

New Dawn on The Tavaputs Ranch



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Photo by Ron Francis, NRCS

Standing at the Tavaputs Ranch headquarters on Desolation Canyon's western rim, an early-rising observer willing to quit his bed before the aroma of coffee or bacon stirs his senses may witness a performance of rare and dramatic beauty. The scrim of sky lightens, blushes deeply, and slowly sets the stage alight with reds, pinks, and violets. There is a pause—then, the sun bursts forth from the canyon's recesses, illuminating sky above and rugged landscape below. As sunrises go, this is one for the bucket list. Standing there on the brink of the canyon, you can easily imagine you're witnessing a cosmic beginning: the first dawning of the ages.

It's no accident, then, that the word "Tavaputs" means "sunrise" in the language of the Ute Indians. It also

denotes one of eastern Utah's most remote and spectacular geographical features. The Tavaputs Plateau is a high tableland of alpine meadows and shimmering aspen groves that climbs gradually from the Uintah Basin to an altitude of 10,000 feet, terminating

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at its southern boundary in the shattered cathedrals and tumbledown ramparts of the Book Cliffs. For millennia, this place was a summer oasis to Ute and Fremont Indians, a verdant island of summer grass and good hunting grounds sequestered high above the baking heat of the painted Utah desert.

In its middle, the Plateau is cleaved in two by Desolation Canyon. Carved over millions of years by the Green River, Desolation splits through the Plateau's russet-colored rock, its sloped walls dropping over 5,000 feet to the bottom where the mazy river twists along its

floor. Though its sides are not as steep as the Grand Canyon, Desolation is a deeper cut in the earth. As it happens, Desolation comes by its name honestly; there are no roads in or out. It is still truly wild country, understood to be one of the most remote places in the lower 48 states.

**“Knowing the land” to the
Jensen family has been
the work of generations.**



Butch and Jeanie Jensen
Photo by Gaylene Erwin

The headquarters of Butch and Jeanie Jensen's Tavaputs Ranch perches at 9,500 feet on the rim of the Tavaputs Plateau, with Desolation Canyon as its astonishing backdrop. Even in this age of heavy-duty diesel pickups and satellite internet, it's hard to fathom life in a place so remote that a quick trip to the store for coffee filters or peanut butter is an all-day (mostly back-road) journey. But the Jensens are as rooted in the Tavaputs country as any one of the stately Douglas firs that congregate along its alpine ridges. This tight-knit family comes from a line of tough, resilient homesteaders who have known how to weather great hardship through to the dawn of new opportunities. But the Jensens' attachment to this country isn't just due to staying power; it's a matter of deeply held affection. In the aspen groves, pine forests, sagebrush flats, and deserts—their nurturing touch is visible everywhere in this land of isolation and spectacular beauty.

Two Ranches and a Wedding

Jeanie Jensen's great-great-grandfather, David McPherson, homesteaded the Tavaputs Ranch in 1889. He emigrated to Utah from the Midwest, planning to work on steam engines for the railroad. It was the mid-1880s; the wilder parts of central and southern Utah were only just being explored and documented at the time. McPherson was able to lay his hands on a copy of John Wesley Powell's notebook from his 1869 expedition on the Green and Colorado Rivers, an adventure bankrolled by the Smithsonian Institution. In his notes, Powell went into great detail about a lush, high tableland stretching from Utah's

alpine region down to a great chain of desert cliffs.

"A long plateau stretches across the river in an easterly and westerly direction, the summit covered by pine forests and intervening valleys and gulches," the notes read. "The plateau itself is cut in two by the canyon. Other side canyons head away back from the river and run down into the Green... The elevation of the plateau being about 8,000 feet above the level of the sea, it is a region of moisture, as is well attested by the forests and grassy valleys... On these high tablelands, elk and deer abound; and they are favorite hunting grounds for the Ute Indians."

Powell and his men made day trips to explore the Plateau as they boated the Green River, passing through a deep canyon Powell described as having many tributaries, potentially making it good wintering country for cattle, but also with a dark and wild aspect. "...[C]rags and tower-shaped peaks are seen everywhere, and away above them, long lines of broken cliffs; and above and beyond the cliffs are pine forests, of which we obtain occasional glimpses as we look up through a vista of rocks," Powell wrote. "We are minded to call this the Canyon of Desolation."

This account stirred the frontiersman in David McPherson; he figured he could put the lush summer country on the Tavaputs together with the low, sheltered land in Desolation Canyon to build an ideal summer-winter cattle operation—provided he had the gumption to pull it off. McPherson took the challenge. In 1889, he and his family loaded up their possessions, took on supplies at the town of Green River, and pushed off to claim

their piece of wilderness.

"The land was there for the taking, and they were the first people in there," says Butch Jensen.

It was little wonder settlers had not yet staked out this country. With no roads in to Desolation Canyon, and none up to Tavaputs, all the McPhersons' belongings and equipment had to be packed in on horses and mules, each trip taking days. Heavy objects had to be broken down for the journey in.

"All the horse-drawn farm equipment, stoves—everything you can imagine on a ranch in that era—they'd just take everything apart, bolt by bolt, piece by piece, as little as they could get it, and put it on pack mules," explains Butch. "Then you had to reassemble everything."

(Amazingly, it wasn't until 1943 that roads were put in to the Tavaputs homestead, ending the era of pack trains up the mountain; Desolation Canyon, however, remains roadless even today.)

The family homesteaded both in the canyon and on the plateau. But within 10 years, both David and his brother would be dead—lost to tragic accidents—leaving the running of the remote McPherson ranch to young Jim McPherson, David's 26-year-old son. Jim embraced the challenge, over time assembling one of the first herds of purebred Hereford cattle in the region. He eventually married, and had a schoolteacher brought in to tutor his five children; he even had an organ packed in on a mule to the Desolation homestead so his family could enjoy music.

"That's what's amazing about young Jim," says Butch, "is that he kept it together as such a

young man, and flourished and did real well."

In 1927, Jim McPherson sold the ranch to his daughter and son-in-law, Pearl and Budge Wilcox, who were Jeanie's grandparents. The ranch then passed to Jeanie's father, Don Wilcox, and finally to Jeanie and Butch.

Butch Jensen's family showed up on the Tavaputs Plateau a bit later, homesteading the Rock Creek Ranch in 1918. By 1947, Therald, Butch's father, had begun buying out his uncles, and eventually acquired the ranch outright. At the time, there were other homesteaders on the Plateau, but little by little they sold out their land and cattle, opting for a less bracing existence than that afforded by the thin Tavaputs air. As they dispersed, Wilcoxes and Jensens bought up the land for their growing operations.

"It's just been kind of a checkerboard game," says Butch. "As ranchers would quit, either my side of the family would buy something up, or Jeanie's family. It's taken two or three lifetimes of a checkerboard game to piece by piece put everything together."

By the '70s, there were only three ranches left on the remote Tavaputs Plateau: the Rock Creek and Tavaputs outfits, and one other. Butch and Jeanie were young adults by this time, but they had known each other all their lives.

"We grew up together in the summer months," says Butch. "They'd be over at our place, we'd be over at theirs, as kids."

In a turn of events any Hollywood director would relish, Butch and Jeanie fell for each other. Their first date was moving cows. Butch proposed to Jeanie down at the old McPherson

place in Desolation Canyon; their honeymoon was spent snowed in at a sheep camp, babysitting cattle on the San Rafael Desert. Their two kids—son Tate, and daughter Jennie—came along in 1980 and 1982, respectively. Butch and Jeanie raised Tate and Jennie in the saddle—trailing cattle, roping, and more recently partnering in the running of the ranch. And as a capstone to the Jensens' lasting legacy on the Tavaputs Plateau, in 2004 Butch and Jeanie completed an historic land deal that allowed them to put their family homesteads together as a single operation.

Butch and Jeanie's story may sound like a cowboy fairytale—two ranchers' kids falling in love on the top of an isolated mountain—but Butch likes to keep it in perspective.

"In all reality, you ought to feel sorry for her, because hell, she didn't have anything to choose from," smiles Butch.

Running a Ranch in the Sky

The spectacular Tavaputs Ranch is in fact only one component of the Jensens' cattle operation, which comprises several high- and low-elevation ranges scattered across a handful of counties. Due to impassible winter snow, cattle graze on Tavaputs only in the summer months, same as on the Jensens' other high country, Emma Park, which is located 20 miles north of the town of Price. In the fall, the Jensens trail or haul their 1,200 head of Angus-based mother cows out of these privately owned summer ranges down to lower elevations. After the calves are weaned, the cows are divided among several desert BLM grazing permits—Icelander, Sinbad, Cisco—names that read like a

list of action movies. One small group of cattle and some of the ranch horses are in for a real-life cliffhanger—trailing down to the original McPherson winter country in Desolation Canyon.

"The Desolation thing is still pretty tough today," says Butch. "There's no roads in there, so when you go in, you've got to take a string of mules, with your grub and your beds."

*This song of the waters
is audible to every ear,
but there is other music
in these hills, by no
means audible to all.
To hear even a few notes
of it you must first live
here for a long time,
and you must know the
speech of hills and rivers.*

—Aldo Leopold

"Pretty tough" is typical cowboy understatement. To drive its stock into Desolation, the Tavaputs crew must pick its way down the 130-year-old trails that were chipped into the canyon's precipitously sloping sides by steely-nerved homesteaders. The drop—if you drop—is several thousand feet. Over the years, a few unlucky critters have taken the plunge, but so far, no cowboys.

The key to success on the Jensens' operation is to manage these winter desert permits with constant attention and care. The high summer pastures receive ample precipitation; when cows and calves are turned out on the Tavaputs Plateau in June, the slopes are lush and green with Thurber fescue—a grass that is

Experience Tavaputs Ranch

Join the Jensens on their historic, 10,000-acre Tavaputs Ranch for a guided hunt or ranch vacation. Ranch trips and activities are planned to create a truly western experience for visitors. Choose accommodations in the main lodge or in private cabins close by. If hunting adventure is your game, Tavaputs offers guided hunts for bucks, trophy elk and black bear. Because of its mountain elevation, the season is limited from June 20th through September 31st.

Email tavaputs@wildblue.net or visit tavaputsranch.com

native to the Plateau but grows nowhere else in Utah. The low winter country is much drier and tougher; to make matters more challenging, the cows must conceive while making their living on whatever winter feed is available on the desert.

"The mountain country's great, but you really live and die by those winter ranges," says Butch.

Generations of negotiating eastern Utah's dry spells have instilled in the Jensen family a deep respect for conserving the resources on their BLM winter permits. To keep the range from getting overtaxed, the Jensens live by a simple rule: graze moderately. Although they are entitled to run substantially more cattle on their BLM permit, the Jensens have always turned out fewer cattle than their permit allows.

"We've never stocked 'em

100 percent," says Butch, who attributes the practice of running moderate herds of cattle to his and Jeanie's parents. "You try and find a happy medium. Good years come along, and we could run a lot more cattle. But then a couple droughty years come along, and you get beat up."

By not grazing their winter permits too heavily, the Jensens always leave standing feed. It's one way to keep the native bunch grasses healthy and vigorous, but it's also an insurance policy for those tough years when having a little extra grass on the ground makes the difference between making it through or having an expensive hay bill.

Not surprisingly, water is also critical to the Jensens' success out on their desert permits. Water is essential for the cattle's survival, but water is also the tool the Jensens use to rotate their cattle from one spot to another, ensuring that the range is not overgrazed in one location, and that different areas get used at different times each year. The family has made a sizeable

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investment developing stock ponds and wells; they even haul water out to the desert when necessary. Beneficiaries of the Jensens' water development efforts include antelope, deer, and other wild denizens of the desert—as well as the taxpayer, who pays nothing for this public service.

While the Jensens have spent generations stewarding these public lands with the pride of private landowners, they have also opened the doors of their

private range on the Tavaputs Plateau to cooperate with conservationists and researchers to improve habitat for a range of wildlife species. For example, scientists with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)—in partnership with U.S. Fish and Wildlife—have worked for several years with the Jensens on a project to benefit the sage grouse by enhancing sagebrush habitat. Through removing older, overgrown sagebrush on over 1,000 acres of private land, the Jensens and their partners have created a diverse mosaic of vegetation, including grasses, forbs, and young sagebrush, all of which are essential to the sage grouse's diet. Through their participation in this project, the Jensens have done more than improve sage grouse habitat on their own ranch, however; they also provide a valuable testing ground for new techniques of sage grouse conservation.

"The Jensens have been real proactive in wanting to sustain good wildlife habitat as well as benefit their livestock operation," says Jeff Fenton,

rangeland management specialist with NRCS. "We're reducing that dense canopy cover of sagebrush, and we're creating a lot more openings for the grasses and forbs which are important to sage grouse, as well as deer and elk. It's going to help create a better diversity of vegetation up there overall."

The open-door policy at the Tavaputs Ranch extends to other folks, as well. In the 1950s, Jeanie's family started running a



Photo by Ron Francis, NRCS

backcountry outfitting business, guiding hunters on deer hunts in the fall; they later expanded to accommodate summer guests who wanted to experience life on a working ranch. To enhance both the wildlife watching and hunting opportunities, Butch's and Jeanie's parents teamed up in the '80s to reintroduce elk to the Plateau. Today, through the Jensens' careful stewardship, the original herd the families transplanted has expanded to between 2,500 and 3,000 head, with hunting guests taking several trophy bulls every season.

More recently, the Jensen's summer tour business has been dominated by visitors to nearby Range Creek Canyon, formerly owned by Jeanie's uncle, but now in possession of the University of Utah. Range Creek contains extraordinarily well-preserved examples of Fremont Indian granaries, petroglyphs, ruins, and artifacts—the Jensens are one of the handful of outfitters authorized to

lead tours. In contrast to the looting sustained by many archeological sites, the Range Creek settlements are virtually undisturbed. This is largely due to being held for over a hundred years in private ownership.

There's no question that the guest business has been helpful to the Jensens' bottom line. But the benefits of sharing their remote and beautiful world go well beyond the pocketbook. City folks have a rare opportunity to witness living history—cattle drives, big game, homesteader cabins, and working cowboys—things that for most people exist only in John Wayne movies. And perhaps more importantly, guests learn firsthand from the Jensens how cattle ranching and conservation can be complementary pursuits.

"It's wonderful to show people our way of life, and how we take care of the land and preserve it," says Jennie Christensen, Butch and Jeanie's daughter.

Little surprise, then, that for many visitors, a stay with the Jensens is a revelation.

"The most common thing we hear from our guests is, 'We had no idea that this kind of thing was still going on in the world,' " laughs Butch. "Hell, it's just an everyday thing to us."

Dark Storms, New Dawn

Everyday things on the Tavaputs Ranch don't change much. Sure, it's handy to be able to drive a stock truck to ranch headquarters as opposed to a mule train (goosenecks still can't make it up the mountain). But the cowboy crew still trails cattle off the mountain in autumn on a five-day cattle drive. The pack mule train still humps bedrolls and grub into Desolation Canyon when the Jensens move cattle and horses down to the old McPherson winter country. In the early morning,



Tate and Butch Jensen
Photo by Gaylene Erwin

bacon and coffee for the crew are still plentiful and hot. And the Tavaputs sunrise will still turn craggy-faced cowboys into poets and dreamers. With the exception of a few technological conveniences (satellite internet: yes, telephones: no) and the passing down of the ranch from one generation to the next, everyday things have carried on with comparatively few interruptions over the years.

Yet even this idyllic life high on the Plateau has not escaped misfortune. Like their homesteader ancestors, terrible loss has tested the Jensens' courage and resolve. In 2011, disaster struck when Tate, Butch and Jeanie's son, was tragically killed. A range science major in college and already a leader in the cattle industry at 31, Tate Jensen was universally admired and respected; his passing has left a big hole in the ranch's future, and many aching hearts.

"Life goes on, but I'll tell you, it sure is lonesome without Tate," says Butch. "He and I, we were good buddies."

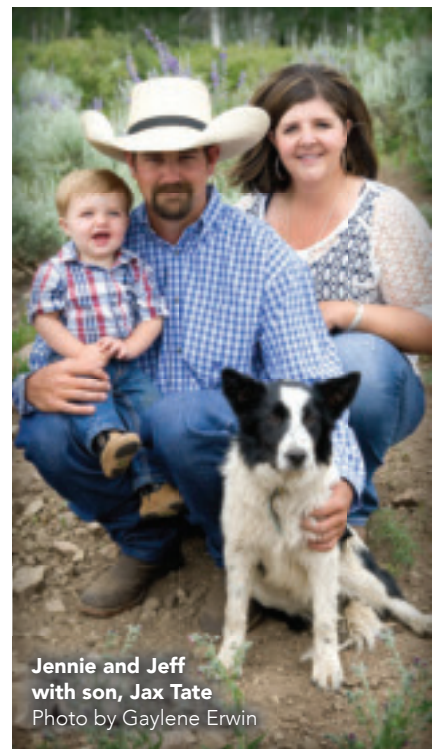
The loss to the family, and to the ranch, was beyond reckoning. But Butch, Jeanie, and daughter Jennie have done what homesteaders do: They carried one another through the darkest hours, and now they will carry on. What remains is to remember Tate, and rebuild.

Jennie will eventually take over the running of the ranch with her husband, Jeff, and their son, Jax Tate. "I've got big boots to fill, because Tate definitely was a true cowboy," says Jennie. But she's got good help. Jeff has gamely taken on the task of learning several generations' worth of stewardship with Butch and Jennie as tutors. And more help's on the way. Jennie and Jeff are expecting—they have another little cowboy due next spring.

Butch and Jeanie have every confidence that their daughter and son-in-law will be able to carry the Tavaputs Ranch into the future, and pass the family legacy of homesteading and land stewardship on to coming generations.

"She's my best hand," Butch says of his daughter. "These pregnancies seem to slow 'em down a little bit, but it doesn't last long," he adds with a wink.

The storm is over, and the sky is clearing. It's been a tough go for the Jensens, losing Tate so suddenly, so soon. But the wounds are slowly mending, to the extent that such wounds ever do. Like their homesteader forebears, they will learn to live with the unimaginable, and carry on. And with their seventh generation of cowboy boots planted squarely on the ground, the sun is rising on the Tavaputs Ranch.



**Jennie and Jeff
with son, Jax Tate**
Photo by Gaylene Erwin