



Diamonds in the Rough

Where canyon living is a lifestyle and ranchers make a living.

Words by Rochelle Danielson. Photos by Nancy Huff.

Dan and Cynthia Warnock operate their ranch at Summit Creek along the Imnaha River in Oregon's north-eastern Wallowa County. Their home place lies deep in a canyon 23 miles upriver from Imnaha, a tiny town that supports a school, a church, a grange hall and a store which is a combination restaurant/tavern with dry goods and groceries—a focal point where people meet.

From “The Store” to the couple’s home—about a 30-minute drive—the wide washboard graveled road winds and climbs southward through a narrow valley of rugged mountain terrain. Dan knows it well as it passes Snell Creek and his childhood home where he and his two brothers, Charles and Joe, grew up. The ranch has been in the family since 1929 when Dan’s grandparents, Charles and Wilma Warnock, purchased it from the Snell family. Grant and Barbara Warnock, Dan’s parents, inherited the place in 1962, and they transferred the ranch to Joe and his wife, Shari, in 1994 when Grant became ill. He



MAP OF IMNAHA CANYON COURTESY OF RYAN R. JOHNSON

passed away in 2017. Dan’s mom still lives there in her traditional red house trimmed in white, while Joe and family live just north a half-mile.

The place holds many youthful memories for Dan. He recalls how, fresh out of high school, he followed in his sibling’s footsteps cowboying for other ranchers and eventually settling in at the Grouse Creek Ranch, located further upriver. While answering a request to help a Wallowa Valley rancher work cows Dan met Cynthia Verges of Plush, Ore. He invited her to a coronation dance. They married in 1993, and as she vividly remembers, “We lived in a tiny house in the canyon.”

During the following 10 years the two became parents of three sons: Tyrel, Wyatt and Rylie. With Dan continuing to work for Grouse Creek, Cynthia began a career with the Soil and Water Conservation District three days a week in Enterprise, a 60-mile drive one way. “The flexibility of the hours worked well in those years when we were raising a family,” Cynthia says.



The Warnock family celebrated Grant and Barbara's 50th wedding anniversary in 2011. Left to right, front row: Cole, Charlie, Grant, Barbara, Joe, Shari, and BoDean. Middle row: Clancy, Wyatt, Dan, Cynthia and BJ. Back row: Rylie and Tyrel. BELOW: Black Angus-crossbred cow/calf pairs on top of Harl Butte. OPPOSITE TOP: Vista view of canyon with Summit Creek and the Warnock home place along the river. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Map of Imnaha Canyon.

After 17 years with Grouse Creek, Dan and Cynthia took the opportunity to lease Summit Creek, owned by Diamondhead Ranch, which included meadow pasture along the river and a large range area high above the canyon—"on top," as it's called—in the Harl Butte area of the Wallowa Whitman National Forest. Dan says, "Besides the lease we have a Forest Service allotment and also rental pasture on Big Sheep Creek and lower Imnaha."



off the pickup alone on dangerous slopes like ours. While calving we take our turns checking heifers. Our boys who live not too far away are always willing to lend a hand.

Temperatures vary in the canyon. "It tickles me watching spring come up the river. I come home from work to the cold and say to Dan, 'Oh, it's spring at your mother's house,' or 'spring has arrived at Charlie's place.' Then we call Ty, who lives five miles downriver from the store to

"It was a tough time for the first few years," Cynthia reminisces. "We started with a few cows, but kept building. Got our own tractors, built a corral, improved the fields and planted alfalfa. We experimented with cover crops trying to improve the soil for better water-holding capacity. Dan was not a mechanic, but we were short of money and so far from town so he learned the art quickly. In the process I found that he is the only person I know who can complete a sentence with nothing but cuss words, and not use the same one twice."

The Warnocks work well as a team. Cynthia, "the hayer," operates the swather and baler. Dan puts the hay away. In the summertime she sets the hand line, calling it her exercise program. Although first and foremost Dan takes care of the cows, he also handles the wheel line, irrigation pods, and helps his wife set pipe. Their water source comes from river flow and a gravity-fed pipeline in the creek. Their Summit Creek place, at 3,200 feet elevation, is a snow zone. "Last winter," Dan says, "we had 16 inches of snow in one night."

Cynthia adds: "During winter months I arrive later to the SWCD office because I help Dan feed cows. I don't want him throwing bales

find it is like summer there."

From mid-May and into fall Dan and Cynthia run their 150 Black Angus-crossbred cow/calf pairs "on top" at Harl Butte. "At near the 6,000-foot elevation the rugged, forested terrain makes it extremely challenging country," says Dan, who has spent many hours at cow camps over the years. "Familiarity is a plus when you ride it week after week observing and moving cows, checking water quality, mending fences, and salt placement."

"Dan is a grass man," says Cynthia. "He know his grass and checks it continuously."

"It's not the calendar date you go in with the cows," says Dan. "It's when that grass is ready. When I see ragged grass I know it's time to move the animals. It's my belief that so many young people now graze it to the ground, and over the years that grass is not going to be there anymore."

In early fall the Warnocks bring the young heifers and steers home. A month later the calves are shipped to Maags Feedlot in Jamison, Ore. Later in fall the momma cows are rounded up, counted, and taken



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The future generation of Warnocks, from left: BoDean, Cole, Clancy, Rylie, Wyatt, BJ and Tyrel. ➤ Lower cow camp. ➤ Dan and Cynthia on his 59th birthday. ➤ Dan on his way up steep draw to lower cow camp to gather strays.

home for winter. Missing cows are tallied and Dan goes in search. Cynthia says: "I've watched him ride off leading a pack animal up snow-covered trails. He'll head across the top from camp to camp in search. He may take three or four days, but he'll find and gather the few wanderers and bring them home. I worry, but he's tough."

"Dan is a true-blue cowboy," says good friend and Oregon state senator Todd Nash. "He's definitely a capable hand with a cow." Todd recalls a time years ago when five different ranchers who formed the Marr Flat Association were gathering and sorting cattle. Dan and his young sons were helping. The boys, although trying their best, would wind up in the wrong spot. Dan silently understood, and without a negative word, he danced his horse around and covered their mistakes. "He was so patient with them. When I mentioned it, he replied that he



wanted his boys to like what they were doing and they'd learn faster by showing instead of yelling at them," says Todd. "He passed a good lesson down to those boys, who, today, are all good with cows. To me, it speaks highly of Dan's character."

To this day Dan and Cynthia have good rapport with their sons who are all in the ranch industry, and good mechanics. Ty is a jack-of-all-trades. He is into farming and Alaska fishing. Recently he married Jill McClaran of McClaran Ranch downriver. Rylie, still single, is employed by Dwayne Voss, a cattle rancher in the canyon. Cynthia says, "We tease those lower Imnaha people that they are stealing our upriver children."

Middle son, Wyatt, and his wife,

Mariana, and three daughters live in Richland, Ore., near Snake River. He works for other ranchers, and is a farrier. Wyatt speaks of his father with fondness. "Dad's a problem solver. You can talk to him, ask questions and he listens. He might not answer right away, but he'll always get back to you...a week, sometimes longer. When he does, he gives a practical solution, something you can work with."

The Warnocks are not always work and no play. Together they fish, hunt elk, pick huckleberries, and hunt morel mushrooms. "Dan enjoys training colts," Cynthia says. "I garden, sew, can fruit, vegetables and meat with Barbara's recipe. I also make rhubarb wine."

After reflection Cynthia admits: "I'm more conservative, and Dan is more, 'Let's do this.' I guess it's a good combination. He makes me think out of the box." Then she sums it up saying, "Dan is a kid who never grew up but assumes his responsibilities." ■

Rochelle Danielson lives in Enterprise, Ore.

Name's the Same!

In *RANGE's* Summer 2026 issue, an article called "Careful Stewards, a Warnock Ranch Family Album" was written by Dan Warnock of Warnock Ranches in Oregon's Baker and Wasco counties. In this Winter 2025/2026 issue of *RANGE*, the story is about Dan Warnock of Wallowa County's Imnaha River Canyon on Summit Creek.

They are two different Dan Warnocks, but related.

Their lineage ties together from the late 1800s and early 1900s when the lure of gold in California, mining claims and stories of majestic mountains and green valleys brought Warnock ancestry across the plains of Kansas to settle in Wallowa County. The history books tell us that Wallowa County's young Dan Warnock's great-grandfather, James "Gullruth" Warnock, followed Tom Warnock's family (cousins), landed and settled six miles up the Imnaha River and that's where it all began. ■