

# A Pretty Nice Outfit

*Idaho's Tom Davis, Jemima, and the Bar O. Nine decades around ranching and still going strong. Words and photos by C.J. Hadley. Historic photos courtesy Davis family.*

**T**om Davis kick-starts his Honda dirt bike and takes off across field and ditch to irrigate his pastures in Cascade, Idaho. Two-by-sixes serve as bridges to cross the running water and he never hesitates, even though his tires are not much smaller than the boards. It's strenuous, physical work and he does it well—stomach satisfied with Jemima's bowl of oatmeal covered with milk and sugar.

Tom was born on Aug. 30, 1915, and in the past 70 years he's bought and sold 22 ranches. He's borrowed millions of dollars, sometimes on a handshake and a glass of whiskey, and he's paid it all back.

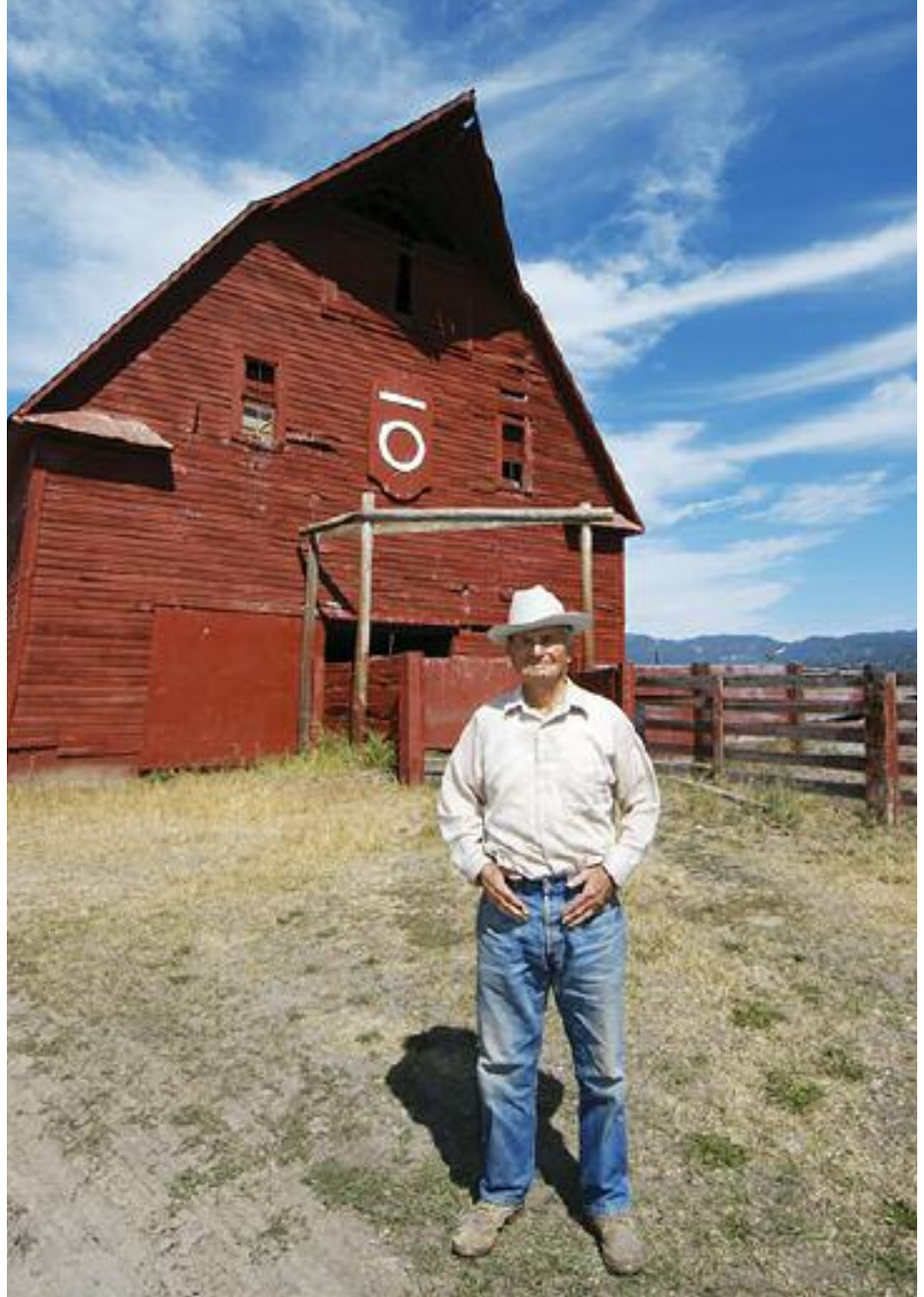
"I never was much of anything but what I was. I was tight. I squeezed every penny. I couldn't have done it if I had been reckless at all. I couldn't have done it."

Tom is from a pioneer Idaho family. His grandfather Thomas left Illinois in 1861 with his brother Frank. "They came from a big family and his father, a woodsman and carpenter, died when Thomas was four. He and his brother were 'bound-out boys,' indentured to work for Andrew and Harriet Ann Claycomb on their farm when they were small. The new family was good to them and when they decided to head west in 1861, the Claycombs gave the boys a bible, and helped finance a buggy, a team of mules and some livestock. They landed in Boise in 1863."

Thomas was 27 when he took out the first homestead in the Boise area. He farmed fruits and vegetables and sold the produce to miners. By 1870 he was the wealthiest farmer in Boise. He married Julia McCrum in 1871 and they had six children. When Julia died in 1906, Thomas donated land to the city of Boise in the name of his wife, for Julia Davis Park.

Edwin Davis, born in 1881, was Thomas and Julia's youngest son. When his father died, Edwin, educated at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and the University of Notre Dame, was named executor of the estate. The ranches went to the boys and the orchards went to the girls.

"The next generation wasn't as good as the first in Idaho," Tom says. "My dad was a good man but he wasn't a businessman. His



father-in-law had Edwin sign a note but poor dad had to pay it and that's what ruined him. He and my mother Marcella got a ranch in Van Wyck out of my grandfather's estate in 1929. It was very rustic, not what we were used to, and it still had a \$15,000 mortgage. It was just outside Cascade and the whole family moved up here in '29. I was 14. But from the time I was about nine or 10, my older sis-

ter Julia and I used to ride horseback from Boise up here for the summer holidays." It was more than 80 miles and took two days.

At age 14, Tom was the boss of men because his father was unable to be. Even though the hired help paid little attention, Tom understood the value of land in Long Valley and knew he would invest in and improve it. He was a natural cowboy and a

born leader. “Dad was one of those gentlemen who should have been a music teacher. He was good with instruments. He played clarinet in college. My mother Marcella wanted to be an *artiste* but my grandmother Julia was ill and asked Edwin and Marcella to marry before she died.”

Tom admits he is the one who benefited most from the move from Boise to Van Wyck. He grew up there until he went to Oregon State College. After graduation, he went into ranching. Edwin and Marcella sold their ranch to the federal government in 1947 so the feds could dam the Payette River near Cascade and build a reservoir. They stayed on the ranch for eight more years until their place flooded.

“We had a good banker then...Frank Callender,” Tom says. “There was an old sheepman named Bally Frisbee at Crane Creek and he wanted to sell my father some cattle. I had just graduated from college at 22. They were pretty good cattle and I told dad he should buy them. Dad said, ‘If you think they are, why don’t you buy ’em? Callender will loan you the money.’”

Tom bought those cattle with the help of that small-town banker, then sold them a short time later at a \$1,700 profit. That was his stake. “I bought some bulls and traded them, made a little bit more money.” He says he’s been lucky all his life.

He and his dad were in Cascade one day and they met Boyd Smith, who was selling a ranch with 1,300 acres and a reservoir. “My dad encouraged me to buy it. Boyd wanted \$20,000,” Tom says, “but me and my dad could only come up with \$5,000. The bank would lend me \$10,000. Boyd Smith didn’t know me; I was just a young guy, but he liked my dad so he said, ‘I’ll just take your note for the other \$5,000.’ I didn’t know much about the ranch but I bought it anyway. It had three bands of sheep on it. That was 1941.”

The next year Tom met Jemima at a dance. Jemima had already heard about Tom. “A friend said I should meet this guy who owns a ranch and he’s really neat,” she smiles. “I expected an old man with a beard. When I met him I was really shocked. He was handsome. He wore a white shirt and Levis.” How did she remember that? “Because he always wears Levis and every Sunday he puts on a white shirt.”

Jemima was from Oklahoma, one of seven kids. Their farmhouse had been flattened three times by three tornadoes. “I was born in the cellar because there wasn’t any money to build the house again.” At age 18,



she moved to Idaho to take care of some children because the pay was better than back home. When her job was over she was going to move to Boise and learn to be a hairdresser. Tom said, “Well, I never get down there so I guess we’ll have to get married.” He’s admitted many times since that it’s the best thing he ever thought of. “If you are on a ranch and don’t have a wife, you have problems. So in a

day or two we got married.”

Their union, starting May 29, 1942, is one to envy. Jemima says the original home ranch “had no running water and the entire house was the same size as our dining room now!”

For years Tom added to his ranches, mostly neighboring places, but he traded a few things too. He says, “I was never afraid to step out and make a deal.” And deal he did.



**ABOVE:** Tom looks over his first major purchase in 1941—the Boyd Smith Ranch in Cascade, Idaho. The original reservoir is still in use. **INSET:** Tom with his favorite banker, Frank Callender. **AT TOP:** Jemima and Tom, with the Boyd Smith meadows in the background, are still dancing together after 65 years. **OPPOSITE:** Tom Davis spends three seasons in Cascade, Idaho, and uses Grandfather Thomas’ Bar O brand. He and Jemima winter in Palm Desert, Calif. As a rancher, entrepreneur, master irrigator, and horseman, at age 92, he says he’s starting to slow down.



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Julia and Thomas Davis, 1870. >Edwin (seated left) with the Phillips Exeter Academy orchestra in New Hampshire. >Jemima (bottom right) and her family in Oklahoma. > Tom and Jemima in 1941, the start of a beautiful life together.*

His ranch purchases are varied and often. But he never scares Jemima because she knows how smart he is. In 1944 they bought timberland from Boise Payette Lumber Company, and called it the Heifer Pasture. The following year they bought Edwin's interest in the Cascade Ranch. In 1950 they purchased Clipper Flat in Emmett by Big Willow Creek. And in 1957 they started buying outfits in Vale, Ore. They bought the Callender Ranch in Cascade, Idaho, in 1968, used his grandfather's brand and renamed it the Bar O. Tom thought that was as far as he could go.

"The weather forced us to look for places to feed our cattle in the winter and spring. This is summer country up here. We needed something to coordinate all the seasons. Cascade is the finest country but we had to round out our outfit—and that forced us to expand elsewhere. Because of this my family will be able to stay in the cat-

tle business as long as they desire."

Tom and Jemima have five children—Jeff, Ed, Linda, Diane and Phil—12 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. Many still live and work on ranches. Jeff is retired from ranching but used to run the Ruby Ranch for Tom in Jordan Valley, Ore. Phil runs the Bar O at Cascade. Tom and Jemima will leave the Boyd Smith home place they are living on to Linda and Diane.

The Callender Ranch in Cascade used to be 10 small ranches. "Frank sold it to a crook who had talked American National Insurance Company into loaning him the money to buy it, but the guy never gave them a payment in four or five years. One day, they told him if he would just leave they wouldn't sue him, so he gave them a quitclaim deed."

Tom had been watching the ranch and knew that the insurance company put it in the hands of Jack Utter in Reno, Nev. Callen-

der got a million dollars out of the ranch but Tom talked Jack into a meeting in Oregon. "I was thinking if I could buy it with a low enough interest rate because I didn't have much money...if I could buy it for \$800,000, five-percent interest, that would be \$40,000 a year."

Utter flew into Ontario and he and Tom met at a club. "First thing Jack said is 'Give me a shot of Johnny Walker Black,'" Tom says. "I thought, what the heck. My dad always told me, do your business first before you do your drinking. But I got me a whiskey, too."

Jack negotiated for the insurance company. "He got a napkin out and wrote on it that we agreed on the price: \$760,000, \$50,000 down, interest only for three years with a rate of five percent." Tom gave him \$10,000 down and Jack got in his airplane and went home. "I kinda forgot about the deal until, months later, I got a call. Jack said, 'Everything's fine,



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Alvord Ranch and the Steens Mountains in eastern Oregon. >View of the irrigated meadows from the Jemima K Dam. >Building Tom J Dam in the late '70s. >Edwin's ranch at Van Wyck before it was flooded for Cascade Reservoir. >The Alvord, left to right on horseback: Bill Black, Jeff, Ed, Tom and Phil Davis. In front: Hollis Hood with Ed and Lani's kids, Mike and Paul Davis.*

but no five percent. It's six percent."

They signed the deal in the summer of 1967 with the understanding that Tom would only pay interest on half a year for the first year, \$20,000, which would give him the start. There were 6,000 acres, all deeded, and the ranch has grown a bit since then.

"I got it because I'm lucky. I had a lucky life. I've had more luck than anybody. I got the right life. I bought the land. But I'll tell you, you have to be pretty responsible when you do things like that. You got to be honest." Within 25 years, Tom got a Federal Land Bank loan and paid the insurance company off. Since then, he's had five or six more loans from the land bank and even served as president of the land bank board.

Soon after he bought the Callender Ranch, Tom built two big dams that cost about \$200,000 to \$300,000 apiece. The first, the Jemima K, was started in 1971. The Tom J

came 10 years later. Each took several years to complete. "We were living with 30-cent fuel back then. Now they would cost millions to build. There are 1,500 acres of timberland on the ranch and money from logging some of it paid for the reservoirs. The lumber paid for the dams pretty much, and the price wasn't so high, about \$50 for a thousand board feet."

The Tom J reservoir holds 3,500 acre-feet and is 67 feet high. Trees grow to its edges: aspen, pine, fir, willow and berry bushes. "There's a canyon that goes back up there for half a mile. Water comes off that mountain, floodwater. About half the ranch is irrigated from these two new reservoirs." The rest of the water comes from the Boyd Smith Dam, the Smalley Dam, and water rights from Cascade Reservoir.

Tom and Jemima purchased the Alvord Ranch in Oregon in 1970; the Ruby Ranch, Swisher Ranch and Westmoreland in Jordan

Valley, Ore., in 1972; the Harwood Ranch in 1973; and Roberts Place in Cascade, Idaho, in 1989. The Kueny Ranch was added to the Alvord Ranch holdings in 1992.

"I used lots of credit over the years. You have to pay every bill and note on time and never write a check that doesn't work."

Tom also bought land from Boise Payette Lumber Company (now Boise Cascade) for \$2.50 an acre. They had logged it and wanted to get rid of it. "I sold 300 acres of that land for \$500,000. That's why Jemima and I kinda have it made and we can winter in Palm Desert in California."

Ed runs the Alvord and Kueny ranches with his sons Paul and Mike and eight grandchildren in southeast Oregon. It is a high-desert outfit with 25,000 deeded acres in the shadow of the Steens Mountains. It can handle several thousand cows with a BLM permit to run cattle in the winter on the desert to the



*Tom uses a Honda dirt bike to move the portable dams on his irrigated pastures at the Bar O and Boyd Smith ranches in Cascade, Idaho. In summer, cattle from ranches in Oregon come up here to fatten up on sweet green grasses. BELOW: The Jemima K reservoir, one of four that are used for irrigation. The others are the Tom J, the Boyd Smith, and Smalley Dam.*

east of the ranch. Some of the Alvord cattle move to Tom's place in Idaho to fatten on the irrigated summer meadows. "Some of those steers can gain up to three pounds a day. They come up at the end of May and leave at the end of August. They sure do look good when they leave."

Before irrigating, Jemima makes breakfast at daylight. Oatmeal with wheat germ and raisins, fresh fruit, toast and homemade jam. "I've ate oatmeal every day of my life," Tom says, "covered with cream and sugar."

At the end of August or early September the last Alvord cattle are trucked out of Cascade. Tom, friends and family get ready for shipping before daylight, have breakfast, then gather the cattle to weigh and load. Tom is horseback in the corrals, pushing 800 bovines in small bunches into the weighing alley. He has help from a daughter and granddaughter. Others handle the chutes, moving cattle into the trucks. Within a few hours, close to a dozen fully loaded semis are out of there.

In the afternoon of Aug. 30, 2006, there is a gathering of family, friends and dignitaries to celebrate Tom's 91st birthday and the



burning of his final mortgage. It's a normal day because he worked as usual, but a special occasion, too. He is dressed in Levis, white shirt, white Stetson ("that's been kept in a box for years"), and a checkered jacket that's been around since the 1970s. He smiles broadly, shakes hands with vigor, and relishes the occasion. Tri-tip is being barbecued for more than a hundred guests, and their garage is a temporary bar.

"I didn't make very many mistakes," he says. "I couldn't have done any more without any money. Pretty near everybody had money to start with. I didn't have any. The hardest thing is to get your belly up off the ground. Frank Callender and I were good friends and I have to give him—and the land bank—credit for helping me do all this."

The Cascade Ranch—using the Bar O brand for the Callender and Boyd Smith ranches—consists of 8,000 acres of forest, hill and pasture. "We built these dams and saved our water. There wasn't much water till we built the dams." The 1,500 acres of forestland Tom and his family own are healthy and open, with a mixture of trees. They log occasionally, taking out everything that's unhealthy. "You shouldn't have these big trees closer than 20 feet apart," Tom says. "We hire loggers before they go to work in the spring. Any diseased trees come out—one at a time—and they get cut into boards. You don't see any dead ones at all."

He likes riding his dirt bike and still irrigates—from late May till the end of August. He either drives straight out of the ranch or loads the contraption in his old truck using two boards—one to walk on, one to push the bike. He used to irrigate horseback or on foot. "That was pretty good. Trouble with a horse is he wants to go home all the time."

Now he runs his Honda pretty much in low gear across the narrow planks that straddle the ditches. He moves the dams by hand, dragging them from one ditch to another to reroute the water. And when he's satisfied the water is going to the right places, he goes home to check on Jemima.

It's not been long since Tom and Jemima quit going to town every Saturday night, to dance. Jemima says, "No one has enjoyed a club more than we have." And Tom adds, "It's been lots of work. We never did quit work, but no one's had a better life."

It's the end of summer and Jemima is packing for California. There will be no more water on the meadows until next spring, when Tom will kick-start his Honda again. His daughters are considering pivots because,



"I guess I can't irrigate this ranch forever!" He waves a hand over his land to the south, a lush and broad green valley running miles towards Cascade. A healthy forest rises from each side.

After driving an hour or two and sharing Davis timberland, reservoirs, paddocks and pastures, with slick, fat cattle in some, Tom stops his rattling truck. "This is just about the end of our land," he says, with eyes twinkling. "Tough, ain't it?" ■

*C.J. Hadley is publisher/editor of RANGE magazine. "Everyone was good to me in Idaho,"*

*CJ says, "but Jemima even buttered my toast—just like she does for Tom." And when Tom found out CJ drinks only water or weak tea, he said, "Well, you can't blame anybody for that! I've enjoyed a little liquor all my life." To learn more about Tom Davis and his extraordinary legacy, check out "Resurrection of the Bar O: The Tom and Jemima Davis Story," by Diane Davis Myklegard and published in August 2007. Send \$24.95 to T&J Publishing, 3100 Crescent Rim, Ste. 408, Boise, ID 83706, call 208-344-9929, or e-mail <mdiane@cableone.net>.*



**ABOVE:** A great crowd of friends, family and dignitaries watch as Tom and Jemima burn their mortgage in 2006. **RIGHT:** Tom and Jemima with sons, daughters, wives, husbands, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for that happy day. **AT TOP:** Tom works horseback during shipping at the Bar O. After a dozen truckloads of fat cattle are loaded and gone, Tom will change his jacket and be ready to party.

