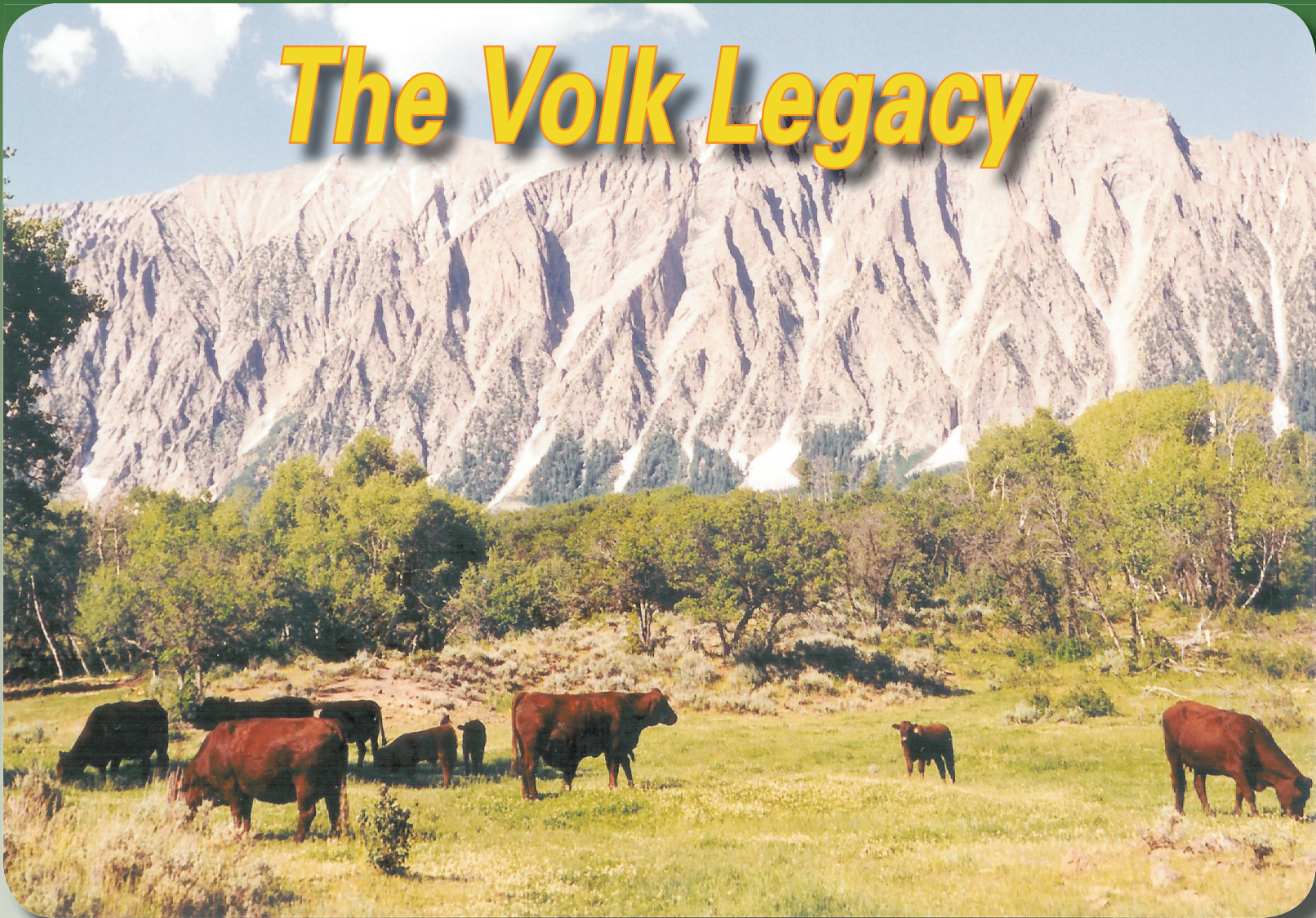


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The ranch at the base of the Ragged Mountains has provided a beautiful setting for 100 years of ranching heritage. The Volks have been in the registered Salers cattle business for about 30 years.

BY PAT SUNDERLAND
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The lush green meadows of the Volks' Ragged Mountain ranch are surrounded by the majestic mountains of Colorado. Streams bring snowmelt from the higher elevations, providing a plentiful source of water for irrigating pastures and consumption by man and livestock. Overhead, the blue sky is dotted with puffy white clouds.

Sounds idyllic, doesn't it? But a hundred years ago, when George Volk Sr. brought his wife Marija to the homestead he'd filed on in April 1911, she must have despaired at the distance from her former home in Crested Butte.

Marija, an immigrant from Slovenia, had been helping out her aunts at their boarding house in Crested Butte when she met George Sr. at a Croatian hall dance. George Sr. was also an immigrant who had arrived in Crested Butte via Allentown, Pa., where he worked in the steel factory and studied English at night school.

Every summer, George Sr. would make the trek from Crested Butte to his 160-acre ranch below the Raggeds to clear land, build a cabin and put up fence. In the fall, he would go back to Crested Butte and work in the mines.

By early summer 1919, he was ready to move his family to the ranch. Their trip by horse drawn wagon took them over Kebler Pass, using a rough trail established by Indians and trappers.

"They had one little team and one little wagon," recalls George Volk Jr. "The five kids (George was not born yet) walked alongside the wagon with the milk cow, calf and steer."

After two days of travel, they reached the ranch. It wasn't until Marija arrived that she realized her new home had no roof, only walls. George Sr. had hired a carpenter to build a 14x14-foot cabin, but he didn't have the money for a roof. The family lived in a tent pitched inside the cabin until that fall, when a foot of snow fell below the Raggeds and caved in the canvas on George's mother and siblings. George Volk Sr. decided "enough of that" and made the trek to a sawmill on Anthracite Creek where he purchased lumber to put a roof

on the cabin. George Sr. continued to work as a miner, primarily at the Oliver Mine, and in the winter lived in the company shantytown. Marija and the children stayed on the ranch, isolated by distance, weather conditions and a language barrier. Marija never learned much English; Slovenian was the language of the home. She rarely made the trek to the general store in Somerset during the winter unless there was enough snow to hitch up a sleigh.

In 1922, George Jr. was born on the homestead. "I've been on the ranch ever since," he said.

When George Jr. was about 5 years old, an "Italian fella" came to the ranch to work. "He took a likin' to me," said George. At one point, the man wanted to buy a cow and George's father thought he was joking. The Italian decided on a roan cow and paid \$50. George's father asked what he was going to do with the cow. The man said he was going to give it to that little boy over there and pointed to George. "That's how I got my start in ranching and I have been in the cattle business ever since," said George.

George was quite a bit younger than his five siblings, Marie, Anna, Frances, Rudy and John. Older brothers Rudy joined his dad at the mine and John served in the military. George Jr. stayed on the ranch, helping out his mom. He recalls being "her buddy, her shadow."

When George was 7, he started school with about a dozen other students at the Spring Creek Schoolhouse located on the Volk ranch. "I was the only one in our family who made it through the eighth grade," he said. His mother thought he should move to Paonia and go to high school, but George wanted to stay on the ranch.

Then came the Great Depression. Since the Volks had always been self-reliant, they found plenty to eat on the ranch and in the surrounding hillsides.

"The Depression was hard on everybody and everything was on the rocks," explains George. "Dad had \$250 in the bank from selling hay and lost it when the banks went under."

Around that same time, some of the neighboring home-

steads became available. So in 1937, George, Rudy and John bought 640 acres of land adjacent to their father's ranch. Rudy made the down payment, and John and George made the five installments needed to pay off the loan.

When George turned 21, he informed his mother he wanted to get married. "You build your own house first," she told him. "There is no house big enough for two women."

So, George built his house and married Margaret Burtard, who was from a ranching family in the Terror Creek area. The newlyweds set up house, using an old table and apple boxes for seating. George made a bedstead and purchased a mattress and springs. Like the original homestead, the house had no electricity, telephone or running water — except in the creek.

George and Margaret had two children, Gary and Margo. Both children attended the Spring Creek Schoolhouse and at one time were the only students. They graduated from high school in Paonia.

George and his brothers continued to expand their cattle operation. Between them, George and Rudy acquired 1,850 acres, including four homesteads. Some of the land was owned individually, and they had their own herds of cattle, but they always worked together building fence and raising hay for winter feed. Eventually their holdings surpassed 4,000 acres.

In 1943, Marija and George Sr. retired to Paonia. The ranch was divided among the boys because the girls had married men who had good jobs at the coal mines and they were not interested in ranching. George Jr. and Rudy got the home place and the Thompson place with the understanding they would continue to run 30 head of cattle for their folks. That was their retirement plan. John got the Dove place. Later Rudy traded his interest in the home place for George Jr.'s interest in the Thompson place. George Sr. died in 1952; Marija died in 1972 at the age of 89.

During the 1960s George Jr. and Margaret decided to open the Ragged Mountain Guest Ranch on what was known as the Downing Homestead. "Cattle were not worth much money so we sold our herd and just purchased steers in the spring and ran them for the summer on the ranch," George recalls.

For 10 years they operated a guide and outfitter business during the hunting seasons and a dude ranch in the summers. "Margaret and Margo really made those businesses work," said George. They would get up at 5 a.m., cook breakfast, make beds, clean the cabins and finally go to sleep at midnight.

In the meantime, Gary earned a degree in civil engineering from Colorado State University. He worked as an engineer in Silver City, N.M., building a copper plant and in Louisiana building a coal power plant. He came back to

ranch with his family in 1971.

Margo, a graduate of Fort Lewis College, married Austin Keiser in 1968. They got back into the cow-calf business and moved onto the old Allen place on the Anthracite Creek, running that side of the operation in the early '70s.

Despite help from the younger generation, the Volks were stretched pretty thin. So they sold the guest ranch and 100 acres surrounding it and purchased the Figure 4 Ranch in Hart's Basin near Eckert. The land is considerably lower in elevation, giving them a place to move the cows in the winter and fertile ground to raise hay, silage and corn for winter feed. Gary returned to the family business to manage the Figure 4. Today he and his wife, Gail, are partners with George in the cattle ranches in Eckert and the Ragged Mountains.

No strangers to adversity, the Volks faced a particularly tough string of events starting in the late 1970s. They had about 2,200 head of cattle with grazing leases on the Uncompahgre and Grand Mesa along with the Ragged Mountain Ranch and the cow herd became infected with brucellosis. The Volks lost nearly 1,000 head of cattle. When combined with high interest rates and low cattle prices, the family questioned the wisdom of continuing on in the cattle business. In 1984 Margo died of cancer and Austin left the ranch to start a new career in real estate. But with dedication and perseverance they rode out the tough times and stayed with the ranch. This year they are proudly celebrating 100 years of ranching in the North Fork Valley.

At the age of 89, George Jr. has not lost his love for the ranch under the Ragged Mountains. He spends his winters on the Figure 4, but every spring he eagerly returns to the home he built for his young bride. (Margaret died of cancer in 1995.) He vividly recalls the early days on the ranch and is sharing those stories with his granddaughter, Jo Dexter, who is compiling the Volk family history.

George Jr. has had a lifetime of service to the community. He was one of the founders and past president of the Ragged Mountain Water Users Association that was formed in 1962. To unite all of the small inactive livestock

groups of Delta and Gunnison counties, George helped start the Delta County Livestock Association in 1976. He was the first president and has been a member of the North Fork Water Conservancy District Board since 1962. For eight years, he served on the Gunnison County Planning Commission as a member and then president. George has been a longtime member of the Hotchkiss Elks, member of the Paonia Masonic Lodge 121 for 52 years and a master, and member of the 32 Degree Scottish Rite for over 50 years. He participated in the Colorado Cattle Range Demonstration Committee, responsible for preserving the Black Mesa Grazing Pool. In 1996 he married longtime acquaintance Betty, and they are still married today.



Marija and George Volk Sr. on their wedding day in 1904.

Look for George and his family in the Cherry Days parade in Paonia July 4. George, the parade grand marshal, will be riding in an antique carriage drawn by two black Morgan horses with his son, Gary. The family will be decked out in clothing reminiscent of the early 1900s riding in a wagon drawn by two Percherons. The carriages and wagons are furnished by the Grand Mesa Harness Club. The recognition by the Paonia Chamber of Commerce is fitting for a family who has maintained their ranching heritage for a hundred years.



Above is the original homestead cabin built in 1919, where George Jr. was born. It is the family's treasured landmark.



George Jr. and his horse Lightning check cattle on the Downing Place in the late 1990s.