

The Journal of the American West

# Ranch & Reata

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The Romance of Robert Dawson's West

Wyoming's Polo Scene

Oklahoma Saddlemaker Jeff Wade

The Legacies of Charlie Russell and Teddy Blue Abbott

# Home on the Range

When your family's home and business have barely changed in a century, what happens when you see your livelihood dwindling even as you watch your grandkids growing up?

By Tim Keller



photos by Tim Keller

New Mexico rancher Darien Brown flanks a herd of cattle headed to new pasture. The Brown Ranch encompasses 10,500 acres, enough to support 200 cows

**W**aters flowing down the east slopes of Johnson Mesa, east of Raton, form the Dry Cimarron River as it passes the Folsom Man archaeological site and the village of

Folsom, where a devastating 1908 flood left little in its wake. The river – some would call it a creek – continues east and north for 80 miles before exiting the state on its way to the Arkansas River above Tulsa.





In 1865, Irishman Mike Devoy took a job creating the original government survey of the valley. Finding Mexican shepherders and a winter Indian camp, he liked the place so much that he filed a homestead claim and moved in. He built a small general store and a successful cattle ranch whose irrigation system and buildings are still in use, 140 years later, by the Brown family, who acquired the ranch at auction after Devoy's death in 1914. From the inception of American cattle ranching to the 21st century, this one ranch has seen it all.

Dawn hasn't begun when the phone wakes me. "You wanted to ask me some questions about ranching?" It's Darien Brown. "Today's a good day.

We're taking some calves a hundred miles south and we can talk in the truck."

In the sunrise glow, I brake for a flock of wild turkeys scurrying across Highway 456 besides grazing Longhorn cattle near Folsom Falls. It's autumn: the smell of roasted green chile lingers in the crisp air.

At milepost 13, I turn at the modest old "Brown Ranch" sign and find Darien loading cattle from Devoy's old pens, assisted by his sons Brian and Robbie and friend Lupe Machuca. Underfoot are grandsons Kyle, Kade and Jace, ages 4 to 10, the sixth generation of the Brown Ranch.

"This is the first time we've gotten so little rain that we have to truck some cows to someone else's pasture,"



Kade and Kyle Brown represent part of the family's sixth generation on the ranch

Darien tells me later on the long drive to Vernon Reif's ranch south of Clayton. "He got his rain this year, and mine, too."

Darien's great-grandfather was John Thomas Brown, a Texas cowboy who moved to the Dry

raise just 200 cows. "It's too much work for one man, but not enough money for one man to make a living," Darien explains. "In the 1950s and '60s, 50 or 60 cows would make a good living for a family. Today, 200 cows won't pay the bills."



Despite the economic challenges of ranching, Darien Brown values the chance to work in the open with his sons and grandsons

Like most ranch wives today, Darien's wife, Dianne, earns a much-needed paycheck working away from the ranch: with degrees in agricultural biology and pest management, plus a masters degree earned online, she's the science teacher at the Branson School, just across the state line in tiny Branson, Colorado; the Branson School is closer than the nearest New Mexico school, at Des Moines.

Darien and Dianne's son, Brian, works for Folsom

Well Service. "Any time I'm not working there, I'm working here on the ranch," says Brian, 28, who lives in Branson with his wife, Laura, and their sons, Cole, Jace, Kade and Kyle. Brian's brother, Robbie, 27, left Texas Tech just short of earning a mechanical engineering degree to join the U.S. Air Force. "He got patriotic," Dianne says. Robbie's a C-130 crew chief stationed at Abilene, close enough to drive 475 miles home to help move these calves.

Unloading the calves at Reif's, I ask Robbie whether he wouldn't prefer a weekend of rest. "This *is* rest," he replies. He and Brian hope to one day take over the ranch, just as Darien did from his dad, just as Darien's dad and granddad did from their dads. Despite

Cimarron Valley in 1882 and built a home in Long Canyon. His son Jay T. Brown bought the Devoy place and started ranching it when he returned from World War I action in France, paying off the entire loan with his first year's alfalfa crop. "It's not like that anymore," Darien laments.

"Fifty years ago," Darien says, "my dad could trade the money he made on 10 calves for one new car. I'll make about \$700 per calf this year. Ten calves might buy me a third of a new car."

Over the past century, the Brown Ranch has grown to 10,500 acres, which sounds like a lot to someone unfamiliar with the realities of ranching in the Southwest. But in this high, arid country, it's enough to



today's daunting challenges, it's an enviable outdoor lifestyle: it's not just *close to* the land; it *is* the land.

But the cows don't make enough money for Darien to hire cowboys for this all-day job. He's got Brian and Robbie. He's got Lupe, who works in trade for Darien pasturing 16 of Lupe's own cows, a deal that's suited both for more than a decade.

Neighbors help neighbors. Driving downstream from the mouth of Toll Gate Canyon, where Highway 551 branches north to Branson from the Dry Cimarron, there's the Jeffers Ranch, the Bannon, the Brown, the Cross L, the Burchard, the Whittenburg. Darien's using a Cross L trailer; they've borrowed his tractor rake. Darien loads a semi-trailer from the Bannon's chutes; the Bannons borrowed Darien's tractor for mowing. Ranchers call this neighboring.

The Bannons have a daughter at Des Moines High School and two sons off at college. Like the Brown Ranch, the Bannons' century-old spread will be here for the kids, the sixth generation, but it may not support them.

As the numbers increasingly fail to add up, cable pioneer John Malone's T.O. Ranch is buying family ranches right to the Dry Cimarron, just as Malone's friend Ted Turner is doing west of Raton. Looking for a place to invest fast-growing wealth, each of these self-made media billionaires is building a sprawling multi-million-acre ranching empire like the cattle barons of the 19th century. This preserves the vast open beauty of the land, but it displaces the families along with their century of ranching heritage.

In a caravan of three pickup trucks pulling stock trailers toward Clayton, Darien sees rubber fly off a tire on the trailer Robbie is pulling. Darien calls Robbie's iPhone from his own cell phone. "This is something that amazes me," Darien turns to me. "We're driving down the highway and I'm on the telephone. I use it in the fields, everywhere." Robbie pulls over to change the tire, losing only minutes.

"Now I have my cow records and bank records in a computer," Darien continues. Though I will learn to reach him by phone, he doesn't do e-mail. When Dianne's too busy to type out a business letter for him, he reluctantly sits at the computer to do it himself.

Like the telephone, horses are still around, too, but Darien doesn't use them as much as he used to. "I've got seven horses and three 4-wheelers," he says. "I use the horses

when we're shipping or branding or gathering cattle off the mesa, but I use the 4-wheelers about 10 times more often. They're better for most things around here. I keep three of them so I always have one that works."

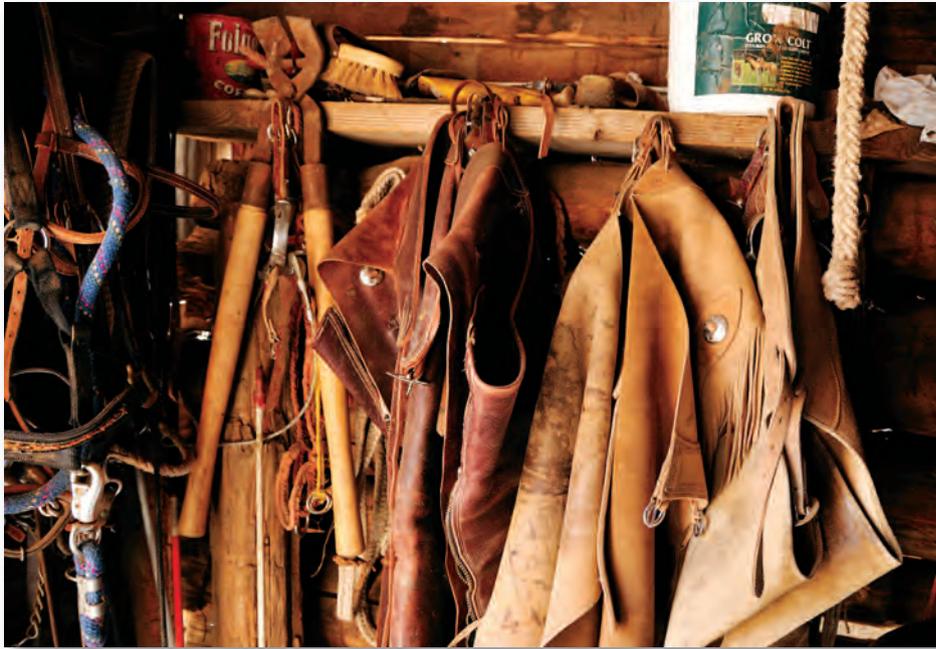
Another new technology may bring financial hope for the future. Like all of eastern New Mexico, the Dry Cimarron Valley is rich in wind. Darien has joined with many of his neighbors to form the Sierra Grande Land Association, which is lining up to negotiate deals with wind power companies. Like the oil boom a century ago, wind power promises to help many ranchers stay on their land in the 21st century. According to Darien, one wind turbine produces more electricity than all that's carried by Southwest Electric Co-op, which powers the



Darien's son, Brian, lives in town and works for a well service. He hopes to partner with his brother, Robbie, to one day take over the family ranch



northeast corner of New Mexico. The new wind corridor will send its electricity on to power-hungry Arizona and southern California, leaving a trail of money to those on whose land the big wind turbines sit.



The Browns' tack room offers evidence of the ongoing importance of horses in the ranch's work. More and more, though, 4-wheelers prove to be efficient alternatives on the outfit

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Darien makes some money leasing his ranch to hunting guides – a lucrative business in these parts, where hunters come from far and wide and pay top dollar to bag an elk, deer, antelope, wild turkey, bear or mountain lion. This West is wild enough that Darien, Brian and Lupe carry pistols – not to ward off outlaws so much as rattlesnakes and four-legged varmints. In the last five years, neighboring ranchers have killed a rabid bobcat, a mountain lion, rattlesnakes, and three troublesome bears.

Driving up a back canyon a couple weeks later with

young grandsons Kade and Kyle sharing the bench seat of his most recent truck, a 1997 Ford, Darien says he'll work the ranch as long as he's alive. "A rancher retires when they throw dirt on his face," he smiles.

He clearly loves the life. Nodding at Kade and Kyle, who accompany him all day, two days a week, he says, "There's very few people who have the privilege of taking their kids, or their grandkids, with them to work. We pay a high price for being this isolated, but one of the payoffs is this."

He recalls riding around the ranch with his own father, Jay T. Brown Jr., who died in 1992. There's no telling at this point whether the 145-year-old ranch will pass next to Brian and Robbie, then to Kade and Kyle. It's supported an

economy and a lifestyle since the close of the Civil War. The iconic American cowboy has progressed from trail drives to trailers, from horses to pickups and 4-wheelers.

A welcome rain arrives as Darien throws flakes of hay off the flatbed to a line of hungry calves while 5-year-old Kade guides the slow-rolling truck. At Kade's age, Darien was doing the same thing. The past is easy to see. Now that it's coming on dark – his days never end before dark – Darien's too busy to spend his time pondering a future that no one can see anyway.



Writer and photographer Tim Keller teaches English at Raton High School in Raton, New Mexico. See more of his work at [www.timkellerarts.com](http://www.timkellerarts.com). This story originally appeared in *New Mexico* magazine.