

Est. 1872

Six generations on Arizona's wild Sierra Bonita. And they still have grand plans.
Words by Leo W. Banks. Photos by Scott Baxter.

Jesse Hooker Davis sits at his dining room table, thinking the morning's problems have eased and he can now enjoy a quiet lunch. But he runs a cattle ranch, so that idea is out. The phone rings. The conversation with foreman José Adame proceeds in Spanish, and the gist of it is that a heifer is about to give birth and José can't see the calf's feet. They decide José will go it alone to get the little one turned. If he can't, Jesse will cut lunch short and head to the so-called hospital pen to help out.

"To me, running a ranch is damage control," says Davis, owner of the Sierra Bonita Ranch, 27 miles north of Willcox in southeast Arizona's Sulfur Springs Valley. "You make your list the night before, your grand plans, then you walk out the door in the morning and it's a whole new day."

Davis and I have spent much of the morning talking about the history of this storied property. Begun in 1872, the ranch is among the oldest in Arizona, a place where Billy the Kid once worked, where Wyatt Earp



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came while running from a posse, and where generals, politicians and writers found welcome from founder Henry Clay Hooker.

Hooker was born in New Hampshire in 1828 of English stock, and he became a western cattle baron who insisted that diners at his table wear a coat. He kept extras on hand for guests unaware of the rule. He was a cattleman, not a cowboy, known to everyone as the Colonel. Although no one today can explain the title, we can be sure he liked it. But Hooker also possessed that generosity of spirit unique to the West. When it came to men looking for work, he accepted them as they were, without regard for how they looked or talked, or even if their stories didn't hold up.

"We take a man here and ask no questions," Hooker once said. "We know when he

"We know when he throws his saddle on his horse whether he understands his business or not."

—HENRY CLAY HOOKER

throws his saddle on his horse whether he understands his business or not. He may be a minister backsliding, or a banker saving his last lung, or a train robber on a vacation—we don't care. A good many of our most useful men have made their mistakes. All we care about is, will they stand the gaff? Will they sit 60 hours in the saddle, holding a herd that's trying to stampede all the time?"

Hooker made his way to California after the Gold Rush. When his hardware business in Placerville burned around 1866, he moved to Arizona Territory and made his fortune selling beef to military posts and Indian agencies. He founded the Sierra Bonita—beautiful mountain—near a lush *ciénega*, or spring. The valley was abundant with feed: sacaton, bunchgrass, grama, and sweet grasses, and so high they brushed a rider's boots. Another benefit was the moderate climate at 4,500 feet, which allowed Hooker's cattle to winter on the range without fear of losses from snowstorms.

But the land's most valuable asset was water. In all, the ranch held five springs, numerous wells, and the valley basin collected enough mountain runoff to keep the grasses high. At the peak of his power, Hooker ran 20,000 head on land measuring 30 miles long and 20 miles wide—roughly 250,000 acres.

But this part of Arizona in the early 1870s

was wild, the homeland of Cochise, the Chiricahua Apache chief. Hooker built his home under tall cottonwood trees, on the site of an early 1800s Spanish hacienda whose occupants had been driven out by Apaches. The Colonel made his house a fort, a three-sided rectangle measuring 100 feet by 80 feet. Its exterior walls stood 16 feet high and were made of adobe, 20 inches thick. They were windowless and cut with rifle ports to hold off attackers. The fourth side of the house was enclosed by a wall, a gate providing the only entry. Inside the courtyard, the family maintained a well and windmill, in case of a long siege.

The Interior Department, citing "the fortresslike appearance of early days," as well as the look of the original adobe corrals, bunkhouses and barns, named the Sierra Bonita a national historic landmark in 1964. Pat Taylor, an adobe preservation contractor based in Mesilla, N.M., inspected the Hooker house and calls it a "classic building that retains all its original character." Given that the same family has ranched there since its founding in a valley that's also largely unchanged, he believes the landmark status is well deserved. "It's such a unique place, absolutely beautiful," he says. "I don't think there's anything like it in the Southwest."

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The morning has been a blur. Davis and José, who started at the ranch as a maintenance man 34 years ago, have been branding replacement heifers, distributing minerals and protein, and vaccinating calves. But Davis, the Colonel's great-great-great-grandson, takes a break to sit by a picture window



TOP LEFT: Henry Clay Hooker, known as the Colonel, established the Sierra Bonita Ranch in 1872. At his death in 1907, he was still the cattle king of Arizona. LEFT: Cowboys are branding cattle in the spring. ABOVE: The ranch crew, tired and ready to eat.



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Headquarters of the Sierra Bonita, ca. 1900. Carriages similar to the ones pictured are still in the garage on the property. LEFT: Jesse Hooker Davis, a self-described surfing cowboy, in a tack room at the ranch. OPPOSITE: Cowboys roping today. INSET: Cowboys roping cattle in an adobe corral on the Sierra Bonita at the turn of the last century. The work hasn't changed much. At its height, the ranch stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction.

off the dining room and talk.

He is 39 years old, stocky, a former running back for the Cornell University football team. But he only lasted a year and a half in upstate New York before the culture shock got to him and he transferred. He spent most of his youth in San Diego, playing sports and surfing. He still loves the water, dreams of it from parched Arizona, and takes surfing vacations to places like Nicaragua and Costa Rica. He moved to the ranch in 2003 to manage it for his grandmother, Jacqueline Hooker "Rinkie" Hughes. He was 30. "A surfing cowboy," Davis says, filling the room with a booming laugh.

From living at the ranch as a preschooler, and later returning to help with roundups, he knew how to ride and drive cattle. But he acknowledges that the details of cowboying were a mystery and his learning curve has pointed straight up. "It's been a pleasure, though, too," he says. "I'm picking up a ton every day."

Through the big window, we can see out to the Pinaleno Mountains, 10 miles northeast. Beneath them stand the remains of old Fort Grant, built to deal with the Apache threat. "It's no accident that Hooker placed his headquarters in direct line of sight to the fort," says Davis. "It was his protection. He lived pretty much on the periphery of every-

thing. This was the Wild West. This is where it happened."

Billy the Kid killed his first man near Fort Grant in August 1877. It seems that blacksmith Francis "Windy"

Cahill, living up to his nickname, was badgering the Kid, and what a mistake that was. Billy left Arizona in a hurry, Cahill dead behind him. Little is known about the Kid's short time at the Sierra Bonita, although some believe the teenager didn't take to hard work and was let go.

Earp made a fast exit from Arizona as well, in March 1882. In revenge for the murder of his brother Morgan, Wyatt killed a cowboy in Tucson. On the way out of the territory with a murder rap over his head, he and his men, including the tubercular dentist Doc Holliday, stopped to see Wyatt's friend Hooker, for rest and resupply.

Although the Apaches killed several of Hooker's cowboys out on the range, the house was never molested. Hooker and Cochise got along, even trading blankets as a family story says. The Colonel believed it was better to feed the Indians than fight them, and he often cut out beef for them when they wanted it.

At first Hooker stocked the ranch with Texas longhorns and low-grade Mexican *corrientes*, later replacing them with Durham cattle. He eventually moved to Herefords and their white faces became his trademark. The Colonel also raised trotting horses and greyhounds. At his death in Los Angeles in 1907, Hooker was still the cattle king of Arizona.

At 45,000 acres, the ranch today is about five times smaller than in the Colonel's time. Some land has been split off among family members, and in the early 20th century various government actions allowed homesteaders to claim portions of the federal land Hooker's family controlled.

"This reduced the size of the ranch con-

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siderably,” says Gary Thrasher, a veterinarian who helps Davis doctor his stock. “But it also shrank the ranch’s access to water and that’s as important as having grazing land.” In dry times, Hooker moved his cattle into the mountains where perennial springs provided plenty of water, and after the rains he’d move them back to the valley. “But Jesse is mostly on the valley floor now and doesn’t have that option,” says Thrasher.

The Sierra Bonita has no running water except for two springs, making the ranch, like most Arizona properties, dependent on rainfall to refill the aquifer and keep its 26 wells pumping. Davis also has dirt tanks to collect mountain runoff. “But if those tanks go dry, we’re hauling water or moving cattle,” he says. “If there’s a broken pipeline, or lightning takes out a well on electric, we have to move fast to get it back up.”

Rainfall in this high-desert environment is low, with 13 inches considered a good year. And the rain can be spotty even within the ranch boundaries, sometimes forcing Davis to haul water from a thriving pasture to one that is water poor. Or, if winter and spring rains don’t fall, he might have to sell cows to get through the summer before he can build up again. “There are times when all we do, all

day long, is take care of water,” Davis says. “People who don’t live in the Southwest don’t understand that.”

Another issue he wrestles with is preservation. Naturally, after so many decades the main house needs work, and some outbuildings, especially the original adobe bunkhouses in back, are in serious disrepair. Three years ago, a winter storm roared through the valley and flattened a barn dating to about 1900. Doing repairs himself would be prohibitive, and as his great-grandfather Harry Hooker always said, “When the house pays the bills, we’ll fix the house.” If the Park Service renovates a private enterprise, Davis says, there usually is some benefit to the public, such as opening it for tours, and he already knows what that would be like. At least once a month, unannounced visitors drive up and start taking pictures before he has a chance to say hello. Some knock on his door and ask to come inside and look around.

“They don’t realize this is my business as well as my home,” Davis says.

“What do you tell them?” I ask.

He pauses and grins. “Sorry, but I haven’t made my bed today.”

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Davis and I talk through lunch

about various aspects of ranch life. Then the phone rings again. “Wait a minute, this is José,” he says. “*Hola.... Gracias! Muchos gracias, José!*”

The news is good. The calf has been born and Davis and I head out to the hospital pen to have a look. The heifer backs up at our arrival, snorting and swaying, her big eyes fixed on us. When finally at ease, she steps forward and noses her shivering newborn and begins to lick it clean. A new life has come to the Sierra Bonita and Davis is there to welcome it, as his family has done for 140 years.

But he can’t linger. The clock is ticking on a short winter day, and he has that to-do list to winnow down. “This ranch has been passed down through six generations of my family in a way most people can’t even fathom,” he says. “That’s why I don’t consider it my ranch. This is my family’s ranch and it’s my turn to take care of it.” ■

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