

Richard and Phyllis Guerrieri – Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission

2022 Agricultural History Honoree

The Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission has honored Phyllis and Richard Guerrieri with their annual Historic Ranching Recognition for significant contributions to the agricultural history of the valley. The family has been directly involved in the production of livestock in the Gunnison basin since the late 19th century and has documented that history in books co-written by Phyllis and Richard and their daughter Cara.

Richard and Phyllis' grandparents all arrived in the valley in the mid to late 1800s. Phyllis' paternal grandparents, the Imoberstegs, began as ranchers in Crested Butte near what is now the Danni ranch and her maternal side started as blacksmiths in Pitkin. Richard's forebears all began as miners in Crested Butte, pivoting to ranching over time.

Phyllis, born in 1932 into a robust ranching life, comes from a strong family of women ranchers. Her grandmother, Olive Imobersteg Spann, raised her siblings after her mother died when she was a teenager, and later was postmistress of Jacks Cabin while also running the ranch with her husband Lang. Phyllis mother, Ernestine Eastman Spann, was an advocate for women's education and financial independence. At a time when only landowners could vote on certain county issues, Ernestine insisted that her name be listed on the deed on her Crested Butte land, which was unusual for women at the time. When there was an effort in the 1970s to condemn that property (now Hidden River Ranch) for an airport, Ernestine led the successful effort by her family to fight the takeover.

Richard was born in 1931 in Crested Butte where he lived a rich life surrounded by family and friends, miners and mothers, wildlife, and mountains. In 1945, at the age of 14, his family made the move to Gunnison, motivated by a desire to escape the dangers and darkness of a mining life, and settle into the ranching life.

Gaspar and Rosario Guerrieri, Richard's grandparents, emigrated to Crested Butte from Grimaldi, Italy in 1891 and 1900 respectively, and struggled to bring their oldest child to a country that didn't welcome immigrants with physical defects like cleft palate. Ultimately Gaspar and Rosario buried 8 of their 14 children before they could reach adulthood, highlighting the hardships of a life of poverty in the early 20th century. Through hard work and perseverance they were able to eventually settle down and prosper in Gunnison County.

Richard's mother, Mary Sneller Guerrieri, was born in the long-abandoned mining town of Floresta and was fluent in Croatian, Italian, and English. His father Geniali (Gene) ran the tippie at the Bulkley mine, located on the eastern flank of Gibson Ridge just south of Crested Butte. Gene was proud of passing the arduous test required to qualify to run a tippie, no small feat for a man with an 8th grade education. Today the Baxter Gulch trail crosses the old tailings heap from the Bulkley mine. Gene had an entrepreneurial spirit and moved his family around the county to work the various ranches that he would lease, buy, and sell.

Ranching, in part, brought Phyllis and Richard together, meeting first in their mid-teens when their families worked neighboring ranches. When they were 19 and 18, Richard and Phyllis married, and were able to buy a ranch from his parents, right across the Gunnison River from her parents, and from there things rolled one to the next. Dairy cows proved troublesome and gave way to beef cattle. Five children came along, land holdings expanded, the children grew and mostly left the ranch life behind, except for their son Burt and wife Sandy who now operate Mill Creek Ranch.

A well-earned retirement now sees Phyllis and Richard leading the quiet life, still living in their ranch house after 71 years of a shared life. She paints watercolors; he writes poetry and memoir. Richard's family history is well documented in The Spaghetti Gang: Memories of a Crested Butte Coal Miner's Son. Phyllis' watercolors and accompanying historical antidotes are highlighted in Pure Joy: Art by Phyllis Charlene Spann Guerrieri, and in the children's story she illustrated, The Mill Creek Kids Count to Ten. They both seem to embrace their lives and legacies in the Gunnison Country, while at the same time wondering just a little what the fuss is all about.

The Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission congratulates Richard and Phyllis on their many accomplishments and contributions to the agriculture history of the valley.