

# Homestead



*Ryan Grant took a journey to discover his roots. He's shown here with his father, freelancer Eric Grant; his grandmother Joann Freedman; and his great-grandfather John Hill.*

Freelancer Eric Grant takes his son on a journey to discover who he is.

*by Eric Grant*

It has been a long two days of driving — perhaps too long for my 10-year-old son, Ryan. Yesterday morning, a couple hours before sunup, we left Colorado and traveled across Wyoming and Montana. Today, we are descending the western slope of Lolo Pass and driving into the far reaches of central Idaho.

The road before us bends and curves and bends and curves like none I've ever seen. There's not even oncoming traffic to make things more interesting. So Ryan shifts his weight, takes short naps, sits up straight, listens to some music and naps again.

I try to hold his attention by talking about the significance of this canyon. It was the Northwest Passage for Lewis and Clark, the route that took them to the Pacific.

Ryan smiles, pulls his sketch pad from his backpack and takes a few notes. "This will be good information for my teacher," I can hear him thinking, so he writes this down in his assigned journal.

My eyes turn to the river, and I watch the water riffle. The green rocks shine beneath the surface. The snow of the mountains has given way to streaks of sunlight and occasional patches of fog.

In an hour or so, we will be at the family's homestead near Winchester, Idaho, high atop the Camas Plateau, where we will meet up with my grandpa John Hill; my mom, Joann Freedman, and her husband, Dave; and my uncle Randy Hill and his wife, Cindy. They, too, have made the journey into these mountains to see firsthand Grandpa's boyhood home.

A good friend once told me firsthand experience is the key to creativity and understanding. In other words, to understand something, you must be there to see it. So I have dragged Ryan from school because I want him to see it for himself, to wrap his hands around who he is, to

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*Family generations*

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grasp a bit of what was and to realize that the past shapes his life today.

"You know," I say to Ryan, "someday you'll be old, too, and you'll want your grandkids to know where you came from."  
I'm not sure he understands.

## Meeting Grandpa

We meet Grandpa and the family at the Howard Johnson's in Lewiston. They already have spent the last two days visiting relatives, meeting with local historians, visiting cemeteries, trying to make sense of old memories. I am sorry to have missed so much, but there is still much to learn.

Grandpa's story goes something like this: He was born in Winchester in 1914, where his father was a logging man and his mother was the descendant of eastern Washington farmers. The family left Idaho in 1924 for Colorado, when Grandpa was 9 years old. They packed everything they could into a 1914 Dodge touring car and traveled across the sagebrush desert of southern Idaho, into the red-rimmed country of Utah and up the Colorado River. The trip took weeks.

Grandpa grew into manhood in Colorado's Plateau Valley. He began piecing together a ranch when he turned 18. He married Josephine Severson, a school teacher, in 1938. They raised five children and together built their ranch into one of the valley's finest cow-calf outfits.

Today, at 85, Grandpa is as sharp, spry and energetic as ever.

## Common threads

I think for a few moments about how Ryan and Grandpa are similar. Both enjoy a good book. Both enjoy words. Both are shy, but good to their friends and neighbors. Both possess academic, school-boy looks. Had their roles been reversed and Grandpa born in the late 1980s, he might have become a professor or an engineer in the coming century. I'm not sure if Ryan would have grown up to be a cattleman.

Most important, both prefer solitude. It is in the quiet places that Grandpa reached his greatest potential and where Ryan, I am certain, will find his. Grandpa did his best work and most of his life's planning when he was alone. He accomplished much of what many of his neighbors thought impossible. He bought unproductive land, cleared it by hand, built ditches beneath red-rock rims and grew timothy, brome and orchard grass in abundance.

Today, Grandpa's fields and pastures remain his favorite places, and he returns to them each day to toil beneath the sun, to spread water in the summer or to feed cows in the winter. In all he does, he moves with a quiet purpose, a comfortable sense of being.

These same fields were school for me, and I learned more

from Grandpa than from anyone else I've ever known. He taught me how to look at a piece of ground, to appreciate its potential and to understand that anyone can accomplish anything if they have dreams and perseverance and guts. "A man must know what to do next," he told me many times.

Even today, hardly an hour goes by that my mind doesn't return to Salt Creek. I miss the peace of the pasture, the sweet stem of orchard grass, the cool shadow of a summer cloud. In everything I do, every word I write, I filter it through my experiences with Grandpa, think about what his reaction might be, know there is an angle that I'm not seeing that would be clear to him. It is the greatest gift anyone ever could have given me.

I am uncertain, however, how I will ever repay him; the debt is so great. So I have brought Ryan with me to Idaho because I want Grandpa to know that, even though the world has changed profoundly since his own childhood, his life continues to have relevance, his life has meaning, and it continues as a positive force in the lives of his descendants.

## Life's story

I have asked Ryan to write out a list of 10 questions to ask Grandpa. He comes up with 17, and he conducts his interview atop a pile of fenceposts outside the house where Grandpa was a boy. The air is quiet and cool. The sky is deep blue above them, and the wisps of clouds stretch across the farthest reaches of the horizon.

At first, their conversation is awkward, with gaps of misunderstandings. Ryan quickly learns to speak louder. Grandpa spends more time explaining the meanings of words like "cream," "buggy" and "Appaloosa."

Together they sit and talk, their lives spanning two centuries. They talk about life in Idaho, how the family built the barn, milked a few cows and kept draft horses. Grandpa explains how they walked up the road to attend school in a one-room school house, what they did for entertainment and what his parents were like.

At the end of their interview, Grandpa, eyes sparkling, places his arm around Ryan's shoulder. "I hope I've answered your questions to your satisfaction," he says.

Ryan nods approvingly, relieved to have gotten it done. He closes his notepad, and together they step inside the carriage shed through the barn — and into their future.

"His story is your story," I tell Ryan the next day as we drive across Wyoming toward home. Ryan pauses from his drawing, looks up from his notepad and sets down his pencil. The road stretches before us as far as he can see, and the sun has just risen. There is so much beauty in potential.

This time, he understands.

