

Life at Horsethief Canyon Ranch had its difficult times



Looking down from the rock wall of the canyon is the Horsethief Canyon house with the Colorado river flowing by at the top of the picture. Judy Spann VanDahm photo collection

By Kathy Jordan

(Second in A Series on Horsethief Canyon Ranch)

Before Jennie Knowles died, the storm clouds had started to gather at Horsethief Canyon Ranch, the ultra-modern home built by her brother-in-law, George Hurlburt, and her husband, Frank.

Money was getting tight; things were slowing down. The indoor plumbing began to freeze in winter. Knowles put in an outhouse, and the family had to do much of the ranch work themselves.

After Jennie died, her husband, Frank, became extremely depressed and moved to California. He left the Knowles children, Anna, Frank Jr., George and Ethel (Teddie) in care of Jennie's sister, Cora Hurlburt, and her husband, George.

The situation for the Hurlburts was not good either. The Bank of Ouray collapsed and took most of the remaining Hurlburt money with it. George had also spent a great deal of money on the Grizzly mine without a return.

The Hurlburts moved into the ranch house fulltime, along with their children, Helen, George Jr., and Miriam, and the Knowles' children.

It was getting more and more difficult for the Hurlburts to make ends meet at the ranch. Not only was the plumbing already out of commission, the water system and heating system froze after they moved in.

Eventually the family moved to Fruita, and Cora became a cook to help support the family. Cora also deeded one-half interest in the ranch to secure a note for \$2,500, presumably to help with living expenses.

In 1910, Cora bought the one-half interest in the property that had belonged to her sister from Knowles and the children. Subsequently, the ranch was rented, left vacant, and/or looted. Cora sold the ranch in 1918.

For years the house was neglected, as it was either vacant or inhabited by tenant farmers. During this time all of the fixtures were stripped from the house.

According to Judy VanDahm's research during these years of neglect the house experienced a checkered history on both sides of the law. One family was reportedly responsible for illegal cockfights held in the same room where years before George had taught his children and nieces and nephews.

For several years the house was abandoned. It was disintegrating quickly when Judy's parents, Jack W. and Betty K. Spann, purchased the property in 1963. The Spanns owned the ranch for 30 years, which was a large portion of the ranch's history.

The Spanns immediately began work on the house.

Judy said that the first thing her parents had to do was replace the windows throughout the house. Over the years the double-hung windows had been lost to neglect and vandalism. They were missing panes of glass, and the wood had deteriorated over years. New windows were built to fit the original masonry openings so the window openings would not be altered. The east exterior door had weathered the storms of time, so that it still sports the beveled glass window in the upper part and two panels in lower part. The original decorative wood remains around windows. Several of the turned balusters on the stairway were missing or broken, and the Spanns had new balusters made. They also put in new wood flooring and remove some deteriorated plaster.

Judy said that the Keifer brothers of Fruita plastered the house in 1896 and that the plaster looked translucent and therefore were not painted or wallpapered at the time.

When running the ranch became too much for the Spanns, Judy said they sold it to Mike and Michelle Meade of California, who then sold the ranch to a party from Wood Creek, that party then sold it to Bill Joy and Sara Ransford.

One of the first things Bill and Sara did was to have Jon Dyer of Dyer Construction build a new foundation. After more than 100 years the sandstone that was covered with dirt had started to crumble. Dyer also renovated the interior of the house.

In 2005 Sara Ransford completed a conservation agreement with the Mesa Land Trust. This agreement, which takes significant capital investment and hard work on the part of the owners, will preserve one of the last working ranches on the Colorado River before it crosses into Utah.

The agreement also provides protection for the house that stands proud and tall within the remote 170 acres, a tribute to the solid construction of over 115 years ago.