

Growing up a tomboy on the Empire Ranch, Part II

By Betty Barr

This article was originally printed in *The Bulletin* in two parts, July 18 and 23, 2003. It is posted on the Empire Ranch Foundation website with Betty Barr's permission. This material is copyrighted and may not be further reproduced without permission of the author.

The story so far: Laura Vail Ingram was born in Tucson in December 1914 and nicknamed Dusty by her father who thought that the bawling baby sounded parched and thirsty. Vail had been called away from a posse to attend the birth and his replacement was killed, leading the family to credit Dusty with saving his life. Dusty was a tomboy who idolized her father and loved horses. She began riding at age six, survived being kicked in the face by a horse and shot a mountain lion among other exploits, all before age 12. Her grandfather Walter Vail purchased the original 160 acres of what was to become a vast "empire" in 1876 for \$2,000. He was killed in a tragic accident in 1906 and his young son Banning trained at the ranch and eventually became the manager in 1913. Dusty's mother was Laura Perry, a Tucson native well known and loved for her gracious hospitality. The ranch was peopled with a large cast of romantic characters that Dusty never forgot, including Apache Joe, ranch hand Bartolo, Mr. Helmann the bookkeeper, the beautiful Jamaican cook Lena and her children Brother and Freida, Mr. Purofoy the deaf storekeeper at Pantano and Mrs. Jones, the German cook who couldn't make him understand her telegraph messages.

There were lots of other memorable characters living at the Empire, like the new nursemaid who was to arrive from across the border. When the ranch hand went to Nogales to pick her up she was barefoot and had two children of her own with her. She had been beaten and abused by her husband and wanted to get out of Nogales so he wouldn't be able to find her. When they asked her name, she said she didn't want a Mexican name, she wanted Laura to re-name her. Laura reeled off a list of names and the girl picked Sally. She was known as Sally from then on. Another favorite was the maid, Josefina Escalante, who would chase them with her broom when they would tease her with, "Josefina Escalante, color de elephante."

There were Ma and Pa Farrar who lived in an old house out toward Rosemont Station, one of the outlying sections of the ranch. Ma had been pestering Banning that she needed a new house so they went out there to figure out where to build it. Banning insisted on a spot on the edge of a bluff, looking down on a wash even though Ma kept shouting that she wanted it built right next to her old house. Seems that in her old age, Ma fixed all their meals from cans and when she was done, she threw the empty cans out the window. Banning said if he built it on the cliff, she could throw out the cans and they'd roll down the hill. When the flash floods came they would all be washed away. He had devised an early day waste disposal system.

Dusty had no interest in helping around the house with domestic chores; she always wanted to be more like the cowboys. Wearing dresses, and especially bloomers, was the bane of her existence and it was a happy day when she was finally allowed to switch to

blue jeans and chaps. Chaps available at the mercantile were too big and stiff for her ride in comfortably. Somehow, Banning talked Shorty (Blas Lopez, the ranch foreman) into letting her wear his “broken-in chaps.” He wasn’t much taller than Dusty so it was the perfect solution. Her dad also had a saddle made for her at Porters, a well-known saddle-making shop in Phoenix at the time. She was also allowed to trade in her traditional Mary Janes for a pair of lace-up shoes that came up above the ankle like a baseball shoe.

Her greatest joy was to hop on her horse for impulsive excursions. One day the family was eating lunch in the dining room and Banning mentioned that he’d love to have some watercress. There was a spring nearby that was lush with watercress so Dusty tore down to the orchard on horseback, pretending she was the pony express, filled a lard bucket with the watercress and dashed back with it. Her dad was still at the table, so she proudly, “Got the mail there on time,” and he enjoyed his watercress.

Business of course, was the heart of the ranch operation. When there were guests for dinner, the men would repair to the master bathroom after dessert to smoke their cigars and talk cattle. They referred to it as the “Gentlemen’s Room.” The Empire brand was VH for the horses and a heart for the cattle. Business sometimes had a way of interrupting family outings. Many an eagerly anticipated trip to Tucson, with mother and the children waiting in the car, was delayed at the last minute when a cowboy would suddenly run up with a wire of ear cuttings. When branding time came, the cowboys would notch the calf’s ear and spear the cutting on a piece of baling wire. Later they could count the cuttings and know exactly how many calves they had processed. What this interruption meant to the kids was a one-to-two-hour wait while Banning and the boys discussed the condition of the cattle and how many calves they had. The cowboy coming with the wire was not a welcome sight as far as the children were concerned.

One year there were several springs on the property that needed to be cleaned out. A lot of trash had built up over time and it was getting harder for the water to get to the surface. When Banning got down near the bottom he found all kinds of cooking and eating implements, possibly dropped in the spring by people who had been dipping a cup for drinking water or washing dishes. A professor came down to the ranch from the University of Arizona (UA) and found an Indian burial site near the spring. The skeletons were all lying face down, leading the researchers to suppose that they had been killed in battle and buried in the prone position to make it harder for them to get up to the happy hunting ground.

The worst memory Laura had of her life on the Empire was during the terrible drought in the mid-1920s. The livestock were all starving and the ranchers were rounding up as many cattle as they could and either feeding them at the headquarters or shipping them to ranches they had leased in Mexico. Banning trailed over 7,000 head of cattle south of the border in what was to be the last major Arizona cattle drive. If they were too far gone



Dusty wearing her “broken-in” chaps that originally belonged to foreman, Blas Lopez. (1925).

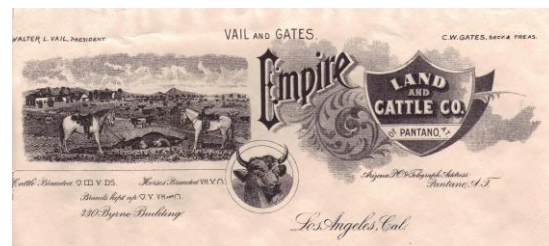
they would shoot them on the spot. The rangeland had become overrun with what was referred to as “cold-blooded horses,” which were old, worn out or lame mounts that had been set free to fend for themselves. The coldblood herds had multiplied and were eating valuable grass that the rancher needed for his cattle. Banning decided to round up all the horses and notify the neighbors that they could claim as many as they wanted. The horses that no one wanted would have to be disposed of. Dusty still remembers the miserable ordeal. It took two days for her father to shoot all the horses and drag them far down the wash where they were heaped up so high that one of the cowboys could walk all the way across the wash on the backs of horses. The whole affair caused much sorrow to Banning and his family.

Not long afterwards the Empire was sold to the Boice family (the Chiricahua Cattle Company) and at age 12 or 13 Dusty moved from the Empire and her life as a “cowboy” was over forever. Almost 70 years later, Dusty Vail Ingram told an interviewer, “My formative years – really the most fun years of my entire life, were spent on the Empire. I don’t know of anything that influenced me as much as the 12 years that I spent there on the ranch. They molded a great deal of my thinking and living – not only me, but my children as well. I often wonder how it’s possible out of a whole lifetime of 80 years, that 12 years could have been so important - when some of those years I wasn’t even aware, and I certainly wasn’t aware of what it meant to me and that’s the pity of it all. The most important thing is the legacy I passed on to my children.”

Laura, “Dusty” Vail Ingram died April 17, 2003 at age 88 and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery next to her beloved husband, Navy Captain Red Ingram (Ret.). The Empire Ranch where she grew up is now part of the Las Cienegas Natural Conservation Area. She assisted with restoration and research projects relating to the ranch and helped establish the Empire Ranch Foundation. Several years before her death she remarked to interviewer, Will Woolley, “The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) – I couldn’t think of a better thing that could have happened to this ranch. (I foresee that) it will become available to many people with different pursuits (who will be able to) learn what the west was really about.”



This photo of cow ponies stretching out a bull was used on the engraved letterhead (right).



The official Empire Land & Cattle Co. letterhead incorporated several ranch photos.

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. Photos courtesy of Susan Hughes and the Vail family