

The bed and dresser remain. The screened porch, tattered and weathered, speaks of near-perfect summer evenings over half a century ago. Eighty-nine-year-old Herman Vowell sits near the venerable copper-clad Malleable range, remembering March 25, 1948.

"Eighteen inches of snow fell the night before," he says. "At breakfast, I noticed Betty stopping to hold her side so I paid extra attention to the ranch house as the team of Belgians pulled the wagon and brother Ray and I forked hay to the cattle."

On Valentine's Day, her birthday, Betty told Herman that she might be pregnant. "I think we have our little one growing inside," she had whispered affectionately to her buckaroo husband that evening.

Herman, as foreman, plus Betty and Ray managed W.C. Dalton's Steele Swamp Pitchfork Ranch in the remote Devil's Garden of extreme northeast California. "It was our dream life. We couldn't have been happier," recalls Herman. "It was 18 years of near bliss living there."

Herman came to the Swamp as a lean rawhide buckaroo in 1936. That first evening, he walked up to the rimrock and watched the sun set over the valley, distant mountains and nearby juniper and pine hillsides. His spirit soared with the view. "My heart belongs here," he had said to himself. And to this day his spirit dances when the Swamp comes into view.

Herman met his pretty bride at the McDermott Ranch near Morgan Hill, Calif., in 1938. Herman had been sent to round up steers that Dalton pastured there. "My heart skipped a few beats when I first saw Betty. She must have thought that I had a speech impediment because I could not get a word out edgewise, let alone straight, when we were introduced."

Betty was the queen of the Madrone Rodeo that year. Herman entered the bronc-riding event and won before 4,000 cheering fans, but the fan he wanted to most impress was Betty. Herman and Betty were married in 1942.

Herman won many rodeo events over the years. He and Ray became known as two of

Unyielding Spirit, Undying Love

Herman and Betty Vowell, in California's snowbound buckaroo country.

By Larry Turner

the best team ropers around. Betty rodeoed too. She and Herman once won the top buckle at the Cedarville, Calif., rodeo.

"God must have turned my head from pitching hay at that moment that day," when

Herman saw Betty open the kitchen door and frantically wave a dishtowel. He told Ray: "There's something wrong with Betty."

Ray took over the team. Herman ran to the house where he found Betty unconscious on the kitchen floor. He carefully placed her in their bed, then rushed to the phone, hoping that the huge snowstorm had not cut off their service—a rather primitive 50 miles of telephone line strung between juniper trees from the Swamp to Alturas. Operator Rita Smerl answered.

"Rita, Betty is in bad shape," Herman said. "We need a doctor out here badly."

"I'll do my best, Herman," Rita replied, "but with the storm, the road may not be open for days or even weeks." Herman's cowboy friend Mervin Wilde had recently taken over as head of Klamath County's Search and Rescue in Oregon. "I'll call him," Rita said. "We'll get help your way as soon as we can. Hang in there, Herman, and take care of her the best you can."

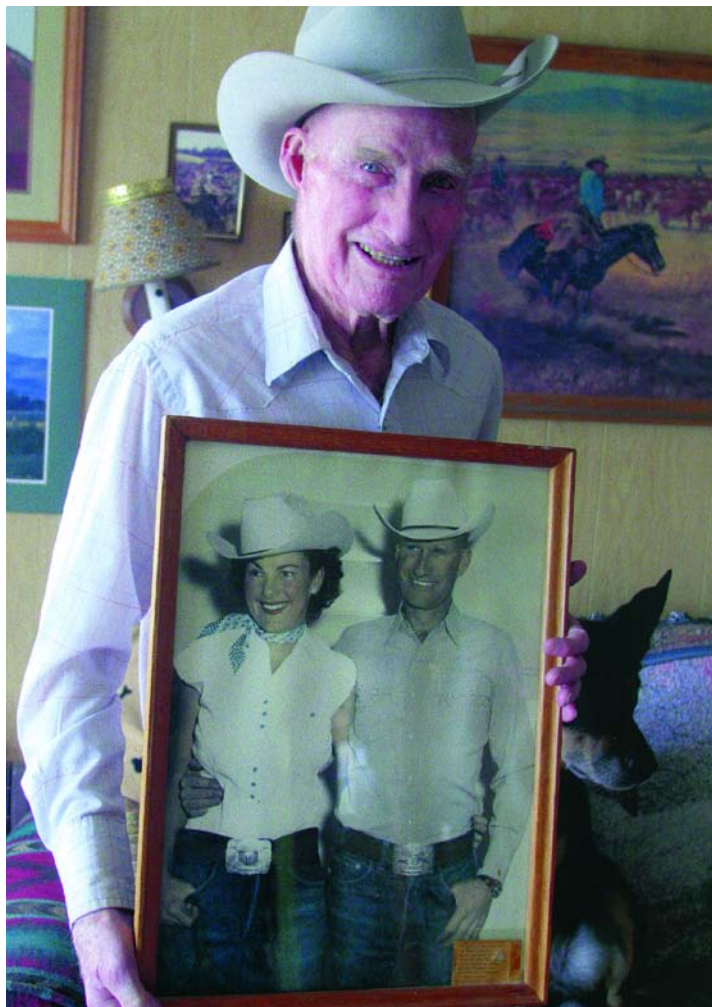
The Vowells' nearest neighbor Thelma Archer, wife of the Willow Creek Ranch manager, overheard the party-line conversation. She saddled up, left a note for her husband, and rode toward Steele Swamp, 20 miles distant.

Rita reached Mervin in Malin, Ore., 50 miles by road northwest of Steele Swamp. Dr. Jack Martin from Topeka, Kan., had set up a practice in Malin just three weeks earlier. Mervin convinced Jack of Betty's grave condition and arranged a flight with pilot Bud Arnold in his Piper Cub.

Jack quickly gathered his medical supplies, including extra plasma, and headed to Malin's tiny dirt-runway airport. "We're going to have to pack the snow on the runway before we take off," Bud said. He ran his plane up and down the runway for 45 minutes, packing it enough to try a takeoff.

"Okay Doc, we have one shot at this to clear the fence," he instructed Jack. "You're going to have to help by pushing the plane and jumping in at the last moment."

Without hesitation the young doctor did as instructed and hopped onto one of the plane's





HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY HERMAN VOWELL

skis, hoisting himself into the door as the plane cleared the fence by two inches.

Fifteen minutes later they arrived at the Swamp and the ski-fitted plane landed perfectly on a makeshift runway marked with gunnysacks in the level pasture near the barn. The day before, the field had been a quagmire of mud. Herman says, "The fresh snow was a godsend, allowing them to land."

Coincidentally, the plane had had its 65 hp engine replaced with a 95 hp just the day before. "If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't have cleared the fence in Malin," Bud said.

Jack rushed into the house. He diagnosed Betty with a ruptured ectopic pregnancy. With the internal bleeding, he knew her survival depended on immediate surgery but it was a surgery beyond his training. He called to a fellow Kansas surgeon, Dr. Raymond Tice, who was practicing in Klamath Falls, 70 miles distant. Bud flew to Klamath Falls and picked up Raymond, who had secured 100 pounds of sterile surgical equipment from Hillside Hospital. Within an hour, they were at Steele Swamp.

In the meantime, the Vowell brothers and Jack Martin had made a makeshift operating table in the ranch house kitchen. Two sawhorses held a kitchen door and a mattress.



The stove was stoked with plenty of wood. Water was boiling.

Working quickly, Raymond arranged his surgical instruments on the kitchen counter. Betty was placed on the mattress table. A chunk of firewood elevated her legs. All the light was mustered, including kerosene lanterns and two generator-charged kitchen bulbs. Later, brother Ray was positioned with a flashlight to illuminate Raymond's stitching. Jack Martin administered anesthesia.

The surgical procedure was straightforward but risky—an incision opening the abdomen to stop the bleeding and remove

Herman and Betty check the map of Steele Swamp country. INSETS, FROM TOP: Riding at Steele Swamp, 1943. The Vowell brothers, Ray, left, and Herman, ready to ride. OPPOSITE: Herman tenderly holds an old photograph.

the damaged tube, closing the incision and administering blood and plasma. The doctors were up against the possibilities of surgical shock, the patient not being strong enough to survive the surgery and—in view of the operating conditions—the risk of a deadly infection later on.

Waiting in the bedroom, Herman prayed that his beloved's life would be spared. He thought about the night he proposed to her, Dec. 6, 1941, the day before Pearl Harbor was bombed. They were parked on a hill overlooking the ocean at Santa Cruz. It was their first kiss that night, too. Later that evening he asked Betty's parents for permission to marry their daughter. Their first honeymoon night at the Swamp was spent in the Weed Valley cow camp buckaroo cabin. The other buckaroos set up their tents a good distance away, giving the newlyweds the "honeymoon suite."

Herman remembered picnics by horseback from the ranch house to the distant hills. The smell of sage and juniper mixed with the fresh high desert air and the sweat coming off

*Betty and Herman,
Dec. 6, 1941, the
day he proposed
and was accepted.*

*FAR RIGHT:
Herman and Betty,
honeymoon cabin,
Weed Valley
buckaroo camp.*



*The ranch house where the
operation took place. The
kitchen is on the left.
Eighteen inches of snow had
fallen the night before.*



the horses. He saw Betty's bright emerald eyes, flowing dark hair and lovely smile. She loved the ranch, the isolation, the critters and wildlife, the simple life. Herman would surprise her with fresh wildflowers. She would giggle, nuzzle into him and say: "Thank you my sweet cowboy. I love you." He made a mental note to bring her a bouquet of spring buttercups, which he would soon pick at Bowles Creek, four miles away.

The early spring sun had set when Ray came into the room and said: "Herman, the doctors are done and she's doing fine. I'll go do the chores while you talk with them." The weight of the world fell from Herman's chest as he wiped the tears away, thanking God, the doctors, Bud and Ray for the great news. He kissed Betty gently on the forehead. "How is she?" he asked Raymond.

"She will be fine," the surgeon said. "She has gone through a lot of trauma but she will recover." The ruptured tube had ended her pregnancy. One life was spared. One would never be.

Brother Ray paused in his chores, staring into the moon of the clear, cold night, thanking the powers that be for allowing his dear sister-in-law to live.

Thelma arrived after her long horseback ride, exhausted but buoyant after hearing about the operation's success. The operating room was turned back into a kitchen as she made a hearty supper of ham, eggs, bacon and biscuits.

A Forest Service vehicle arrived after an all-day drive on the treacherous roads and took Dr. Tice back to town. Jack spent the night, attending Betty, departing with Bud in the morning. Bud would fly a nurse in later in the day.

Betty's story made headlines around the country. Herman and Ray went back to their everyday ranch work. Betty healed. Spring brought back the sandhill cranes and a bellying new calf crop. The love between Betty and Herman became stronger than ever. They adopted a daughter, Susie.

They spent 12 more years at Steele





Swamp. No one has lived full-time at the Swamp since.

"It was heaven. No one was happier than we were—thanks to the courageous people who came to our aid that fateful day," says Herman as he tells the story about the great love of his life. "The spirit of these people will live in me forever."

Herman, Betty and Ray eventually purchased a small ranch in Malin so Susie could attend school. Betty died of cancer in 1966 at age 45. Bud Arnold succumbed to a heart attack in 1953. Ray Vowell passed away in 1999 and Jack Martin in 2004. Raymond Tice



ABOVE: Herman has lost his bride and his brother, but he remembers the good times. LEFT: The buckaroo and Betty. It was mutual admiration.

and Herman continue to maintain their friendship with visits and telephone conversations. "We're forever linked by that pretty lady filly of mine. God rest her soul. I love her." ■

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