

# CORDOVA CANYON RANCH

## The Story of the Cordova Family

by H.B. (Jack) Bickers

In 1916, several years after their marriage, Epemineo Cordova and his wife, Emmer Christiana West Cordova, established a small ranching operation at Blue Spring in the Yellow Cat country north and east of what is now Arches National Park. Together, they built a small house and sheep pens of rock from the higher portion of the cliffs forming the background to the north. This country was then much wetter, grass grew and water was more plentiful. Ruins of the old place may be seen today. Blue Spring is in the lowest part of the escarpment just northwest of an open area in which the "flats" road and the old "back" road converge west of the (upper) Yellow Cat Wash crossing. The spring still manages to seep a little, but the surrounding country is some of the most barren in Grand County.

One day in 1919, "Epe" was down in lower Salt Wash looking for cattle that had strayed from his camp area. The cattle went into a side canyon and Epe went in after them. To his surprise, he saw a beautiful two-headed canyon about a mile in length, with springs and seeps coming from several portions of its walls. Epe reported his wonderful discovery to Emmer, and almost immediately, they moved into the canyon and homesteaded.

Someone had lived in a dugout cabin in the dirt bank prior to their arrival, but Epe and Emmer built a home of several rooms. It was constructed of planed lumber hauled from Thompson to the canyon rim, where it was lowered into the bottom. Each trip was a two-day journey and required an additional two days back to Thompson for another load. It is probable that the roads were no better

than they are nowadays, and these are four-wheel-drive roads out this far.

Vegetable gardens, corn and alfalfa flourished as did the livestock and the ever-increasing family. Watermelons are said to have been better than Green River melons. Prospectors and cowmen passing the rims when melons were in season would exchange shouted greetings, then inquire if there were any melons available. If there were, they would tie their ropes together, lower them down, and haul the melons up. The melons were kept in the home spring pond - nice and cool. One can imagine how eagerly they were brought up and how they were

enjoyed on a hot and dry August day! Furthermore, they were always given freely.

In 1932, the original home burned to the ground after a spark from the stove fell onto a throw rug. This was a terrible setback for the Cordova family. A small home was then built closer to the home spring. One room of this second home still stands, but the other - apparently built later - has only one wall standing. A feeling of awe and sadness comes over one as he looks at the remains of days gone by. The old cook stove is still in place. The steel frame of a baby carriage stands outside the door. A dog house, a chicken



*The north wall of Cordova Canyon near its mouth. Note remains of the old fence.  
photo by Barney Phelps*

roost, fencing, a hay rake and various pieces of irrigation piping are seen as one looks over the old place. A new feeling of respect for the settlers comes over the observer as he ponders things seen. To touch anything at all seems sacrilegious.

This writer and two close friends first became interested in this place during trips to explore Yellow Cat country intensely in 1988. The beautiful Cordova Canyon was first looked into at its south rim. The colorful north wall had hundreds of feet of seeps collecting into three small rivulets, then into a common drainway to the canyon's mouth. Close to this section, a giant seeping grotto of arch-like design adorned the canyon wall. Remnants of a fence across the canyon's mouth could be seen. The hike back to the north rim road then disclosed the old cabin below, the home spring and the large spring in the southwest head. The sound of running water in the canyon could be heard all along the rim. Flow of the stream was visible through its entire watercourse to Salt Wash. The desire to see it all closely swept over us. This discovery was made in late December, but before the end of March, 1989, we were able to hike in, since snow was sadly lacking that winter.

The home is in the westerly head of the canyon, less than 50 feet from the spring, which drops from a crack in the vertical wall into a small holding pond. This is an absolutely beautiful setting - so peaceful and untouched except by nature and time. A hummingbird's nest is seen on a weed stalk at the pool's edge. Birds flit and twitter among the cottonwoods.

Two or three hundred feet of seeps in the southwesterly head had a levee built along a natural ledge to collect water into piping for irrigation of the fields. This system has deteriorated and the water has long-since resumed flowing into its natural pond the Cordova children called "the swimming hole." Its overflow runs down the deeply-cut arroyo.

Next, for this author, came a strong desire to know WHO lived there, WHEN, and who might remain to tell the story - or at least part of it - of WHAT happened there. An article in the Times Independent newspaper told of our trip to the canyon. A relative clipped and saved it for Danny Cordova, a grandson of Epe and Emmer, who came through this area on vacation in 1989. Danny and his



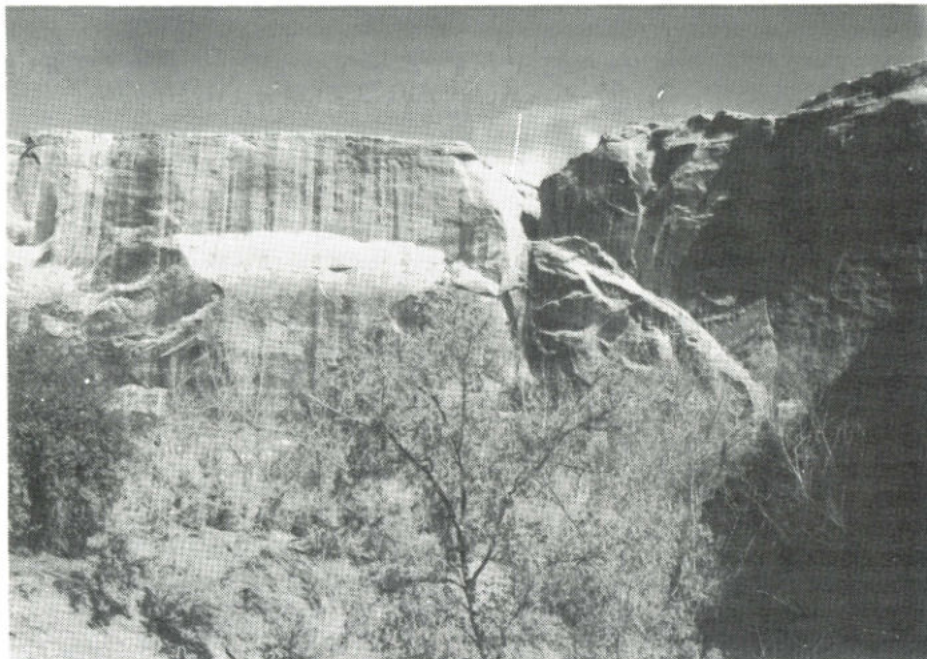
*Epemineo and Emmer Cordova with eldest son Beveline and daughters Sinda and Beatrice, circa 1922. The lady standing is a cousin to Emmer.  
courtesy of Jack Bickers*

family reside in Missouri and he has never seen the canyon. His work has prevented his return, but he told us whom to contact for further information. (Incidentally, he has a standing offer to be taken to the canyon whenever he returns.)

It was learned that Epe and Emmer reared nine children by birth. Of these, two sons are alive: Basilio Pemineo (called "Uth") and Enley, who were the last children born in the canyon. The Cordovas also reared a granddaughter,

Nita Duran Martinez, daughter of Carmen Nita, who died in complications of childbirth. In addition, Epe and Emmer reared Lena, the daughter of their daughter, Christie, who died quite young. The couple lost twins in a miscarriage, and a son in his first year. Three Indian children were also raised by them. Emmer Cordova died on December 1, 1940 in Price, Utah; Epemineo died in April, 1946 in Salina, Utah.

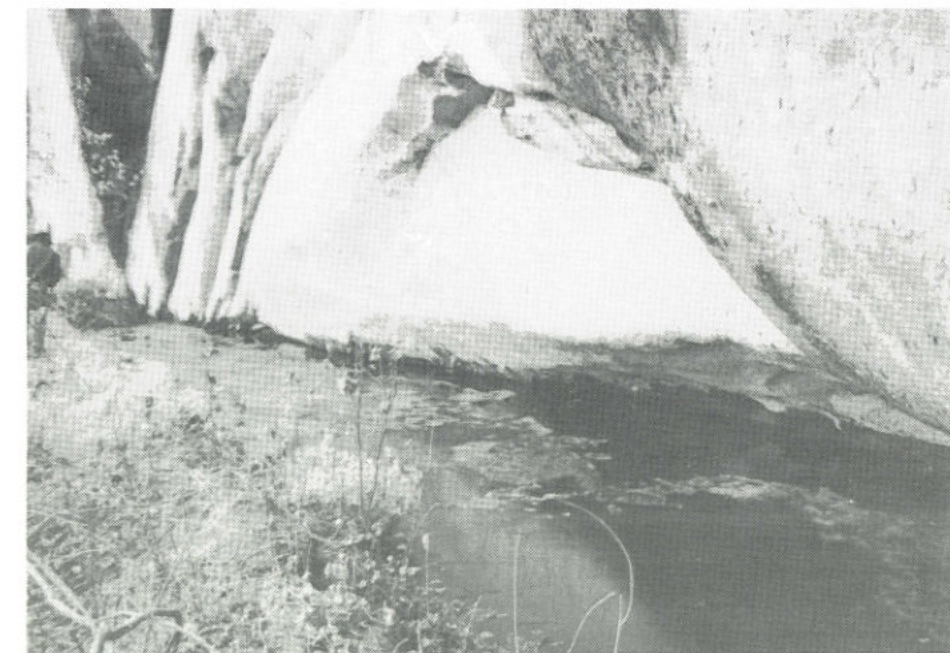




The "Footman Trail" (right of center). This was a way to the rim that even the children often used.  
photo by Barney Phelps.

With four-wheel-drive, it is easy to reach the trailheads the Cordovas used, but NOT the trails into the canyon. One called "The Horseman Trail," went into a deep and brushy side canyon to Salt Wash and proceeded (roughly) downstream to the mouth of Cordova Canyon. The other was called "The Footman Trail," and was a horribly steep rimrock trail on the south rim. The children went up and down these trails without injury it seems, and all in all, childhood is said to have been a wonderful experience for the children. Beveline (the eldest of the Cordova children), and his wife, Bonita Keel, lived on the ranch and reared their children there also.

A trip to Thompson was a big event for the kids, and possibly the elders. Since it took two days by wagon, the overnight stop was often at "the upper place" that still served the Cordovas to some extent in their livestock operations. Sometimes part of the family wintered there. A somewhat more direct trip was made by spending the night at Green Oak Spring. This spring is now called "Dead Oak Spring," and has facilities for a large cattle operation, presently unused. The spring is nearly dry now, but for a long time served many head of cattle - and probably will again.



The home spring pond—a beautiful, clear pool. Note the hummingbird nest on the weed stalk.  
photo by Jack Bickers

the kids' horse to another Spaniard one time, and reported this to her grandmother. Emmer quickly halted negotiations and Epe vowed not to teach Nita any more Spanish. And he did not.

During school terms, Nita lived in Thompson with grandmother Emmer and went to school with some of the younger Cordovas. Return to the ranch was always eagerly awaited. There were several miles of wagon trail in Salt Wash bottom to travel once the trailhead was reached. The trail required considerable maintenance with a horse-drawn slide. The route was mostly in the bottom but in places it was necessary to climb and run the sandbanks. Uth came in with a Model A Ford he owned after leaving the ranch, but this was exceptional rather than routine. Nita enjoys reminiscing about her good life on the ranch. She is happy, sad, wistful and joyful - all at the same time - when she is taken out to the rim for a view of the old home in the head of the canyon. She was married 27 years and lived in Denver and has one son. Her husband died in 1978, and she returned to the Moab and Thompson areas.

It has been a privilege to become acquainted with Nita and hear the story of Cordova Canyon. Present-day ownership of the ranch? A dark-gray area not within the scope of this article. In the meantime, life goes on for many

descendants scattered in Wyoming, Utah, Oregon, Missouri and other places.

The more one becomes acquainted with the Canyon Country, the more one learns about what went on before. It is said that every place where anyone could have possibly produced some kind of a livelihood was homesteaded, lived on, or otherwise occupied at one time. The earliest of the settlers got first choice, of course, and the later ones got the rest. Places such as 'Crips Hole,' 'Arths Pasture,' or 'Murphy Brothers Corral' in the Bull/Little Canyon/Sevenmile area are not just neat names. They tell where the old settlers interests were. Those were the days when a few head of cattle taken to market each year could buy subsistence for a family. This meant a few hundred dollars per year. Now, a few hundred per week MAY do. Thinking in these terms, it becomes easier to understand why most of these places are no longer utilized.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry B. (Jack) Bickers first came to Moab in 1962. He logged over 300 pleasure trips from Texas to this area, purely to roam the Canyon Country, then took early retirement to Moab in 1981. He built his and his wife Pat's home on Spanish Valley Drive and continued to learn more about the area and to become acquainted with more of the long-time residents. While he does not aspire to become an historian, or even a writer, he has produced much valuable information on things, places and people of the Moab area. He has always had an innate urge to show and tell others exactly how to get to a place, what is there and just what went on before. This CORDOVA CANYON article is typical of his interests.

Bickers has published 3 books: LABYRINTH RIMS: 60 Accesses to Green River Overlooks, 40 GRAND TRAILS FROM THE DEAD HORSE POINT ROAD and MAZE AREA, for the CANYON COUNTRY series, as well as numerous articles for 4-Wheeler Magazine and the Times Independent newspaper.



An early December, 1989 picture of the old Cordova home; front or west view. The home spring was about 50 feet westward from this doorway. Note the baby carriage frame near the doorway.  
photo by Barney Phelps



The hayrack—half-buried in the arroyo near the home.  
photo by Barney Phelps