



**“That simple act
would help set the
Gorrill family on
a tradition of
conservation.”**



- Corrie Davis

*Pictured here:
Seven of Ralph Gorrill's ten
grandchildren, 3rd generation
Gorrill Ranch*

*Reverse:
Corrie Davis, 4th generation
Gorrill Ranch*

NCWA
Northern California Water Association



When life gives you clay, build a legacy.

Ralph Gorrill was one of those astute types. Give him a problem and he'd find your answer at the tip of his drafting pencil. A builder seemingly from birth, it was fitting that he'd be found nose deep in back-breaking, 50-pound text books at the University of California, Berkeley. Just below the famed Campanile Clock Tower, Ralph found himself confident that he would soon be an engineer - just like his brothers.

With a degree in hand, Gorrill landed 150 miles north of the East Bay, following his brothers in hopes of finding work in the rural Sacramento Valley. "It was in Butte County where his brothers were landing work, so it was only natural at the time our great-grandfather would follow," said Corrie Davis, a fourth-generation family member who serves as the managing partner and chairman at Gorrill Ranch.

In the year 1917, before the modern day Highway 99, only a variety of country roads connected the rural towns of Northern California but Ralph landed a job creating a better route for ranchers and farmers delivering cattle and wheat. With his drafting pencil in hand, Ralph drew up a solution for the main road, known as the Midway, that would cut hours off of delivery times. "Little did he know that this two lane strip of roadway would wind up setting him on an entirely new path."

The Leland Stanford Trustees were looking to sell their 17,000 acre Durham Ranch (a portion of which had been purchased by Ralph) along none other than that very strip of concrete Ralph had helped create. As his brother-in-law was also the ranch manager on LST farm, the engineer had an inside track on all the relevant gossip. "What has always fascinated the family, is that our great-grandfather wasn't a farmer, yet he was confident that he could make use of this farm that hugged Butte Creek. He saw real potential there," said Davis.

A thick adobe clay spanned the property, which meant this land was prime for something other than cattle. The unique soil combination was best suited for rice. (Gorrill Ranch is now known internationally for their quality premium rice.) In a state that is no stranger to prolonged droughts, Gorrill wanted to make sure he used whatever water he had, as efficiently as he could. "He truly became fixated on constructing the best irrigation system in the Sacramento Valley." Using gravity and leveling the clay at precise angles, Ralph crafted a sprawling web of water that reached every bend, edge, and corner of his fields. "He never knew the meaning of doing something halfway. He built his labyrinth of pipes so well that our family still uses that same irrigation system to this day." Whether he knew it or not that simple act would help set the Gorrill family on a tradition of conservation.

When he passed away in 1964, Ralph's daughters Sally, Jane and Anne took over the farm. For some families, another generation of non-traditional farmers would mean it's time to sell. But for descendants of Ralph Gorrill - that would be called giving up.

Throughout their reign on the family ranch, the sisters turned their attention up to the sky, down below the creek surface, and into the surrounding native groves. First, helping to create a comfortable place for birds to rest along the Pacific Flyway with their rice fields, and second, thanks to the sisters, there are now 40 acres of land set aside as an environmental preserve.

Ralph's ten grandchildren soon joined their mothers in leading the farm. Their timing couldn't have been better to help their underwater friends in Butte Creek. By the late 1990s, Chinook salmon were disappearing at an alarming rate. "We owe much of our success to Butte Creek," added Davis. "And our family knew it was time to prevent the creek's main inhabitants from disappearing." Joining other neighbors, many whom operate along the same Midway trail that Ralph once helped design, the Gorrills and this coalition of farmers, environmental groups, and other agencies dove head first into a massive restoration project known as the Butte Creek Fish Restoration Project. The group retrofitted dams and screens to protect fish from entering irrigation systems, then built fish ladders to help the fish swim upstream throughout the summer and winter months.

Today, 10,000 fish make their way through each spring spawning season. "It truly is one of those projects our family holds dear to our hearts. To see this rebound in the salmon shows what is possible when we all come together." Statewide, California's salmon are still in trouble as population numbers remain dangerously low. The Gorrill family believes it is a problem that will be solved, and it is hard to deny their optimism. With a family tradition of problem solving and helping native species now a century old, they're simply staying the course - and as they've proven time and again, they certainly aren't afraid to draw up a solution to a problem when called upon.

