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Springtime on the Suburban Ranch

By Diane Claytor



New calves on the Sperry Ranch in Moraga enter a chute before branding. Photo Andy Scheck

on the property. Other than her years away at college, Sperry has lived most of her life on the ranch.

Widowed in 1986, the Moraga elementary and middle school teacher of 37 years married Sam Sperry, a municipal bond attorney, five years later. Together with Frazell, they continued to work the ranch on weekends. "We were the ranch hands and Gordon was the manager," Sam Sperry said. And since everyone had full-time jobs, working the ranch "was more like a hobby," he added.

There's always something to do when you live on a ranch. Most of their time is spent mending fences, fixing or replacing water pipes, and weeding. One of the biggest problems in the area is water, which comes from springs. The ranch is located outside the town boundaries, so the 18 houses on their road are on both private water and private sewer systems. The Sperrys have reserve water tanks and use grey water to water the fields, but last year, for the first time, Susan Sperry stated that they had to truck in water. "Cows drink a lot of water in the summer and not having enough also affects the grass, which the cows eat. We've had to reduce our herd because of the lack of water," she said.

The Sperrys currently have eight cows and one bull, in addition to six calves. They're expecting another two calves to be born within the coming weeks. "We were only able to brand four of the calves," Sam Sperry explained, "because one was too small and slid through the machine and one - our rambunctious, hyperactive girl - was too fast, broke down the gate and got away." She didn't go too far - just far enough so they were unable to catch and brand her.

The calves are usually sold on consignment through an auction house in mid-summer, but the cows and bull are full-time residents at the ranch. To regulate the months of birthing calves, the bull is kept in the barn from September through the first of January. During that time, Susan Sperry noted, they bring him hay twice a day. The bull was born on the ranch and, she said, is "pretty frisky. He's been known to jump the fence. One time, he got out and my 5-year-old grandson and I used the 'Hansel and Gretel' method to lure him back." They put out some alfalfa, drove about 20 feet, put out more alfalfa and kept repeating the process. The bull followed the alfalfa and made his way home.

The Sperrys, a warm, affable couple who laugh easily, live less than three miles from central

On a warm Saturday morning, while many Lamorindans were out enjoying the sunshine, four recently-born calves on the Sperry Ranch were perhaps not as happy. They were being branded, which is done for both identification and as a theft deterrent. According to Susan Sperry, who has lived on the Moraga ranch for more than 60 years, branding doesn't really hurt the animals. "It's like placing your hand on a hot stove," she explained. "It only hurts for a minute or two."

In 1944, Sperry's father, Gordon Frazell, bought the 80-acre ranch located on the eastern border of Moraga. A house painter by trade, Sperry's father spent weekends building his family house on the property - the house now occupied by Susan Sperry's younger daughter.

Sperry and her late husband built a house just up the hill from her father's (where she currently lives) and her older daughter recently built one up the hill from that. Sperry's sister also built a house

Moraga, although it seems like a world away. It's easy to understand why they love it so much. Riding with Sam Sperry in their four-wheel drive off-road vehicle to the top of the property as he points out the ranch's features, his pride is apparent. The views of Mt. Diablo, downtown Walnut Creek and Concord and even the South Bay, are breathtaking. "It's a lovely place to live," he said, "but not without its challenges."

Both Sperrys are now retired and enjoy having their very own family compound, with four of their eight grandchildren as next door neighbors. They still mend fences and are always on the lookout for pipe leaks and, of course, they still brand their calves every year. As Susan Sperry said, "I go for walks with my friends who tell me about the books they're reading and the great restaurant meals they've enjoyed. I tell them about snaking out a sewer line or chasing a calf."



One of the Sperry's recently branded calves.



A calf enters the chute on its way to be branded. Photos A. Scheck

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