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CULTURAL RESOURCES

A History of Ranching in Old Isabella and Post-Dam Lake Isabella

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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
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I. INTRODUCTION

Aerial view of Isabella Lake and Dams looking south toward the town of Lake Isabella.

The town of Lake Isabella, California, is located at the confluence of the north and south forks of the Kern River in the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. Known as the "Kern Valley" or "Hot Springs Valley," the area is named for the Kern River and naturally occurring hot springs. This landscape has borne witness to part of the greater narrative of the American West. Generations of Native American people have the longest history in the area. The Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu have been stewards of the landscape for thousands of years and both cultures have proven resilient across centuries of change. A mining boom in the 1850s signaled the beginning of intensive non-Native settlement, followed by an emergence of ranching and agriculture that started in the 1870s. From the 1900s to the 1980s, Isabella was best known as a ranching town. The ranching heritage of Isabella included Tübatulabal, Kawaiisu, Chinese, Spanish, Mexican and Euro Americans who contributed to an ethos of self-sufficiency, strong work ethic and small-town community that continues to shape present-day Lake Isabella.

Isabella Dam construction site, c. 1950. *Credit: San Joaquin Valley Library System.*

The social fabric of the ranching era has endured through a significant change in the landscape. In 1953, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the Isabella Dam as part of a larger plan to manage flooding in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys.[1] The dam on the Kern River created Isabella Lake, a reservoir that flooded the original town site of Old Isabella, the neighboring town of Old Kernville and hundreds of acres of rangeland. The Isabella Dam also signaled a decline of the ranching industry in the Kern Valley. By the 1980s, most of the ranches had been sold and tourism became the leading economic engine in Lake Isabella.

This report follows the ranching history of Old Isabella and the post-dam town, renamed Lake Isabella, through three generations of a single ranching family. The story of the Neill-Silicz-Mulkey family began in 1875 when John Neill emigrated from Prince Edward Island to the Kern Valley.[2] After working at a local sawmill for several years, Neill acquired businesses and land, becoming a successful entrepreneur and rancher by the early 1900s.[3] Neill's daughter, Dora Silicz, née Neill, continued to manage the family ranch, which she passed on to her daughter, Marion "Mernie" and son-in-law Burel Mulkey, a nationally recognized rodeo champion.

Isabella Main Dam control tower, Oct. 29, 2012. *Credit: Photo by Carlos Lazo, SPK-PAO.*

DORA NEILL SILICZ

Central to the story of the Neill-Silicz-Mulkey ranch is Dora Silicz. A lifelong resident of Isabella, Dora's lifetime spanned the rise of the ranching industry in the Kern Valley in the late 1800s through the construction and aftermath of the Isabella Dam in the mid-1960s. Dora was also a cornerstone within her family and the community of Old Isabella. Known best for her generosity, skill and work ethic, Dora grew up learning how to farm, raise cattle, cook and manage finances from her father. After she married, Dora successfully ran the family ranch while raising a family of six children. Dora did not leave behind many written records, but her personality and values have been captured in the oral histories of her children and granddaughters.

Dora Silicz. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Burel Mulkey. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

For almost a century, the ranch represented the work of crews of cowboys and generations of family members who herded cattle on horseback across the Kern River Valley and surrounding mountains. During the late 2010s, the ranch and rangeland became part of the Isabella Dam project area. Infrastructure improvements required an expanded footprint at the foot of the dam, and remaining buildings from the Ranch were demolished. Although the Ranch no longer exists, the ranching era and the values represented by community members like the Neill-Silicz-Mulkey family continue to shape the heritage of Lake Isabella, California.

The story of the Ranch is part of the broader heritage of ranching in the West. The buildings and landscape are physical reminders of a century of ranching in Isabella, and as a result of this legacy, historians and archaeologists at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in partnership with the California State Historic Preservation Office, have determined that the family Ranch complex illustrates a meaningful part of American heritage according to the standards the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The character of the family operation exemplified the close-knit community rooted in a shared awareness of ranching life in the Kern Valley. The Ranch also represented the ranching lifestyle through the entertainment and horsemanship of the rodeo circuit, as illustrated by the career of Burel Mulkey, a champion cowboy.

Passed by Congress in 1966, the NHPA established guidelines for preserving national heritage in the United States. A key element of the legislation is "responsible stewardship of cultural resources by federal agencies."[4] "Cultural resources" is a broad term referring to the tangible evidence of human culture: archaeological sites, objects, buildings and modifications to the landscape can all be classified as cultural resources. Under the NHPA, federal projects, like the Isabella Dam, must balance infrastructure improvements with measures to preserve the cultural resources of the area.

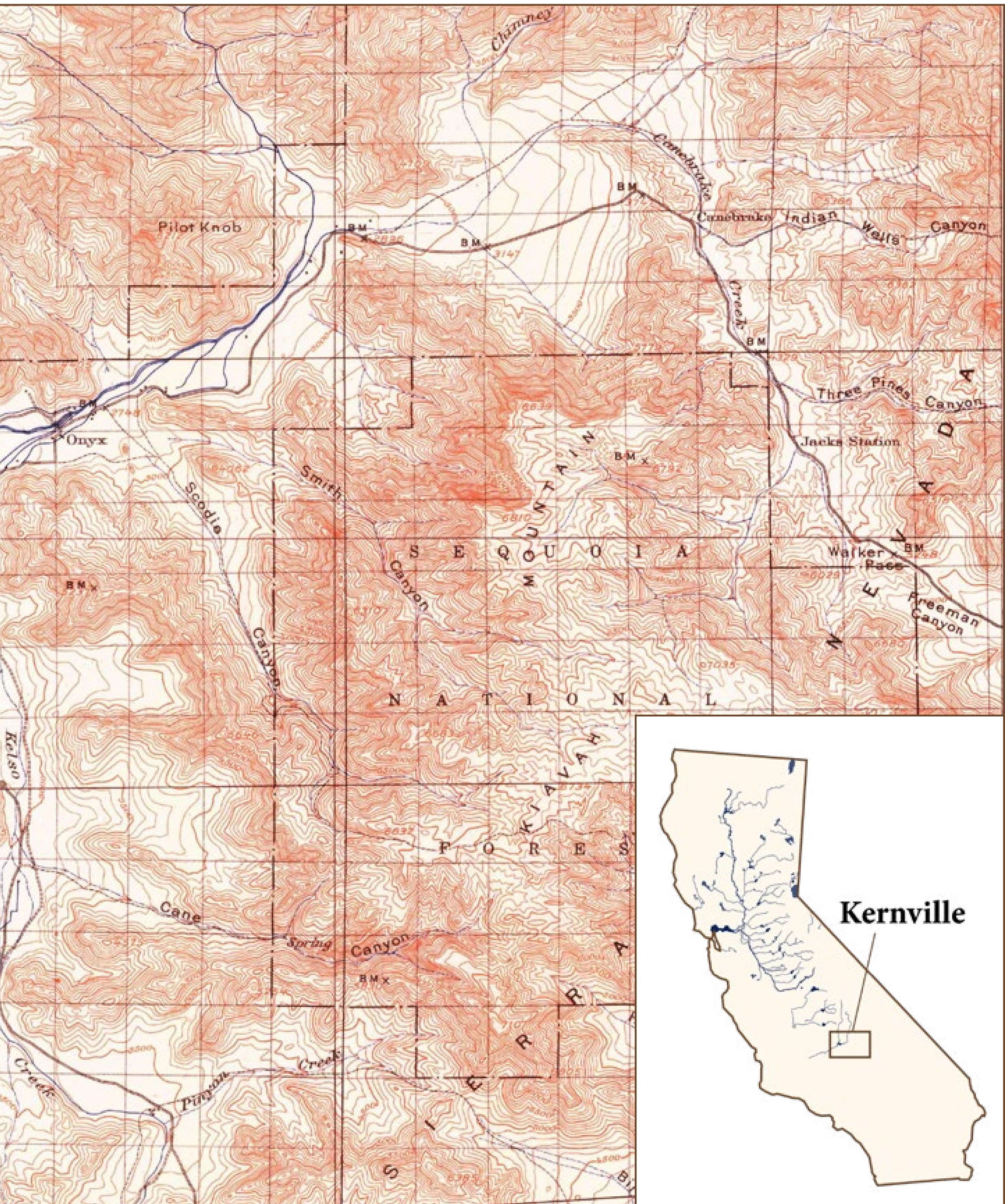
In 2018, the Corps demolished the remaining buildings at the Ranch in advance of work on the Isabella Dam. Under Section 106, part of the NHPA, projects that cause such damage result in an "adverse effect" to historic properties and require mitigation in the public interest. Mitigation may take a number of forms, ranging from exhibits to documentary videos. In order to mitigate the removal of the Ranch buildings, this document records and acknowledges the history of the Ranch and the community affected by the Isabella Dam.

The historic Hot Springs Ranch property in Lake Isabella, California, c. 1970. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

The historic Hot Springs Ranch property in Lake Isabella, California, Oct. 25, 2016.
Credit: Photo by Rick Brown, SPK-PAO.

KERNVILLE, CALIFORNIA, 1906

One of the earliest maps of Kernville, California before the construction of Isabella Lake Dam, 1906. *Credit: USGS. Kernville, California location map (lower right) design by John Prettyman, SPK-PAO.*



II. KERN VALLEY BEGINNINGS

When John Neill ventured west from Prince Edward Island in 1875, the town of Isabella had not yet been established; instead, the future community was a rural outpost, just south of the town of Kernville. The histories of Isabella and Kernville, both situated along the Kern River, have been intertwined through geography, commerce and community. Kernville was founded in the early 1860s when a quartz strike brought the first significant population of non-Native settlers to the area.[5] By 1870, census figures showed that just over 160 people lived in the newly established mining town of Kernville. Unsurprisingly, the majority of Kernville residents claimed "miner" as their profession, and the ratio of men to women, approximately 8 to 1, indicated a heavy presence of male miners who travelled from strike to strike without families.[6] Although mining remained the most common industry through the 1870s, signs of transition from a transient boomtown to a more stable community were present in the statistics.

Kernville, c. 1910. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

The Kernville School District was established in 1868 and by 1870, 11 families lived in Kernville.[7] Family life also appeared in professions. Apart from mining, the most common occupation was "keeping house," claimed by 14 people, all adult women. "Keeping house" referred to the work of managing a household without monetary compensation.[8] Formal employment for women was rare, but the duties of "keeping house" were often essential to businesses run by the family or couple. The success of the Ranch would have depended on the active participation of wives and children who were involved in all aspects of operations, from meal preparation to caring for livestock.

The majority of Kernville citizens enumerated in the census were American-born, emigrating from states ranging from Maine to Texas. Bolstered by the children of the 11 Kernville families, first-generation Californians made up the greatest proportion of residents in Kernville, but the next most prevalent birthplaces after California were China and Mexico. Just under half of Kernville residents were born abroad.

Kernville in 1870

Most Common Occupations

50%
Miner

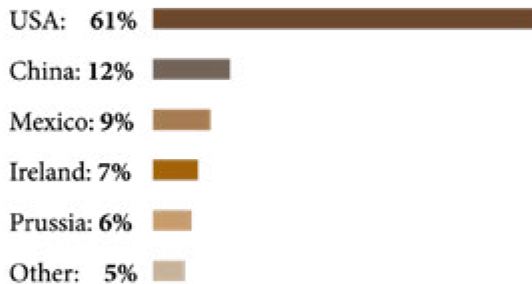
11%
Keeping House

6%
Cook

5%
Teamster

4%
Farmer

Nationality



Gender

79%
Male

21%
Female

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau. *Credit: Graphic design by John Prettyman, SPK-PAO. Illustrations by Getty Images.*

A notable exclusion from the main census was the Native American community. Both the Tübatulabal and the Kawaiisu continued to live and work along the Kern River in the 1870s, but from 1860 to 1890, census regulations directed enumerators to exclude "Indians not taxed" from census figures. In other words, Native Americans who lived on reservations or independently of pioneer settlements did not pay taxes and were not counted by name, age, profession, etc. In California and select other Western states, a separate form could be used to give round numbers of people living in Native American communities.[9] As a result, census records from this period offer a rough idea of how many Native people lived in the West, but these round numbers often overlooked significant portions of the Native population.

According to the 1870 Kernville census, 75 Native American women and men lived on the outskirts of town, but the census assumed a degree of separation between Native and non-Native people that was not reflected in the community.[10] By the 1870s, intermarriage between Native, Anglo, and Mexican families was not uncommon. One example was the Butterbredt family who lived in the North Fork area of the Kern River.[11] The family of seven began with the marriage of Frederick Butterbredt, a white miner, to a Native woman who adopted the name, Betty, in the 1860s. The Butterbredt family was one of many who reflected the diverse heritage of communities along the Kern River. Through time, children and grandchildren of the Butterbredts would go to school and start their own families in Kernville. In Isabella, future generations of the Neill family would go to school with Native children and considered them fellow classmates and friends.[12] This inclusivity and diversity, however, came with a history of conflict that began with the mineral strikes of the 1860s.

III. TÜBATULABAL AND KAWAIISU COMMUNITIES

The growing towns of Kernville and Isabella were founded on the ancestral territory of the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu. Tübatulabal lands spanned from the drainages of the North and South Forks of the Kern River north to Mount Whitney.[13] The Kawaiisu lived southwest of the Tübatulabal, settling primarily between the Paiute and Tehachapi Mountains and traveling periodically into the Mojave Desert between the Amargosa and Mojave Rivers.[14] On the southern foothills of the Sierras, Tübatulabal families travelled together, settling near the rivers during the winter, and traveling over the river valleys, meadows and lakes during the rest of the year. Kawaiisu families lived primarily between the Tehachapi and Paiute Mountains, moving frequently to follow seasonal resources in the chaparral and woodlands, grasslands and desert in the region. Built on the rhythm of the seasons and the distribution of natural resources, the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu cultures developed a generational knowledge of stewardship of the land.

Cheh Weh (Esteban Miranda) and Marie Soustenant Carro, holding baby Teresa, 1916.
Credit: Thomas T. Waterman, U.C. Berkeley.

Starting with the arrival of the Spanish in the late 1700s, the Tübatulabal and the Kawaiisu were in distant contact with non-Native settlers who settled along the coast. Spanish missions, notably the San Buenaventura Mission established in present-day Ventura, introduced new opportunities for trade with coastal and interior groups. Through the early 1800s, Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu interactions with Euro-Americans were largely limited to trade transactions.[15] This ended in 1848 when the gold strike at Sutter's Mill brought thousands of fortune seekers to the California territory. Between 1848 and 1849 the Euro-American population grew from less than 15,000 to over 100,000.[16] In the two decades following the 1848 gold rush, repeated gold strikes in the West brought more and more settlers to California.

Gold was first discovered in the Kern River Valley, then known as the Hot Springs Valley, in 1854.[17] Hard rock mining was the primary draw in 1860s Kernville, and the search for mineral wealth altered waterways, timber resources and soils, disrupting the lifecycles of game, fish and plants that served as the foundation for survival in the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu communities. Miners also brought alcohol, disease and violence.[18] With the dangers posed by contact, the Tübatulabal, Kawaiisu and neighboring tribes began to avoid traditional gathering areas near Euro-American settlements.[19]

Legislation and military action paved the way for Euro-American miners, pioneers and ranchers to take ownership of Tribal land throughout the state. In the 1850s, Congress created seven reservations in response to mounting tension between miners, ranchers, farmers and Native American communities.[20] Reservations were presented as sanctuaries for the Tribes, however these designated lands required Native American communities to leave ancestral territories, often forcibly, and were frequently mismanaged. Residents were subject to starvation and forced labor.[21]

As difficult as it was to live on reservations, living on ancestral lands could be dangerous as well. In the 1860s and 1870s, Native Americans could not legally obtain a title for land ownership, and most could not become landowners until the General Allotment Act of 1887. Without basic legal rights, Native communities were subject to government-sanctioned violence. The most striking example near Kernville was the massacre of 1863, when a detachment of the U.S. Calvary and volunteers killed 35 Native men, including a number of tribal leaders, two miles from Whiskey Flat.[22] The Cavalry ordered the massacre based on an unfounded rumor of Native American revolt. The loss decimated the small Native community. After the death of so many Native men, it was

Mish Nik (Nicolasa Linares Costello) holding her daughter, Rose. *Credit: Thomas T. Waterman, U.C. Berkeley.*

common for Native widows to marry into other tribes and white and Mexican families.[23] This tragedy marked the beginnings of the Butterbredt Family. Frederick first met his future wife in 1863 when he discovered her hiding near Whiskey Flat after her family was murdered.[24]

A memorial to those killed in the 1863 massacre stands in Wofford Heights, and continues to be a testament to the bloody history of western expansion. During a commemoration of the massacre at Wofford Heights in 2007, Ron Wermuth, the great-great-grandson of one of the Tübatulabal men who died, stated, "[The massacre] had a great effect on the survivability of the entire tribe. We cannot forget."[25] The ramifications of contact continue to be part of the history of the Kern Valley, yet, the Kawaiisu and Tübatulabal culture remained resilient. When ranching became a defining part of the American West, Native American families adapted to the new socio-economic order, becoming skilled horsemen and actively participating in the ranching industry. Cultural traditions were compromised by contact, but modern tribal organizations are actively working to preserve and revitalize Native culture in the Kern River Valley.

Howard Peterson, Lottie Chico and Lottie's mother, mana wat (Mariana). *Credit: Thomas T. Waterman, U.C. Berkeley.*

Henry Joaquin holding cowboy hat and looking toward Kern Canyon, June 1916. *Credit: Thomas T. Waterman, U.C. Berkeley.*

In the standard American narrative, "cowboys and indians" have often been set on contrast to one another, but in reality, Native American communities played a pivotal role in the development of ranching in the West. The skills required to manage a ranch: reading the landscape, horsemanship and monitoring herds of big game, had been part of Native American culture in the West for generations.[26]

For thousands of years prior to the rise of the American cattle industry in the Kern Valley, the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle that depended on knowledge of the landscape. Each summer, the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu joined in communal antelope drives with the neighboring Tejon, Ventura Indians and Yokuts near present-day Bakersfield.[27] The Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu thrived without pack animals, but in the late 1700s, horses were introduced through trade with the Spanish missions and were quickly integrated into traditional lifestyles of the Kern Valley.[28] Already skilled at basket making, the Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu made saddles and bridles from milkweed twine and bred, trained, and traded horses as part of a seasonal, semi-permanent lifestyle.[29]

These skills would later translate to the ranching industry. A 1938 ethnographic report about the Tübatulabal community near Old Isabella noted that the "majority of young and middle-aged men work as cowboys and ranch hands on stock ranches in South Fork valley," while women were often responsible for managing family farms including gardens and poultry.[30] One of these cowboys was Earl McKay. McKay was a star cowhand on the Ranch, known for roping, tracking and for his impeccable aim with a rifle. Able to singlehandedly locate, run and tie up seven wild cattle and kill four deer with four shots, McKay's skills could have been fodder for a Wild West novel. Bud Silicz, a Neill grandchild who grew up and worked on the Ranch, observed that McKay was "always at the right place at the right time with a fresh horse," the highest praise for a cowhand.[31]

IV. JOHN AND BOB NEILL'S ISABELLA

Kernville Hotel. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

It was into this community that John Neill arrived with four of his brothers in 1875. Of the five Neill brothers who journeyed from Prince Edward Island, John and his brother Robert or "Bob" Neill, would make their homes in Isabella.[32] Both John and Bob Neill first found work at Evans' Sawmill. Located on Greenhorn Mountain, just south of Kernville, Evan's Sawmill provided steady employment for John for 27 years. During his career, John purchased land at nearby Wagy Flat and built a family home for his wife, Annie, and two daughters, Dora and Mildred. Bob also started at the Evans Sawmill, but he quickly moved to the Kernville-based Sumner Mining Company, working as a car-man and then a fireman. In the 1880s, Bob took a bookkeeping position at the A. Brown Store at Weldon, east of Kernville and in 1888 served as the postmaster of Weldon.[33]

Kernville continued to grow into a center for commerce throughout the 1870s as additional mineral strikes stimulated development and population growth. In 1873, the Havilah Miner, a local newspaper, reported that the population of Kernville had doubled in five months, and that new hotels, storefronts and houses were being constructed in quick succession, outstripping the supply of local lumber.[34] At the same time that quartz mills, stores and homes were shaping Kernville, the number of enterprises in the South Fork of Kern River, the future town of Isabella, were also on the rise.

Within two decades of the arrival of the Neill family, the community of Isabella grew from a mining outpost to a ranching and farming community. Two of the earliest ranches were the Smith Ranch founded in 1861[35] and the A. Brown Ranch, founded in 1871.[36] The first school in Hot Springs Valley was established in 1876,[37] and the township of Isabella was surveyed in 1893.[38] The area also saw an uptick in visitors drawn by naturally occurring hot springs in the valley. This early tourism stimulated road construction and stage coach traffic, providing an economic market for the existing mining community and a growing number of farmers and cattlemen.[39] As Isabella grew prosperous, both Neill brothers went into business for themselves, becoming major landowners and entrepreneurs by the turn of the century.

Isabella School. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

V. BOB NEILL'S RANCH AND THE NEILL HOUSE

John and Bob Neill (second and third from right). *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

In 1889, Bob Neill purchased a ranch near the south fork of the Kern River, a little over two miles south of Weldon.[40] Between 1900 and the 1930s, Bob Neill grew his herd of cattle, branded with the mark R. N, and farmed over 200 acres of alfalfa.[41] Bob built a two-story home on his property in the 1890s for himself and his fiancée, who would move from her home in Prince Edward Island to start married life in Isabella.[42] Unfortunately, Bob's fiancée passed away before they were married. In her absence, Bob's sister Millie traveled from Prince Edward Island to live with her brother in the "Neill House." The Neill House, solidly built with elaborate woodwork, became known as a center for hospitality due to the kindness and generosity of Millie and Bob.[43] Both were active in the local Methodist church, and were involved in the lives of John's children and grandchildren. After the Isabella Dam was constructed, the Neill House was moved to downtown Kernville in 1991.[44]

Millie Neill. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

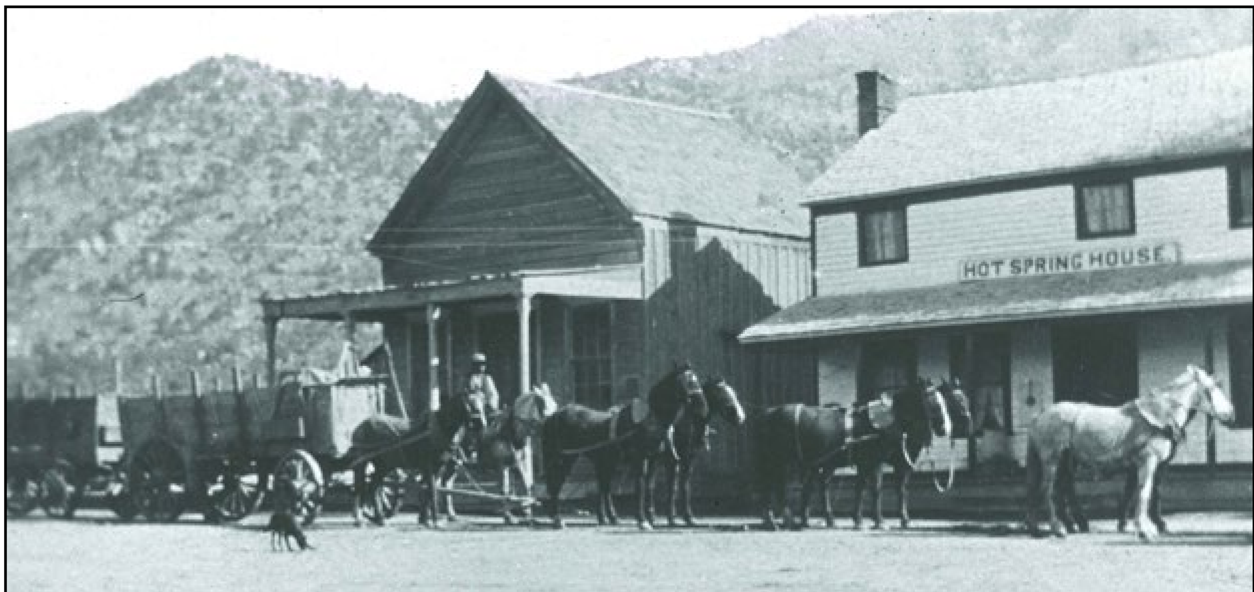
Millie Neill (right). *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

John Neill, an entrepreneur and rancher in the early 1900s. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

VI. JOHN NEILL'S HOT SPRINGS RANCH

John Neill entered the business world in 1902 when he purchased the Hot Springs House, a local hotel, restaurant and mineral spa.[45] Established in the 1860s to accommodate weary miners, the Hot Springs House had been a profitable business for two decades by the time the Neill family bought the hotel and surrounding land. The business had the benefit of being close to the Palmer school, where John's young daughters Dora, Millie and Maude attended.[46] As the Neill businesses grew, each member of the family played a role in running the hotel, farm and ranches in Isabella and Wagy Flat.[47]

Maude and Dora. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*



Hot Springs House, c. 1900. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Annie was the central figure at the hotel. She ran the business with exacting attention to detail, running a spotless bathhouse and a restaurant that fed between 50 and 60 people per night. Annie was pragmatic, frugal and businesslike. She took pride in her work and in the success of the family business. In the Hot Springs Hotel ledger, Annie Neill's neat cursive documented expenses and profits each day. Annie was also a gifted manager, delegating tasks to suit the capabilities of her employees. In the mineral spa, Robert Little, John Neill's young cousin, was responsible for keeping the bathing rooms clean and supplied with fresh towels and soap. The spotless wooden floors were scrubbed so frequently that the wood was smooth and bleached by the ash-based cleaning solution. For the culinary side of the business Annie often looked to the Chinese district in Kernville. The Hot Springs House regularly employed skilled Chinese cooks, and Annie Neill bought produce from gardens in the Chinese quarter of Kernville.[48]

Under the management of the Neill family, the Hot Springs House expanded and modernized with new galvanized metal tubs to accommodate visiting tourists. The hotel also grew to take in boarders who lived there for months at a time. For locals, the dining room served as a gathering place for meals and square dances each Saturday.[49]

When he bought the hotel, John also purchased 840 acres of surrounding land where he cultivated alfalfa, raised cattle and sheep, and opened a slaughterhouse.[50] In the mid-1910s, a local biographer wrote that his homestead had "ample barns and other out-buildings and [was] supplied with implements and appliances of every kind essential to diversified farming."[51] Agricultural land was an important part of John Neill's holdings, but ranching would be the enduring legacy of the Neill property.

76

Robert Little

Dr. 1905				Cr.			
Feb	12	Tobacco	50	Feb.	28	Labor	40 00
	16	Overhalls	1 00				
	23	Shoes	3 00				
	25	Tobacco	50				
	26	Suspenders	40				
	28	Bal-due	34 60				
Mar.	13	Tobacco	50	Mar.	1	Bal-due	34 60
	23	[illegible]	4 00		31	Labor	40 00
	27	Tobacco	50				
	31	Bal-due	69 60				
			74 60				74 6[illegible]
Apr.	4	Hat	60	Apr	1	Bal-due	69 6[illegible]
	5	Poll Tax	2 00		16	By difference in overalls	[illegible]
	21	Tobacco	50		30	Labor	40 0[illegible]
	30	Bal-due	106 75				
			109 85				109 8[illegible]
May	2	Socks	30	May	1	Bal-due	106 7[illegible]
	6	Shirt	65		31	Labor	35 5[illegible]
	10	Salve	25				
	15	Tobacco	50				
	"	Socks	25				
	18	Hob Nails	10				

In February of 1905 Robert's monthly earnings of $40.00 bought a new pair of shoes, overalls, suspenders and tobacco. Hot Springs Ledger from 1905. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

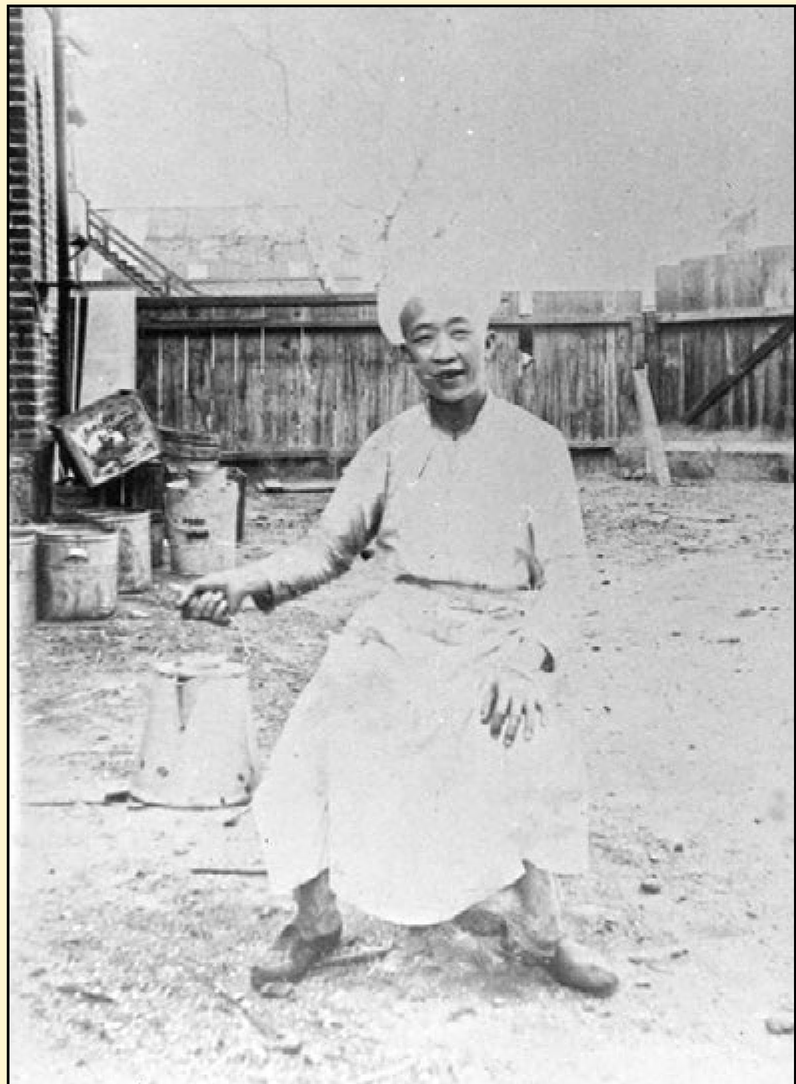
Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, Kern County was home to a thriving Chinese community. Between 1870 and 1890, the Chinese population grew from an estimated 143 residents to over 1,100.[52] Like many other groups who traveled to California during the gold rush, Chinese immigrants hoped to pursue work and upward mobility in the American West. Chinese workers shared a common goal with other pioneers. American legal and social restrictions, however, barred Chinese workers from a number of opportunities.[53] In spite of these obstacles, Chinese residents shaped communities and contributed to iconic developments in the American West including mining, railroad construction and cattle raising.

The Chinese community in Kern County was established following an 1854 gold strike on the Kern River. As miners flocked to "Kern River Excitement," near Keyesville, also known as Keysville, residents of the boomtown made it clear that Chinese people were unwelcome. In June of 1854, the *Daily Alta California* noted that "one of the first regulations established by the pioneer miners of the Kern River was not to allow a Chinaman [*sic*], under any circumstances to enter the diggings."[54] As a result, many Chinese miners in the Kern River Valley worked on the outskirts of the primary mining district or followed mining booms after the peak of prosperity, re-working placer mines that had been abandoned by their Euro-American counterparts. A flood in 1862 caused many Euro-American miners of the "Kern River Excitement" to leave the area, allowing Chinese miners to try their luck on the Kern River.[55] Over time, Chinese residents established communities in nearby towns.

By 1870, Kernville was one of many California mining towns that was home to a Chinese community. Located near the Kern River, the Kernville Chinese quarter had 19 residents. The majority were Chinese immigrants; one, nine-year-old Charles Hing was a California-born American citizen. Almost half of Chinese adults in Kernville claimed "miner" as their profession. As the hard rock mines yielded less and less, however, those miners who remained in Kernville pursued other opportunities in domestic service and agriculture. In 1870, for every Kernville Chinese-American who worked as a miner, there was another who worked as a cook. Chinese cooks had a reputation for hard work and culinary skill and were often employed at local businesses including the Hot Springs House, the Kernville Hotel, the N.P. Peterson Ranch and the A. Brown Ranch.[56] Another trademark of the Kernville Chinese quarter was the gardens. Many Chinese residents cultivated gardens for personal use,

and through the early 1900s, some sold crops as a side business, or turned to farming as a primary source of income.[57] One gardener known as "China Charlie" grew produce in Kernville during the 1880s and supplemented his income with odd jobs. Another farmer, Lee Sik You, brought his family of young children to Kernville in the 1890s to make a living by farming.[58]

Throughout the 1880s, members of the Chinese community were active in the local economy. In 1886 and 1887, while Bob Neill worked for the A. Brown store, accounts for "Ben Chinaman" Heo Bon, and "China Joe" appeared in the store ledger.[59] Chinese customs and cuisine were often preserved in the home, but Chinese people were also participants in the western lifestyle. Chinese ranch cooks prepared the same meat and potatoes that were part of the standard American diet. China Joe of the N.P. Peterson ranch near Kernville was famous for his pies, pastries and donuts. Adie Peterson, N.P.'s daughter, remembered elaborate cakes that China Joe baked for her birthday.[60] By the early 1900s, many Chinese residents in Kernville had moved to pursue other opportunities, especially as Bakersfield became a center of development.[61] Although few Chinese-Americans remained in Kernville past the 1940s, their hard work contributed to the growth of early Kernville and Isabella.



Chinese cook at a southern California ranch, c. 1910. *Credit: Los Angeles Public Library.*

USFS Lake Isabella Work Center, April 17, 2019. *Credit: Photo by Jeremy Croft, SPK-PAO.*

The early 1900s marked a time of change for ranchers in the Kern Valley as the United States Forest Service began to regulate grazing in the area.[62] Prior to the early 1900s, cattle and sheep grazed freely on public lands. As herds grew on the Great Plains and the West, lack of oversight resulted in overgrazing and overcrowding.[63] Bolstered by the Conservation Movement at the turn of the century, the Forest Service was founded in 1905 with the mission to promote responsible use of natural resources in national forests. Between 1906 and 1907, the Forest Service established ranger offices around the country. Most of the land surrounding Isabella was part of the Sierra Forest Reserve. The reserve, established in 1893, became part of Sequoia National Forest in 1908.[64] In Isabella, the government hired local ranchers as rangers to patrol the area. Rangers on horseback monitored road and bridge conditions, firebreaks, fires and water supply. Ranching was regulated through grazing seasons, permits, allotments and rental fees on public lands. In 1906, the Forest Service charged between 25 and 35 cents per head of cattle or horse on national forest rangeland.[65] Today Sequoia National Forest encompasses 1,193,315 acres and is one of 19 National Forests in California.[66] Generations of forest rangers have lived and worked in Kernville and Isabella.[67]

Sequoia National Forest, August 24, 2011. *Credit: Photo by Hunter Merritt, SPK-PAO.*

VII. THE NEILL-SILICZ RANCH

As Dora, John Neill's daughter, grew older, she became more active in the family businesses. Leaving school after 8th grade, Dora developed her skills in the kitchen of the Hot Springs House and while working alongside cowhands on the range. By the time she reached adulthood, Dora had become an accomplished cook who was just as capable as any cowhand on the range.

Dora's training as a rancher's daughter would become her livelihood. In 1910, Dora married Alex Silicz, another Isabella native who had grown up working on local ranches. After their marriage, the couple settled in Wagy Flat and became business partners with Dora's father John.

Alex Silicz on porch with dog. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Dora with horse and cowdogs. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

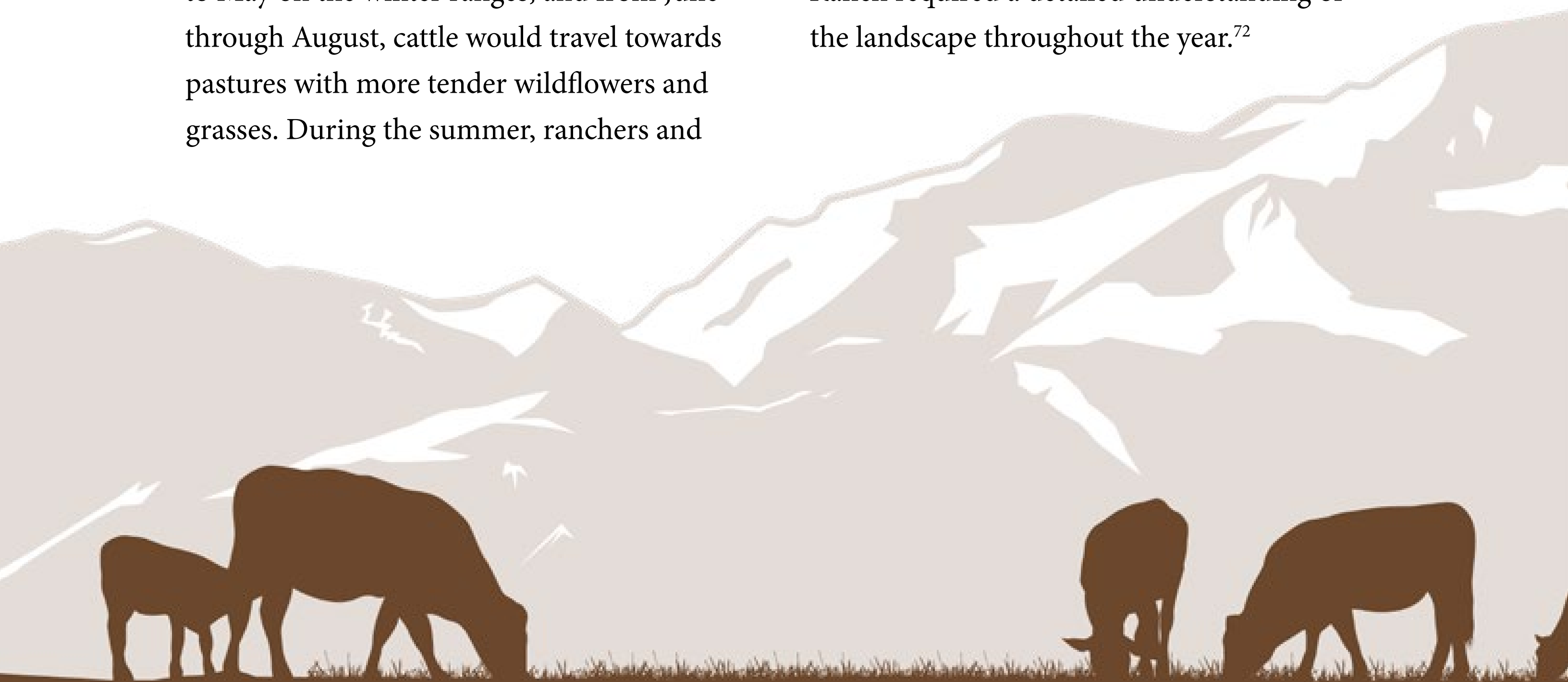
In 1934 John bought the majority of his brother Bob's land near Weldon and constructed a home for his daughter's growing family. The house became the Silicz family home and ranch headquarters.[68] By the 1930s, the range land used by the Neill-Silicz family extended west from the current site of Lake Isabella almost all the way to Bakersfield. The southern end was bordered by the Kern River and the northern end reached Glennville.[69] Most ranching outfits in the area were family-owned like the Neill-Silicz Ranch, and the seasonal rotation of stock raising established a shared rhythm and experience in the family and in the community.

Map of Bakersfield and Glennville, California. *Credit: Google/USGS/NASA. Map design by John Prettyman, SPK-PAO.*

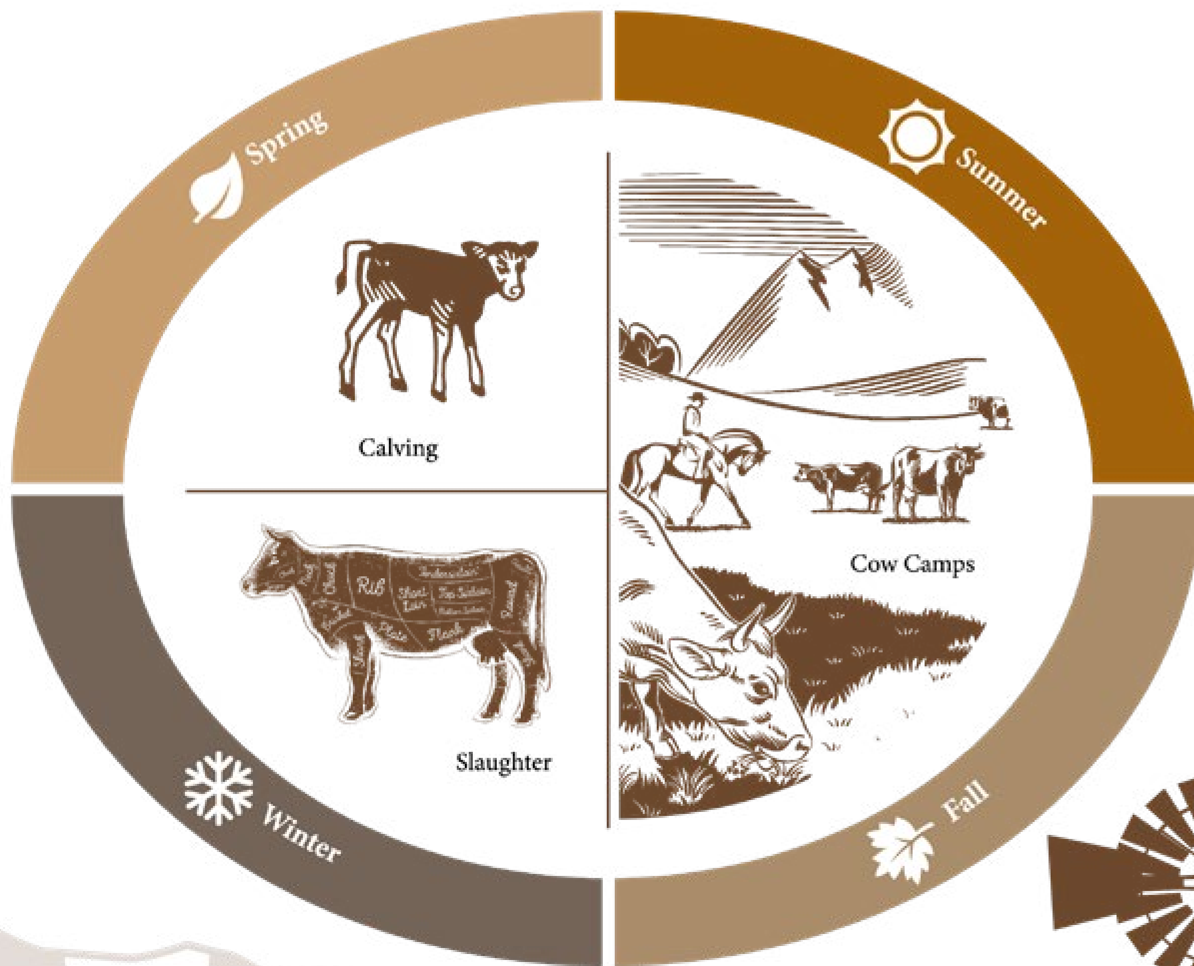
VIII. A RANCHER'S CALENDAR

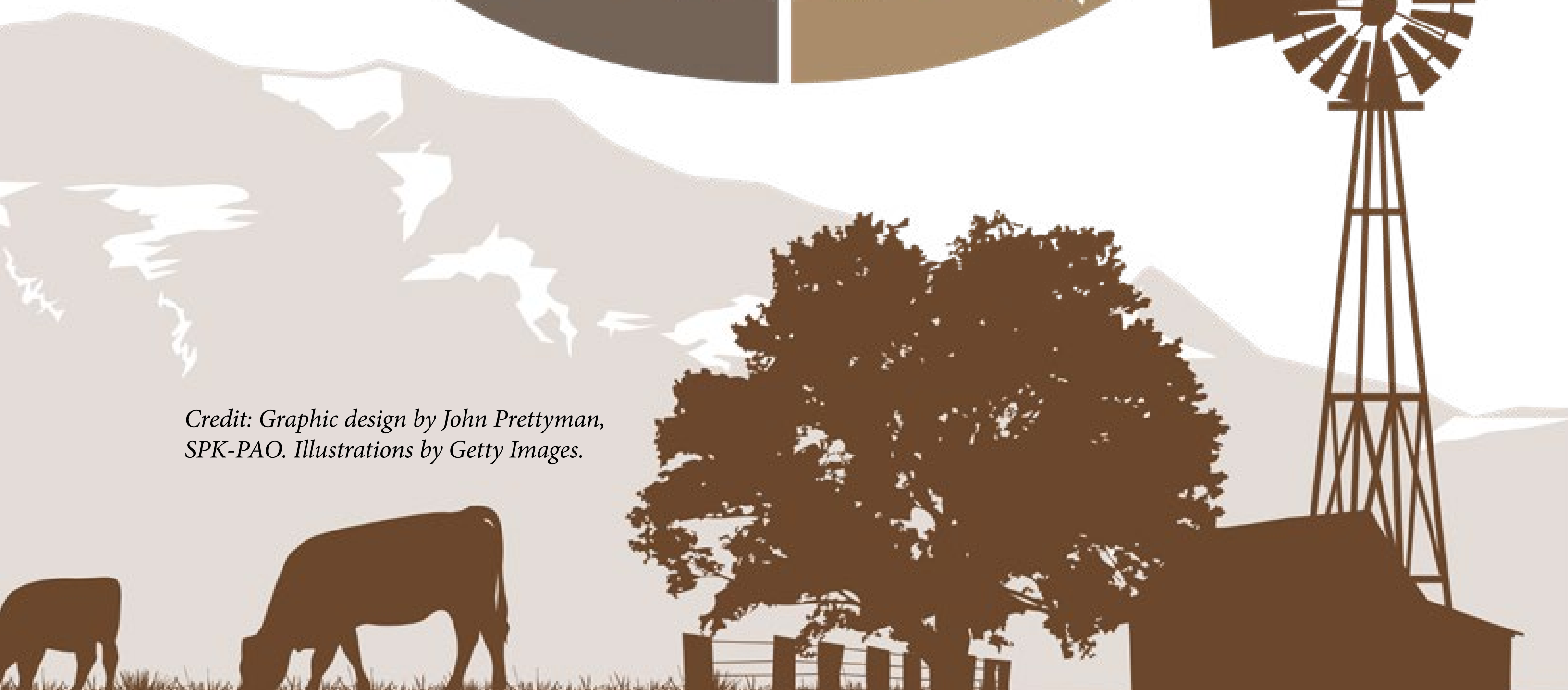
A rancher's calendar was focused around the seasonal rotation of herding cattle. Herds moved to graze on vegetation that grew on the range, reaching higher elevations during the summer and descending to lower elevations during the winter.[70] Generally speaking, a home ranch served as the headquarters for the operation: it was here that newly weaned calves would spend three or four months on a diet of hay under the watchful eye of ranch owners. The home ranch was also the winter dwelling for bulls, nursing cows and calves. For the rest of the herd, the winter range was often at lower elevations where scrub brush was the primary source of food. Calves were born from March to May on the winter ranges, and from June through August, cattle would travel towards pastures with more tender wildflowers and grasses. During the summer, ranchers and cowhands would spend months on remote parts of the range in backcountry cow camps. From August through September ranchers and cowboys drove the herds back towards the winter ranges, and in January, yearlings were sold for meat.[71]

While there was a familiar cycle of calving in the spring, cow camps during the summer and slaughter in the winter, there was also constant day-to-day adaptation to availability of forage, changes in weather, and cattle health and behavior. Dependence on forage meant that ranch owners relied on rain for grasses to grow. Climate and weather patterns dictated where herds could safely roam. The rugged mountains used by the Ranch required a detailed understanding of the landscape throughout the year.[72]



Seasons on the Ranch





Credit: Graphic design by John Prettyman, SPK-PAO. Illustrations by Getty Images.

IX. SELF-RELIANCE AND COMMUNITY ON THE RANGE

For the many of individuals who worked on ranches, the primary benefit of the job was the lifestyle. As a general rule, the cattle business was unpredictable and operated on narrow profit margins. Bob Powers, longtime resident, US Forest Service ranger and ranch manager of the Kern Valley, observed that "The wages [cowboys] receive are often surprisingly low compared with what they would be for other tradesmen who have spent a comparable period of time learning their profession. Because of this, many cowboys choose to work on cow outfits because they are attracted to this type of life and not to make big money (...) The rancher is usually made up of the same material as the cowboy. They really have to love ranching or they would never risk their money in something as unpredictable as the cattle business."[73] The independence and athleticism involved in herding cattle on horseback was part of the attraction, but a deeper sense of belonging within the community was just as important. At first glance, the self-reliance of cattle ranching runs counter to the close-knit community that grew in Isabella. It was this common experience of ranch work, however, that united the community.

A rodeo boss coordinated the work of each cowhand at the start of a multi-day stretch on the range, assigning each individual to patrol hundreds of acres of rangeland. For example, a cowhand might be directed in the general area of "Greenhorn Mountain," where he or she would spend the week monitoring the health of the cattle.[74] These long, solitary stints required grit, self-reliance and skill. When roping cattle, the cowhand first had to gauge the movements of the animal. A cowhand would calmly position his (or, rarely, her) horse so the horse could sprint when the cow or steer came within roping distance. Once the cow or steer was roped, veteran cowhand Earl McKay remembered, "they would nearly always turn and charge…You wheeled your horse out of the way and let the animal go by, throwing enough slack in your rope to let them get their front feet over it. You jump your horse out the other way and when the horse hits the end of the rope the animal's head is jerked back under him and he usually goes down."[75] This crisscross of rope was the only safeguard against a reluctant 800-pound steer, and it was essential, especially on the rocky terrain of the Neill rangeland, to be able to "read" the behavior of the cattle and

Neill daughter on horseback at the Neill Ranch in Weldon. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.Credit: Myrna* Sweeney.

Amos Petersen, a neighbor and close friend of the Silicz-Mulkey family at the Ranch. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

maneuver the rope correctly. A roped steer or cow could charge a horse and rider in a narrow pass and cause injury to both.[76] This common experience of managing cattle on the range shaped a unique code of conduct common to all who participated in the industry.

Safety came first in the hazardous job of cattle raising. If injured on the job, a cowhand might be left to his own devices for days before help arrived. Injuries were avoided through careful calculation, observation and skill, but every so often a cowhand would get hurt. Even then, the ranch hand was expected to be self-sufficient. One longtime Isabella resident noted that injury was "accepted philosophically as part of the game; an occupational hazard," adding, "A cowboy would feel uneasy if he thought the bosses were too concerned about his physical wellbeing. He has other things to worry about, and so do they."[77]

In addition to personal safety, a cowhand was responsible for the safety of the livestock. The Ranch had thousands of head of cattle, but cowhands recognized that each one represented an investment.[78] With a glance, an experienced cowboy could assess the well-being of the herd. In the spring, cowhands kept a close eye on cows close to giving birth and monitored their health afterwards. A calf who shook his head in a certain way was probably suffering from worms and a cow who was moving slowly might be injured. Even when cattle were out of sight, a cowhand could distinguish an animal who was moving easily from one who was struggling by looking at the

hoof tracks.[79] From there, they would also have the knowledge to remedy the condition.

Dora in particular often administered treatment to cattle in trouble, and she continued to do so into her late 70s. At age 77, Dora asked her granddaughter, Myrna, to help treat a calf "gone to founder."[80] The treatment involved restraining the reluctant calf while flushing the digestive tract with a hose. While Myrna held the calf steady, Dora aimed a hose down the calf's throat until water released alfalfa blocking the digestive tract, saving the calf's life.[81]

A thread of compassion towards livestock ran through the gritty independence of ranch work. Horses in particular received attention throughout each day. A skilled cowhand constantly gauged the endurance of their horses on the range, making sure that the horse had the physical capacity to chase a steer and anticipated needs for rest and water. Cowboys famously wore jeans so dirty that they would stand on their own. For horses, however, only clean saddle blankets would do, and saddles were crafted specifically to fit the horse's back. On a hot day, a cowhand would take breaks to prop the saddle up off of the horse's back to let cooling air flow. Ranch hands shod their horses every six weeks and kept riding gear in good condition.[82]

Ranchers also cared for the herds of others. No fences contained livestock on public range lands, and as a result, it was common for cattle from several ranches to graze the same area. Each fall, as the Neill-Silicz family and cowhands started gathering the herd at the top of Greenhorn Mountain to make their way down towards Bakersfield, the crew accumulated cattle from other ranches and regularly sorted and returned livestock, even un-branded calves, to their owners.[83]

The culmination of grit, compassion, honesty, skill and self-reliance on the ranch was embodied in the "horseman" or a "cowman." The terms applied to both men and women, and a "cowman" or "horseman" was considered to be part of an elite club in Kern County. Within the small community it was noted who took care of their livestock, who could work independently on the range and who would behave with integrity towards neighbors. By the same token, the community easily recognized a "hack," a "B.S.-er" who was unfeeling or cruel towards his horses or cattle and cut corners in the hard work of ranching.[84]

The values of horsemanship were instilled early and often. In summer, babies rode in the saddle with their parents. A photograph of Nancy, one of the Silicz granddaughters, depicts her at one year old sitting in a basket while her family cooked food and gathered cattle near Weldon.[85] When school was out of session, it was common for children to ride unaccompanied over the

range, hauling wood, or carrying a branding iron or a vaccine gun. Older children with more experience might carry a rope for cattle.[86] On the Ranch, it was customary for animals to eat before the family had breakfast, and even houseguests took part in feeding the livestock.[87]

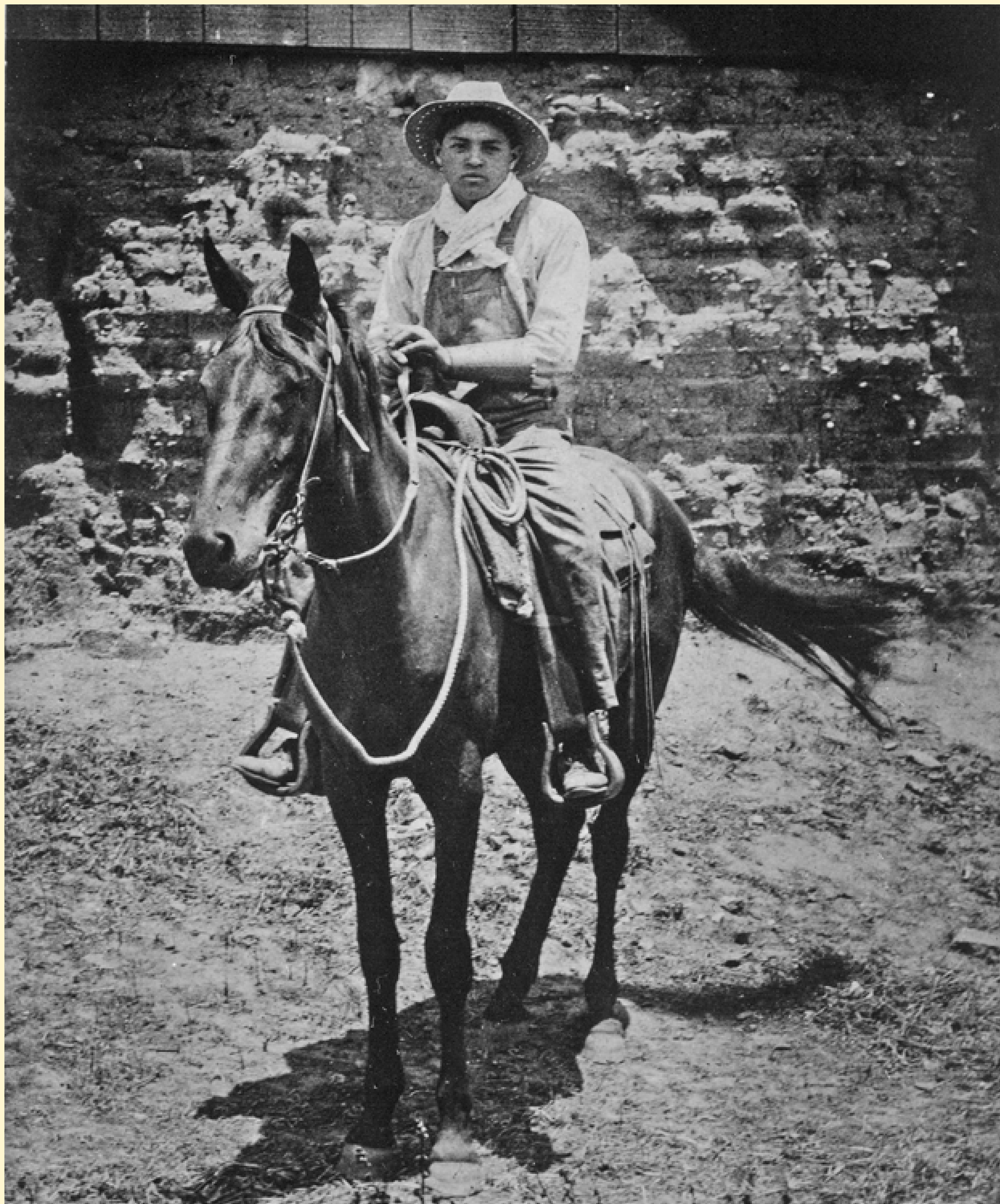
Ranching was part of nearly every aspect of life. The Neill-Silicz family celebrated Easter on the mountain both as a family gathering and as an opportunity to check on the cattle. Ranching tasks became family events: summer outings were organized around checking the water on Greenhorn Mountain, and the annual branding and marking of calves in the spring involved the whole family.

Alex Silicz holding John, Alex and Dora's firstborn. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Bud, John and Dot Silicz. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

The ranching and cowboy culture that became a trademark of Isabella stemmed from an earlier tradition of cow herding dating to the Spanish and Mexican presence in California. The word "vaquero" is derived from the Spanish "vaca" for cow. Before California became part of the United States, Spanish, Mexican and Native vaqueros tended cattle on the rangelands of the Sierras and beyond. Starting in the 1660s, Spanish missions operated ranches with the labor of Native American vaqueros.[88] Under Mexican control, from 1821-1848, land grants from the Mexican government superseded the Spanish mission system and established vast ranchos over most of southern California.[89] The current Tejon Ranch Company, south of present-day Bakersfield, is located on four former land grants: Rancho Los Alamos y Agua Caliente (26,626 acres), Rancho El Tejón (97,612 acres), and Rancho Castac (22,178 acres) were granted by the Mexican government in 1843; the fourth, Rancho La Liebre (48,799 acres), was granted in 1846.[90] When California became a state in 1850, settlements in southern California remained "cow counties." Through the 1880s, Los Angeles was best known as a cow town rather than the American metropolis that it is today.[91]

Arnold Rojas, who became an author and authority on vaquero culture, began working on the Rancho Tejón during the early 1910s. Born in Pasadena in 1896, Rojas' ancestry represented the blended heritage of pre-statehood California. Rojas claimed Mexican heritage from Yaqui and Yoreme tribes in Sonora and Sinaloa and Sephardic Jewish heritage from Spanish immigrants.[92] At age 12, Rojas ran away from an orphanage in San Luis Obispo hoping to become a vaquero. Part of his decision was driven by the lack of opportunity for someone with his ancestry. Rojas explained, "I came to the San Joaquin because the only work I could get in the town of my birth, Pasadena, was orange picking, and I wanted to be a rider. The way to be one was to get a job as a vaquero; besides, the only work a man of my race could get in those days was as a mule skinner or vaquero, both cheap labor."[93] In early 20th century California, the scales of employment and land ownership were tipped to favor Anglo residents. It was more common for vaqueros to work as hired hands rather than to become ranch owners themselves.[94] In fact, as a whole, the Anglo version of the Cowboy narrative has dominated the history of the West. It was the knowledge and influence of vaqueros, however, that laid the foundation for cowboy culture. Texas cowboy Frank Graham characterized the vaquero as a "master teacher" who showed new cowboys in the American West "how to work cattle in this wild, open country."[95]



Pedro Rios, vaquero in San Juan, California. *Credit: Pierce, C. C./The Huntington Library.*

Brands and earmarks unique to each owner distinguished herds on the open range. Following the new generation of calves born each spring, ranchers gathered their herds to brand, mark and vaccinate calves and to prepare for the ascent to summer grazing lands. Each member of the family had their own brand, and they were displayed in the home. A drop down desk in the living room of the main ranch house was engraved with six brands: "ES" stood for Eleanor Schneider, 68 belonged to the neighboring Pascoe family, Lazy Five was Doug and N+ was Dora's brand.

Cattle brands on a desk in the old farmhouse. *Credit: Photos by Rick Brown, SPK-PAO.*

X. **ROLE OF FOOD**

Food was part of the glue that held ranching communities together. In a practical sense, food was fuel for long days of manual labor, but more importantly, meals served as important social events that united families and community members. Each day at the Ranch, Dora would make three hearty meals for her family of six and a crew of up to twenty-seven. For breakfast she served steak and eggs with hot syrup. Lunch and dinner were just as hearty with a dessert at each. Outside of formal mealtimes, food was part of daily operations. When Dora went to check water for the cattle on Greenhorn during the summer, her granddaughters remembered that she would load grandchildren and dogs into her blue Hornet, and bring "the best tuna sandwiches you ever ate in your life" on the bumpy drive over the mountain.[96]

Dora also prepared food for long trips in the backcountry. When her granddaughters were young, their fathers took them on a three-week trip into the high mountains with 17 pack horses. The fathers did the camp cooking, but Dora did the legwork to gather and pack the provisions. She packed dozens of fragile eggs in grain; as the journey progressed, the horses ate the grain and the riders ate the eggs. She also furnished salami, ham, bologna, rice, whiskey for highballs and Crisco to fry fish that the group caught along the way.[97]

While on the range for extended periods of time, cowhands and ranchers made meals with limited equipment using ingredients that were either shelf-stable or harvested from the range, but they also depended on reinforcements from the home ranch. During the summer, Joanie remembered that her grandmother "would butcher two beefs a week by herself to feed the road crew."[98] Joanie, Nancy and Myrna all remarked on Dora's excellent meals. Joanie declared that her Nana made "the best biscuits in the world" and all three remembered her apple pies and her effortlessly perfect pie crusts. Meals and cooking were the centerpiece of weddings, birthdays, funerals, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter.

The sheer volume of each meal led to bulk purchasing of ingredients and enormous cooking equipment. A favorite dish among the grandchildren was homemade plum pudding and fruitcake. Myrna remembered that she and the others would get in her Nana's blue Hornet or green pickup to go to Long Street's Liquor store to buy gallons of brandy for her recipe, "with little kids in the car!" Celebrations included extended family members and friends: bachelors who had no

family, cowhands and community members were all at the table. Before a holiday, Dora, and later her daughters Mernie, Eleanor and Mickey, cooked for weeks in preparation. Once she started baking, Dora mixed and baked ingredients in big stainless steel pots the size of bathtubs.[99]

Food preparation itself was often a social event. Dora, Mernie and Sis periodically met with Native American women, including Grandma Miranda, Sis' godmother, for an all-day effort to make tamales. Dora had grown up with Native American children and often hosted Native families during holidays and meals.[100] School pictures from the 1910s through the 1930s show the Silicz children in classes with the Coughran children, a family of Native American ranchers who continue to raise cattle on their family ranch in Kern County.[101] When Sis and Mernie had children, Myrna remembered that regardless of racial lines, children would swim, play and go to school together. Cousins Joanie, Myrna and Judy would play with children from Native families while their mothers and grandmothers butchered chickens, made broth, prepared filling and assembled tamales.[102] A difficult history remains part of the legacy of contact in Isabella, but within this history are stories of friendship and community.

Two children in Kernville, June 1916. *Credit: Thomas T. Waterman, U.C. Berkeley.*

Cowboys at their camp in southern California, 1898. *Credit: University of Southern California Library/California Historical Society.*

XI. HOSPITALITY AT THE RANCH

Dora's household was busy and highly social. Her children and grandchildren described her as compassionate, skilled, generous and pragmatic. In addition to the sumptuous meals that she prepared each day, Dora went out of her way to create a welcoming household for her family, friends and travelers who often spent time at the ranch.[103] A type of extended family developed at the Ranch when Dora welcomed individuals who needed a place to stay. Melvin Marshall, a longtime resident on the property lived in a small two-room wooden house located near the family home. Eventually, the board and batten house, likely constructed from wood milled in Wagy Flat, became known as "Melvin's House" among family members. Melvin was also part of the gold rush history of California. His uncle, James Marshall, reported the gold strike at Coloma that sparked the California Gold Rush of 1848.[104]

Melvin's House. *Credit: Photos by Rick Brown, SPK-PAO.*

Dora also regularly reached out to those in trouble. Filbert Etchverry, a classmate of Mernie and Eleanor's, had to quit high school at 16 to take over the family sheep herding business. As an inexperienced teenager, Filbert was not equipped to manage thousands of sheep, a fact that Dora recognized as the herd passed by the Ranch. Dora sent Mernie and Sis to bring Filbert back to the main house, where he stayed for over a week while Dora cared for the sheep and fed him. When Filbert was ready to leave and his herd was in good condition, she sent him with provisions and with Mernie and Sis as guides to take the sheep back to Bakersfield.[105]

Dora's hospitality was extended through her children, who brought friends to stay at the ranch during the weekends of the school year. Guests were part of daily operations. Bud Silicz was a football player who would bring his "macho" teammates home and open their eyes to the hard work that went into feeding cattle each morning, a task more laborious than football practice.[106] A high school friend of Eleanor's remembered the enormous cowhand-sized breakfasts that Dora prepared, describing a "steak that took up the whole entire plate" and "great big round biscuits and eggs."[107]

Sheep Drive in front of Hot Springs House, c. 1900. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Silicz-Mulkey and Peterson families. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

XII. THE NEXT GENERATION AT THE RANCH

As the Silicz children grew up, they too entered the cattle business. Two of Dora Silicz's daughters, Sis and Mernie, married World Champion rodeo stars who worked on the ranch between competitions. Frankie Schneider, World Champion Bull Rider in 1933 and 1934, and World Champion Bareback Rider in 1935, married Sis in 1936.[108] Frankie's friend and fellow rodeo star Burel Mulkey married Mernie in 1940.[109] When Frankie and Burel spent weekdays at the ranch, working in exchange for room and board, they spent days with the Silicz brothers on the range and joined everyone during meals.[110] Mernie noted that during this ranch work Burel and his future mother-in-law developed a mutual respect. In 1940, when Burel asked Dora for her daughter's hand in marriage, Dora said simply, "If you can get along with her, it's fine by me." The couple married shortly afterwards.[111]

Merna (left) and Burel Mulkey, 1946. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

As Dora's children grew into adulthood, they took a more active role in ranching. John and Bud, the two oldest boys, became ranch owners in the Kern Valley. John was known for his dalley skills. This method of roping used the saddle horn to secure the end of the rope that was lassoed to another animal. To dalley meant that a rider had to judge at breakneck speed how much slack to give a bucking cow or horse. Ultimately the lasso would stop the roped livestock, but too many passes around the saddle horn would cut the slack too short, resulting in a broken rope or the saddle horse being lurched down by the force of the lassoed animal.[112] Doug, the youngest son,

competed as a team roper in local rodeos as a young man and worked his way up to become cattle foreman at another ranch in Northern California, eventually managing 8,000 head of cattle for Monroe Brown of Wheatland by the 1970s.[113] Millie, the youngest Silicz daughter, married a cattleman who later worked as the manager of a federal land bank and production credit unit in California.[114] Federal land banks and production credit associations continue to allow farmers and ranchers to take out loans to support operations, a necessity when the profit of each year is determined by a crop or livestock yield.[115] Both Mernie and Sis returned to the Kern Valley after their husbands retired from the rodeo circuit to work on ranches.

Over time, Dora's pragmatic and skillful management of the ranch led to a profitable business. Even after her success, Dora's grandchildren remembered that "she never acted like she ever had a cent."[116] The Mulkey family took over Dora's business in 1958, but Dora and other family members continued to help with operations.[117] Family ownership and participation in the ranch remained constant throughout three generations of owners, but the cattle industry in the Kern Valley changed dramatically with the completion of the Isabella Dam in 1953.

The on-the-road lifestyle of the rodeo circuit led to friendships between fellow competitors. Burel Mulkey and Frankie Schneider had been friends before they married into the Silicz family, and their friendship continued afterwards. After their marriages Burel, Mernie, Frankie and Sis drove to rodeo events across the United States. Mernie and Sis took turns driving while their husbands rested. Mernie described the time as "one long honeymoon."[118] For four years, the Schneiders and the Mulkeys drove around the country, until Frankie and Burel retired from rodeos in the mid-1940s.

Burel (far left) with fellow rodeo competitors. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Burel Mulkey on bronco. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Prior to his ranching career in Isabella, Burel Mulkey established himself as a rodeo champion on the national stage.[119] The Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame described Burel as "one of the sport's most colorful performers in the 1930s with his love of pranks, his trademark black satin shirt and his penchant for going all out on every ride."[120] Burel won the prize for World Champion Saddle Bronc rider in 1937 and All Around World Champion in 1938. Burel was also instrumental in establishing the Cowboys' Turtle Association, the first organization responsible for unionizing and professionalizing rodeos in the United States.

Burel's experience with horses started early. Born in 1904, Burel grew up on a family ranch and dairy in Clyde, Idaho, where he learned about the cattle business. After he graduated 8th grade, Burel left school to work on area ranches where his primary responsibility was "breaking" horses, or training young horses to carry a rider for the first time, for $30.00 per month. In between working on ranches, Burel took his skills to the rodeo ring, competing on the much wilder bucking broncos for "mount money."[121] He earned $5.00 for each horse he rode, equivalent to roughly $97.00 in 2018 dollars.[122] For a chance at these rodeo earnings, Burel and a friend hitchhiked to local venues and paid an entrance fee with the conviction that they would make back their money.

Burel's skill and perseverance developed with each competition. By 1929, at age 24, Burel became a fulltime rodeo circuit contest rider, traveling to compete across the country. Rodeos eclipsed Wild West shows in the 1910s and 1920s, drawing crowds across the west and in nationally recognized venues including the Chicago Stadium and Madison Square Garden.[123] Burgeoning popular interest in rodeos and cowboys launched Burel and his fellow competitors to celebrity status.

The rodeo lifestyle brought fame and

Shirt Advertisement. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

opportunity to see the country, but rodeos were dangerous and largely unregulated. By age 38, Burel had suffered a head injury and was still providing his own transportation, entry fees and lodging on tour.[124] Cash prize money and judging criteria were inconsistent, and competitors who lost made no earnings to cover the costs of participation. Burel and 60 other riders formed the "Cowboys Turtle Association," to improve working conditions. They went on strike until rodeo promoters agreed to a set of professional standards. The group called themselves the "Turtles," because they were slow to organize, but in the end, the cowboys stuck their necks out.[125] The principles of the Turtles set the foundation for the contemporary Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, a safeguard for fair treatment in the rodeo industry.[126]

Burel (far left) with fellow rodeo competitors. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

XIII. THE ISABELLA DAM AND THE RANCH

Water management was crucial to industries in southern California. Local solutions for water management predominated until the 1890s, when state engineers identified the Kern River as a strategic waterway for flood control in the San Joaquin valley. Little action was taken, however, until 1936 when Congress approved a study to examine flood control infrastructure on the Kern River. As part of a post-WWII building boom, construction of the Isabella Dam began in 1948 with funds appropriated in the Flood Control Act of 1944.[127] The Isabella Dam was the first of many in the region. Proponents of the new system hailed dams as the solution to chronic flooding in California.

Construction of Isabella Dam, c. 1950.

A 1952 editorial in the *Madera Tribune* affirmed:

"With Valley eyes turned apprehensively toward the mountains whence flood waters are expected to pour down in the next few weeks, renewed attention is being paid to plans and projects of all sorts for damming mountain streams." The author described the partially completed Pine Flat Dam, Folsom Dam, Isabella Dam and future Oroville Dam as practical, "multiple purpose" projects that would simultaneously offer the benefits of water supply, irrigation, power and flood control. The editorial concluded, "following a wet winter like the one just past, the flood control feature can well be worth the entire cost of these projects if disastrous flooding of the lowlands with its subsequent destruction of property, herds and crops is averted."[128] Following the ground-breaking ceremony at Isabella, another headline proclaimed "Kern Realizes Dream of Years," affirming the Isabella Dam had been "a dream of farmers and engineers."[129]

Other publications were more circumspect. In the article "Work Starts on Kern River Dam," the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reported that the dam would "save millions of dollars of flood losses, but will drown a group of Kern canyon towns founded in California's gold rush."[130] In 1949 the *San Pedro News* ran a travelogue that included landmarks slated for demolition "when the government completes the huge Isabella Dam."[131] Another article in 1953 praised Kernville serviceman Harold Ripley, who successfully requested leave from his post in Paris to visit his hometown one last time before it was "doomed to a watery grave behind the new Isabella Dam."[132]

The final design of the Isabella Dam consisted of two earthfill dams. Together the main and auxiliary dams created Lake Isabella, the reservoir of over 560,000 acres that exists today.[133] The dam dramatically changed the topography of the Kern Valley and the cattle business. The most immediate consequence of the dam was the inundation of Old Kernville, Old Isabella and thousands of acres of rangeland. Amos Peterson, a close friend of the Silicz-Mulkey family, was reaching the middle-age when the dam flooded his family ranch and the rangeland that he had worked since childhood.[134] Joanie remembered that, after dam construction, Amos "ha[d] nothing to do," and no place to start over in the Kern Valley.[135] Many longtime landowners near Isabella started selling their remaining cattle and left the area. For ranches like Dora's that continued to operate after 1953, the Isabella Dam dramatically changed the landscape and the cattle business.[136] The new dam and lake divided the Neill-Silicz rangeland, flooding passages that had been part of the seasonal cycle of cattle herding for three generations.

Furthermore, wind patterns near the dam changed, and flooding due to seepage became an ongoing concern around Dora's home at the foot of the dam.[137] Dora's granddaughters remembered the dam as the "ruination" of the Ranch as the family had known it.[138] Dora filed several unsuccessful lawsuits for property damage following dam construction. In 1957, Dora sold some of her holdings near the auxiliary dam to local property owners, divided half of her property among her six children and turned management of the remaining rangeland over to the Mulkey family.[139] Although the family ranch would never again be as prosperous as it had been in the 1940s, Burel continued to run the ranch with help from family and seven cattle dogs.[140] Well-established traditions of large family gatherings and rodeos continued.

Isabella Dam project site, April 20, 1948.

Aerial looking east at the completed Isabella Auxiliary Dam with empty reservoir, c. 1953.

Aerial looking north at the Isabella Main Dam (left) and Auxiliary Dam (right), c. 1960.

XIV. THE SCHNEIDER AND MULKEY FAMILIES

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Silicz family grew through marriages and the next generation of grandchildren. Dora Silicz remained active in the operations of the family ranch until her death at age 78, but as she grew older, she increasingly relied on help from her children's families. All of the Silicz children helped on the ranch, and Doug and his wife Virginia lived and worked there from 1948 to the mid-1950s.[141] From the late 1950s onward, the Schneiders, who established a ranch ten miles away, near Havilah, visited to lend a hand. In the late 1950s, the Mulkey family took over Dora's business and landholdings, remaining in business with help from family members, particularly the Schneiders. For this study, the Corps spoke with Silicz granddaughters Joanie and Nancy, the daughters of Frankie and Sis Schneider, and Myrna, the daughter of Burel and Mernie Mulkey who all remembered living in the Silicz family home for extended periods of time helping their grandmother.[142]

Mernie holding baby Myrna. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

The new generation of Silicz grandchildren, like their parents, was brought up to understand the cattle business and was instilled with the values of independence, generosity and kindness. Nancy and Joanie remembered riding 10 miles from Havilah to visit their grandmother, eat a meal, and ride back with only a cow dog for company before they reached adolescence. Myrna, who lived at the Ranch, made the ride to visit cousins Nancy and Joanie in Havilah and often stopped for cream puffs at a friend's house while she was there.[143] Nancy remembered that she and her cousins would spend summer days outside with their horses, their mothers not knowing where they were but trusting they had the skills to ride home.

Natalie, Myrna Mulkey Sweeney's daughter, sitting on a fence at the ranch. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

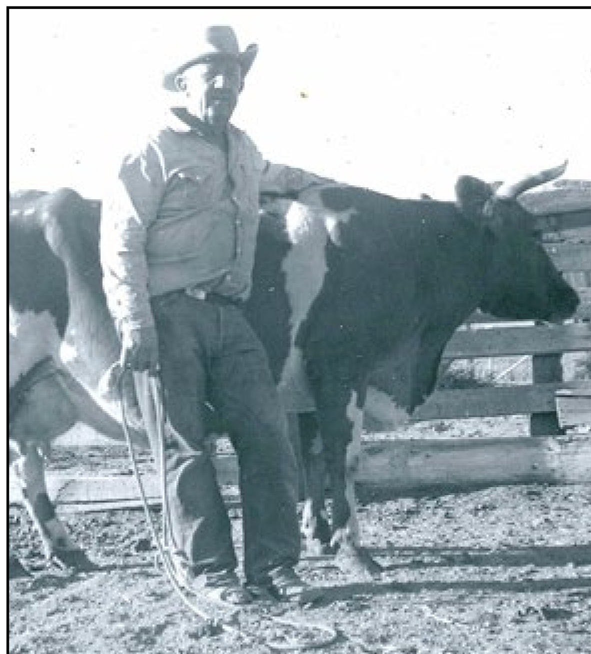
Children were the top priority in the community and for the Schneider and Mulkey families. Frankie and Burel, even before they were married, would take time to greet children and take pictures with them at rodeo shows. Frankie and Burel lived by the credo, "There was never a bad kid born. They are made that way by an adult."[144] As fathers, Burel and Frankie invested time in their children's upbringing, and also the wellbeing of other children in the community. Parents counted on their neighbors. Nancy noted that this sense of community has changed throughout Isabella and other nearby towns in recent years.[145]

Burel Mulkey and his daughter Myrna. *Credit: Devere Helfrich/ National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.*

Burel and Frankie offered their attention to the next generation through coaching for rodeo shows. Rodeos were important social events in the Kern Valley. An ongoing (friendly) rivalry between communities in Kern County hinged on who had the best cowboys and horses.[146] Rodeos in Bakersfield, Kernville, Glennville, and Hanford provided opportunities for local children and adults to demonstrate their skills. One of the horse shows that Myrna, Joanie and Nancy fondly remembered was at the Kern County Fair. Prior to the show, a priest blessed their horses, and while the family was at the fair, the children enjoyed a week off from school.[147]

Natalie, Myrna Mulkey Sweeney's daughter, on horseback. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

As members of a family of ranchers and rodeo stars, Myrna, Joanie and Nancy had the advantage of ready access to top notch horse trainers. Nancy, one of the oldest grandchildren, remembered that during her first year at the Kern County Fair she won all of the horse competitions that she entered. The next year Joanie, Myrna, Judy, Helen and other family members began to compete under the same coaching.[148] Frankie and Burel also coached children from other local families. Nancy remembered that along with Silicz children, the Beards, the Charltons and the Cochrans of the Kern Valley were "tough to beat" at horseshows in Southern California.[149]



Burel working with livestock, c. 1960. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Burel and Mernie with Myrna Mulkey Sweeney and her daughter, Natalie. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

Burel continued to manage the Ranch until his death in 1982. A heart attack towards the end of his life led him to take a job as a brand inspector. But even after he sold his herd, Burel continued to help at nearby ranches. Shortly before he succumbed to liver cancer, Burel helped a neighbor brand 250 head of calves.[150] Myrna remembered that her father's last words were to her husband, David: "'Have you fed the cattle yet?' David said, 'Yep, fed the cattle.' And he squeezed his hand and died." Joanie added, "Daddy and Burel both said that they never regretted anything in their life, the way they raised us kids or anything."[151] She summed it up by saying that living on the ranch "was a tough life, but the best one."[152]

XV. THE TOWN OF LAKE ISABELLA

The steady year-round business of cattle and agriculture in Isabella shifted to favor a seasonal tourism industry in the 1950s. Outdoor excursion companies capitalized on the natural beauty of the area and water sports, rafting, boating and fishing in the newly-established Isabella Lake. In 1950, a newspaper article from the *Madera Tribune* noted that state senator Jess R. Dorsey "said that 'Lake Isabella' could become one of the outstanding recreation areas in the Sierra Mountains of the lower San Joaquin Valley." Dorsey affirmed that the "lake could provide fishing, boating and swimming for the 25,000 persons in the immediate vicinity and for visitors from other portions of the state."[153] Regional newspapers reported on the fishing and camping opportunities on Lake Isabella throughout the 1950s. Today, the Kernville Chamber of Commerce website declares Kernville, "Whitewater, USA."[154]

The tourism industry offered some employment, but business was primarily seasonal and it could not support every resident who had been working in ranching or agriculture. At the time of the dam's construction, the town of Lake Isabella became a more affordable housing option for residents who were priced out of Bakersfield.

Isabella Auxiliary Dam recreation area, 1980.

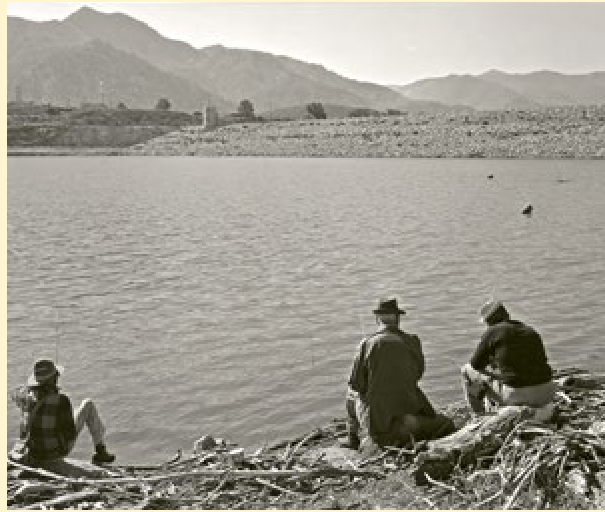
An influx of people to the area combined with a relative lack of economic opportunity caused additional strain on the community. Unemployment has proven a chronic problem in the town of Lake Isabella.[155]

Despite the changes brought by the Isabella Dam, the town of Lake Isabella remains a close-knit community. After Burel passed away in 1982, Mernie continued to live on the family ranch until her death because she enjoyed the sociability of working. She continued to be a regular presence on her family's landholdings, often walking over the ranchland where she had grown up.[156]

Mernie Mulkey. *Credit: Myrna Sweeney.*

The town of Lake Isabella has changed dramatically since the era of ranching and agriculture in Old Isabella. Despite a different economy, a new location and a new landscape, the town of just under 3,500 residents retains the strong ties that characterized Old Isabella. Events including the Isabella Lake Fishing Derby, high school football games and Fourth of July festivities continue to unite the town. Community members also tend to be invested in the wellbeing of their neighbors. In 2007 the *Kern Valley Sun* ran a feature article on Jim Wyly, owner of Mountain Mesa Market, one of few grocery stores in the area. A successful grocer for 30 years, Jim was portrayed as a mentor to his employees and active in supporting community events, particularly youth sports teams. When asked about his favorite parts of the job, Jim echoed Mernie, "When you're in retail and with the public every day of the week, it's the diversity between the young and retirement age people who come in and introduce themselves that I enjoy the most."[157] Another longtime resident, Fred Roach, and his wife moved to Isabella in the mid-1990s, both feel at home in the mountainous community due to similar feelings of belonging, Fred observed, "Everybody knows everybody...My wife and I can go into Von's to get a loaf of bread, and we're in there for two hours, because we see everybody."[158]

When Lake Isabella was created by the Isabella Dam in the 1950s, fishing was presented as one of the recreational activities that would draw visitors to surrounding communities. News articles reported on trout, perch, bass, catfish and crappie being stocked in the lake. A 1960 article noted that "lazy anglers" could park their cars on the side of the road and fish on Isabella Lake from the driver's seat.[159] By the 1980s fishing had become a main attraction in the town of Lake Isabella and in April of 1989, community members organized the first annual Isabella Lake Fishing Derby. Starting in November a committee of "fish feeders" began feeding 10,000 trout three times per day until they are released for the anglers in the spring for the Derby.[160] In April of 2019 the derby celebrated its 30th anniversary and paid out over $30,000 in prizes.[161] In recent years, Derby Chairman Fred Roach estimated that the event draws over 8,500 people to Isabella Lake each spring.[162] The event kicks off the summer tourist season, bringing revenue to local restaurants, hotels and other businesses.



Fishing at Lake Isabella, 1957.

Fireworks above Engineer's Point, June 30, 2018. *Credit: Neil C. Radimaker/Kern Valley Sun.*

XVI. **CONCLUSION**

The town of Lake Isabella, California, reflects a multilayered history of the American West. The Tübatulabal and Kawaiisu people were the first stewards of the region, building complex societies and a sophisticated trade network based on the seasonal cycles of their traditional lands. Precious metals in the West drew attention and contact to the new territory of California during the 1850s, when Isabella was established on the coattails of the Kernville mining boom. The rich soils and rangeland ushered in an era of ranching that followed another seasonal cycle revolving around rain, growth of forage and cattle. Today, the natural beauty of the Kern Valley, coupled with outdoor recreation, has created another seasonal cycle in the form of a summer tourist economy.

Many changes have affected the Kern Valley, but in each era, strong connections between residents and individual self-reliance have fostered collective resilience and adaptability. The community was put to the test in 1953 when the Isabella Dam was added to the landscape. It brought protection from flooding, but also huge shifts in local lifeways as local communities were remade. While the economy and population shifted, the spirit of community endured. The traditions of communal gatherings, mentorship and reciprocity that solidified around ranching in Old Isabella are evident in the annual Isabella Lake Fishing Derby and Fourth of July fireworks that are launched each year from Engineers Point on the Isabella Dam.

Old farm equipment on the ranch with Isabella Auxiliary Dam in the background, 2016. *Credit: Photo by Rick Brown, SPK-PAO.*

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