

# Living & Loving the Little Ranch

*Even a college degree can't deter these young ranchers in Wyoming.*

*By Rebecca Colnar Mott*

**K**ellen Little remembers the day during fall shipping in 2016 when his brother, Sheridan, who was hauling horses, waved him down. “Sheridan had a big grin, handed me a letter and said, ‘You might want to read this.’ I read it right there, refolded it and handed it back. Then I just rode off, tears streaming down my face.”

The letter contained the legacy statement from their grandparents, Glory and Phil Little Jr. In the weighty missive, Glory and Phil stated that Sheridan and Kellen would be owners of the ranch if that is what they really wanted. The ranch came with its own burden of debt

with Grandpa Phil, 88, and his brothers, Jack and Pat. As they got older, they helped brand and pitched in for other seasonal cattle and sheep work. The hardworking boys spent summer vacations, Christmas breaks, spring breaks and any other holidays while they were in high school and college working on the ranch.

“Our mom said all she ever wanted for us was to have straight teeth and a college education,” Sheridan says. Both boys attended the University of Wyoming, earned degrees in ag business, and graduated in 2010, Sheridan in spring and Kellen in fall. “College helped us

Phil Little Sr. built a shack on his homestead claim. When he returned from World War I he started ranching. Not far away, his future wife proved up on her own homestead. Today trees flourish and intermingle with red barns on the original homestead. Sheridan lives in his great-grandparents’ house with his wife, Kelly, and young twin sons.

Great-grandpa Phil came from Omaha, Neb., around 1910 as a young man to work as a cowboy for the Spear Cattle Company, which leased the Clear Creek Valley from Pratt and Ferris Cattle Company. That led him to his homestead of 320 acres near Leiter, which included seven irrigated acres that he raised sugar beets on. The whole valley was leased toward the end of World War I by a large sugar processor, Holly Sugar, with tenant farmers and German prisoners of war planting and harvesting sugar beets into the 1950s. Phil Senior added to his land by picking up several surrounding homesteads and by meeting his neighbor lady and marrying her. From that union came three sons: Jack, Pat and Phil Junior. The oldest brother, Jack, served in World War II and Pat and Phil served in the Korean War. After returning home from service the sons partnered and began adding to the ranch in earnest until it reached 10 times what it is today.

In the late 1950s, their sugar beet crop—probably the last one in the valley—failed due to a late frost, so they replanted the 40 acres in corn to be harvested as silage. Since they needed something to do with the silage, they opted to feed 1,500 ewe lambs for a local buyer who planned to sell them for a profit.

“Well, the brothers decided to buy them instead and suddenly they were in the sheep business,” says Kellen. “We never had sheep before, but we’ve been in the sheep business ever since, and love it.”

In 1956, Phil Junior married Glory B. Jones, who had moved from Detroit to Buffalo, Wyo., when she was 10. Although she wasn’t raised around cattle—only horses—she loved ranch life. Phil and Glory had four daughters in five years. They all helped on the ranch and were involved in 4-H raising purebred sheep.



acquired from buying the interest of Phil’s two brothers.

“We talked about estate planning a lot with our family, which included our four daughters and their children, but nobody knew exactly what we were going to do, although we tried to be as open about it as possible,” says Glory, a peppy 83-year-old. Copies of the letter were sent to the daughters and grandkids, informing them of the significant decision.

Sheridan, 33, and Kellen, 31, dedicated young ranchers with big smiles, were raised to love the ranch. From the time they were young they spent considerable quality time

understand the finances, how to do balance sheets and income statements. It’s more important than ever knowing how to run a business. The old-timers knew how to farm and ranch, but there wasn’t the business climate there is today.”

Having a keen business knowledge, hands-on ranch education and a family legacy fueled the desire to be co-owners of the Little Ranch, which lies six miles east of Clearmont, Wyo. The country is farmland surrounded by hills that graduate into rough country to the north, with the scenic Big Horn Mountains 40 miles to the west. The ranch has been in the family since 1913 when

COURTESY, LITTLE FAMILY

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“When our girls got past the age of 4-H, we were having such good luck with our purebred Suffolk sheep in the 1970s, we expanded the business raising purebred Suffolks and Rambouillets for the next 25 years,” Glory says. “We traveled, showed and sold sheep. Carrie—Kellen and Sheridan’s mother—later became a wool buyer when the boys and their sister, Riata, were young, the only woman doing so in the United States.”

They went with her to different ranches to look at wool and learned about the wool market—a knowledge that serves them well today. Little wool finds its way to the military for peacoats and dress uniforms.

Time passed, the daughters married and although the women would have liked to come back to the ranch, it wasn’t financially feasible. Phil Junior’s brothers were still part of the successful cattle and sheep operation, but the death of Jack in 2010 and Pat’s decision to move to town with his wife in 2015 was the catalyst for Glory and Phil Junior to become sole Little Ranch owners.

“As Phil and I were in our 80s by then, our goal was to see the ranch continue in our family, but you can’t split it in pieces,” Glory says. “A lot of families think they are being fair by splitting the ranch, but half of those who are given it don’t want it, so it ends up getting sold, a family legacy lost. Everyone wanted this ranch to go on, but nobody quite knew how that would happen. We found our own attorney and a knowledgeable mediator.”

Kellen adds: “So many families don’t follow through with estate planning. But in this

case, it settled a lot of hard feelings because my grandparents dealt with it before they died. They said, ‘This is how it is. Good, bad, whatever.’ Most ranch kids have to wait until they are 50 or 60 years old before their parents even consider making plans for the future. Sheridan and I are in our 30s and now have the responsibility of owning and carrying on the legacy of this ranch.”

They rely on Glory to handle day-to-day bookkeeping (“I still use a pencil and paper!”) and Phil for experience and advice. They acknowledge that working with Phil when he was in a different stage of his life was instrumental. “It was nice being raised around him,” Kellen says. “He taught us how smooth and gentle we needed to be to move around livestock. Here was a man in his late 60s and 70s and he didn’t lose his temper. There were Phil Little insights before there was Temple Grandin. In fact, we think he was better!”

When Kellen and Sheridan took over the ranch their grandparents thought they would sell the sheep and run only cattle, but Kellen explains that it’s diversity that helped in 2019 when cattle prices were low and receipts for lamb and wool were up.

They believe the sheep industry has a chance to boom in the next few years because the new generation thinks that lamb is fancy; they believe it’s a healthier alternative to beef and they’re finding out that wool isn’t

*LEFT: Kellen, left, and Sheridan Little decided to run cows and sheep when they got the ranch. When he read the legacy letter, Kellen says, “I just rode off, tears streaming down my face.”*

*BELOW: Phil and Glory Little at a recent branding, happy that their ranch will stay in the family.*

*OPPOSITE: Kellen and Sheridan Little and Randa Clabaugh (right) move cows to summer pasture.*

scratchy but comfortable and breathable. Besides, the economic factors of owning sheep are augmented by the fact the family has had sheep allotments in the Big Horn Mountains for more than 50 years.

“Getting rid of sheep would take a big chunk out of this ranch,” Sheridan says. “We’d have to run 400 more cows to make up for it, and we don’t have the acreage to do that. Phil always joked that he has sheep so he can continue being a cattleman!”

Working together is no problem. The brothers reminisce that as children they each saved money and bought ranch-themed toys. They traded equipment, had their own cattle and a hay business—but it was one big toy ranch and they worked it together.

“We had a list of things we needed and would go back and forth on what was essential,” Kellen says. “You might say we’ve been making decisions together for a long time.” It’s



COURTESY LITTLE FAMILY

apparent seeing the family together that there is plenty of respect among the generations.

Are the two grandsons thrilled with owning the ranch and working with their grandparents?

“It depends on the day!” Sheridan laughs. “Yep,” Glory jokes, “we give them heck.”

The easy banter and enjoyment of family and ranch is why the Little Ranch will no doubt exist for another 100 years. ■

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