

Growing up a tomboy on the Empire Ranch, Part I

By Betty Barr

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It was a windy day in early December 1914, and several murderers had been spotted near the Empire Ranch in Sonoita. The young rancher, Banning Vail, along with a group of deputies, had set out on the manhunt when word was received that Vail's first child was about to be born in Tucson. Leaving the posse, he hurried to town to welcome his daughter into the world. Vail laughingly observed that the baby must be thirsty, she was bawling so loudly she sounded "dusty." The nickname stuck, and as Dusty Vail often remarked, the name suited her a lot better than the ladylike, Laura, that she was christened with. It was later learned that the man who replaced Vail on the posse was killed and the family always credited Dusty with saving her father's life.

Growing up on a ranch in the early twentieth century was an exciting adventure for Dusty Vail Ingram, a little girl who idolized her dad and loved horses. The fearless tomboy was up on a horse at age six. One day when no one was around she lugged her saddle up on the fence, then dropped it down on the horse and hopped aboard. All went smoothly until she returned from the ride and leaned down to unlatch the gate. The horse shied and Dusty's foot caught in the stirrup. She was dragged a little way before the horse kicked her in the face, breaking some bones and laying her cheek open. The doctor didn't want to give her an anesthetic for the stitches, which might cause more swelling. He felt it would be best to sew it up right away while he could still see the lip line. Her dad told her to pull his hair as hard as she could every time it hurt. He said, "Then you'll know it's hurting me as much as it is hurting you." Dusty felt her vigorous yanking might have contributed to his receding hairline in later years, but the distraction helped and once she healed there was no sign of the injury.

Far from letting this incident dampen her enthusiasm for riding the range, Dusty viewed it as her golden opportunity to get a better mount. Sure enough, it wasn't long before her father put her up on Coltee, his best cutting horse. She had no formal riding instruction (although years later she graduated from advanced equestrian instruction for cavalry officers). Her dad said the best way for her to learn was watch and do what the horse suggested. "I can tell you a lot of things about working cattle, but your best teacher is this horse." He told her to watch the ears and the horse would show her what to do.



Dusty on Coltee, the cutting horse who taught her how to work cattle. Ca 1922.

Soon afterwards Dusty was out on the range helping with gatherings, and later when her younger brothers were old enough to sit a horse, playing cops and robbers and other games on horseback. One day the youngsters came upon a mountain lion in the cottonwoods not far from the ranch house. Brother Bill kept his eye on the cat while Dusty galloped home and got a gun. The horses were spooked when the gun went off, but they finally quieted and the kids were able to drag the carcass back to the house.

The ranch that Dusty grew up on had been in the Vail family for about 40 years by the time she was born. Their first 160 acres was originally homesteaded by William Wakefield. He sold it in 1876 to his brother-in-law, E. N. Fish and a partner, Simon Silverberg, for \$500. Less than two months later, the pair turned around and sold the parcel to Dusty's grandfather, Walter Vail, and his partner Herbert Hislop for \$2,000 in U.S. gold coin. Hislop eventually returned to his native England and Vail, along with various other partners, continued to add to the holdings until by 1881 it was truly on the way to becoming an Empire, boasting more than 5,000 head of cattle and including the Total Wreck Silver Mine, a townsite of 300 residents and a toll road that controlled the cattle trail to the Southern Pacific loading chutes.



Margaret Vail watches cowboys working cattle in the historic upper corral with pole fence. Ranch buildings in background. Large barn at left no longer exists. Pre-1885.

Now the prosperous rancher was in a position to make the trip to his home back east to claim his future bride. He had recently added a huge Victorian bay window to the house that he hoped would convince his fiancée's socially prominent family that he would not be bringing their daughter to a savage and uncivilized outpost. Walter Vail and Margaret Russell Newhall were married in Plainfield, NJ, and returned to the Empire where they lived until 1896 when they moved the headquarters to Los Angeles. He had acquired

ranches in California, including Santa Rosa Island, now part of the National Park Service, but continued to travel back and forth to oversee the operations at the Empire. Vail was killed in a tragic accident in 1906. He was getting off a streetcar and had turned to help his wife disembark when another streetcar came along in the opposite direction and he was crushed between the two. At this time his son, Banning Vail, was 17 years old. Banning was sent to Arizona to train at the Empire Ranch and in 1913 he became the manager.

Within the year, his heart was captured by the bright and vivacious Tucson native, Laura Perry, who despite the difficulty of being engaged to three other suitors at the same time, agreed to marry him and move to the Empire. As was the custom of the day, there were maids, cooks and nannies living at the headquarters and Laura's main responsibility was to oversee the smooth operation of the home and provide a comfortable atmosphere for their many guests. Although she had ridden some as a child, she was not an accomplished horsewoman and always made the excuse that she couldn't go out on the range because she didn't have the proper riding habit. Finally Banning and the children convinced her to order an outfit and she sent away for a pongee silk riding costume complete with high boots and a Panama hat. Dusty remembered the outing as a miserable event. "Mother never stopped worrying about us (Dusty and younger brother, Bill) and finally we were on the way home and that was great. We came to a spring with a low reservoir and Mother leaned over to get a drink. I looked at Dad and there was a peculiar look in his eye so I thought maybe I'd get away with it. I gave her a very gentle push and she went in head over heels and came out like a drowned rat!" Once Laura got out of her wet clothes she had to laugh at the sight of a contrite Dusty parading by her window with a bouquet of wildflowers, the surefire way to gain forgiveness for any misdeed. And best of all, Laura had a wonderful excuse never to ride again – the pongee silk shrank and once again she had "nothing suitable to wear."

Laura soon became known for her wonderful hospitality and the ranch was always the site of a continual stream of visitors – friends, relatives and business associates, but to the impressionable youngster, the real magic of the Empire was the large cast of romantic characters who lived and worked there. There was Apache Joe, the stoic Indian whose job it was to keep a continual supply of mesquite firewood on hand. He would stack it in huge piles and bring it up to the house as needed in an old wheelbarrow. The ranch hand, Bartolo, who was the envy of the other cowboys because his wife rolled his cigarettes and put them in a metal box for him to take out on the range. And of course, Mr. Helmann, the prim and proper bookkeeper who kept track of all the cattle transactions and managed the ranch store, but still took the time every morning to clean all the canned goods with a feather duster.



Dusty and her favorite playmate, Brother Brown, son of the family cook, Lena in 1918.

There was Lena the cook with the beautiful Jamaican accent and little apple cheeks whose children Freda and Brother were Dusty's favorite playmates. Lena first came to the ranch to work in the lower kitchen, cooking for the cowboys. They were served delicious jerky, frijoles and tortillas and the children were soon sneaking off to eat at that table. Lena's culinary talent became the talk of the ranch and soon she was moved to the upper kitchen to cook fancier fare for the family.

There was Mr. Purofoy, the hard of hearing manager of the store at Pantano Station, who could put messages through to the outside world. When Mrs. Jones, the cook with the German accent, tried to give him a telegraph message, he had trouble understanding her. When she got to the part notifying the

recipient that the Empire had shipped so many carloads of bulls, he just couldn't make out the word "bulls." Mrs. Jones tried spelling it for him but with her accent he just couldn't understand her, so she said, "No, I said bulls! Bulls - the cow's husbands!" At that point Mr. Purofoy finally got the picture.

To be continued.....

Editor's note: This article was compiled from tapes, handwritten notes, oral histories, Vail family photos, and interviews provided to the author by Susan Hughes, Dusty Vail Ingram's daughter. Materials included: "The Empire Ranch and Walter Vail," by John J. Woolley and Laurel Wilkening, Copper State Journal, Spring 2002; Interview with Dusty Vail Ingram by William R. Gibson, James Huff and Gordon Warren of the BLM, Sept. 29, 1989; Interview with Dusty Vail Ingram by Will Woolley, Sept. 14, 1997; "Women of the Empire Ranch Project," interview with Dusty Vail Ingram by Glenda Bonin, fall, 2001. The photos in the article are courtesy of Susan Hughes and the Vail Family.