

Bud Purdy - Progressive Rancher, Idaho Legend

By Steve Stuebner

There's a man in Picabo, Idaho, who's been a true leader in the ranching and business industry, who also hunted ducks with Ernest Hemingway, and is still flying his own airplane at age 94. His name is Bud Purdy. In ranching circles, he's considered an Idaho legend.



Bud Purdy

"Bud Purdy is one of my heroes," says Bert Brackett, a Rogerson cattle rancher who has worked with Bud for years on many projects. "He's been an integral part of the range and beef industry forever. He exemplifies what a lot of us would aspire to be."

Adds Lt. Gov. Brad Little, a lifelong rancher from Emmett, "He always wants to learn. I bet Bud Purdy has been on thousands of range tours. He sits in the front of the bus; he's often one of the first ones off the bus; he wants to kick the clods, look at the creeks, look at the grass. He's continually interested in range science and resources."

Bud Purdy was born in Beatrice, Nebraska. After a divorce, his mother moved Bud and her three other children to Redlands, Calif., to live with her family. Soon after, her father, W.H. Kilpatrick, sent Bud and his brother, Bill, to work on the family sheep ranch in Picabo in the summer of 1928. The boys were 10 and 11 years old at the time. A family friend, Elmer Cox, drove them to Picabo in a Chevy two-door coupe. It took them four days to get there.

"There weren't very many paved roads then, I'll tell you that," Purdy quips. "We went through Las Vegas and Salt Lake City, and a lot of the area in between wasn't paved."

Bud and Bill got paid 10 cents a load to spread manure in the hay fields. They each had a team of horses to work with. "We only worked half a day at a time, and then we'd go swimming or something, you know how kids are," Purdy said with a smile.



Bud at age 11 on horseback at the K-K Ranch

When he got a little older, Bud ran a derrick cart to pick up hay and stack it in big hay piles with the assistance of the ranch crew. The boys also helped tend to the sheep in the mountains. The K-K Ranch, as it was known then, was primarily a sheep operation.

"We had some range up in the East Fork of the Wood River, and we'd spend maybe a week up there, and one day, I think I was 11, we decided to climb Hyndman Peak," Purdy says. Hyndman is one of Idaho's tallest peaks at 12,009 feet. Obviously, Purdy got his mountain legs pretty quick. "It was a pretty good way for a little kid to have fun."

Bud got a business degree from Washington State University in 1938. He didn't expect to return to the ranch in Picabo. "There weren't any jobs," he recalls. "We were still in the Depres-

sion then. But Grandpa says, you go to Picabo and I'll pay you \$60 a month plus room and board. Well that sounded like a pretty good deal, so I came to Picabo, and I've pretty much been here ever since."

Bud was fortunate to have ties to the Kilpatrick family. The Kilpatrick Brothers Company had done well in the logging, mining and railroad business across the United States, helping build the nation. The K-K Ranch had been established in Picabo by the Kilpatrick Brothers in 1889 at the same time the company was working on building the Oregon Short Line railroad from Shoshone to Ketchum.

When Bud returned to Picabo after college at age 21, the K-K Ranch was focused primarily on raising sheep. They had four bands, or 8,000 sheep, and several hundred beef cattle. In the mid-1950s, Bud and his siblings bought the K-K Ranch. His sister and brother took the sheep operation, and Bud and his brother, Bill, decided to grow the cattle side of the business.

"There was a big transition going on at the time (from sheep to cattle)," Purdy says. "I decided the cattle were the best deal, and it turned out that way."

Purdy notes that there were 2.5 million sheep in Idaho at the time, and today there are only 250,000. "Can you believe that?"

Being a cattle rancher brought more respect, too, Purdy says. "Ranchers always used to say, I'm running a few cattle to keep



Bud remembers climbing 12,009-foot Hyndman Peak, above, as a boy while camping out with the sheepherders in the Pioneer Mountains.



Bud, right, with his grandfather, W.H. Kilpatrick, in the 1940s.

my respectability. People always looked down on the sheep herders."

Bud also acquired the Lava Lake Ranch (which was later sold), the Picabo store, and the Kilpatrick feed and grain elevator business. He named his ranching business Picabo Livestock. Bud was in love with the ranching lifestyle by then.

"Once you get started in it, and get in it, you're hooked," he says. "Every morning, you get up and do something different. You turn out on the range and ride a horse every day. Even now, I go

out and make sure the water is OK, check the fences and make sure the gates are closed. It's just a constant going out there and doing it. "I was never a cowboy, but I've ridden a million miles."

Certainly part of the mystique had to be living on the banks of Silver Creek, a spring-fed blue-ribbon trout stream that winds through the Purdy Ranch. Bud can go fishing or hunt ducks right out the back door. The local fishing and hunting was one reason Ernest Hemingway moved to Ketchum in 1959. He'd already been duck hunting with Bud on Silver Creek for years.

"We were pretty good friends," Purdy says. "He really liked bird hunting. I just looked on Hemingway as just another guy. I knew he was kind of a prominent person, but still, he didn't throw his weight around, he was just another guy."

Hemingway was a good shot, too.



Working cattle, checking fences, running the ranch and topping it all off with a dip in Silver Creek is Bud's idea of a perfect day.



Hemingway brought a number of Hollywood celebrities to go trap shooting or duck hunting on Silver Creek with Bud, including Gary Cooper, left.

"With a shotgun, he could outshoot all of us, really," Purdy says. "We'd throw up hand traps once in a while, and we'd bet a dollar on the deal, and he'd always take our money."

Bud and his wife, Ruth, socialized with Ernest and Mary Hemingway, and they skied together as well. Hemingway brought many celebrities out to the Purdy ranch including Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and Gregory Peck. "We met most of them, and they were all right," he says. "We went to a few parties at Trail Creek, but I was busy, I couldn't just party around. I was working!"

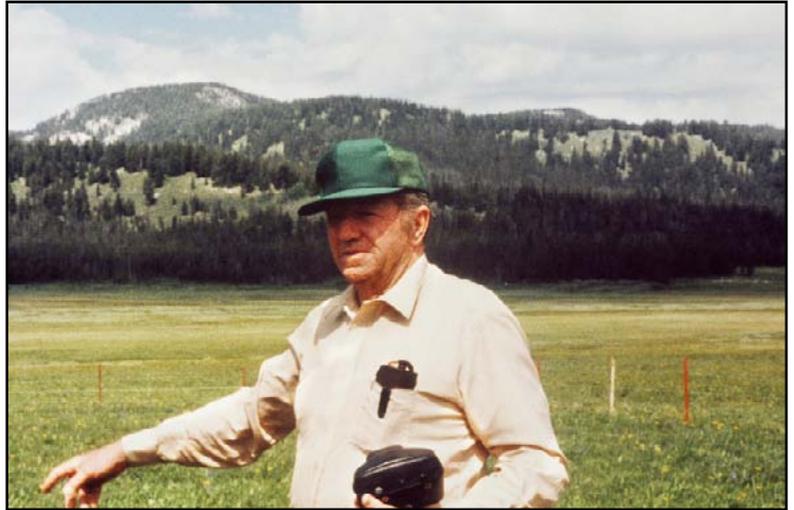
The Hemingways were fond of Bud. They sent him several guns as a gift, and Hemingway signed his books. "My favorite is *The Green Hills of Africa*, which is about hunting in Kenya and Tanzania, too," Purdy says. Hemingway signed the book, "To Ruth and Bud - Best Always, Love, your friend and fellow shooter."

As Bud developed the cattle business, Purdy Livestock encompassed 6,000 acres of private land next to Silver Creek and the Lava Lake Ranch property, and 50,000 acres of BLM and Forest Service grazing leases. They raised grain, barley, corn, potatoes and alfalfa on the private land. They wintered more than 2,500 head of cattle at the home ranch, using some of the original barns built in the late 1800s, and a 50,000-gallon water tank built by the Kilpatricks, which also provided drinking water to the town of Picabo. They always had a ranch foreman and several employees to stay on top of things. "It's a big operation," Purdy says.

Bud and his first wife, Maxine, had three children, Nick, Christine and Mark. After a divorce in 1950, Bud got remarried to Ruth Eckles, to whom he was married for 51 years before she died a few years ago. Ruth also had a son, Gordon Eckles, who became part of the blended family.

In the 1970s, Bud tried some new cattle grazing management techniques. He credits Gus Hormay, the father of rest-rotation grazing, with educating ranchers about doing things right. Hormay worked for the Forest Service and spread the word about rest-rotation grazing with ranchers throughout the western United States.

"After listening to that guy, you start realizing we've got to take care of the plants, the soil, and the water," Purdy says. "And then my son went to



Gus Hormay, a grazing specialist for the U.S. Forest Service, was instrumental in convincing ranchers to try rest-rotation grazing. The Purdys were among the early converts.



The Purdys donated a conservation easement along Silver Creek (above) to The Nature Conservancy to ensure the ranch is never subdivided and preserve the stream's water quality and fishing.

work for us in the 1960s, and he was even more gung ho than I was about it. And so we just started in and tried to make things a little better all the time."

Being located next to world-class fishing stream made the Purdys sensitive to the impacts of cattle on stream banks. They provided off-site water for livestock to keep them out of the river. They also adopted rest-rotation grazing systems on public lands. Range tours helped with the education, Purdy says.

"I've got to give the agencies, and the universities and extension credit for calling that stuff to our attention," he says. "The tours, they're the best thing in the world. See what someone else is doing."

In the 1990s, the Purdys took the next step in their conservation legacy and donated a 3,500-acre conservation easement to The Nature Conservancy. Bud's son, Nick Purdy explains.

"The easement is on the whole ranch. It's a non-developable easement. You can't subdivide. Essentially, there's a

100-foot strip on either side of the creek that's restricted in terms of grazing and spraying and different practices. I'm glad we did it. Our easement was a gift with no intention of taking any money for it or tax advantage taken."

The conservation easement has been valued at \$7 million, according to some sources, as was reported in a history of the Kilpatrick family.

"It's such a special piece of property," Nick Purdy says. "There's hardly any land like it because of Silver Creek. I feel we're just holding it for the generations and passing it on ... it isn't really ours, and it's really too special to really belong to you, so we're just kind of in charge of it, and it'll go down through the generations."

Nick Purdy says it's important for ranchers to have a strong conservation ethic. "I think you have to have that if you're going to stay in business," he says. "You've got to protect the land, protect the water, and make it better all the time because it's good business sense, but morally, you've got to do it too."

Little says the Purdys' leadership in conservation work helped quell environmental extremists in the Sun Valley area. "Quite frequently, issues about livestock grazing boil up and grow out of Blaine County. It's an absolute certainty that there would have been a lot more issues with a lot more velocity if it hadn't been for Bud's presence over there," Little said.

Education is important to Bud Purdy. He was one of the founders of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission, a state agency with a mission to educate urban dwellers about the importance of rangelands, a land classification of open shrub-steppe grasslands that make up 44 percent of Idaho.

"We need to get the word out to the school kids about rangeland," Bud Purdy says. "Not particularly the cattle or the sheep, but the rangeland. It's unbelievable what it supports -- watershed, wildlife. It supports everything!"

Bud Purdy also served in many leadership posts in education and business circles. He was chairman of the University of Idaho Foundation, president of the Idaho Cattle Association, and chairman of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry (IACI), the state's most influential business lobby.



Sharon and Nick Purdy at the Silver Creek store in Picabo. Above, Silver Creek at sunset. Silver Creek is an integral part of the ranch and the Purdy's life. (Courtesy The Nature Conservancy.)

Tom Wilford, who was chairman of IACI the year after Purdy, says, "Bud really represented the cattlemen and the farmers -- the people who used the land in Idaho. He had a real sense of how you preserve it and how you keep it for the future."

"Bud was involved in everything," says Little. "I followed him on the University of Idaho Foundation Board and IACI. Anything that had significant importance to the state of Idaho with a nexus to his ranch, he was involved in it."

When Purdy was chairman of IACI in 1982-83, he flew around Idaho with IACI President Pat Harwood to help recruit members. Another one of Purdy's talents is being a private pilot. He still flies his own plane -- a Piper 235 Cherokee. "I fly it all the time," Purdy says. "It flies like a dream."

Purdy's been flying since 1941, checking on his cattle, finding strays, flying to business meetings, and even flying with son Nick to Mexico to go dove hunting. The Purdys have a turbo-charged, pressurized Cessna 210 with a Rolls Royce engine. Nick flies that plane.

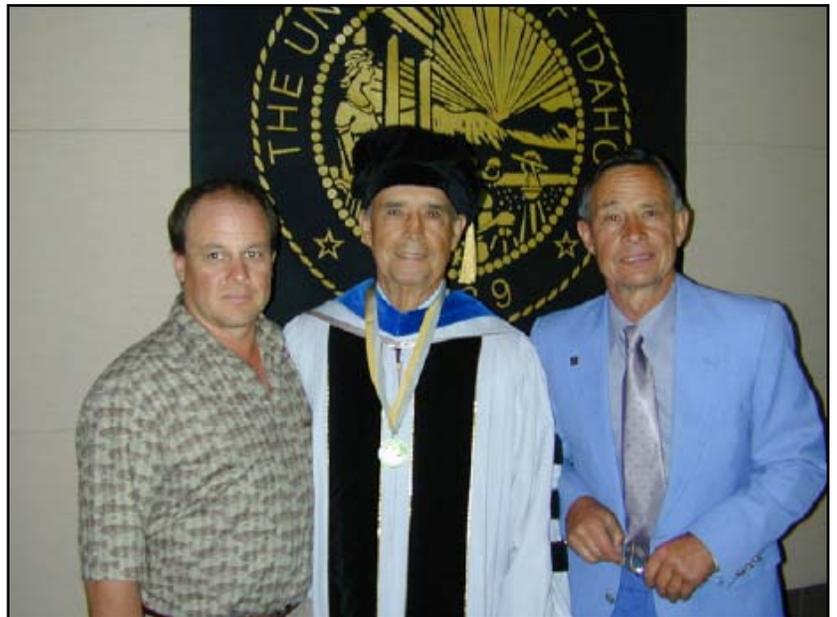
"There's something about flying that you like to fly," he says. "If a band of sheep gets lost, you can get in the airplane and spot them real quick. I like to fly for recreation, too. Hell, for 50 years, we flew into the Root Ranch and hunted elk."

As time went on, the Purdys developed a number of new business ventures as they saw opportunities to expand. Many of the businesses grew out of innovative things they did on the ranch. Silver Creek Irrigation, launched in 1973, was one of them. It started out selling irrigation equipment to local farmers, and expanded to include plumbing supplies, turf irrigation equipment, golf course irrigation equipment, pumps and panels. Nick manages that business along with his sons, Randy, Pat and Mike.

The Purdys also became an IBM computer dealer in the early days when PCs had just been invented. Randy and Mike Purdy started another company that designs and builds computer-controlled water-pumping stations for subdivisions, feedlots, farms and golf courses. And the Silver Creek store in Picabo has stayed in the family since Bud bought the ranch in the 1950s.



Bud Purdy's Piper 235 Cherokee, foreground, is parked next to Nick Purdy's modified Cessna 210 in a hangar behind the Silver Creek store. The Cessna has a Rolls Royce engine and a pressurized cabin.



Bud received an honorary degree in natural resources from the University of Idaho. With him are his son, Nick, right, and his grandson, Randy, left.



Four generations of the Purdy family pose for a photo at the ranch. Ranching teaches kids a sound work ethic, Bud says, just like it did for him.

"They've always been a cutting-edge production ranch in terms of ranch management," says Little. "They were early-adopters in using composite cattle in their breeding operations. What they've done with sprinkler irrigation, founding Silver Creek Irrigation. What they've done with software in terms of managing dust around confined animal operations. What Bud and Nick did in terms of keeping individual records on their livestock and monitoring livestock. It's a textbook in modern ranching."

Purdy doesn't have any particular advice for living a long and full life. "Just take it one day at a time, that's all you can do," he says. "I don't do anything special, you know. I don't abuse myself ... I'll take a drink but I don't smoke, I'm careful."

Most of all, Bud believes that growing up on a ranch teaches kids to have a strong work ethic, just like it did for him. "You couldn't beat it, could you? No way. Nick's boys were raised on the ranch, and they're real workers," Purdy says. "Boy those are the best kids you ever saw. Unbelievable. That's what it does, they learn to work. "

Here is a list of awards that Bud Purdy received over the years:

- U.S. Forest Service 75th anniversary award, 1980.
- Soil Conservation Service (now Natural Resources Conservation Service) 50th anniversary award, 1985.
- Idaho Cattleman of the Year, 1987.
- National Environmental Stewardship Award, National Cattlemen's Association, 1994.
- Pat Harwood Award for Distinguished Service to Idaho Business, 1999, presented by the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry.
- Distinguished Service Award, College of Southern Idaho.
- Outstanding Achievement Award, Society of Range Management.

Steve Stuebner is the writer and producer of Life on the Range, a public education project sponsored by the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission. www.lifeontherange.org