

# The Horses of Joe Fallini's Dreams

Words by Tim Findley. Photos by Tim Findley and Fallini family.

You might say Joe Fallini worries too much. Then again, those 662,000 acres of classic rangeland surrounding his Twin Springs Ranch on the eastern edge of Nevada's Great Basin command enough concern to make anybody lose a little sleep now and then.

Joe isn't that way. He's the kind of guy who takes care of problems before they catch up to him. In his 68 years on this piece of land at least 25 miles apart from anybody else, he has dealt with winters of 10-foot snows, droughts that last half a decade, and people who breeze in off the road looking for space critters rumored to be in the area. He and his wife Susie have raised and homeschooled three brilliant daughters, all of whom now hold graduate degrees and potential careers that might never bring them home again, if home was anything less than Twin Springs. They all have nursed sick calves and found dead cows, refilled 150 mile-distant water troughs, rebuilt remote fences and adopted a joyful mutter of six well-loved dogs that somehow get along together in the front yard. They've seen rustlers and drunks, lonely lost travelers, and at least one damn fool reporter who blew past Twin Springs all the way to Rachel—where they celebrate the dead aliens at Area 51—before he could make his cell phone work and call back.

Joe worries about them all, usually only long enough to do what he can to fix the problem, but he does worry. It's like a small

dark spot on the cheerful apple of his cheek-cracking good nature that has won him a friendly and generous reputation all over the state. Still it's not those little, practical things that worry Joe Fallini Jr. so much. It's the horses that make him lose sleep.

Unless the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finally lives up to its promises and to a court order this September, wild horses—mustangs, if you must—may finally ruin all the years the Fallinis have invested in making Twin Springs a balanced and productive ranch that is much more than a relic of western freedom.

There were horses here on the long sliding slopes of sage that run off from the rocky high mesas and hidden box canyons when Joe's grandfather, Giovanni, arrived in this country in the 1860s as an awkward teenager born in the Alps near Switzerland, ready to do just about anything he could to get by. He saw plenty of horses, maybe more horses let loose or lost by missionaries or venturing settlers than there were cattle on the open range. More horses than were useful to miners busy cracking out a wealth of silver and gold and building hopeful new cities like Goldfield and

Tonopah. Those two towns, about 70 miles west of Twin Springs, haven't changed much, except for the deep coat of dust that covers blank windows of once stately hotels and the dark empty nights on scruffy forgotten streets where there at least ought to be ghosts. Tonopah, along Highway 95 leading to Las Vegas, still has the nearest gas station to Twin Springs.

Out where Joe began growing up during World War II has always been the wild part, locked off from the dip down into Death Valley by its own high shoulders of peak-clipped volcanic mountains running south like a fortress wall. Joe's grandfather and his three sons, soon known and still remembered all over the region as Fallini and sons, had the bellies of the miners and soldiers of the passing war to feed in those days as they built upon what might seem a small empire today, added acre by acre to a size beyond all the horizons around them.

It never occurred to Joe Junior, as they still call him, that he might go somewhere else. This was all he ever expected to want, his whole world where he knew every crease and crop of grass, where he climbed into the ancient caves once occupied by long-lost clans and tribes and from where he could spot the running antelope in the valley as the Indians themselves must once have done. It wasn't just home to Joe, it was the center of the universe, and everyplace else might just as well be



the moon. So in the 1950s, when he watched his father and his uncles begin confronting something new in the attitude of federal authorities he hardly even thought about before, Joe started learning that all that feeling of freedom he had could be made to fade.

Typical of Nevada, where at least 85 percent of the land is federally managed, Twin Springs' deeded property consisted of only 2,000 acres. The rest, a humongous stretch known as the Reville Allotment, was under the purview of the BLM, a low-budgeted federal bureaucracy in the 1950s that managed at a usually helpful part-time distance. When Joe's father, grandfather, and his uncles needed to make changes on the land—installing new water systems or rotating grazing regions or keeping the wild horse herd down to what they saw as a manageable size of about 145 head—they worked with the Nye County commissioners. But starting in the late '50s, the BLM began taking a full-time role, often with fresh-out-of-school conservation agents who had taken advantage of the GI Bill of Rights. For the Fallinis and other ranchers in the Great Basin, it was their first encounter with “outsiders” taking their own authority a little too seriously. At the same time, what was left over from the just-finished war seemed to be shipped to Nevada to practice for the next one.

Just over the mountains to the south of Twin Springs, they could see the flash and the lingering glow periodically from the Nevada Test Site while above-ground nuclear testing was still permitted. Joe Junior still believes it was wind-drifted fallout from those tests that contributed to his father's death in 1979. That, and the long battle with the BLM just beginning. “I had an old [war surplus] Power Wagon my dad gave me in those days,” Joe remembers, “and I could get around just about anywhere, feeding the cattle, fixing the



*Joe Junior and Susie with daughter Anna, son-in-law Ty, and baby Giovanni, at home at Twin Springs Ranch in Nye County, Nevada. OPPOSITE: One small bunch of free-roaming horses on Joe's outfit.*

fences, just enjoying it all. But, now and then, I'd go with them to BLM meetings and, even as a kid, I could feel the tension building up.”

Nobody could doubt the Fallinis were good stewards of the land. Old Giovanni counted on caring for his family's livelihood in a way that would preserve it for many generations. Thus, he mixed a program of feed and grazing meant to create a balance that included the numbers of wild horses that he thought the range could handle. It is not the amount of grass consumed by horses that worries ranchers; it's the shape of the horse jaw that, unlike cattle, cuts into the soil and pulls the grass up by the roots, ruining pasture for at least a season.

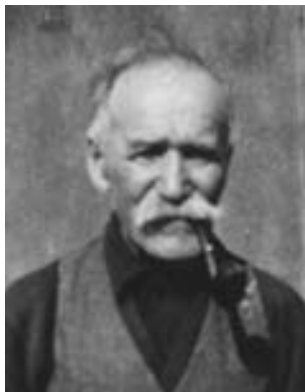
The Fallinis admired the wild spirit of the horses and understood it better than the romanticized film stories. They figured they could maintain a herd of 145 or so in the canyons and arroyos apart from the 2,000 head of cattle on the ranch. When the horse herds grew large, Giovanni or one of his sons would request permission of the county commission to gather up the excess animals, giving away all they could to anyone who could break them and selling the rest. It seemed to work well until 1976 when amendments to the Federal Organic Act began expanding the authority of the Department

of Interior to manage government lands for multiple public uses. Times were rapidly changing.

By then, Joe Junior had been off to his greatest adventure away from home, earning his degree in agricultural mechanics from the University of Nevada, Reno, learning to fly single-engine airplanes, and making 197 sport parachute jumps. It was the 1960s, after all, and Joe had his own style of craziness. It was also when he met his roommate's sister, Susie, the pretty girl of German extraction he took home as his wife.

They have been married 44 years now, yet you can hardly take a picture of them together in which she is not looking at her man, or be near them both for long before noticing the gentle, reassuring rubs she gives his shoulders. That's a team, the heart and soul of a close family and the durable spirit that really makes a place like Twin Springs not just home, but a vital organ in all their lives, defining their place in humanity.

With his grandfather gone and his father and uncles all feeling the weight of time, Joe Junior stepped in smoothly to the long and unwanted fight with the BLM. Neighbors all around him were becoming famous in the rebellious West for their own struggles with the federal land agency that was pushing, pushing, to limit grazing on federal lands. The government wanted Wayne Hage's allotments to expand the bizarre railroad to nowhere to be called The MX Missile Defense System and they wanted Ben Colvin broken as an example for any rancher who would



*Giovanni Fallini arrived in this country in the 1860s as an awkward teenager born in the Alps near Switzerland, ready to do just about anything he could to get by. His son Joe, right, worked just as hard.*



defy their new limits on numbers of cattle permitted and stand in the way of their controlled burns. Eventually, the BLM would settle for a fine paid by Colvin, while Hage won a federal ruling against the taking of his cattle. It was a moral victory for them, but the years-long fight took a sad toll on their lives. Even now, four years since Hage died, the feds are still stalling payment on an estimated \$9 million takings penalty ordered by the U.S. Court of Claims. With the Fallinis fingered as among the most troublesome of Nevada ranchers, the BLM appeared to use another tactic—they would let the horses eat Fallini out of business.

“When I was a kid,” Joe says, “I remember seeing people driving out from the cities or someplace around roundup or branding time and stopping on the road just to watch the roping and the cowboys. Then I remember only a few years later people who would drive by the ranch and cuss at us. I couldn’t understand at first what made them mad.”

It was the new politics, inspired in part by the BLM itself which did nothing to dispute the widely told lies that all ranchers were overgrazing the western range in a greedy attempt to expand and enrich their herds. The government knew better, especially about the generational ranches like Twin Springs that had long ago devised plans to preserve the stingy land that was their livelihood. But with “The Misfits” movie, starring Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe, and with the campaign of a Reno secretary who became known as Wild Horse Annie to enlist schoolchildren in a campaign to save the “Black Beauties” of wild mustangs, the government loaded another weapon in what was becoming the war on the West.

Joe’s mother, Helen, was near enough to hear at one point when Thelma “Annie” Johnston returned from a helicopter ride with BLM officials over the Reville Allotment and the Tonopah Bombing Range saying she was “thrilled” to see such an area “perfect” for the

horses she hoped to save as living national monuments. Perfect, except for the long-held rights of the Fallinis. “There are other ways to get it done, Annie,” Helen overheard the BLM official say. “Other ways.”

The BLM had never formally objected to the Fallinis’ management of the horse herds, but especially after the passage in 1971 of the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act, it took its responsibility for the mustangs to be first a responsibility against the ranchers. The Fallinis were even denied permission to gather their own branded 25 horses from the range. Joe rented a small plane and began a year-by-year inventory of the herds. In 1971, it was a manageable 126. By 1973, the BLM itself counted 260 horses in the allotment. By 1982, when the BLM issued its Reville Stewardship Allotment Management Plan, Joe himself counted 2,052 head of horses on the allotment, some grazing right up to the corals at the ranch, even attacking their domestic stock and ranch hands.

Other ways had apparently been found in what was hatching out as a BLM plan to establish a federal wild-horse range just where Wild Horse Annie had wanted it. It worked its influence in Washington along with pressure on the range. As early as 1976, Joe Junior had received a call from an aide to Sen. Paul Laxalt (R-NV) asking him “why we wanted to sell out.” A hearing ordered in Tonopah revealed that the BLM wanted not only Twin Springs, but the Colvin, Clifford, and Meyer ranches to encompass this plan. The ranchers were furious but Gene Nodine, BLM district manager who had shown Wild Horse Annie around, merely shrugged. He had enough trouble with Hage and others to get in a fight over his little secret at Twin Springs.

Over the years, the Fallinis repeatedly went to federal courts and other federal hearings seeking peace, but the BLM went to extremes, even to absurdly accuse the family of hiring gunmen to kill horses. The horses were dying—of starvation, thirst and locoweed—but it was the “other ways” the BLM used to encourage their overpopulation that was to blame. Legal costs and repairs to range water and feed facilities might break the Fallinis anyway.

A management plan approved by the BLM itself in 1982 had provided that the stewardship plan would reduce the herd back into the original area of use. But the BLM pleaded that it lacked sufficient funds to carry out its own plan. Instead, the feds tried to cancel the Fallinis permits for range improvements, alleging that establishing gates around



*Branding at Twin Springs, June 2010. Back row, horseback: Anna Fallini Berg, Erik Jackson, Corrina Fallini Jackson. Middle row: Doug Jackson, Rheanna Jackson, William Haas, Lorinda Fallini Haas, Joanna Haas, Suzie and Joe Fallini. Front row: Ty Berg, with children, Dustin, Giovanni and Sage. ABOVE: Ranch headquarters. OPPOSITE: Joe uses the Bell helicopter to move cattle on the desert.*





water sources was discouraging horses from drinking. Damage done to their stock watering facilities by now had cost the Fallinis more than \$135,000 to repair. It was becoming a war of attrition until 1986 when a federal court ordered that the BLM begin removing horses from the allotment by March 1987. The BLM stalled, contending that it did not have an accurate account and that a portion of the range should be excluded from the gather. Again and again and again the Fallinis were forced back into court, spending thousands to win legal rulings the BLM simply ignored. “My dad told me he just couldn’t understand it anymore. He had always tried to be fair, but they just wouldn’t let up,” Joe says. “I think he just got too tired.”

In the 1990s Joe bought and learned to fly an aging Bell helicopter of the bubble-nosed variety familiar in “M\*A\*S\*H\*.” He used it to watch his Herefords, the BLM’s horses, and the government itself. “I kinda felt it put me even up with them and their excuses,” Joe says. “And it worked, too.” In finally doing a court-ordered gather, the BLM still dragged its bureaucratic feet, claiming some parts of the allotment were separate management areas, accusing the Fallinis of not maintaining their fences, and generally hinting to Joe that there was still a long battle ahead. It was just a variation on the same tactics being used against other ranchers.

At last, in 2002, the federal court ordered the BLM to take an annual census of the wild

horses in the allotment and when the management level exceeds 138 horses, a gather be conducted within 120 days to reduce the number of horses to the management level. That was basically what the Fallinis had been

doing even before the BLM. But despite the court order, no census of horses on the allotment was taken other than that by Fallini in his own helicopter until 2009, when the BLM counted 213 head. Another count in February 2010 made it 231, exceeding the allowed number of 138 and demanding a gather be initiated by court order within 120 days. The BLM said it could not put together such a plan before September.

Maybe Joe Fallini worries too much, but this time if some horses aren’t removed, he’s worried they may claim the winter feeding ground he has reserved for his cattle. It’s just that over these years, he has learned not to trust the BLM. So he worries.

Not too much, though. Joe’s youngest daughter Anna has become a pilot herself in addition to earning a degree in bio sciences and agricultural engineering. She and her husband Ty live at Twin Springs now and are sharing the delight of their two-year-old son with Grandpa and grandma. The bright and precocious toddler loves feeding the calves almost as much as he loves to fly in grandpa’s helicopter. Romping ahead of them or swinging happily on the arms of Susie and Joe, the little boy reminds them of someone else who loved this place—a charming little kid whose name, of course, is Giovanni. ■

*Tim Findley, investigative reporter for RANGE, lives in Fallon, Nev.*

## Another sequel...

No wonder Joe Fallini loses a little sleep now and then when federal land managers keep coming out with sequels to their previous nightmares.

The latest was the return of Jim Baca last spring, years after the rancher-smashing former chief of the Bureau of Land Management spent nine months on the job rampaging against multiple use of federal lands. He was thought to have been sent to a political grave in New Mexico before he suddenly re-emerged in Reno last June.

Baca seemed to scare even current Interior Secretary Ken Salazar by proposing Nevada become the national refuge for wild and feral horses. Salazar had proposed to move at least some of the out-of-control herds to new pastures in the Midwest, but Baca argued that, “It doesn’t make sense to send them to the Midwest when you already own the land you already need.” Nevada is more than 85 percent managed by the federal government.

The once-discredited BLM boss is apparently working with wealthy socialite Madeleine Pickens, who has emerged like the ghost of Wild Horse Annie to campaign for the horse reserve in Nevada. Their methods include converting cattle-grazing allotments in the state for the exclusive use of horses. Now, with so many horses in BLM holding pens in Fallon, Nev., that they can’t keep them all alive, the horse advocates are demanding that the BLM do a complete inventory of wild horses running free in Nevada.

Joe Fallini and Twin Springs are supposedly protected by court order, but what will you bet this September that Joe will have more to worry about? ■