

Pride in the land

George Gamble honored for his decades of work

By MIKE TRELEVEN
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George Franklin Gamble is not your typical cattle rancher.

Long before it was widely seen as the right thing to do, he was acutely aware of the environment, taking care of his land, showing a passion for raising quality livestock and understanding the links between wildlife, their habitat and good grazing practices.

He touts cattle as the ultimate environmentalists. He says the four-legged animals provide the best way to avoid wild fires and rid land of non-native noxious weeds, such as star thistle.

Gamble, a mild-mannered cattleman who chooses his words carefully, has been ranching in Napa County since 1960. He lives in a modest home in the hills of the Knoxville Berryessa area, with a front door view of Lake Berryessa. The house was moved to its current site from the former town of Monticello, which is now just a memory at the bottom of the man-made reservoir.

“I take pride in my land and my animals,” Gamble said. He added that his father, Launcelot Gamble, began to bring him to the ranch when he was 5 or 6.

“This is where I learned to shoot a rifle, went dove hunting and came to for all the (cattle) brandings,” he said.

The family’s cattle brand is in the state’s first brand book, which was published in 1919. It is the oldest brand still in use, according to Gamble.

In part because of his deep ranching roots and appreciation for the environment, Gamble was recently named Agriculturist of the Year by the Napa County Farm Bureau.

“George exudes a love of the land,” said Sandy Elles, executive director of Farm Bureau. “His stewardship and exemplary rangeland management practices are beyond par.”

Gamble said it is an honor to be recognized by the Farm Bureau and his ranching peers. “Most of my peers now are younger than me. And I am proud to be the first cattle rancher to be recognized,” he said.

While sitting at his kitchen table, which boasts a Lazy Susan and can of Skoal chewing tobacco, Gamble admits he could never be comfortable working behind a desk. He’s more at ease in his Wrangler jeans, short-sleeved blue work shirt, work boots and white cowboy hat.

The living room walls of his home are finished in barn wood salvaged from a parcel of family land near Oakville formerly called the California State Farm. A wood stove stands near the front door. A wall-mounted air conditioner hums in the kitchen. An upright piano sits by the TV. A well-worn brown easy chair stands near the wall opposite the television.

Steward of the land

Gamble is a ranching environmentalist. Throughout his property Gamble has created food plots —oases for wildlife to visit during the lean summer months. The lush irrigated plots are planted to alfalfa, clover and other vegetation enjoyed by wildlife.

“I was the first person in Napa County to do this,” he said.

He not only makes sure the cattle have adequate water, but also the wild critters. It is a project he has been working on with Napa County Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Phill Blake, district conservationist with the NRCS, described Gamble as an activist for land stewardship.

“His interest in the health of the land and for the land to support good wildlife, just as much as the need for the land to provide a reasonable economic return, is pretty unique,” Blake said. “He knows the land better than anyone. And he knows birds better than any agriculturist I have ever met.”

Blake describes Gamble as a “real humble guy who looks at the ground when he talks. But he is as determined as he is humble.”

Gamble’s father, Launcelot, got into cattle ranching in the early 1900s. He began acquiring land at Berryessa, Knoxville, Middletown and in Napa Valley.

When the government bought 3,000 acres of Gamble ranch it needed to build Monticello Dam, Launcelot used the money to buy a piece of surplus state property at auction. Located between Oakville

and Rutherford, in the 1950s it was called the California State Farm and was used to raise livestock and vegetables for the Veterans Home of California in Yountville.

Today, it is the Gamble Ranch Vineyards.

Launcelot Gamble was the only bidder on the valley floor parcel back in 1955.

“I don’t want to say what dad paid,” Gamble deadpanned, “but it was considerably less than what vineyard land sells for today.”

Eventually, the Gambles entered into a long-term lease with Beringer Vineyards to plant the land to grapes.

The ranch will host the Napa Valley Grapegrowers Harvest Stomp on Aug. 29, a party at which visitors can meet growers and enjoy dancing, fine food and wine during and after a vineyard sunset.

The Farm Bureau recognized George Gamble for his contributions at special dinner at Charles Krug Winery last month.

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For years, Gamble ran cattle on as much as 14,000 acres, raising hundreds of Hereford cross with Angus cows. He’s sold off parcels over time and now has about 6,000 acres.

Gamble, 72, no longer runs his own cattle. He remains busy fixing fences, making repairs to outbuildings and working on further improvements of the land. He describes ranching as a job that goes from daylight to dark.

“I don’t intend to ever retire. This keeps me outdoors, and I love the birds and all the critters. That’s why I’ve stuck with it. I am not a social person, so it keeps me out of town and gives me a chance to enjoy my way of life,” he said. “... This is my life. You can take the man out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the man.”

One of the hazards of ranching is acquiring aches and pains. Gamble has been thrown off horses and dragged around. His most recent mishap was in April when his All-terrain vehicle flipped on him.

“I used to bounce,” he said with a hint of a smile. “I don’t bounce anymore.”

He was once was an avid pilot. He has a Piper Super Cub in a hangar at the ranch. When it came time to round up cattle, he would take to the skies to see where the cattle were. Back on the ground, he knew exactly where to head.

“It saved a lot of time,” he said. “One time while flying around, I spotted a mountain lion on top of Blue Ridge,” he said pointing toward the eastern horizon. “I circled the lion three times, each time coming in closer, until he finally spooked and ran off.”

Another time, he saw a black bear charge through a barbed wire fence, and it didn’t even slow down. “I then looked up a tree and saw the bear’s two cubs. That’s quite a thrill for me.”

Gamble’s love of birds is demonstrated in a book he and his brother Launce published, “Birds of Napa County,” which is in its second printing. The illustrations were done by Hermann Heinzel, a well-known German artist who now lives in southwest France.

Gamble also takes pride in “Berryessa Valley,” which was first published in the 1950s. The booklet was an attempt to convince Congress not to build Monticello Dam and flood the fertile 17,000-acre Berryessa Valley.

He recently helped get the book, with plenty of photos of Monticello, republished. The town was best known for its annual rodeo. “There are old timers around who still remember it,” he said.

Gamble has three children; Tom, 48, of Yountville and Jim, 46, of St. Helena, who grow winegrapes and produce wine in the Napa Valley; and Aimee, 44, who lives in Tiburon.

“I’ve never had any desire to grow winegrapes. I don’t even like to drink wine that much,” said Gamble. “Give me a steak or a burger and I’m happy.”

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