



# The Will to Survive

EPHRAIM RAISED MAX. MAX RAISED MIKE. MIKE RAISED CURTIS. CURTIS RAISED RICK. AND RICK IS RAISING MAX. SIX GENERATIONS OF WILCOX RANCHERS HAVE BEEN RUNNING COWS IN THE CHAPPED UTAH DESERT, AND WITH FIVE LIVING GENERATIONS CARRYING ON THE LEGACY, THEY ARE BLAZING A TRAIL FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.

BY MARJORIE HAUN

PHOTOS BY ALYSSA FOSS WILCOX

## LA SAL

In 1917, Ephraim Wilcox moved to La Sal, Utah, with his large family. After his wife, Margaret, died an untimely death, he married Linda, a widow with several children, one of whom was a son, Max. Ephraim and Linda then had three children of their own. To support their sizable household, they acquired 160 acres, and cared for 30 to 40 dairy cows and a 17-acre family garden. Although the kids were well disciplined and industrious, as they got older they began to leave, looking for work in nearby towns. Only Max and two of his little sisters stayed on to work the ranch.

At age 18, while Max was serving in Japan during World War II, he promised himself that if he ever got back to the pinyons and the cedars he would never leave again. When he returned, he bought up more parcels and





bie has spent her life as a ranch wife and mother figure to many. She lives just down the road from her grandson Curtis, and his wife, Beth. Known as Grandma Bobbie to the children, she volunteers at the local elementary school and teaches Sunday lessons at her church. At the helm of five generations of ranchers, Bobbie is a model of unassailable good cheer.

Bobbie's home and that of Curtis (Mike's oldest son) sit on the original ranch homestead founded by Ephraim. In recent years,



*ABOVE: Bobbie, 88, is matriarch of the Wilcox bunch and adopted grandma to almost everyone else in La Sal.*

*BELOW: Joanie qualifies for the Million Dollar Race on her champion barrel racer, Buzz. "I wanted to be a champion barrel racer, but I gave those things up for this life."*

*LEFT: Curtis and Rick trail their cows deep into the Lockhart permit for winter grazing.*

married Roberta "Bobbie" Garlett. To avoid family infighting, Max and Bobbie borrowed enough money to buy up the siblings' interest in the property. They put a trailer park on a few acres to cushion the economic downturns that tend to sweep through the region like dust devils. Having survived the uranium booms and busts, they held tightly onto much of the land, despite many opportunities to sell out.

In 1957, Max expanded his holdings to Lisbon Valley, south of La Sal, with the purchase of 960 acres. His son, Mike, has expanded the Lisbon ranch several times, now owning thousands of acres in both private parcels and federal permits.

A living landmark in La Sal, Bobbie carries on as the matriarch of the clan. With looks and energy that belie her 88 years, Bob-

Mike and Curtis have managed to stitch back together many of the historic family parcels, with the aim of keeping the land in the family permanently.

### LISBON VALLEY

Lisbon Valley seems an unlikely place for cattle, people, or anything that eats or drinks to thrive, but Mike and Joanie Wilcox, the third generation of Wilcox ranchers, are thriving indeed. To the naked eye, Lisbon Valley looks scant, but under its surface lies treasure in the form of minerals. Dotted with open-pit mines and gas wellheads, this obscure locale is set between Highway 191 and the Colorado state line. In a sheltered vale with low cliffs to the north and west, Mike and Joanie have put up a self-sustaining ranching operation complete with a

ranch house, a barrel arena for racing horses, corrals for sorting and branding calves, solar and propane for power, and spring grazing country as far as the eye can see.

Married while still in their teens, Mike and Joanie both came from ranching and rodeo roots. Mike remembers how they met. "Joanie and my little sister were best friends, and she spent a lot of time at our house. Back then she was just a tall skinny girl, and the only curve on her body was her nose. Then I came home one day and she had...changed."

He grins and says, "It didn't take us long after that to get married." Joanie says, "I loved the rodeo and wanted to be a champion barrel racer, but I gave those things up for this life."

Mike's brief formal education didn't include a lot of book learning. "I went to Dixie College on a full scholarship for riding bulls. As long as I was riding bulls I didn't have to worry about education," he laughs. "I pulled a B average and never went to class."

Sharing a deep faith, Mike and Joanie make it a point to pray often for the well-being of others. Maybe it's because they know that prayers of faith have carried them through the hard times. A decade ago, Mike was treated for prostate cancer and soon after that Joanie was diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. Joanie says: "I shouldn't be here. No one survives stage-four ovarian cancer, but the Lord has blessed us so much."

Now in their mid-60s, with the kids and grandkids taking on more responsibility, they have enough time to practice their rodeo skills. In 2019, Joanie qualified for the







Million Dollar Race, a barrel-racing competition that pits her against women of all ages, most of whom are a good deal younger. She trains daily for the race to be held in Salina, Utah, June 22-28, 2020.

Joanie loves the barrels. She has a racing mare that turns tight, and she worries about hitting her left knee. Her trepidation stems from a gruesome injury she suffered one day while working cows. Having to jump a fence to get out of the way of a horse gone wild, Joanie split her tibia like a log hit by a maul. “My knee dropped straight down,” she says with a grimace. “It took three metal plates and 14 screws to put my leg back together.”

Mike and Joanie’s sons, Curtis and RL (short for Ronald Lane), are both in their 40s. “Them boys knew that this ranch wasn’t big enough for both of them,” Mike says, “so RL went to trade-tech to learn HVAC, and now makes his living as a journeyman electrician.”

Joanie chimes in: “RL is the youngest and is a kid with such a big heart. He knew how badly Curtis wanted the ranch, so RL went to work in Monticello.” Then she beams: “But he’s a great cowboy. Anytime Curtis calls him, he’s there to help with the cows.”

The Lisbon Valley ranch is extraordinary for its remoteness but it’s the hub of essential ranch work. It is there that calves are branded, horses are trained, and cows graze during the spring months. The fourth and fifth gen-

*ABOVE LEFT: RL, Curtis and Rick rope cows for branding in Lisbon Valley. Curtis says, “It’s not about making money; it’s about the next generation.” ABOVE RIGHT: Curtis works cows in Lisbon Valley. BELOW: A sandstone grotto makes a natural sorting corral for the Wilcox cows while on the Lockhart permit.*

erations—Rick, Alyssa and their son, Max—live in the ranch house, and are building their own herd as part of a plan to one day take over the operation entirely.

#### **CURTIS AND BETH**

Curtis and Beth live in the house they built on the original homestead in La Sal. On the property lies the family cemetery. Curtis’ Aunt Colleen, who was killed in a horse accident when just 18, is buried there. Bobbie’s third child, Helen, has a baby buried there as well. Curtis is passionate about pulling the ranch together. He and Beth made a deal to get the

land from Max and took out loans to restock the place. But none of it is for the money. Curtis says: “That’s what has to drive you in the agriculture business. It’s not about making money; it’s about the next generation.”

Curtis and Beth begat Rick and daughter, Stevie (Clement), who lives with her cowboy husband in Delta, Colo. The Wilcox men seem to have cattle running in their blood. “From the time Rick was a little boy and could work a computer,” Beth says, “he was researching the different kinds of cattle. He has a knack for it.”

His evolving strain of drought-proof cows







HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOBBIE WILCOX HOLT



*Ephraim and Max Wilcox (foreground) on the old homestead in La Sal. RIGHT: Max, age 14. BELOW: Mike on the Lisbon Valley ranch.*

sets Curtis apart from your typical cow-calf rancher. “We don’t just want the cows to survive the drought,” says Curtis. “We want them to thrive in it.” His winter permits are in some of the most arid and inaccessible stretches to be found. “These cows have never eaten a flake of hay in their lives,” he says. “They eat what’s on the range all year round.”

Raising such a herd has required a lot of sacrifice. Curtis describes the first disastrous season on the range: “The first year we did that we lost half of our heifers. But we bred calves out of the heifers that survived, and for nine years the cows keep getting better each year. Last year was the worst drought I can remember, and we weaned the biggest calves we ever had.”

Curtis’ unique high-altitude Brahma-Brangus-Hereford-Simmental-cross calves are wiry and incredibly tough. The desert, with its coyotes, mountain lions, bears, badgers, and large raptors, has yet to conquer his formidable breed. “We don’t dehorn. We have a lot of horned cattle out there so I challenge any critter to get my cows. Those cows will kill you if they feel a threat.” Beth interjects with a qualifier, “Those cows are so nice...until they get a calf.” Curtis adds: “Once they calve, they’ll knock over a horse. One nearly killed me when she knocked me off a cliff!”

With 320 deeded acres, the La Sal place isn’t as expansive as the ranch in Lisbon Valley, but Curtis runs his cows on permits that

stretch from the slopes of the La Sal Mountains to the slickrock chasms of the Colorado River. Curtis and Rick, with their mettle and cow smarts, trail their ornery, drought-proof herd 150 miles across the desert twice a year.

#### THE LOCKHART PERMIT

During the winter months, the Wilcox cows are on the Lockhart permit. Set in a place where the very bones of the earth are laid bare by withering wind and searing sun and angular reefs of stone rise from fluted bluffs above brick-red waters, cows graze the sparse desert vegetation and drink from the Colorado River. There, desert predators and the implacable climate team up with another daunting adversary—Utah’s rapacious tourism industry.

Mountain bikers, hikers, and other recreationists, ignorant of the fact that ranchers populated the red canyons a century before the tourists came, are sometimes amazed to see cows on the narrow trails. Alyssa says: “Hikers or mountain bikers will come up to you and ask, ‘Are you out for a trail ride?’ And we just have to laugh.” Curtis and his cowboys have regular run-ins with recreation denizens who balk at pulling off a trail to let the cows through, but he sees such moments as a grand teaching opportunity. “We’re not going to change this,” he says, “so we have to learn to live together. I

try to educate the tourists about the importance of grazing.” He muses: “Without grazing there would be no trails, everything would be overgrown, and the environment wouldn’t be as healthy. I try to teach them these things so they won’t fight us, so they appreciate what we do.”

A century of ranching helped make these lands amenable to outdoor recreation and “looky-loos.” Mountain bikers and off-road



enthusiasts travel historic cow trails. The campgrounds along the river were once hayfields and pastures. And many of the forage plants that prevent erosion and beautify the desert floor were planted by cowmen decades ago.

#### RICK, ALYSSA AND MIRACLE MAX

Rick, 27, married his own ranching and rodeo beauty from Collbran, Colo. Not unlike many young ranchers, they work multiple jobs. Rick is a brand inspector and



Alyssa, 25, is an assistant postmaster in La Sal, works at a nearby hospital, and does freelance photography. But their hearts and future dreams are in Lisbon Valley.

Already working from the top of a horse at age three, Max is a little man with a big heart and even bigger courage. Though small for his age, Max has a rare wisdom behind his obsidian eyes. Born prematurely at 26 weeks, his odds were poor. According to Joanie: "You could hold him in the palm of your hand. He was almost transparent." She continues, her eyes shining with tears: "His lungs were

underdeveloped, he had bleeding on the brain, and the doctor told Rick, 'He's not going to make it.' And Rick looked that doctor in the eye and said, 'That's not up to you to decide.'" If fortune can be reversed by sheer faith, it was that day for Max. Rick prayed through the night for his son, and as Joanie says, "When the doctors came in the next morning they said, 'We don't know what happened, but there's no bleeding on his brain.'"

Rick, Alyssa and Max live in the ranch house in Lisbon. After Alyssa gave birth to Max and then lost another premature child a

year and a half later, Joanie and Mike gave them the ranch house, and moved into their fifth-wheel trailer. "We don't want them in an RV," Joanie says. "We want them to have the best we can offer. This has been a healing place for Mike and me. It can be a healing place for them too."

Alyssa, who grew up raising "every animal under the sun," takes charge of buying new stock. According to Rick, "She has the eye and the patience to go to the sales and pick the right animals." Little Max also comes equipped with a cowman's instinct. Rick





beams: “We branded him some cows and he can pick them out by their brands. He remembers exactly what they look like.” Rick and Alyssa are slowly building their own herd, which started from a handful of heifers that Curtis gave Rick as reimbursement for his labor on the ranch.

Rick and Alyssa started their family in Collbran, but Rick missed Lisbon Valley. He says: “We needed to be closer to a neonatal ICU, and we had good jobs, but I wasn’t happy there. I worried about what Dad had going on with the ranch, and it’s been better



COURTESY JACOB CLICK

ABOVE: Rick, Alyssa and Max on their high-desert ranch in Lisbon Valley. BELOW: Beautiful and bold Monica, the lone longhorn, is the self-appointed lead cow of the Wilcox herd. LEFT: Cows trail toward Hurrah Pass, a favored tourist destination near the Colorado River south of Moab, Utah.

NOTE: Photographer Alyssa Foss Wilcox is a part-time photographer and full-time mom and ranch wife.

for everyone since we’ve been here.” He continues: “I want Max to have the same opportunity that I did. And when Max was born, it lit a fire under Dad to have us all back here.”

The succession of the ranch weighs on Rick’s mind. “Grandpa and Grandma, they don’t want to admit it,” he says, “but one of these days they’re going to age out and somebody’s going to have to take over. Our hope is that someday we won’t have to work other jobs so we can just stay here and work the ranch, but we’re not there yet. Right now, we’re just taking it one day at a time.”

The Wilcox family’s will to survive has sustained them through loss, injury, illness, and isolation, but with five generations hanging tough and hanging together, they are preserving an essential way of life. The blows of the past are softened by a focus on the future. They have proven that you can adapt to change, while staying true to your beliefs, and, with new ideas, sustain a traditional way of life. ■

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