Bard of the Southern Sierra

John Dofflemyer, fifth-generation California cattleman. By Carolyn Dufurrena

Long-haired horses watch the house
exhale smoke that spills off eaves—
taste oak and manzanita, listening
for the screen door's slap awake.

Gentle nickers with each step closer,
they fidget and angle for the first flake
of alfalfa to shatter in their feeder,
while the old bay waits with hoof at rest

on the bottom rung of his own gate.
At 26, he knows my walk
has slowed, no less impatient
than I made him. Looking back

from the barn, the house breathes.
Through its open eyes I see you moving—
feel all the years compressed into one
sure moment of belonging here.

—John Dofflemyer, "Poems from Dry Creek," winner of the 2009 Wrangler Award for Poetry

The Dofflemyer Ranch nestles near the foot of Kaweah River Canyon, a steep-pitched rocky climb to the High Sierra, at the base of Sequoia National Park. Several hundred head of Angus/Hereford-cross mother cows graze these steep hillsides.

"These cattle are out and spread out, and that's where you want them," he says gruffly, the voice roughened by tobacco smoke and 70 years of weather, markets, and life on the land. It's mostly deeded ground, some 9,000 acres, and 700 acres of BLM at the top of Sulphur Peak. "There's no water up there, and no fences," he says. "The north side is solid poison oak and buckeye. You can't ride a horse through it. The ground dictates how you have to run your outfit."

He and his wife, Robbin, drive the ranch in a little Kubota side by side, which gets around the steep hills better than a pickup. "The cattle love it, because they can see you, the protein tubs, the salt, or a few bales of hay in the back. When we go to gather, they see these little rigs and just fall in line behind them. A couple guys behind the bunch, and they come right to the corral. Simple."

John's roots run deep in Tulare County. His mother was a Cutler, and the Cutlers showed up in Tulare County in 1853. "Her great-grandfather was the first elected judge and the first doctor in Tulare County," before Visalia had been designated the county seat.

John's great-granddad, T.J. Dofflemyer, came west from Pueblo, Colo., in 1890, to raise his two sons in booming turn-of-the-century Los Angeles. Real estate was cheap and oranges were king. He and a partner marketed their fruit under the Gobbler and Marguerite brands, those beautiful citrus labels that are so hard to find these days. T.J.

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became a director of Mutual Orange Distributors, the packinghouse that helped make oranges a national breakfast staple. Son W.T. (Todd) and younger brother Lewis would move north to Tulare County in 1913 to plant citrus around Exeter. W.T. raised oranges for Sunkist and Lewis raised table grapes as well.

W.T. bought the Ward Ranch in 1938 for eight bucks an acre. "My grandfather's idea was that he could raise citrus up here, but it was too cold and there wasn't enough water," John says, "so they ended up running cattle."

John was born 10 years later. He has lived in that steep foothill canyon his entire life. His parents made sure John had a proper literary education, sending him to private school and then to USC, where he graduated in 1970 with a degree in business. His summers were spent in the High Sierra, packing mules for Bill DeCarteret in the upper Kings, Kaweah and Kern River watersheds.

"One night, packing a trail crew out of Mineral King, I didn't get back till late, a couple hours after dark. It is really steep country, and Bill was worried sick. They had a cookhouse and cabins across the creek and had saved a little something for me for dinner. I sat there talking with a young girl who was working there. We were both about 17. She brought out this collection of poems by Gary Snyder; we stayed up late drinking coffee and

John Dofflemyer's family has been farming and ranching in Tulare County since the 1850s. "I don't think people realize," he says, "that you're not always riding into the sunset."

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reading poems by lantern light."

Snyder was writing poems about the ferocious granite country that John was working in. "I thought, 'You may not be the smartest S.O.B. in the world, but you've got experiences, and you can write about them.'" Thus began a parallel life as a poet, writing about the country, the animals, and the life he led.

He went to his first National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko in 1989, on a lark. "There were no books for sale," he says. "Recitations are fine and dandy, but I wanted to see the words on the page." There were plenty of issues in contemporary ranching that should be reflected in our poetry, he thought. The result was *Dry Crik Review,* a quarterly anthology of poems, which he published from a garage in Visalia.

"I always gave my poetry to my folks to read, but they didn't want to read it," he says. That changed when he published the work of a couple of cowboys who had been in Vietnam. "I was blown away," he says. "I thought, 'If you're going to publish a journal, these two guys need to be in it.'" He gave Rod McQueary and Bill Jones a place to publish their work, and "once you pulled the cork out of that bottle those poems just came. 'You guys keep writing till you're done and I'll publish a collection,'" I said. "The result was 'Blood Trails.' It was, hands down, the best thing Dry Crik Press ever did."

John's dad, Robert, had fought in the Battle of the Bulge as a 25-year-old lieutenant. Most of that generation never talked about their experiences. "His soldiers were 17, 18 years old. He told me he didn't sleep for a week, his communications were cut off. The Germans kept approaching; he kept retreating. All he was trying to do was get those kids home."

Even though his dad didn't like poetry, "I gave him a copy of 'Blood Trails.'" It must have struck a chord. "He liked it, which really made me feel good."

Dry Crik Review published all kinds of writers of contemporary verse—many of them women who weren't getting published elsewhere—from 1991 until 2005. Dofflemyer has won multiple awards for his efforts from various organizations, but he probably would have kept doing it without any outside accolades. *Dry Crik Review* eventually morphed into an online blog, "Dry Crik Journal: Perspectives from the Ranch," which he still runs with Robbin.

He writes every morning, except in summer when they're weaning calves. "In the winter I can get up at five and have a couple hours writing before it's time to go. In the summer, morning comes early. I get fired up after the first rain, write every day through spring."

Tough Times

When John's dad died in 1997 the family managed to keep the outfit together, but inevitably, when their mother passed in 2010, the land was divided between the three siblings: John, the eldest; his sister, a retired Asian-art teacher; and his brother, five years younger, an orange grower. Such divisions are not easy. John got the cow/calf operation, and he and Robbin lease his siblings' interests in the ranch.

Dry Creek lived up to its name in California's recent drought. Although they had developed springs and troughs, it wasn't enough. "The third year, that's what really hit us. The water just was not there." There was no grass either.

By 2015 they were feeding year-round and ended up selling about half the herd. "We kinda rolled the dice on it and kept a lot of heifers in 2016, the fourth year of the drought. And then we kept a bunch in 2017, so we're pretty close to back where we were."

The heifers are lounging down the canyon this day, down the two-lane asphalt, through a gate, under a grove of gigantic sycamores, a variety which only grows in this state. This is the largest sycamore alluvial


© ROBBIN DOFFLEMYER

John stands with his crew. Left to right: His son, Bob; cowgirls Terri Drewry and Allie Fry; and Clarence Holdbrooks, age 81, who started working for John's grandfather at age 16. Until recently, Clarence rode colts and took horses to Reno's Snaffle Bit Futurity. AT TOP: Angus-cross heifers gather in anticipation when they hear John's Kubota growling through the trees. OPPOSITE: Water tank at the entrance to the ranch. Like every rancher in California, Dofflemyer does not take water for granted.

Collectors' items: graphics from three generations of Dofflemyer oranges. The Gobbler brand was first, with oranges grown in the Los Angeles area, 1912-1914. The Marguerite brand started with patriarch T.J. Dofflemyer and his partner Cobb around 1914, continuing through the 1950s; later it was taken over by W.T., John's grandfather. Sometime in the '40s Robert joined his father, W.T., packing Naranjo Beauty for Sunkist.
BELOW: In this world, neighbor is a verb: Dofflemyer branding with folks from nearby ranches. Robbin and John are cuddling, sixth and seventh from left.

woodland in the Sierra Nevada ecosystem. Stretching five miles up Dry Creek through the ranch, a species of interest to local environmental groups. "The root-ball is 15 to 20 feet in diameter, part of it exposed, part of it not. These trees just grow out of the root-ball; they're hundreds of years old."

A long, irrigated pasture parallels the road, fringed with blackberries, chinaberry, elderberry and wild grapes. The girls wake from their dozes in the shade when they hear the Kubota growling closer.

Flocks of wild turkeys slip through the brush. A coyote trots along parallel to our course, partially screened by the giant sycamores. There's a rifle in the cab, but John doesn't take it down.

"The elderberry was endangered for a time because it was host to the valley elderberry longhorn beetle," he says. "It caused great consternation for agriculture. That elderberry stopped a lot of development, and needless to say did not ingratiate the ranchers with the environmental community. I have it on good authority that no one has ever seen a valley elderberry longhorn beetle. Ever. The only way they can identify it is through the boreholes in the valley elderberry."

You gotta love California.

There are giant white egrets here and a few blue herons, remnants of a rookery that has moved on. "My dad loved those blue herons," he says. "They would sit out on the gopher mounds in the spring, stick those gophers with their long beaks, throw 'em up in the air and catch 'em with their necks stretched, and the varmints would slide right down their gullets."

Suddenly we emerge from the green shade. The massive Terminus Dam rises, monolithic, above us at the mouth of Kaweah Canyon. It dwarfs everything of human scale. "There's a big move on in California to put in more dams, like here in Dry Creek. You do not make water by building dams. The state is saving all this water for agriculture and recreation under the auspices of flood control, but there's no recharge out in the valley if they hold the water back. There are guys on the west side of the valley drilling wells three-quarters of a mile deep, right underneath their neighbor's property lines. And that water was laid in there during the Pleistocene, 10,000 years ago. It will never recharge."

John thinks a lot about the future. "With each generation that goes by we lose the knowledge of how things work, and you can't fix anything if you don't know how it works. Whether you believe in climate change or not, no amount of hand-wringing or finger-pointing is going to make one iota of difference. We as agriculturalists are going to have to deal with it on a daily basis."

John's son Bob, age 41, youngest of his three children, is back at the ranch helping now, irrigating, taking care of the heifers. It's really good having him back, especially helping with the heavy lifting. "He sees this hero disintegrating before his eyes," John laughs ruefully. "And he doesn't mind the work."

Dofflemyer has ranched on the same landscape for more than 50 years, and you can't live like that without making some changes. "We've made improvements on the ranch as we could afford them. Our list is long, and it's a good thing we can't afford everything we think we want. Some project that may work this year may not work four years out of five. My grandfather used to say, 'If you can make the right decision three times out of five, you should be able to survive.'" ■

Carolyn Dufurrena writes from northern Nevada, where the weather and the cow business are just as unpredictable as in California. She thanks the nonprofit Citrus Roots Foundation in Claremont (citrusroots.com), which catalogs vintage citrus labels for collectors. Value varies from $5 to $1,000.


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