



Photo courtesy of Eric and Marilyn Oberbeck

By Casey Beard

**A**s Oregon prepares to celebrate its Sesquicentennial, it looks back upon a storied ranching history. In 150 years since joining the Union, the Beaver State has been home to some of the West's greatest cattlemen and ranches. Headquartered in The Dalles, Ben Snipes — the Northwest Cattle King — ran 120,000 head of cattle and 25,000 horses.

Oregon's vast eastern reaches were home to the murdered Pete French's famous ranching empire. And, it was said that a man could ride from Sacramento to the Columbia River and stay every night in a Miller and Lux Ranch line shack.

The Beaver State's oldest registered brand and continuously operating cattle ranch, however, is not to be found in Oregon's classic ranching country east of the Cascade Mountains, but in the heavily timbered, rainy, coastal mountain range overlooking the Pacific Ocean near Coos Bay. Founded in 1854, the Dement Ranch remains in family hands and continues to produce herds of top quality cattle bearing the D Dot brand.

Its founder, Samuel Maxwell Dement, an Ohio native, caught Oregon Fever in 1851. A blacksmith by trade, Dement sold his shop, loaded his wife, Caroline, and young son, Russell in a wagon, and followed the Oregon Trail to the new promised land.

Shortly after reaching trail's end at Oregon City in the fertile Willamette Valley, he learned of a gold strike near Jacksonville, in the southern Willamette Valley. Sensing opportunity, he later moved the family to the Coos Bay boom towns on the Pacific coast.

*More than a century after Samuel Maxwell Dement established his ranch, his grandson and great-grandson, E.S. and Sam Dement, continued the family traditions.*

Oregon already supported a ranching industry in the Willamette Valley, with its first recorded cattle drive in 1837 when early settlers trailed a herd from California to stock the valley's lush pasturelands. Dement, however, did not set out for the Rogue River with the intention of raising livestock.

He sought work blacksmithing for the miners and settlers in the new communities on Coos Bay. But for the lure of a gold strike on the nearby Coquille River in 1854, Samuel Dement might have toiled over a forge the rest of his life.

With a companion, Samuel set out on foot over heavily forested mountains to reach the new diggings. Following faint Indian trails, the pair struggled through heavy timber and up steep slopes carrying 75-pound packs.

Their sagging spirits were lifted when they reached open meadows on Russell Creek, later named Dement Creek, a tributary of the Coquille River. Cheered by the lush open country teeming with wild game and berries, they decided to rest a few days before pushing on to the Coquille gold fields. While camped there, they befriended a band of local Indians whose Chief, Old



*A view of one of the horse barns on the historic Dement Ranch from the patio behind the house. The patio offers stunning views of ranch pastures and surrounding mountains of the Siskiyou National Forest.*

David, invited them to settle on the meadows.

Pushing on to the gold fields, they found the best digging sites already claimed. Disappointed, Dement abandoned mining to take up the Chief's offer to settle on Russell Creek and raise livestock. Samuel however, was a rancher without cattle. With cash earned blacksmithing, Dement set out to buy the foundation of his herd.

The closest available cattle in the Umpqua River valley were of poor quality and expensive. Seeking lower prices and better animals, Dement walked 250 miles from Coos Bay to Oregon City. With his capital, Samuel bought two bred cows for \$120. Leaving his cows on Russell Creek to fend for themselves through the mild coastal range winter, Dement returned to his family.

In the spring of 1854, the family moved 50 miles into the isolated, rugged back country to take up their claim. Even today, the Dement Ranch is nearly as isolated as when Samuel first found it. There is still no electricity or phone service. The ranch wasn't connected to the outside world by road until 1955.

Reaching the home site, Samuel discovered his cattle had wandered nearly 20 miles. Even more discouraging, he found wolves had killed one of the calves born during the winter. It was a harsh introduction to the tribulations of ranching.

Supplementing his income by shoeing travelers' horses and making butcher knives, Dement laid the ranch's foundation. He built a house, smithy and corrals; cleared land and planted fruit trees and a vegetable

garden. By autumn, he had saved enough money to purchase more cattle.

Traveling in relative luxury riding a borrowed mule, Dement purchased more cows in Oregon City. His return trip, however, was fraught with worry for the Rouge River War had erupted during his absence. Attacks on the Indian tribes living along southern Oregon's coastal river valleys by unemployed miners sparked reprisals. Scores of settlers were killed and the terrified survivors fled to larger settlements for safety.

Desperate to reach his family, Dement left his cows and the mule with an acquaintance and hastened home. Samuel was greatly relieved

to find his wife and son safe. Thanks to his friendship with Chief Old David and the ranch's remoteness, they were spared. As a precaution, however, the Dements retreated to the safety of Coos Bay until the troubles passed.

By the spring of 1856, the Rogue River War was over and the Dement family, increased by a newborn daughter, returned to their remote mountain ranch to continue carving a home out of the wilderness. Caroline Dement was cheered to know that besides a new daughter, they would have neighbors. Dement's companion on the trip to the Coquille goldfields had decided to settle his family nearby. After having only a fiddle, journal and Bible as comforts, neighbors were a welcome treat.

The Dement herd prospered to the point that by 1863, finding



*This ranch house was largely constructed out of Port Orford cedar and parts of the home date back to the late 1800s. This was one of several buildings that came with the purchase of the Haines ranch in 1927. Photography by Rebecca Malamud*

markets for their mature steers was a problem. Samuel solved the challenge with a bold solution; drive 60 head of beef to the gold mining camps near Boise, Idaho.

With one cowboy, Samuel undertook this momentous journey over 400 miles; crossing three mountain ranges, several rivers and arid high deserts under threat from outlaws and hostile Indians. Dement's drive was years before Texas cattlemen began trailing their herds to Kansas railheads after the

Civil War. It can be argued that the classic Western cattle drive was originated in Oregon Territory by early ranchers like Samuel Dement, Ben Snipes and Colonel A. J. Splawn who drove herds hundreds of miles to mining towns in Canada and Idaho during the 1860s.

Encouraged by his success, Samuel repeated the feat the next year with a longer drive and a much larger herd. Russell Dement accompanied his father on this epic 16-month drive. Highlighting the enterprise's danger, vigilantes hung an outlaw near their camp. Russell recounted that during the entire time they slept on the ground every night and cooked all their meals over a campfire.

With railroads pushing their way down the Willamette Valley and growing local demand for beef, the Dements' long trail driving days ended. When ready for market, the cattle were gathered and driven 75 miles to the railhead at Roseburg, Oregon.

Their marketing problems resolved, Samuel and



Photography by Rebecca Mulamud

*With Sugar Loaf Mountain in the distance, Dement's 400 mother cows graze on the ranch's 3,700 acres.*

Russell Dement concentrated on expanding their land holdings and improving the quality of their cattle. Ultimately, Samuel owned approximately 5,000 acres. His theory was that it was cheaper to own the adjacent property than to fence it off. Utilizing the transportation revolution created by the railroad, Samuel imported Shorthorn and Devon cattle from his native Ohio.

By 1885, the years of hard frontier living had taken a toll on Samuel's health. Hoping that a change of climate would improve his condition, he traveled to California. Unfortunately, Samuel suffered a fatal heart attack and was buried in Fallbrook, California, far from his beloved mountain meadows.

After formal education at Portland, Oregon, Russell had married and begun to acquire his own land and cattle. He also developed interests in dairies, butcher shops and banking. Over time, he bought out most of his relatives and neighbors as he continued expanding the ranch and its herds. By 1907, Russell had largely retired from active ranching, turning over operations to

his twin sons, Lester and Ellis. Freed from day-to-day ranching responsibilities, Russell concentrated on banking, observing in his memoirs that, "This banking business is cold-blooded and as you grow older you mellow so I don't think old people are fit for bankers. This is my reason for resigning (from the bank) at the age of 87."

Ellis emerged as leader of the next generation of ranching Dements. Like his father and grandfather, he was a force in Oregon's cattle industry introducing Hereford bloodlines to the operation, greatly improving the ranch's herds.

After renting the property for many years, Ellis made another significant contribution to the family's legacy by purchasing the Haines ranch in 1927. Built in 1865,



Photo courtesy of Eric and Marilyn Oberbeck

*Myrtle "Ma Jett" Garner (right) who appears here with Grandma Wells, fought charges of cattle rustling from the Dement Ranch all the way to the United States Supreme Court. It reportedly is the only cattle rustling case to appear before that judicial body.*

the house had served as a community post office and frontier hotel. The property's timber frame barn, built in 1890, retains its original thrashing floor; the only one remaining in Oregon. These historic buildings still form the ranch headquarters.

Ellis was also involved in one of the state's most interesting cattle rustling cases. In 1939, Oregon's version of Cattle Kate, Myrtle "Ma Jett" Garner and her gang of rustlers acquired a ranch adjoining one of the Dement's remote ranges on the Sixes River. Gathering Dement steers off these isolated pastures, the Garner gang drove them to corrals on Ma Jett's ranch. From there, the stolen cattle were trucked to Vancouver, Washington, for sale. An alert logger observed the cattle being hauled out of the secluded Garner ranch and suspected they were Dement's. The logger notified authorities who swept in and arrested the gang.

Although the Dements had used the "D" brand for 50 years, in the mid-1920s, Oregon enacted a new brand law. By the time Ellis requested the "D" brand, the Department of Agriculture informed him that the brand had already been registered to Jay Dobbin of

Wallowa County. Since Dobbin was on the State Agriculture Commission, there was little point in appealing the decision. With no history of rustling in the area, the brand's local familiarity and Wallowa County being located on the other side of the state, Ellis decided to continue using the "D" iron.

Garner tried to use the brand registration issue in her defense to no avail. Following her conviction and four-year prison sentence, Ma Jett appealed her case all the way to the Supreme Court, reportedly the only cattle rustling case to appear before that august body.

After the rustling case, Ellis decided to resolve the brand issue. Fortunately, as a school project his son Sam had made a D brand with a dot in the middle. Ellis registered it as the D Dot which is still used today.

Sam Dement, the founder's great grandson, continued the family legacy improving their cattle and adapting to changing market conditions. Rather than finishing their steers for market, he switched to a "cow-calf" operation; selling yearlings to feedlot operators.

A star athlete, Sam also continued the family tradition of community leadership. Following World War II service, he remained active with Oregon State University where he is a distinguished alumnus. Sam also found time to serve as a state senator and President of the Oregon Cattleman's Association.

One of Sam's most important contributions to the D Dot legacy is passing on his love of ranching to another generation of Dements. In 1997, he created a Limited Liability Corporation to transfer ownership of the ranch to his daughters and son-in-laws.

True to the brand, this generation — daughters Diane and Joan and their husbands Gary Simon and Ron Harpole — has served the community, expanded the ranch's holdings, introduced innovative ranching techniques and received a Food Alliance Certification recognizing outstanding stewardship of their land, cattle and the environment. Fittingly, the family's sixth and seventh generations now ride the lush mountain pastures that first enchanted Samuel Maxwell Dement 150 years ago. 🐾

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*A gift to Sam Dement on his 70th birthday, this custom barbecue pit conveys the history of the Dement Ranch brands. The D brand, on the right, was used by the family for 50 years before new brand registration regulations and a nasty cattle rustling case brought about the need for a new mark. Young Sam built a D Dot branding iron as a high school project; his father registered the D Dot (left) and it remains in use today.*

