

This Is It Ranch's history spans from a truck

By Mary Ann McAuliffe

You can't miss the sign to This Is It Ranch, whether you are traveling northbound or southbound on South Virginia Street, just north of Damonte Ranch Parkway. It announces a gateway into a narrow, cottonwood-lined, dirt road leading back towards a home and other buildings. For many Galena area residents This Is It Ranch conjures up fond memories of the day camp their children attended each summer.

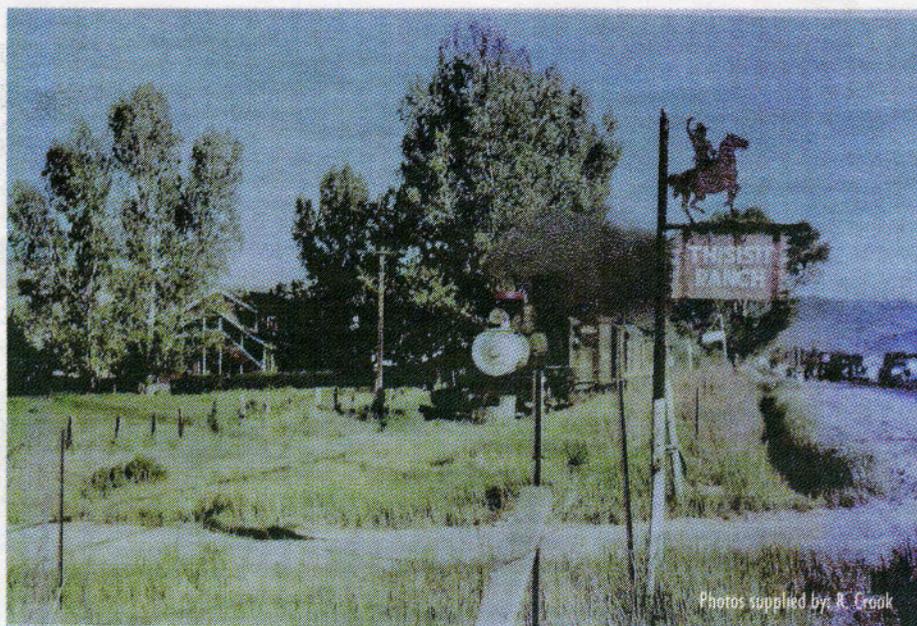
Upon taking a closer look and really noticing the towering trees and the surrounding pastures with quietly grazing Black Angus cows, one has to wonder about the history of this peaceful place – even before it was a summer camp for children. As it turns out, its history is remarkable.

The story begins in 1943 when Peter and Edith Crook and their nine-year-old son Rusty came to Nevada in search of a ranch. They were determined to find the perfect piece of property – with an eye towards what Peter called the “Three A's”: affordability, availability and accessibility. While touring Reno with a realtor, they came upon an area south of the city. Peter turned to his wife Edith and said, “This is it!” Peter and Edith fell in love with the 35 acres, complete with mature trees, lush meadows – and even a brand new, charming white house.

THE TRUCK FARM

After committing to this new venture and lifestyle, Peter Crook decided it was time to learn the business of farming, which he knew little about. Through hard work and determination, the ranch soon became a top food producer for the area. The Crook's truck farm grew a variety of produce along with chickens, turkeys, geese and ducks and was a major supplier to area hotels and restaurants.

In 1944, one year before the end of WWII, the Crook's Ranch played a positive role in a dark moment of our country's history, becoming a refuge for relocated Japanese Americans who otherwise would have been forcibly interned in government War Relocation Camps.



This Is It Ranch Summer Program

Week 1: June 11-15

Week 2: June 18-22

Week 3: June 25-29

Week 4: July 2, 3, 5 & 6

Week 5: July 9-13

Week 6: July 16-20

Week 7: July 23-27

Rocket Week and Introduction to Sportsmanship

Rodeo Week and Personal Responsibility

Carnival Week and Teamwork

America Week and Kindness

Pirate Week and Leadership

Jet Boat Week and Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Rewards

Olympic Week and Sportsmanship Conclusion

In the wake of Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Americans who came to the Crook's ranch were likely destined for Manzanar, located at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in eastern California's Owens Valley. With nowhere to go and possibly nothing to return to, the individuals who came to the Crook's ranch were offered a share in the profits of the truck farm. Peter took in three Japanese families; a total of ten individuals. Most spoke English and Johnny Kato, a graduate of University of Tokyo, served as the man-in-charge of the ten. They helped to build chicken coops, green houses and lathe houses and attended to all the crops on the ranch.

THE RENO DIVORCE ERA'S GUEST RANCH

While the wedding industry was always important to Reno, it was the act of dividing couples that really put

Reno on the world map. Starting with a British earl, divorce became king in terms of serving as a major economic engine for Nevada. In 1900, the Second Earl Russell, a member of the House of Lords, came to Nevada to take advantage of the state's generous six-month residency requirement and divorced Lady Russell. Sensing opportunity, the state legislature shortened the residency period to three months in 1927. In 1931, with the Great Depression hanging over the nation's head, Nevada legislators shortened it again, to six weeks, opening the floodgates to this lucrative trade. People from all over the world came here to get “Reno-vated” including names such as Vanderbilt, Dempsey, Hayworth and Rockefeller. Thousands and thousands of short-term residents idling around Reno for six-week stretches presented Peter and Edith with an intriguing revenue opportunity.

So in 1947, they decided to transform the truck farm into a guest ranch that catered to the burgeoning divorce trade. This wise business move guaranteed the family financial security as their guests – up to six people at a time – had to bide their time for six weeks as they waited out the residency period for their divorce. Peter and Edith were positioned for success with this new venture since they were well-known and respected in the Reno business community which included all judges and attorneys back in town. These relationships served as a pipeline, keeping their guest ranch full.

Guests were picked up at the train station or airport. The This Is It Guest Ranch had a reputation for quality and was renowned as a quiet ranch where divorcees were practically guaranteed non-notoriety and no wild nightlife. People who wanted peace and quiet, and the opportunity to stay under the media radar range, like Alisha DuPont, of the famed DuPont family, sought out Peter and Edith's ranch. This reputation for discretion, uniquely positioned their ranch from other divorce ranches in the area, such as the Flying M-E Ranch, the Lazy A Ranch and Donner Trails Ranch, which were considered the “wild” ranches.

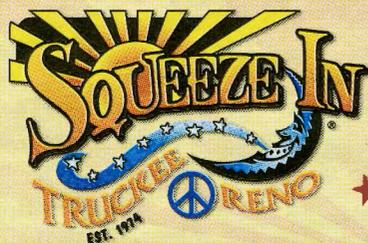
The main house at the ranch was used for guests while Cliff, with his wife and two children, lived humbly in the bunk house previously used by the Japanese families. All meals were included in the stay. Edith, a well-educated Wellesley girl, traveled all over the world before meeting Peter and settling down in Nevada. Her worldly travels gave her a taste of the good life – and exquisite cuisine, like Chateaubriand, Veal Cordon Bleu, crepes, pop-overs, and soufflés. Word spread about these exotic meals, lovingly prepared by Edith, and further gave this ranch a reputation for quality.

A variety of activities kept guests entertained as they awaited the end of their residency period. Peter bought a Ford Woody station wagon and took guests on day trips to Virginia City, Pyramid Lake and of course Lake Tahoe.

No divorce ranch was complete without a cowboy and horses to ride. Peter hired the famed Cliff Garner, then current world champion, all-around cowboy – a contest he won in New York City's Madison Square Garden. He was the consummate cowboy and wore a large belt buckle that proudly displayed his title. Horseback riding to picnic areas was one of many regularly scheduled activities, which often included a picnic near the present Galena High School “G”.

When the day finally came for a guest's court date, Peter was required to appear in court and testify that he indeed saw this person daily at the ranch for the required six-week, mandatory residency requirement. If contested, the guest was

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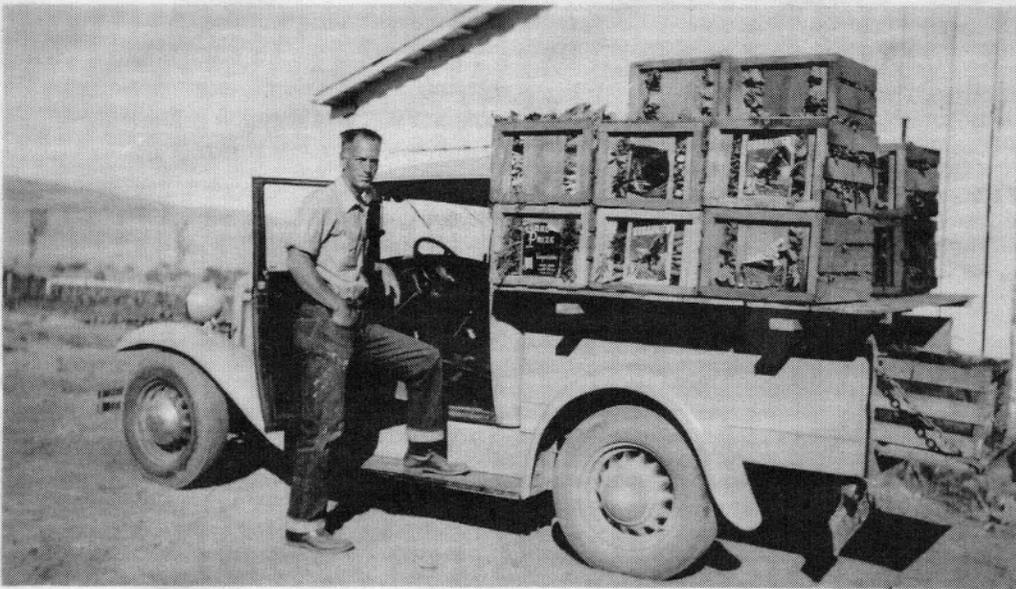
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farm to a day camp



This Is It Ranch owner Peter Crook poses in front of his loaded vegetable truck, ready to make a delivery to Reno restaurants.

ordered to stay an additional 90 days at the ranch. Although this dispute was rare, it did happen about one out of ten cases. The Crook family catered to this profitable business until approximately 1957. Ultimately the divorce trade died out in Reno upon the rise of the no-fault divorce in several states during the 1960s, making it unnecessary to come to Nevada.

FAMOUS FRUITCAKES

While the guest ranch was still in operation, Edith, an amazing cook, had a special fruitcake recipe that became a surprising business venture for the family. People raved about her fruitcake. So in 1951, she began formally taking orders for her secret confection. Her impressive client list, maintained in a simple card catalog, included the likes of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the First Lady of the Republic of China and wife of Generalissimo and President Chiang Kai-shek (who annually ordered 50 cakes), Bill Harrah of Harrah's casino and Pappy Smith, owner of the famous Harold's Club in downtown Reno. Edith never had to advertise; her fruitcakes were renowned. She simply sent out an annual postcard notifying her customers to remember to place their orders in time for Christmas. She made one to two thousand pounds of fruitcake a year and continued this business for over thirty years.

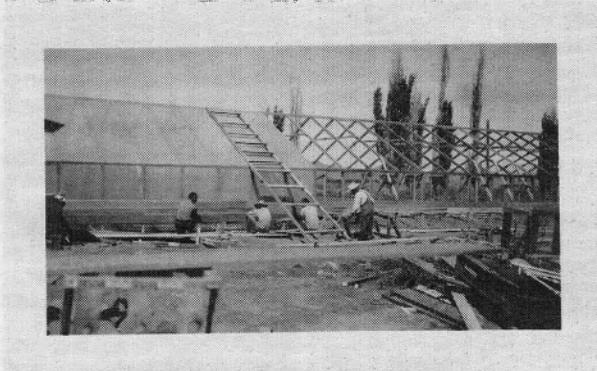
RUSTY AND THE DAY CAMP

Rusty, Peter and Edith's son, was a natural athlete at Reno High School, winning the state championship in pole vaulting and ski jumping. He graduated in 1951 and left home to attend college where he lettered in seven sports including soccer, skiing, diving, gymnastics and track. His ski team at Denver University won the NCAA Championship, earning Rusty an induction into the Denver University Athletic Hall of Fame. He graduated with a degree in physical science in 1956. Within a few months, he was married, accepted a teaching position, and then unexpectedly was drafted into the army. Two years later, Rusty returned to Reno, and settled into a teaching position at Billingshurst Junior High where he taught physical education and math.

It was in 1964, when Rusty transitioned the ranch into the business that has endured the longest – nearly 50 years – the This Is It Ranch Day Camp for children. As the Crook family approached all business endeavors, Rusty was determined to make his day camp the best in the area – offering exclusive activities that other camps



Aside from vegetables, the Crook's farm produced turkeys, chicken and ducks for area restaurants.



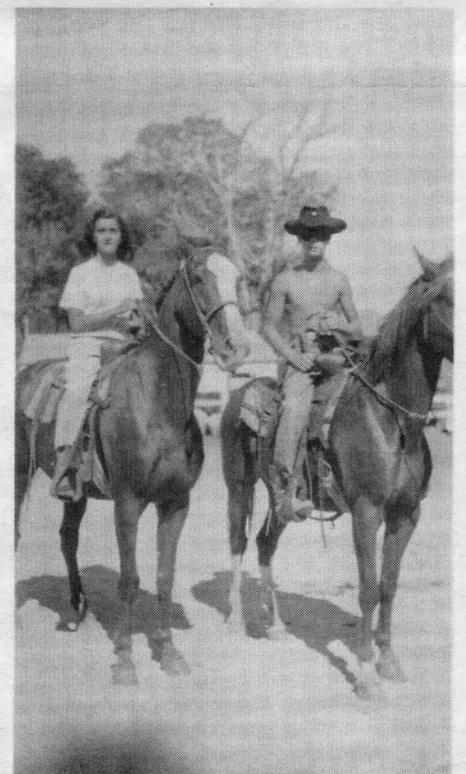
American Japanese workers help build and maintain green houses at This Is It Ranch in south Reno.

couldn't match. In the early days, these activities included rock climbing, back packing, scuba diving, skiing, archery, air rifling and wood working.

Today, the This Is It Ranch Day Camp for children has evolved into a program that stresses sportsmanship, teamwork, and leadership skills in an environment of unconditional dignity and respect, where learning and fun are honored above competition and winning. Children at the camp get the opportunity to experiment with a variety of sports and crafts rather than specializing in a limited few. The camp boasts numerous amenities to pique a child's interest including a swimming pool complete with a cave, slide and diving board; a wide variety of athletic equipment including trampolines; an archery and BB-gun range; climbing bars, bucking barrel, table tennis and croquet; a basketball court, pickle ball court, volleyball court,



The last label of Edith Crook's world renowned fruit cake denotes that "Work is love made visible."



Rusty Crook shows an anonymous divorcee the area on horseback.

badminton court; a large field for soccer, softball, lacrosse, children's games, and other weekly themed activities including their popular carnival, pirate skits and treasure hunt.

So the next time you find yourself driving along South Virginia Street, glance to the east as you pass This Is It Ranch, look down the narrow lane and reflect on the remarkable history of this special place.

Mary Ann McAuliffe is the Galena Times history section curator and a Galena Resident since 2004. For more information on the This Is It summer program and to register, please visit www.thisisitdaycamp.com.