

# OUR WRITING

## The Long Way

By **Tim Keller**

*A Dust Bowl childhood taught Sadie Renfro the pleasures of ranch life and the necessity of long drives. At 90, she still puts the big miles on her pickup.*

The dirt roads went on and on. Sadie Brown didn't care for them. During school years, she had to lodge with town families far from her own on the remote Brown Ranch in Long Canyon, 30 miles northeast of Folsom, New Mexico. "Winters were hell," she says, "and summers at home were heaven."

She spent her first four school years over the ridgeline and across the border in Branson, Colorado, 20 miles from home. Then she spent six at Folsom School. There was a year with an aunt and uncle at Otto, near Clayton where the Dust Bowl had recently changed everything. Just before her 17th birthday, she graduated with the class of 1940 at Des Moines School, 38 miles of dirt road from home.

To understand why anyone would keep coming back, you'd have to spend a little time at the ranch. That's where Sadie spends her time. Last summer, she turned 90



Sadie's grandfather, Texas cowboy John Thomas Brown, moved to Long Canyon and built the rock ranch house in the mid-1880s. Sadie grew up in the rock house; today she lives a quarter mile up the road and her daughter Margaret lives in the rock house. Nephew Henry Brown lives a quarter mile the other direction.

From any of the three houses, Long Canyon curves elegantly, Red Angus cattle dotting the distant hillsides. For 130 years, this valley has sustained generations of the Brown family.

Sadie left for business school in Albuquerque. “In 1941 I was working at Jordan’s Clothing Store when I met my husband. He’d ride by on his motorcycle and whistle at me. I’d whistle back.” Sadie married Kenneth Renfro in February 1942. They lived in the city and raised two daughters, Gloria and Margaret, but they all enjoyed extended stays at the ranch.

“We’d come up here for our vacations,” Sadie recalls. “I’d help my mother and Kenneth helped with ranch chores. It may have been work, but for us it was vacation, getting out in the country.” When the girls were old enough, they’d board the train at Albuquerque to spend summers on the ranch. “Our grandparents would come pick us up at the depot in Raton,” Margaret says. “There was no TV out here. We did a lot of reading. I learned to sew and cook and ride horses and drive, all out here.”

Sadie built a career in banking, becoming bank vice-president before retiring in 1980 to move with Kenneth back home to the Brown Ranch. They set their house beyond the rock house where they could see the whole valley. Together, they built up the cattle operation, winning awards for their conservation and grazing management practices. Since Kenneth’s passing in 1999, Sadie has continued with the help of her nephew Henry Brown and, more recently, daughter and son-in-law Margaret and Danny O’Quinn. “I like to say that we moved home so she could take care of us,” Margaret says.

“I had the most wonderful childhood out here,” Sadie says from her lush lawn. “We raised red shorthorns. Mom raised chickens and the garden. She canned, and we traded butter and eggs for groceries. Dad would hire hands to help with the hay crop. Mom and I cooked for the crews. We raised hay with just rain and flooding, opening the dams, and we used the team and wagon.”

This summer the only green has been Sadie’s lawn. “Since 2000, it’s been heck here, it’s been so dry.” She feeds her 50 cow-calf pairs daily. “I go out with Henry once a week to check them all. He has his cows and I have mine but we buy together and ship together. I order my own hay, do all my own business management. I’ve never missed a branding or shipping. I’ve always been proud of my cattle. They’re my life.

It turns out she’s never been without at least a few cows of her own, even in Albuquerque when she was a bank officer.



Her home is an oasis of green, beautifully landscaped. "I'm pretty independent," she allows. "I don't really have any idle time. I'm not a telephone person." She doesn't do email, either. She does her own grocery shopping and cooking. She's a passionate gardener, tending her vegetable garden and fruit trees. Last year she canned a bumper crop of apricots. She likes taking care of herself. When Margaret tried once to take an armload of firewood from her, Sadie rebelled, saying, "What are you trying to do, kill me? I need my exercise."

She watches some TV but spends more time reading books, especially westerns, Christian books, John Grisham, Danielle Steele, biographies and other non-fiction. "And I love to walk," she says. Each evening she sets off down the road, first crossing the lawn she's no longer allowed to mow. "When Margaret and Danny moved to the rock house last year, Danny disabled my mower so only he can mow." He couldn't abide a 90-year-old woman mowing her own lawn, but Sadie did it herself until she was 89.

There don't appear to be any other concessions to age. She's loved to dance since she "learned all the steps from my Uncle Charlie at the country dances in the basement of the Luna Theater in Clayton when I was a schoolgirl." When Margaret says Sadie is still "cuttin' the rug" at country dances, Sadie scoffs. But she's still dancing. "It's probably one of my most enjoyable things to do," she says.

In 1996, Sadie and daughter Gloria O'Bryant became partners in R.O.P.E.S. Western & Casual Wear in Clayton. Sadie worked as a sales clerk for a spell. She's still the bookkeeper. Every ten days, she drives her 13-year-old 3/4-ton four-wheel-drive Chevy pick-up to Clayton to do the store's bookkeeping.

She takes the long way so there's only the first eight miles of dirt road. She reaches her mailbox at six miles; mail's delivered three times a week. It's 83 miles to Clayton. She could take the short cut, just 63 miles, but that's dirt road all the way and there's no cell phone service anywhere.

Sometimes she spends a night in Clayton. When she arrives back home in Long Canyon, she takes her evening walk. Deer, elk, and wild turkeys are common companions. Bears and rattlesnakes are more common than she'd like. A bobcat recently killed seven of eight kittens in a litter so now she and Margaret keep a new litter sheltered at night. Keeping cats helps keep the rattlesnake population down, but other wildlife keeps the cat population down.

It's hard to imagine anything keeping Sadie down. She comes from a long line of nonagenarians. Margaret and Danny are in the rock house, helping with ranch operations. Gloria and her husband Jim have always run cattle near Clayton. Asked about the future, Margaret says, "Both daughters will make sure this ranch keeps going. It's been in the family too long not to."

They'll have help, too. Sadie has six grandchildren, 16 great grandchildren, and one great great granddaughter. Like most 21st century families, they're scattered far and wide, but many are still engaged in various elements of the ranching life.



Last June they all came together, five generations, to celebrate Sadie's 90th birthday. The big party was held at Freedom Outpost, formerly the Folsom Inn and now Margaret and Danny's community center in Folsom. Friends came from near and far. Eloy Gonzales's band came from Clayton to provide the music. The dancing went deep into the night and, more often than not, there was Sadie, at her own birthday party, in the middle of the dance floor, cuttin' the rug.

Tim Keller teaches English language arts at Raton High School. A professional freelance writer and photographer, he's a regular contributor to *New Mexico Magazine*, *Western Horseman*, and others. He posts his work at [TimKellerArts.com](http://TimKellerArts.com).