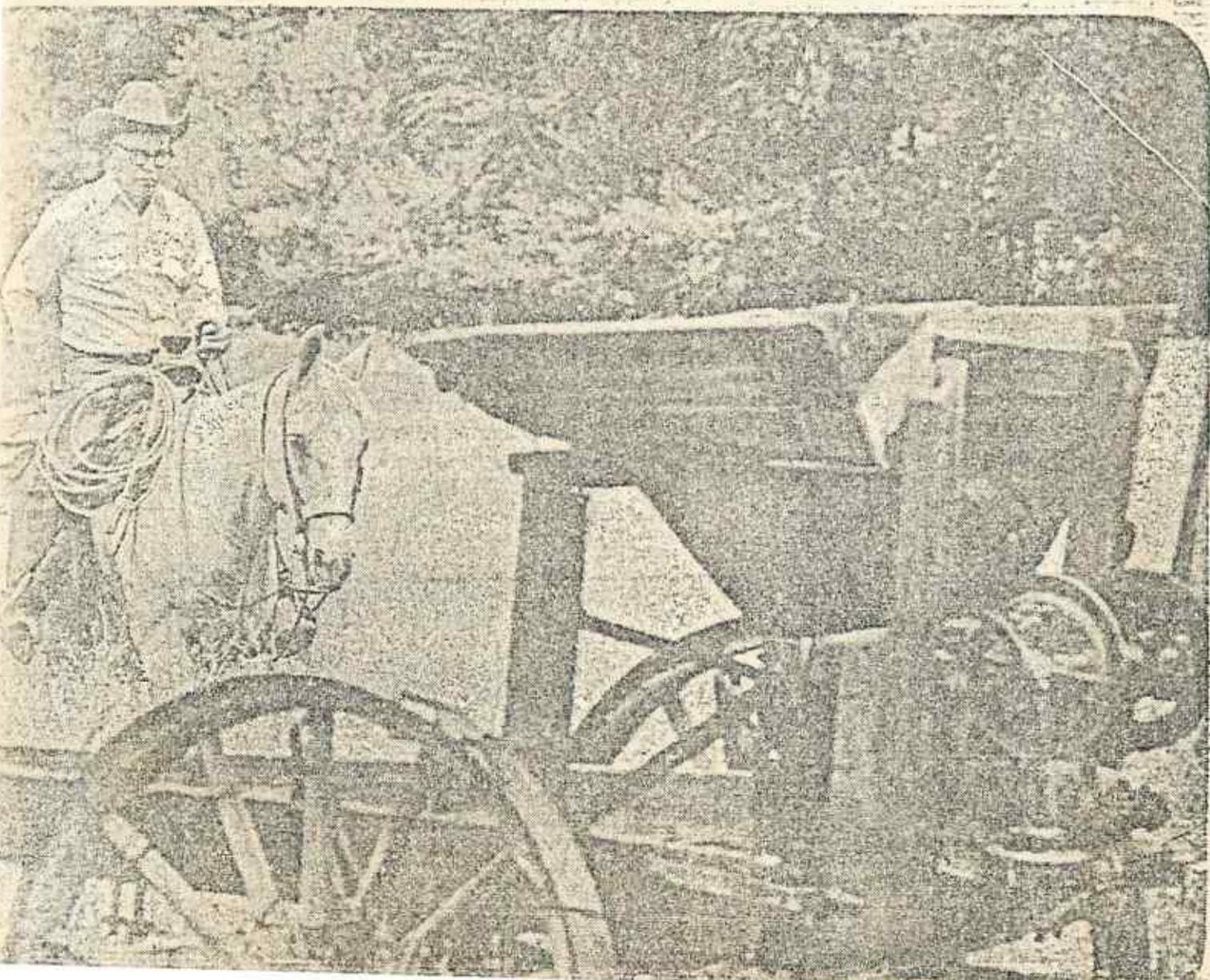


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An Old-Time Cowhand Still Works His Spread





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Los Angeles Times Grange County

Part X

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 1979



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STORY BY GORDON GRANT
Times Staff Writer

PHOTOS BY STEVE RICE
Times Staff Photographer

Reyes Serrano, wiry, bowlegged, tobacco-chewing descendant of the Spanish land grant Serranos, a man who is at home with leather and horses and guns, turned 78 this year at about the same time he and his wife, Dora, celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

At that time, on Feb. 4, roads were washed out by winter rains and creeks were running high, "so we couldn't get together with all our people to celebrate the way we wanted," Dora said. "You know, with all the families together and music and dancing. ..."

"And drinking," Reyes broke in.

"But," Dora went on, "some friends gave us a very fine Red Angus bull."

It could hardly have been a more apt gift.

Reyes (he's usually called Ray) was the oldest working cowboy on the great Irvine Ranch when it came time for him to retire in 1967. And he didn't really retire. He kept signing on part time during spring and fall roundups, riding, roping, branding, keeping lean and

strong despite his years, using his hands with their strangely soft palms like a 20-year-old.

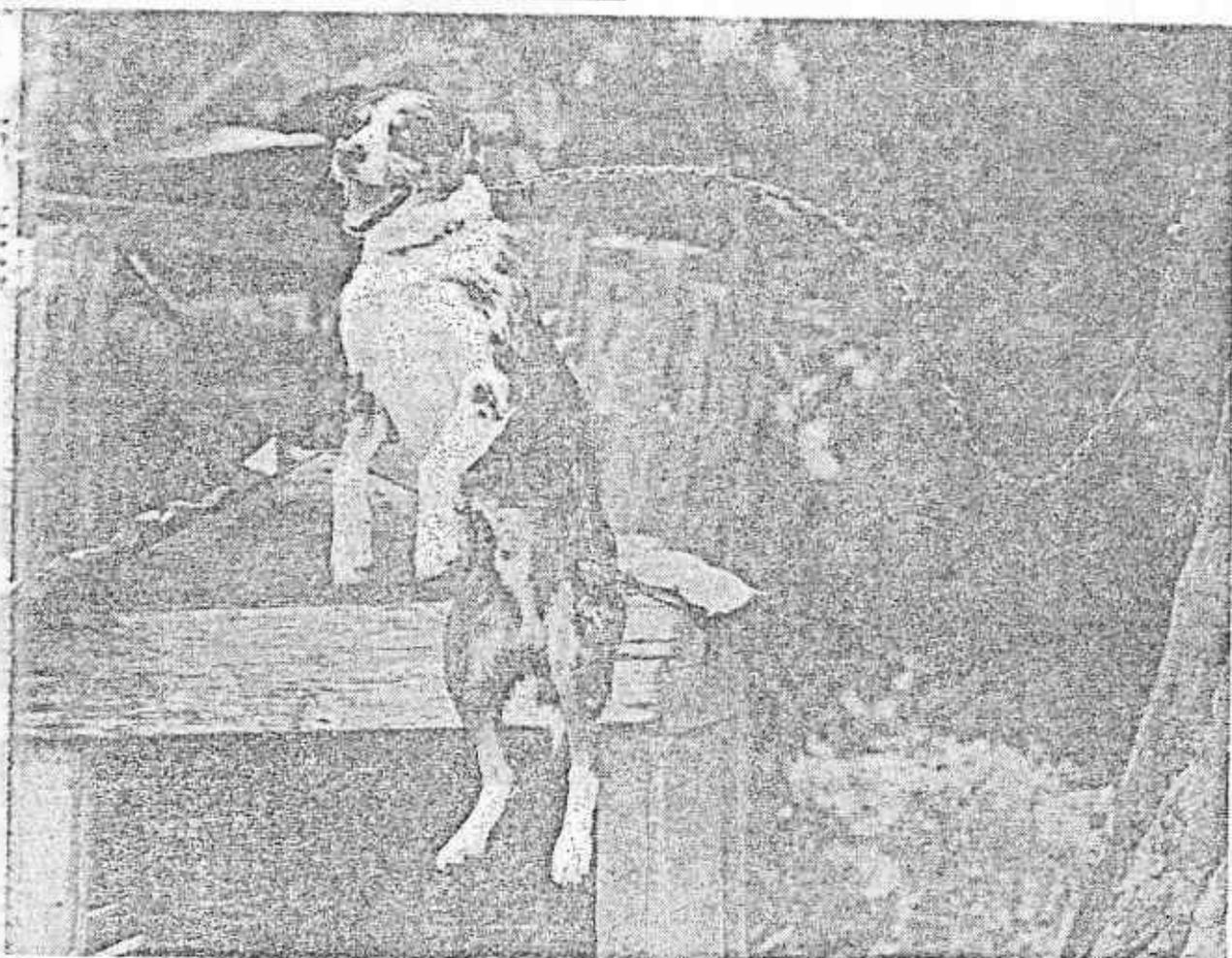
Now Reyes and Dora live in the hills on a 102-acre spread far up in Trabuco Canyon. It isn't their land; they are caretakers for the owners. But it is land they know and love — open land rolling up to the peaks of the Santa Ana Mountains with scattered stands of ancient oaks and sycamores, a lot of silence and many animals, both wild and domestic.

"I've never lived in a city," Reyes said. "Oh, hell," — a squirt of tobacco juice — "I lived in El Toro for a while, back when there wasn't much there. A store, a warehouse, a cattle chute. And I was born in San Juan Capistrano but there wasn't much there either in 1901."

After that, when he became a cowboy, home was a bunkhouse on the Irvine Ranch, then for a while on the Moulton Ranch, and later back in quarters provided by the Irvine Co.

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WAIT FOR ME—Reyes Serrano's dog, Dan, who is no more interested in retirement than Serrano

is, pleads to come along as Serrano saddles up to set off toward some of his ranch chores.

Times photo

COWHAND

Continued from First Page

After their marriage in 1929, Dora and Reyes began raising a family, extending the Juaneno Indian blood that they say runs in both of them, as well as the heritage of the Serranos that is traced back to Francisco Serrano, a member of the Portola expedition that moved through the foothills in 1769.

Francisco's youngest son, Jose Antonio Fernando Serrano, was granted the 10,586-acre Rancho Canada de Los Alisos and later built an adobe house which still stands as the center of a county park off Trabuco Road in the Lake Forest-El Toro section.

"My father, Frank, was born in that adobe," Reyes said. And for most of his life Reyes has lived on and ridden over great portions of the land that was given to his ancestor by the Spanish.

His home today is a trailer set well back off Trabuco Canyon Road, hidden from view by a rise in the ground and groves of tall trees.

He has 17 head of cattle, three horses, a dog named Dan who has a litter of pups, a cat with kittens, some chickens, ducks, doves and sheep.

He has his own brand in the shape of his initials, RS, but they are reversed because somebody before him had the same initials and the same idea.

He has 14 guns and does a lot of hunting, in season, for deer and quail. He has a small, weathered wooden shed in which he keeps his saddles (one of them more than 50 years old) and other gear. The cat family lives there, assigned to keep pack rats from gnawing at the leather.

A slab of white tallow hangs from a beam by a string. He

uses that to keep his braided rawhide bridles and cattle ropes soft and supple.

And he has his own kind of humor, a humor that is often hidden behind a straight face.

He was asked not long ago to saddle up a horse and pose

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COWHAND

Continued from 14th Page

for a picture. "The horse died last night," he said. Several days later, when he felt like it, he put a saddle on the "dead" horse and sat for his photo.

He was asked what year he was born.

"That was 1901," he said. "That was just yesterday morning, wasn't it?"

He chews tobacco and smokes cigars and seldom turns down a drink, and he sits straight in the saddle and moves with the strength and agility of a much younger man.

He is happiest when his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren visit him, which is often.

It takes a little while for him and Dora to tick off their progeny. There are two daughters, Mrs. Joan Camarillo and Mrs. Agnes (Aggie) Urmson. There are Joan's children, Dean and Dianne, who is called Princess; Aggie's children, Ronald, Ray, Robert, Teddie and Pinky, and the great grandchildren, Brandy, Michael, Danny, Gilbert, Jessie and Jeremy.

"Reyes wanted to make a cowboy out of little Ray Urmson," Dora said, "but he got interested in sports. A lot of the kids got into sports, winning trophies and everything."

Actually, aside from Reyes himself, the only other family member who followed in the footsteps of their forebears and became a cowboy was Cecilio Martinez, now 72, a son of one of Reyes' sisters. He worked at Rancho Mission Viejo.

Dora spends much of her time researching the Serrano family through old clippings, church records and books and hopes someday to put together a book of her own. Along the way, she said she has cleared up some long-accepted misconceptions in local lore, such as how the community of El Toro got its name.

"Many people say it was because of the bellowing of the bulls as they were moved from pasture to pasture near the old Serrano adobe," she said. "But we think it was because of a white-faced prize bull that Reyes' great-great-grandfather, Francisco, bought one time.

"This bull disappeared one day, and everybody was running around looking for him. They found him in the bottom of a well, dead, and they named the place El Toro."

Reyes has his memories of the siam-bang days on the Irvine range: saddled up for eight to 10 hours a day, riding over land that has now fallen to developers, roping, branding, mending barbed wire fences, alert for rattlesnakes, earning \$25 a month plus room and board. And the good times: huge barbecues, lots of music, lots to drink.

"I used to hunt with old James (Irvine)," he said with a partially concealed grin. "Well, not exactly hunt with him. A couple of days before he was going to have some of his friends out to the ranch for quail hunting, me and another cowboy would ride out and locate the birds.

"We'd keep track of them until James and his pals showed up, then we'd sort of ride herd on the quail to keep them in front of the hunters.

"Old James was a good shot. Never missed with his double-barreled shotgun. Never cussed, either. He'd just say 'gosh, gosh.'"

While Reyes was considered an expert at butchering steaks and tending barbecue fires, Dora became famous for her barbecue sauce.

"Joan Irvine (Smith) asked me for my recipe," she said.

Reyes remembers another day on the ranch when, for some reason or other, the daily drudgery around the corrals was broken by a visit from three Irvine Co. dignitaries all in suits and white shirts.

As they stood beside the fence, watching the branding going on inside the corral, Reyes rode past them and dropped the big loop of his lariat over all three of them.

"One of them yelled at me," Reyes said. "He said if I pulled that rope tight I'd be fired."

Reyes chewed for a moment, squirted, and said:

"He lost his job long before I did."

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The last cowboy

Reyes Serrano, 91, calls canyons home

Story by Laura Saari
Photos by Jebb Harris
The Orange County Register

Down a rutted dirt road in Trabuco Canyon, the last cowboy sits, spitting brown tobacco juice and squinting at the hills.

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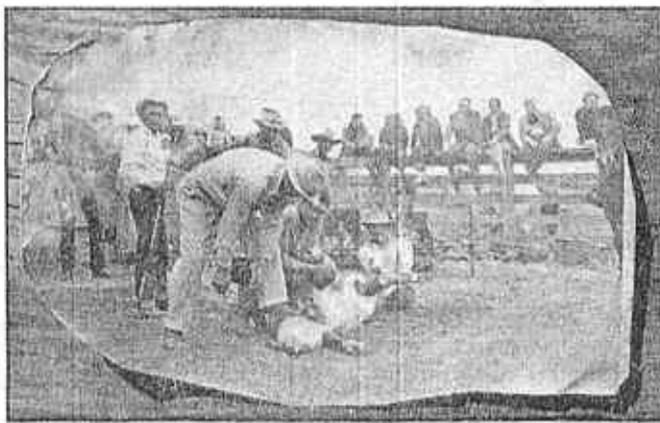
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"I know the canyons," he says. "All of 'em."



An Irvine Ranch roundup is captured in a 1950s photo.

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"You gotta be tough to chase cows," he says. "You gotta get up and go no matter what the weather. You gotta get on your . . . horse every morning and get out of here. You get a bad back. Your horse falls on top of you."

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He got bucked a few years ago, up into the tree tops, he says.

"That horse, I knew something was going to happen," Serrano says. "That horse had never been rode bareback. He threw me in the manure pile."

Serrano broke his leg, but that wasn't the worst of it. He lost his cowboy boots.

"I got to the doctor, I said, 'Take these damn boots off, my feet are going to swell up,'" he says. "They said, 'Mr. Serrano, we got to cut your boots.' I said, 'Cut them right, then. I just bought these boots.'" But the boots were done for. "Now they got me in these damn shoes," he says, looking down at a pair of hiking boots. He spits between them. "Never wore no pair of shoes before."

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Serrano's heritage goes back to the folks who came here from Asia Minor.

Please see **COWBOY/8**

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Reyes Serrano poses in front of the 1955 Chevy pickup that is on its second engine and in which he wants to be buried. 'We got the hole dug already, 7 feet deep,' Serrano says.



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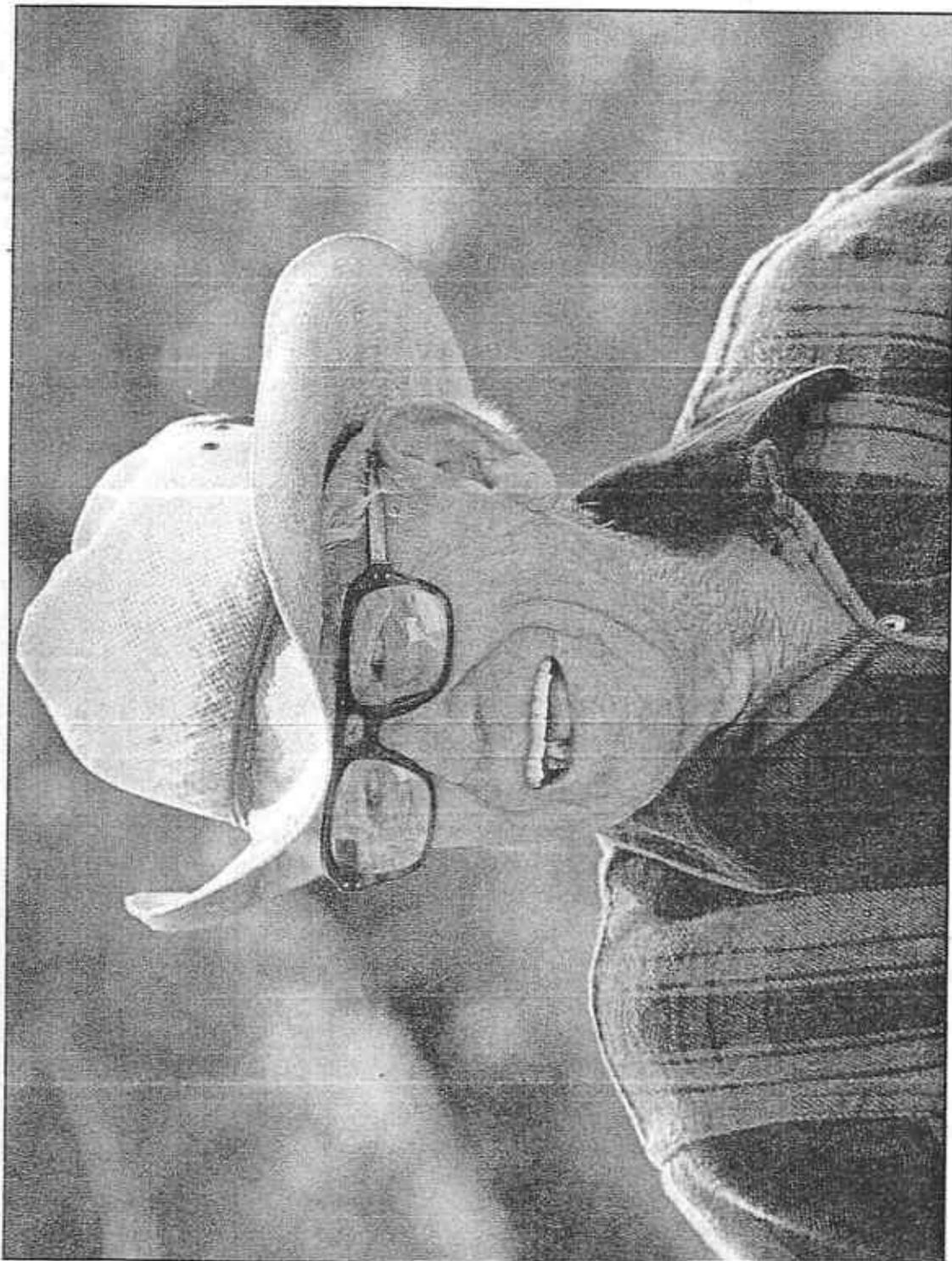
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Jebb Harris/The Orange County Register

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They married when she was 16. He was 29.

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For a time, they lived in a donated tent, unwilling to leave their animals and their plot of land. Then the company developing the 822-acre Robinson Ranch nearby donated a mobile home.

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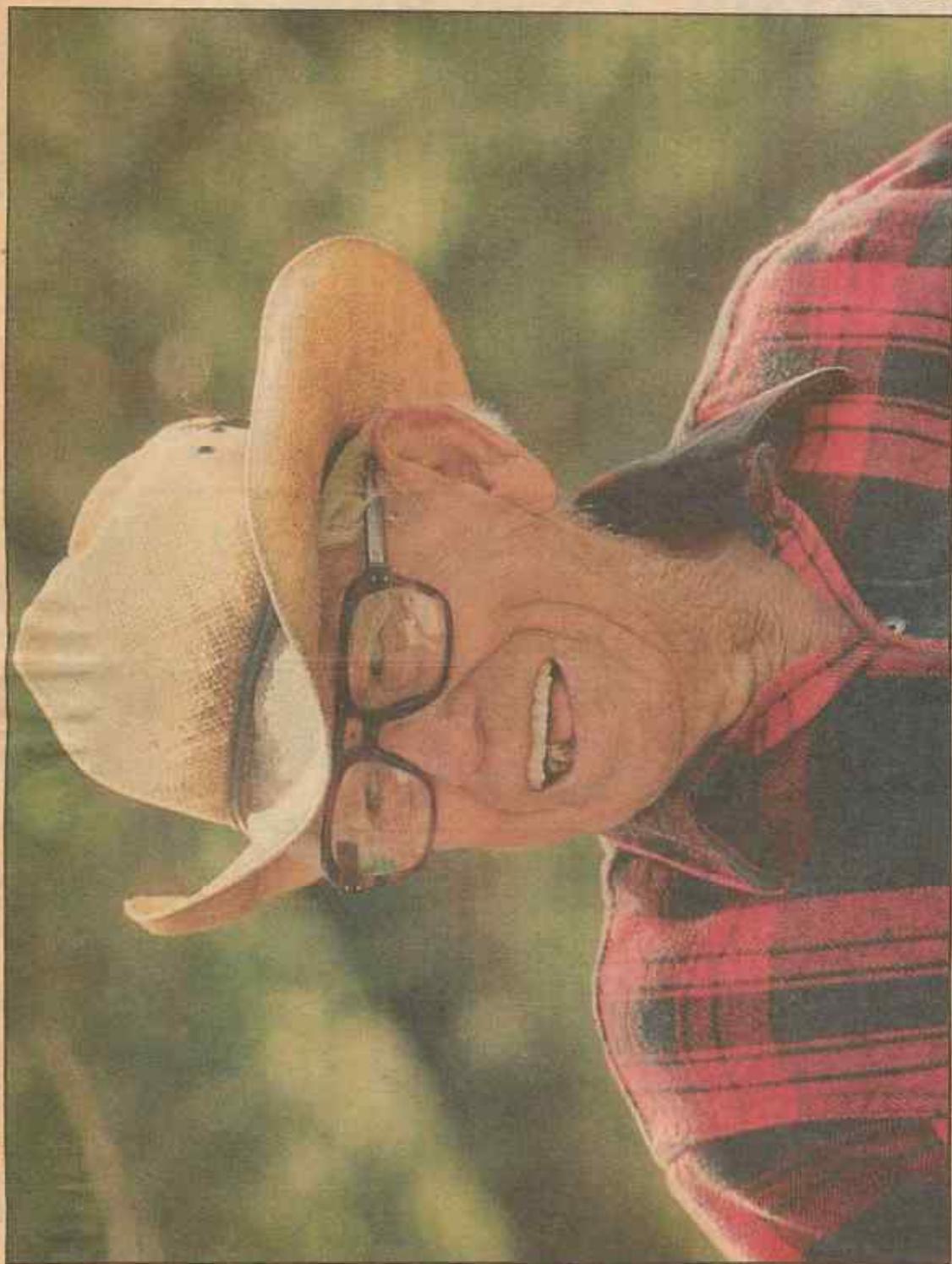


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