



The Dahls of Starr Valley

Across Nevada's Ruby Mountains and stretching far beyond.

By Leanna Lehman

The Ruby Mountains have long stood sentry over Starr Valley, where Harvey and Margaret Dahl raised their seven children among cattle, horses, and stories that would stretch far beyond Elko County. From that quiet corner of northeastern Nevada, the family's influence carried into ranching, politics, art, faith, and even medicine, shaping a legacy as vast as the wild, rugged range they called home.

It's February 1954, and Harvey Dahl, who has been raising cattle and kids with his wife, takes a position with his longtime friend, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson. In the service of friend and country, the couple trades the Ruby Mountains for Fairfax County, Va. Loading her seven children into their Cadillac, already groaning under the weight of bags and blankets, Margaret places the youngest onto a buckboard rigged to fit in the back seat and sets off for the East Coast where Harvey is waiting. That journey would be the first of many for the Dahl family.

A few months later, with the school year nearly over, Demar, 10, and Joe, a year younger, learn that they are needed back at the ranch. The story, as Joe tells it, only works because the principal agrees to let the boys out early, heartily declaring, "We don't want school to get in the way of your education."

With suitcases in tow, the two boys board a bus bound for Nevada.



ABOVE: Margaret and Jennifer shoot. AT TOP: Harvey and Margaret with their seven children, from left, Jennifer, Olivia, Mark, Drew, Joe, Demar, Claudia, Margaret and Harvey.

A few days later, after an accidental detour in the wrong direction, the boys are back on the ranch and heading straight for cow camp. Joe recalls the morning of his 10th birthday that June, "We woke up with six inches of real wet, heavy snow on our bed." Horseback, following an old Dodge pickup for a cook wagon, they get on with the business of working 500 head of Hereford-cross cattle in the snow.

Despite this—and against the later advice of Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings—the Dahl boys do, in fact, grow up to be cowboys. Or in this case, buckaroos. Joe's brother Drew recalls his awkward place in the family growing up. "I am right in the middle. It's a tough spot," he says. "The big kids always get to do

the fun stuff, and the little kids get to stay home." Drew does not stay home, however, when he, Joe, and Mark mount up and attempt to rob the Pony Express run at Secret Pass. While he tries to pin the scheme on Joe, the mastermind of the operation, Drew admits his part in the failed escapade. "The Pony Express started on the West Coast and took mail to D.C., to President Nixon," says Drew, explaining that Joe had written a letter to the president. "We were going to give it to them as they came by. But we were going to rob them first to put it in the bag and then give it back to them."

The riders are unimpressed by the Dahl boys' antics. "They took being Pony Express riders really seriously," says Drew, who later con-

fesses that they were armed. “Joe was on a really fast horse, but he was kind of wild. We caught them switching horses and riders, and one of the guys grabbed Joe’s horse by the bridle. So I pulled down on him and he let go. We got away, but then Joe kept trying to give them the letter, but they wouldn’t take it. We don’t know if Nixon ever got it.”

Mounted robbery attempts aside, Drew runs the home ranch for four years in his early 20s, which ultimately leads Drew to a 36-year career in livestock nutrition. By chance, fate, or the gods of good fortune, those years would shape his future life’s work. Born out of efforts to address mineral deficiencies in livestock, in 2001 Drew developed EmpowerPlus, a highly effective nervous system supplement designed to help individuals with mental health challenges. While this medicine man is no longer a full-time rancher, he still spends time on horseback, branding and working cows with his brothers. He and his wife, Pam, have four children and live in Fallon.

Demar, the eldest, was rodeoing in Australia while on a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when his brothers were

Despite leaning toward equines over bovines, Joe can buckaroo with the best, still actively branding and working cows with his brothers. Never an average trader, Joe always follows the horses wherever they take him, from sagebrush flats in Nevada to jumper courses, race-tracks, and the polo fields in California. He is working on a “Horse Stories” series, sifting through the string of memorable mounts and characters of his long and storied life. Joe says he has loved every second spent horseback, whether day-working on a ranch, chasing mustangs, or striking a deal for the next *best horse* he’s ever had. He lives in Fallon with his wife, Janette, while leasing a ranch in Lida, Nev. He still trades in horses, real estate, and tall tales.

Like all his siblings, Joe boasts of great kids, six in all, including his son, Harvey, a former NFL player, and his daughter, Rachel, who fol-



PHOTOS COURTESY DAHL FAMILY



ABOVE: The Dahl boys, from left: Harvey the dad, Demar, Joe, Drew, and Mark. LEFT: Siblings, from left: Claudia, Demar, Joe, Mark, Jennifer, Drew and Olivia at a family reunion in 2021. BELOW: Branding in Lida, from left: Ben Colvin, Joe Dahl and Finn Parsons, with Scott and Jace Nelson horseback.

attempting their mail heist. Now 83, he flies from his home in Fallon to his Starr Valley Ranch. Like Drew and Joe, Demar is an avid pilot. He recalls purchasing an old J-3 plane with Joe, which cost them a horse and \$1,500. As Demar tells it, Joe read a book on flying and offered to fly to Oroville to show Demar the ropes. “Joe said, ‘I’ve got this plane figured out. I’ll come up and show you how.’ I said, ‘Good, how much time in it do you have?’ ‘Oh, I’ve probably flown five hours.’ He flew up, I got in, and away we went.”

Demar, statesman as well as cattleman, made a nearly successful bid for U.S. Senate against incumbent Harry Reid in 1992, and later became a three-term Elko County commissioner. An original member of the 1970s’ Sagebrush Rebellion, Demar remains a powerful voice for grazing, land rights, and the return of public lands to the states. “It’s all been a lot of fun,” he says, recalling his life as a buckaroo, rancher, and politician. He and his wife, Laura, have five children and also live in Fallon.

Joe, the horse trader, measures his life not in years but in horses.



lowed in her grandfather’s footsteps by taking a job with the USDA in 2023, all while establishing a community newspaper in rural Nevada. Preferring her scrappy little newspaper to working for the feds, very much in the fashion of William Randolph Hearst—but in jeans and red cowboy boots—Rachel added three more papers to her burgeoning media empire. Now she’s taking the reins in the challenge of her lifetime as *RANGE* magazine’s new publisher.

Mark, who was also raised working cattle in Starr Valley, became



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: Mark, Demar, Joe, Drew, and Ira T. Wines (sister Claudia's son) at the 2023 family reunion in Starr Valley. BELOW: A fancy spur by master silversmith Mark Dahl. His bits are a knockout, too. BOTTOM: Rachel cooks for a big family reunion. All reunions for the Dahls are big. The biggest was in 2019 where they entertained and served 200 at the home ranch in Starr Valley.

fascinated with silver-mounted bits and fancy spurs at an early age. With a young family to feed, he chose silversmithing over a safer paycheck. "At first he'd take a whole month to make a pair of spurs and get \$200," his wife, Coralee, recalls. "That didn't go very well with five kids at home. I told him he could make more pumping gas in town, but he said no. He could make more doing silver than anything else."

Mark taught himself the hard way. "I just had a very long, expensive education in my shop," he says. He is now a founding and emeritus member of the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, with orders that stretch years in advance. The couple, who have six children, still live in Starr Valley. Their son, Tabor, manages a ranch in Lund, Nev., while also practicing silversmithing, and their grandson, Rueben, works alongside Mark learning the trade.

Claudia Dahl Wines, the oldest, carried her love of home and history into years as director of the Northeastern Nevada Museum in Elko and later into two books. Of her four children, one is carrying on the fami-



ly tradition of ranching. "My son, Ira, is managing the largest ranching operation in Nevada," she says proudly, noting that he is now president of Ellison Ranching Company, which spans more than two million acres.

Olivia Dahl Anderson carried the family's faith outward. With her husband, Brad, she served on missions as far away as Sweden, the same place where her grandfather Dahl first joined the LDS church before immigrating to Utah's Salt Lake Valley. Settling in Reno, they raised six children. One daughter, Hanna, makes her home in Starr Valley, not far from her grandparents' ranch.

Jennifer Dahl Smith, the youngest, took her early ranching experience to Texas with her husband, Ray. Their four sons are building on that legacy in their own ways. Alexander runs cattle, sheep, and goats in Oklahoma. Austin worked at Rupert Murdoch's Matador Ranch in Montana before recently relocating to Oklahoma, and Eli is a farrier near Texas A&M. Zachary and his sister, Jennifer, followed different paths. "I was about 10 when I followed my dad straight down a ridge on horseback—like something out of 'The Man from Snowy River,'" Zachary says. "I made it, but I knew ranching wasn't for me."

Every other year, the Dahl family gathers for a summer family reunion. Shared winter holidays are impractical, however, as the clan is now over 200 strong and would require a convention center to contain them and their raucous laughter. Whether in Wells City Park or a Starr Valley backyard, four generations of Dahls gather to swap memories. While the siblings recall snow on their bedrolls, roping wild horses, and the home ranch, the next generation adds their own chapters to the family's cowboy story across Nevada, Texas, and beyond. ■

Leanna Lehman is an award-winning journalist and published author who grew up surrounded by the traditions of ranch life that now span four generations.