designation strips the land of much of its monetary value because no one can build on the land, and also lessens the value the rancher could obtain from a conservation easement on the property.

The dilemmas Stodieck faces have become common in Carson Valley. Aging ranchers of multigenerational families are finding it harder to make a living off the land and often finding there is no one to pass the ranch to. "There's probably 100 bona fide farmers left in Carson Valley," he says.

And it's not just an issue in Carson Valley, where equity-rich Californians resettled during the housing boom and set off a series of land-use changes. The changes are being felt in the rural corners of the state as well. Ron Torell, who raises bull outside of Elko and is the second vice president of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association, says the changes are reaching northeast Nevada. "Some of these ranches sold for way more than the price of cattle can support," says Torell, who is also a livestock specialist with the University of Nevada, Reno Cooperative Extension. "The people that buy them are tickled to death."

Today, it's not so much the pressures of the real-estate market that are fueling the changes, Torell says. Many ranches are disappearing because of the bad economy. "It takes a larger operation to make a living than it once did," Torell says. "So some of these family ranches have had to expand or go out of business."

Rocha, who has studied the progression throughout the state's history, sees a precarious future for agriculture in western Nevada. "Agriculture as a way of life is losing the battle to urbanization," he says. "By the end of the 21st century, if we continue to grow the way we have, I don't expect there to be much agriculture left in Carson Valley."

Living off the Land

Some don't see such a bleak future for ranching in the Silver State. Nevada held the title of the fastest-growing state for 19 years in a row, then lost it in 2006 to Arizona before regaining it in 2007. Since then, the state's growth rate has dropped sharply. In 2008, the Census Bureau ranked it as the eighth fastest-growing state in the nation.

The downshift in growth has taken a bite out of the state's economy, says Thomas Cargill, an economics professor at UNR. But agriculture, as it has throughout a Nevada history packed with booms and busts, has, by comparison, stayed strong. "The reason ranching has been stable is it is a long-term industry. It is stable because people need to eat," Cargill says. "I think that as a percentage of the state's economy, it could increase because other industries will decline."

Operation Agriculture

Nevada residents are not blind to the loss of heritage and landscapes that the slow deterioration of agriculture is bringing to the state. A ballot



measure titled Question 1, approved by voters in 2002, is funding conservation easements across the state. The money has preserved the Greil Ranch, an alfalfa farm in Washoe Valley, the Rambling River Ranch near Fallon, and many others.



Jon Paul Kiel, a grants and projects analyst with the Question 1 program, says some of the easements keep open important deer migration corridors, others protect riverfront land, and all preserve the state's rural character. When you drive into Fallon and gaze at the Rambling River Ranch, "You're looking at 600 acres of agriculture fields and cottonwood galleries instead of 600 condos," Kiel says.

For some ranchers the easements are life savers, infusing more cash into a ranch teetering on the edge of viability. Dressler travels the country preaching the importance of land preservation. He has difficulty telling his story in a casual setting. But out on a ranch, when speaking to a fellow landowner who is facing the same economic realities and generational changes he is, Dressler's tale unfolds naturally.

Dressler knows his ranch will likely never be passed down to his son Garrett, 14. Inheritance taxes and family disagreements have killed that dream. "That broke my heart, that the generational secession came to an end," Dressler says. His son still carries on the ranching tradition in spirit, wearing a cowboy hat and insisting he wants to be the sixth-generation Dressler rancher. "They call him 'cowboy' at school," Dressler says. Whether Garrett takes up the cattle business or not, the efforts of his father and others mean there will be forever-protected pasture and roaming cows in Carson Valley when he grows up.

It's not a victory over housing development that Dressler and others want to see. It's a balance that preserves a portion of the past. But there is still work to be done. "The lowered pace of development is buying us some time," Petite says. And then tracing his finger across a map of Carson Valley, sweeping over River Fork Ranch and out across multigenerational ranches settled during the Gold Rush, he adds, "This is a huge piece of an important jigsaw puzzle we are trying to put together."

NEVADA RANCHING BY THE NUMBERS

- Decrease in head of cattle from 2007 to 2008: **50,000**
- Number of ranches that either disappeared or quit producing from 2002 to 2008: **100**
- Number of ranches that produce less than \$1,000 in agriculture: **758**
- Number of ranches that produce less than \$2,500 in agriculture: **350**
- Average age of rancher or farmer: **56**

Source: *National Agriculture Statistics Service*
(nass.usda.gov)

RANCHING PERSPECTIVE

Guy Rocha, Nevada historian

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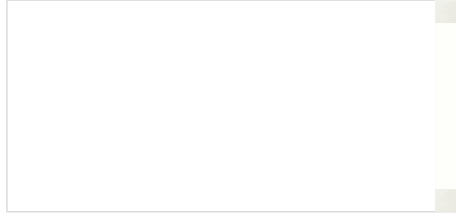
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