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# Idaho

## Rancher uncovers intrigue in family history

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS  
Capital Press

THREE CREEK, Idaho — Old notebooks and loose papers in a forgotten trunk in the attic of an old rock house held more family history than rancher Chet Brackett had bargained for.

Buying the house — which had been occupied by a series of family members since his grandfather built it in 1912 — Brackett cut into the attic to add a second floor and found the trunk with the faded and scribbled writings of his great uncle Chet.

He glanced over the writings but with two ranches to run and remodeling the house, he was too busy to pay much attention, he said.

Nearly 25 years later, during a 2013 family gathering to celebrate what would have been his father's 100th birthday, Chet remembered the writings and figured it was time to set about organizing family stories.

What he discovered were many things never spoken of in the well-respected ranching family and intriguing underlying stories of family history he had only known a bit about.

Those revelations involved family secrets in both his grandfather's and grandmother's family trees in the late 1880s and early 1900s, revelations that led him and wife, Kim, to more research.

Both his great uncle's writings and further research revealed Chet's not-so-distant ancestors' associations with infamous outlaws of the day, avenged murders, bank robberies, horse thefts, quick exits, and deathbed confessions and promises.

One of the most surpris-



Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Chet and Kim Brackett pose with their dogs at their home near Hollister, Idaho. The couple's book "Chet's Reflections" is based on writings and ramblings of Chet's great uncle about the Brackett family's early history in the Three Creek area.

ing revelations was his great uncle's written record of his great-grandfather Ira Brackett's involvement in the 1900 robbery of the First National Bank in Winnemucca, Nev.

Widely accepted that the deed was done by Butch Cassidy and his Wild Bunch Gang — despite evidence placing Cassidy in Wyoming at the time — Ira's 1920 deathbed confession to his son (the elder) Chet tells a different story.

Sharing confidences, Ira revealed the heist was pulled off by himself, and Chet's other great grandfather, Bige Duncan, and three great-great uncles on his grandmother's side — Tap Duncan, Jim Duncan and Green Berry Ketchum.

In further research of other Wild West events, Chet and Kim

found allegations of lawlessness surrounded Tap and Jim Duncan and Ketchum's brothers Tom "Black Jack" and Sam, who were both hanged for their crimes.

But Ira's involvement in the Winnemucca bank robbery was a real surprise. Ira was upstanding and pretty straight-laced, Chet said.

And he was a family man, taking his bride Sarah's siblings under his wing before he moved the family from Colorado to Idaho, and bringing some of his brother Levi's children into the brood after Levi's murder back in Colorado, Kim said.

The story of the bank robbery is anything but cut and dried and seemed to have little to do with monetary gain in Ira's case.

The story starts in Colorado where Ira had a few serious

run-ins with a gambler. Ira, with his equine skills, had shown the arrogant man up in a horse race. In addition, young Sarah had shunned the man's romantic interests and chosen Ira instead.

The man, proven capable of murder, had instigated a barroom brawl with Ira and his brothers and waged serious threats against all of Ira's family. Fearing for their safety, Ira quickly decided to move the family to the Idaho Territory he had heard of through his brief association with the Duncan and Ketchum brothers. The association with the Duncans would last a lifetime.

Ira was unable to talk brother Levi into joining him and Sarah in the move and headed for Idaho by train in 1886, but not before another run-in with the gambler, who slit the throat of

into the sagebrush sea.

Ira was that man, but his involvement was a near impossibility given his character.

But Tap had a hook. He had earlier told Ira about avenging his brother Dick Duncan's death at the end of a noose, and Ira had solemnly commented he wished he could have done the same for his brother Levi.

In return for Ira's involvement in the bank robbery, Tap would take care of the men in Colorado who killed Levi and were threatening to find and kill Ira.

That story is just one of many twists and turns in "Chet's Reflections," a book written by Chet and Kim intended as a fun family history but finding wider interest.

Chet and Kim say they can't independently prove the accuracy of all of their great uncle's journal, but there are corroborating accounts that place the right people in the right location at the right time.

Great Uncle Chet left his intriguing writings behind when he left the rock house, likely keeping deathbed promises and unwilling to face the backlash of family reaction.

Enough time has passed that some of the history can be revealed, but some is still too fresh and will remain hidden a while longer, Chet said.

"Chet's Reflections" is available at the Twin Falls Visitors Center, Twin Falls County Museum, Vickers Western Store, Rogerson Service and on Amazon.com. Chet and Kim are also working on a book about Tap Duncan.

They can be reached at (208) 731-1037 (Kim) or (208) 731-0135 (Chet).

Chet and Kim Brackett will present their history of Three Creek as it ties in with film maker Claude Gagnon's presentation on his research into Western writer Will James at 2 p.m. May 2 at the College of Southern Idaho Fine Arts Auditorium in Twin Falls.

Ira's prized horse and reiterated death threats toward Ira's family. The gambler came through, murdering Levi in 1888.

A few years later, Tap and Jim Duncan left trouble in the Southwest and settled at Three Creek in the Idaho Territory. Their brother Bige, feeling hemmed in down in Texas, later had a notion to find his own wide-open space out West.

Looking for a ranch, he and Tap happened upon a banker, George Nixon, in Winnemucca, who liked the men but denied a loan because they lacked collateral. He said he would keep in touch with Bige, however, and it was only a few months before Bige received a letter from the banker saying he wanted to talk. Nixon, an aspiring politician, was president of the First National Bank in Winnemucca. The bank was in trouble and his only way out of the mess was if the bank were robbed. So he offered Bige a deal — rob the bank and he would have money for several ranches.

Tap organized the heist, bringing in brother Jim and Green Berry Ketchum, who could be trusted to keep his lips sealed. But he needed a master horseman who could find and manage the getaway horses so no posse would be able to keep up with them as they escaped

## Official envisions Idaho as ag technology hub

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Idaho Department of Commerce Director Jeff Sayer wants to make Idaho a Silicon Valley of agricultural technology.

"Agricultural technology is about to be one of the biggest conversations in the business industry and Idaho stands to capitalize on that opportunity in a very unique way," he told lawmakers recently.

Sayer said the venture capital market put \$150 million into agricultural technology in 2012 but that number increased to \$1.8 billion in 2014.

"That momentum is starting to surge," he said. "There's no reason that capital can't come to Idaho. Idaho has unique assets and if we pull them together, they have a critical mass that would get the world's attention."

Sayer said there is a lot of expertise in the technology and agricultural sectors in Idaho, including work being done on agriculture, unmanned aerial vehicles, "big data" and sensor technology at the state's universities.

The Idaho National Laboratory is studying ways to help the dairy industry to utilize its animal waste and

several large dairy companies have moved their global research centers to Idaho.

The state has emerged at the front of the UAV industry and on the agricultural side, Idaho ranks second in the West in net farm income and third in total farm cash receipts and has an established food processing industry.

On their own, none of these assets is large enough to attract global attention and major investment, Sayer said. But together, they would create a critical mass of expertise that would make Idaho a leader in ag tech.

"We've got to somehow bring all of this (expertise) together under a coalesced ag tech umbrella ... so that we can put it on display for the rest of the world and be part of this wave that's sweeping the nation," he said.

Conversations about ag tech are occurring in the



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

North Idaho farmer Robert Blair, left, explains to Idaho Department of Commerce Director Jeff Sayer, center, how an unmanned aerial vehicle can be used to help farmers, April 22 in Caldwell, Idaho.

tech centers of the world and there's no reason those conversations shouldn't be occurring in Idaho, Sayer said.

"We don't want to miss this window," he said. "We're talking about supporting our existing industries, protecting agriculture, the foundational part of our economy, and putting Idaho on the global map."

## Embezzlement trial set for plant finance official

BLACKFOOT, Idaho — The former financial controller of a southeast Idaho fresh potato packing plant has waived his preliminary hearing and is scheduled for a July 17 trial for allegedly embezzling funds.

Russell C. Leonardson has been charged with 70 counts of forgery and two counts of grand theft for allegedly embezzling at least \$1.6 million from Aberdeen-based Idaho Select, Inc., and its affiliate, Select Express LLC.

Each count of forgery carries up to 14 years in prison and fines of up to \$50,000. Grand theft carries up to 14 years in prison and up to \$4,000 in fines.

According to allegations contained in a separate civil case on the alleged embezzlement, Leonardson was hired

in 1997 to perform financial management functions for Idaho Select and also served as the first manager of Select Express, formed in 1998. His job description included "establishing internal controls to protect Idaho Select from financial predators and deficiencies."

The civil suit alleges Leonardson used company credit cards and checks for personal expenses and changed transaction descriptions in the company's QuickBooks software to appear legitimate. Cooper Norman fraud investigators obtained evidence through a QuickBooks auditing program that tracks missing checks and maintains a timestamped history of changes made to financial records in a format that can't be altered by users, according to the civil suit.

## Western states back uniform truck weight limitations

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

An organization promoting uniformity in transportation regulations is backing a planned amendment to the federal highway reauthorization bill establishing a common maximum truck weight limit for 14 western states.

The amendment is being drafted by Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah. It would rescind a federal freeze on state-specific truck weight limits on interstate highways and allow compact participants — including Idaho, Washington and Oregon — to voluntarily participate in discussions regarding a common standard.

The amendment would cap the standardized weight limit within compact territory at 129,000 pounds.

The Western States Transportation Alliance has been soliciting support for the proposal from state Farm Bureau Federations, cattle associations, other agricultural organizations and congressional delegations.

The highway bill expires May 31, but funding could be extended temporarily.

Idaho has had a 105,500-pound interstate truck weight limit since the freeze was enacted in 1991, though the limit was recently raised to 129,000 pounds on several designated state routes. Neighboring states also all have higher truck weight limits.

R.J. Hicks, Western States executive director, believes the draft amendment should have broad support from the states within a couple of weeks. Though railroads and organizations including the International Brotherhood of Teamsters oppose increased truck weight limits, Hicks em-

phasizes freight demand is growing faster than availability, and energy is often given a higher priority than agricultural goods.

Establishing uniform truck weight limits has been a top priority for the National Potato Council, Idaho's sugar beet industry, members of Idaho's congressional delegation and the Idaho Trucking Association.

"We would be supportive of any effort like that to raise the limit and give continuity between Idaho and surrounding states and give states leeway to set their own limits," said Mark Duffin, executive director of the Idaho Sugarbeet Growers Association. "It makes no sense to be frozen."

Julie Pipal, IITA president and CEO, said her organization has prioritized promoting the Western States amendment. Pipal said an Idaho pilot project has demonstrated heavier trucks improve safety and reduce wear on infrastructure by minimizing vehicle trips and distributing weight over more axles.

At the state level, Pipal said the Idaho trucking industry recently celebrated a separate victory when the Legislature increased the state fuel tax by 7 cents and registration fees by \$21 for passenger vehicles and \$25 for commercial vehicles to provide \$95 million toward improving roads and bridges.

Nationally, leaders with the American Trucking Association are calling on Congress to take similar action and raise the federal gas tax, rather than relying on states to pick up the slack. Chris Spear, AIA's vice president and chief of legislative affairs, said 140,000 U.S. bridges need repairs or replacing, and 40 percent of the nation's roads are in serious disrepair.

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