

The Rankin Family Celebrates 150 Years of Cattle Ranching



A QUOTE FROM THE BAKERSFIELD GAZETTE...JANUARY 8, 1876...

"Walker's Basin - This beautiful valley is about nine miles from Havilah on the stage road from Kernville to Caliente. The Basin is both beautiful and rich...a land of hay, deer and cool nights...it remains a cattle paradise...it is about eight or nine miles long, and is covered by...large ranches...The passing stages offer it intelligence of what is passing in the great outer world, without stirring its own quiet life...while here I enjoyed the hospitality of Messers, Walser, Lightner and Rankin."

Well over a century later, descendants of the Lightner and Rankin families continue to ranch in Walker Basin. This year marks the "150 Year Celebration" for the 4th, 5th and 6th generation family members still living and working on Rankin Ranch.

The westward movement brought our ancestors – the Lightner, Rankin, Prewett, Whisman and Cross families to California as early as 1846. Their reasons for making the journey varied, but the stage was set long ago for the drama which followed. For a century and a half this land has been worked and protected. The history of Rankin Ranch was created by a cast of characters as "American" as our founding fathers, and our ancestors' efforts are remembered by loyal descendants eager to follow in their footsteps. We are proud of our family...our ranch... and our country, and we thank the Lord each day for our many blessings. ~ Bill Rankin

We come and go, but the land is always here and the people who really love and understand it are the people who really own it...for a little while. Willa Carter

The Quarter Circle U Rankin Ranch was founded by Walker Rankin in 1863 during the time our country was engaged in the Civil War. Walker was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on October 10, 1832. His boyhood and youth were spent on his father's farm, and he attended public school until he was fourteen. The lure of the West fired his imagination and would soon change his life forever. In 1854, at the age of twenty-two, Walker left home and headed to California making his journey by way of Panama and sailing into San Francisco. He was fairly successful in the gold fields of northern California, and eventually settled in Walker Basin where he became a cattle rancher.

Walker married Lavinia Estelle Lightner in 1868. Her family had traveled to California by covered wagon from Missouri in 1849, and her father, Abiah T. Lightner, was successful at gold mining in nearby Keysville before settling in Walker Basin in 1858. Walker and Lavinia had six sons and one daughter – Charles, Warren, Lee, Edward “Ned”, Jesse, Walker Jr., and Alice. Their home, which was built from a plan in Ladies Godeys Book in the mid 1870s, is occupied by family members today. Walker was a very successful businessman and is credited with importing the first purebred Hereford cattle to this area.

We still raise White Face Herefords today, and we still use the – Quarter Circle U brand. This brand was registered on July 27, 1867 by my great grandfather, Walker Rankin. ~Bill Rankin

In the 1870s Rankin Ranch became a stage stop for the overland mail route. Travelers stopped at the ranch on their way to Havilah, Keysville, and Kernville. The old barn which was used for tending the horses still stands today and is used for hay and equipment storage. In his life time, Walker purchased thousands of acres of land, and each of his sons eventually became partners in the family business. Walker lived a full life passing away at age 86. After his death, Lavinia continued to run the cattle ranch. Their son, Lee, and his wife, Julia, and their two sons, Leroy and Billy moved to the Basin ranch to help out. Eleven years later, Lee and Julia were both killed in an automobile accident on December 24, 1929. Their entire family was devastated, especially their young sons. A friend wrote of Julia, “Words cannot contain our love. There was, there is, no gentler, stronger womanly woman.” Leroy and Billy moved to town and lived with their grandmother, Lavinia. They completed high school in Bakersfield at Kern County Union High School (now Bakersfield High) before going on to college. After a couple of years away from the ranch, they returned home and formed a partnership – Rankin Brother Cattle Company. In 1936, Leroy married Helen Cross whose ancestors also were California pioneers arriving as early as 1846. Leroy and Helen raised their three children Julia, Patty and Bill on the family ranch in Walker Basin.

Ranching has its challenges and I often think about something my dad told my mother after they were married... “Cattle ranchers are some of the most optimistic fools around. They live by the premise that one good year in seven will keep them going”. I definitely understand. The unknown is always there – drought, floods, grass fires, low markets...but it’s the life you love.

My two sisters, Julia and Patty, and I were raised here on the ranch in Walker Basin. I had a grand childhood. What boy could ask for more – fishing, riding horses, swimming in the reservoir, and I even enjoyed my chores. Well, maybe not all of them. However, I did get paid ten cents an hour for chopping those pesky bull heads, so it made my town trips much more interesting. Milking the cows wasn’t my favorite chore as it cut into my social life – horseback riding with my cousins. ~Bill Rankin

Leroy was very involved in both the Kern County and California Cattlemen’s Associations. His father, Lee, had been a charter member of the California organization when it was established in 1917. Leroy was elected president and served two terms at the state level. In 1947 when the organization celebrated California’s 100th year in the cattle industry, Leroy and Helen were both very involved in the event. It was held in Bakersfield and attended by one thousand people. Helen continued her support of the cattle industry. In 1948, she was a charter member of the newly formed Kern County Cowbelle, and served as president in 1950.

In 1988 my mom was honored by her peers in the cattle industry and was named Cowbelle of the Year. That night she said, “Next to being asked to become Mrs. Leroy Rankin, this is the greatest honor of my life”. She would have been proud of my wife Glenda when she was named Kern County CattleWoman of the Year in 2008, and our daughter Rebecca when she received this same award in 2011. Our family will attend another special celebration in February when our youngest daughter Amanda will also receive the honor of being named Kern County CattleWoman of the Year for 2013. All of the women in my life are very dynamic individuals.

~Bill Rankin

In 1948, the family matriarch, Lavinia Rankin, fondly know as “Nana”, celebrated her 100th birthday with family and friends. She was a remarkable woman. She had arrived in California before it became a state in 1850, and she watched the changes that took place from the days of covered wagons and the “gold rush” period to the invention of the automobile and the airplane. She actually owned one of the first automobiles in Kern County. Lavinia’s memoirs were recorded when she was 90 years old, and these stories have been printed in several Kern County history publications.

In 1954, after the death of third generation, Leroy Rankin, at the young age of forty-two, Helen had a big decision to make. Should she keep the ranch, or sell it? Of course the latter was the easier option and friends advised her to sell, but she decided to continue her husband’s lifetime work. She would have to learn the cattle business. Until that time, she had taken care of their children and managed the house, as women of the 50s did. She had ridden with Leroy and helped at brandings, but knew little about the day-to-day operation of the cattle ranch. By 1965, Helen was doing quite well, but she realized in order to have a better cash flow with the “ups and downs” of the cattle business she needed to diversify to fully utilize her asset – the land. After much thought, she decided to open a guest ranch operation. She and Leroy had always entertained large groups of friends, and this would increase the ranch income and allow future generations the opportunity to continue to ranch. Helen was a forerunner in the field of Agri-Tourism. She was featured in the Sacramento Bee as a leader in the field of diversifying an agriculture entity. Helen was delighted when the next generation decided to continue the family cattle and guest ranching tradition.

I returned from college after graduating with a degree in Agriculture Economics from the University of California at Davis in 1969. In 1971, I married Glenda Hill who had worked at the guest ranch during the summers for four years. Although Glenda didn’t grow up on a ranch, she realized the hard work associated with both the cattle and guest ranch. We raised our four children – Jason, Rebecca, Sarah and Amanda – to respect the land and the sacrifices made by the generations that came before them. Our children all graduated from college and now live on the ranch, and are involved in agriculture and the guest ranch industry. ~ Bill Rankin

Jason Rankin and his wife, Taira are raising their four sons – Walker, Cody, Wyatt and Warren to know the cattle industry. The older boys help Jason deliver hay and work cattle while the younger ones love riding in the tractor with their grandfather when he farms. Rebecca and her husband, Allen Been, with their two young sons, Zachary and Blake, live on the ranch and help out when they can. Rebecca is a teacher and she makes a point of incorporating agriculture into her curriculum. She is also a strong advocate for the cattle industry holding leadership positions with the local, state, and national CattleWomen’s organizations. Allen’s expertise as an agronomist definitely helps out with some of the farming decisions at the ranch. They also enjoy publishing this paper, The Fence Post, each month. Sarah Rankin Wilder and her husband, Clint, are involved in the management of the cattle, farming, and the guest ranch operations. Their two daughters, Emma Mae and Josephine, are already learning about both businesses at a very young age. They love helping their mom with the office work and special guest events. Amanda Rankin Barrett and her husband Brian are also instrumental in both family businesses. Amanda brings a new dimension to the guest ranch with her technology skills. Brian, who is a Kern County Fireman, enjoys farming and helping with the cattle work on his days off. Both Brian and Clint have wonderful mechanical skills which they use to keep the ranch trucks and farm equipment in good condition. Each family member does their part to make this “family business” successful.

My mom, Helen Rankin, lived to see both her ranch and her family doing well. She was pleased that my sisters, Julia and Patty, and I all raised our families on the ranch. She was 89 years old when she passed away in 2003. It had given her great pleasure knowing that our family ranching tradition of well over a century would continue. It is truly a privilege to inherit the stewardship of the land, but along with this opportunity comes a great responsibility, and a lot of hard work. Glenda and I are happy that our children and grandchildren have accepted this challenge as well.

~ Bill Rankin



Photo by Greg Iger