

The Long Haul

For the Ivins family, ranching isn't a job, it's a celebration.

By Marjorie Haun

I followed behind the young cowpunchers on a slow but solid flea-specked gelding. Ahead was a passel of teens and preteens decked out in jeans, western shirts, cowboy hats, and well-worn boots. Despite the task at hand—gathering strays out of the aspen-clogged draws on the Camp Jackson permit—the kids were jovial and right at home with leather saddles squeaking, hooves clacking, and cows bemoaning their inconvenience under a canopy of cottony clouds and slate-gray sky. It occurred to me then that the Ivins bunch endures the toil, stress, dirt, danger and expense of ranching because it brings joyful moments like this.

The Ivins were kind enough to let me tag along for a day of cow work. As Shawn and Tyler gave general instructions from atop their horses—“Keep the cows away from the cliff,” “Don’t let that one get away”—I observed a well-oiled operation, run in large part by youngsters and a handful of adept cow dogs. Averie, 17, Shawn’s eldest, ranked senior among the children gathering cows that day. “I just love that we all get to spend time together and I learn a lot of patience,” she says. “We learn how to ranch and take care of ourselves.”

This defining principle, raising children to know how to ranch and take care of themselves, is why, six generations to date, the Ivins family is in it for the long haul.

The Family

Ivins brothers David, Justin, Shawn, and Tyler are fifth-generation cattlemen born to a family with ranching roots that reach back two centuries. While the oldest brother David, 50, manages a cattle and horse ranch for someone outside the family, he often helps his brothers, Justin, 47, Shawn, 44, and Tyler, 40, with riding, branding, calving, and farming in Utah and western Colorado. Their sisters, Michele Halls, 52, and Nicole Holliday, 42, also pitch in with their husbands and kids when needed...or just for the fun of it.

The Ivins’ great-grandfather, Melvin Jens Adams, was born in 1897 to John Adams and Margaret Nielson who, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, blazed a trail from western Utah to



PHOTO BY SHAWN IVINS

Shawn’s children, Jake (15), Wyatt (10), Averie (17), and Adison (13), help move cows to their winter range in the Valley of the Gods near Bluff, Utah.

“the San Juan” with the storied Hole in the Rock pioneers. In the early 1900s, Melvin and his brothers, Joe and Lloyd, took up ranching in the Bluff area of Utah where they ran cows and grew hay. Like countless

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other ranchers, their cattle business collapsed during the Great Depression so they picked up a few sheep, including some from the Navajo reservation where they traded flour for the animals. Over the course of a few years, the sheep business grew and they subsequently leased land in western Colorado to graze their flocks.

In his journal, Melvin wrote: “When we

first went to Colorado, we could lease a section of land for about \$75; and we bought quite a lot of land out there. You’d give about three dollars an acre for it. We just kept buying land and buying sheep, and we kept growing and growing. In 15 or 20 years, we accumulated 10 or 15,000 head of sheep and had bought the land to run them on. In other words, we just started out from nothing. When we went broke in the cow business, Dad felt awfully bad about it. After we got going in the sheep business, he came and said: ‘That’s the best thing that ever happened to us, when we went broke. You fellows have been a lot better off since we got away from the cow business.’ Well, hell, we built into quite an outfit. I guess we had 230,000 or 240,000 acres of land.”

The Ivins’ grandmother, Audrey Adams, was born to Melvin and Mamie Jones in 1924. After Audrey married Fred Halliday in 1946, they took over full-time operation of the ranch and eventually became its owners. DeAnn was born to Audrey and Fred in 1947 and married Keith Nelson Ivins in 1969. It’s

through this largely matriarchal line that the Ivins came to be one of the most tenacious ranching families in the region.

Cattlemen

In the middle decades of the 20th century, sheep fell out of favor in Utah and Colorado and the family would again take up cattle in the 1960s. Disappointment Valley, a 20-mile divot in the earth that runs westward from the base of Lone Cone Mountain to a sheltered bottomland along the Dolores River about eight miles east of the Utah border, is the anchor property for the Colorado section of ranch and is surrounded by the deeded acreage acquired nearly a century ago by Melvin and his brothers. It is also the heart of Justin's range. Lush with grass, Disappointment Valley seems to belie its name. According to regional lore, this picturesque valley was named by the westward-traveling Mormon pioneers who were disappointed when they discovered that grass was the only thing that would grow there.

Justin, father of four and grandfather of one, never left the ranch and today lives for part of the year in his remote Colorado home with his wife, Stephanie, and youngest son, Ladd. Shawn and Tyler also use the Colorado ranch to summer their cows.

Gifted with athleticism, intelligence and drive, members of the Ivins clan could choose just about any life path and find success. After serving two-year missions for their church, Shawn and Tyler veered, respectively, into the areas of criminal justice and pro golf. With bachelor's degree in hand, Shawn went to work as a social worker at a nearby juvenile

detention center. Tyler moved to Arizona where he served as a golf pro on a course in Gilbert for a time while his wife, Lacey, taught for the local school district.

But having dipped their toes in professions outside of ranching, they were drawn back to cattle and land and in 2009 became 50-50 partners in the Utah portion of the ranch and purchased their first two permits, Camp Jackson and Tank Point. Each has a home in Blanding and shares fields where their herds winter together. Starting with about 300 cows and calves, their holdings have since grown to six permits: one summer permit in the mountains just north of Blanding, and two in Dove Creek and Rico, Colo. Winter range covers permits near Bluff, Utah. They bought the Valley of the Gods permit from fellow rancher Zane O'Dell (see "Caught in the Act," Summer 2019, via rangedex.com), and now have about 800 mommas and baby cows between them.

Shawn and Tyler both married "city" girls from towns in northern Utah and have four children each. According to Shawn, it took some coaxing for Kathryn to become a ranch wife, but now she's hip deep in it pulling stock trailers and managing kids and dogs. Like Kathryn, Tyler's wife, Lacey, would prefer to do the work that doesn't require skill in horseback riding; nevertheless, she bears a deep love for the lifestyle that cultivates such first-rate children.



PHOTO BY SHAWN IVINS

TOP: Valley of the Gods is scenic but very tough range where each animal may require hundreds of acres for grazing. BELOW: Shawn and his oldest son, Jake, and Tyler and his youngest boy, Griffin, debrief following a morning of gathering strays on the Camp Jackson permit near Blue Mountain.

Horsemen

A horseman and a cattle rancher, Justin is perhaps best described in an anecdote related by Kevin McComb, a fellow rancher with whom he shares a Forest Service permit in Disappointment Valley. The story goes: One time while working a horse, Justin was riding with his daughter behind the saddle and his two-year-old grandson on the swell. The boy dropped a boot during the ride and instead of stopping, dismounting and retrieving the little boot himself, Justin dangled the boy by his foot aside the horse while, giggling, he grabbed the boot and took his place again behind the saddle horn. This became a bit of a sport for grandfather and grandson while riding this particular horse, as the boy would drop a hat or a boot just so he could be held by the foot, screaming with joy, as he picked it up.

This is where anecdote becomes legend. When it came time to take the horse to auction, Justin rode him in typical fashion around the arena as fair-to-middling bids rang through. But then he mounted his little grandson on the saddle, dropped a hat in the dirt, and dangled him by the foot as he once more retrieved it, laughing up a storm. The bids from that point on went through the roof and grandfather and grandson made a killing on that well-worked, smart and exceptionally gentle horse.

Horse prowess animates the whole Ivins



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Held every few years on Justin's ranch in Disappointment Valley, "The Trek" is a reenactment of Mormon handcart companies that crossed the Great Plains in search of a permanent refuge from persecution. Pushing most participants to their limits of physical and mental endurance, The Trek brings hardship equal only to its blessings.

family and they raise and train most of their cow horses on their respective ranches. At a glance the animals are healthy, well trained, and rewarded with love. They take their animals seriously, adding values of gentleness and trust that can't be simply worked into a horse, and their reputation for quality ranch horses profits them well.

All the children are skilled riders and, though they may each have their favorite mount, they move easily from one horse to

another. Tyler's son, Griffin, is the youngest cousin of the clan and the youngest rider, and like all the others, he is given opportunities to overcome his fears and learn self-sufficiency on the trail.

The Trek

I asked Justin how he and his brothers have been able to adapt to the decade-long regional drought and without hesitation he says, "With prayer." Faith in God's providence illuminates

every aspect of life for the Ivins family and church attendance is as natural for the children as chasing cows on horseback. On Sundays throughout the warm months, Justin's family travels across a lot of rough country to join up with his brothers' families in Blanding for church services.

Having access to landscapes ranging from sculptured low-desert red rock to aspen stands and pine-studded mountain slopes, the Ivins family has found a way to put faith



PHOTO COURTESY SHAWN IVINS

In the shadow of Lone Cone in western Colorado, two generations of Ivins trail bosses take a moment to relax. Left to right: David Ivins, Tyler Ivins, Michele Ivins Halls, Justin Ivins, Nicole Ivins Holliday, Keith Nelson Ivins, DeAnn Halliday Ivins and Shawn Ivins.

into action. A many-day-long youth camp known as The Trek is a reenactment tracing the experiences of Mormon pioneers who traveled West from Illinois pulling handcarts across boundless prairies and through mountains, canyons and rivers. Every couple of years or so, Justin offers his ranch as setting for The Trek, whose participants are mostly young people who have never undertaken such a challenge. Its hazards are manifold. Imagine hundreds of teenagers, most from cities and towns in the Four Corners region, pulling handcarts laden with food, beds, gear and tired bodies up the rugged slopes of Disappointment Valley. This year, a team of the Ivins' draft horses and mules helped the trekkers pull carts up the steepest inclines. Imagine still that, though many couldn't finish on foot due to exhaustion, not one succumbed to injury or even discouragement, and everyone finished the punishing journey. For as rife as The Trek is with dangers, it is more bounteous with blessings. Justin says: "Whenever we have drought, I know it's time to host a trek. When we do that, the rains come."

The Road Ahead

It's hard, if not impossible, to find anyone in southeastern Utah or western Colorado who will speak ill of the Ivins family. The consensus is that it runs a disciplined operation and everyone in the family approaches work with optimism and humor, without transgressive jealousies or turf wars. No ranching family is totally without foes, however. The uncertainty surrounding the Bears Ears National Monu-



PHOTO COURTESY SHAWN IVINS

ABOVE: There is no lower age limit for children working cows on the Ivins' ranches. Tyler's oldest daughter, Aspyn, cousin Averie, youngest daughter, Chezney, and son, McCoy, share a tender moment on the trail. BELOW: Working cattle is always an adventure in nature. Here Adison shows off a "good luck toad" she found while chasing strays with her cousins Aspyn (background) and Chezney (middle).

ment leaves them wondering about their Utah permits, 90 percent of which are within the boundaries of the Obama/Biden rendering of the monument. Superseding uncertainty about boundaries and permits is the present reality of exploding tourism in the area, which inevitably impacts the condition of their range for the worse. Tyler says, "Right now the greatest challenge is drought and the influx of people to the area due to publicity of the monuments."

And like all other American food producers, costs of farming, transportation, feed, and

everything family related are cutting more deeply than in previous years. But the Ivins carry on, undaunted. Tyler continues, "One thing that has always stood out to me about how all our ancestors operated is that the first priority has always been family and raising our kids to appreciate an honest day's work and recognizing what needs to be done and getting it done."

Now in their 40s and 50s, the Ivins brothers and sisters are still young and strong and their children are as active with school, athletics and other interests as they are on the ranch. The Ivins kids know they are free to pursue their own paths, but most of them told me expressly that they love what they do and always want to be involved in the family ranch. Shawn says: "Ranching and farming are more than a way to earn money and make a living. Ranching is a way of life and a lifestyle. For us, ranching is the best way to raise kids and grandkids."

The Ivins have struck an enviable balance of practicality, firmness, compassion and faith. Imbued with an appreciation for physical work and a love for all aspects of ranching, it is the sixth generation of this ranching family that holds the promise of a productive and bright future. ■

Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist specializing in ranching and natural resources policy. She lives in the remote and beautiful mountains of eastern Utah with her husband and too-many-but-never-enough horses.



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