

Grant Gerber
A Lasting Legacy
By Heather Smith-Thomas

The man who gained national attention with his coast-to-coast Grass March Cowboy Express this past October is gone. The 72-year-old Elko, Nevada attorney and county commissioner passed away on October 25, 2014 in a Salt Lake City hospital, surrounded by his family, after a head injury suffered when his horse fell down with him during the ride to Washington D.C.

His horse Ghandi stepped in a groundhog hole in Kansas. Grant was able to push clear of the horse so it didn't fall on top of him, but landed on his head and was knocked unconscious in the fall. After the fall, Grant told his son Travis that he was glad he was the one who took the tumble, and not a fellow rider. He was checked at a St. Louis hospital but at that point there was no sign of bleeding on the brain, so the riders continued their journey and arrived at the Capital on horseback October 16, seeing the ride through to its completion.

After the petitions were delivered, however, Grant had nagging headaches. He stopped in Cheyenne Wyoming on the way home, where doctors discovered bleeding and sent him for emergency surgery in Salt Lake. He succumbed to complications 2 days after the surgery to relieve swelling on the brain. Although he never made it home, his family was able to gather at his bedside one last time in the hospital to say goodbye.

His son Zach Gerber posted this comment on the Grass March Cowboy Express Facebook page: "Our last hours with him were wonderful. We listened to his favorite old cowboy songs, told stories about his great life of service, and held his hand with his cowboy hat and boots on the bed..."

Grant was dedicated to fighting for ranchers' rights, and prepared to take big risks to carry on this fight. He knew that his final ride was not without risk. After his death, a secretary at his law office found an e-mail entitled "Dangerous Venture" that Grant had written and sent to himself on September 10, 2014, 16 days before the start of the cross-country ride to Washington D.C. The e-mail said,

"Dear family and participants of the GRASS MARCH/COWBOY EXPRESS: When I volunteered for the Army and went to Vietnam I did not expect the country to stop fighting if I was killed or hurt. And now I do not expect the GRASS MARCH/COWBOY EXPRESS to stop if I am killed or hurt. In both cases, I believe the cause of freedom was and is worth the risk. This ride is dangerous and I accept that danger. I believe the risk is worth the danger and hope you also take that approach. Please carry on if I am killed or hurt. And then after the petitions are delivered you can scrape up my old bones and deliver them back to Elko County. Grant Gerber"

The Nevada Cattlemen's Association released a statement, sending sympathy to Grant's family and friends, saying "Grant was a strong advocate for private property rights related to resource management of our rangelands, often thinking outside the traditional box to further get his message across. Prime examples include the Cowboy Express and Smoked Bear campaigns. Grant was not afraid to bring others together while putting forth the time and effort himself to get his message across."

The Cowboy Express to Washington was a bold and innovative move to bring national attention to the western ranchers' plight with public land issues that are forcing many ranchers out of business. It was the sequel to the Grass March ride in late May (from Elko to Carson City) to deliver petitions to Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval calling for removal of the Battle Mountain District BLM manager who ordered Lander County ranch families to get their cattle off their range allotments.

The first Grass March, which started as an effort to protect the ranchers' livelihoods, blossomed into a larger protest against controversial federal land policies and wildlife concerns due to federal mismanagement. The day after the Grass March riders delivered petitions to the governor, Grant's friend Demar Dahl jokingly asked him, "What are you going to do next, ride to Washington?" Grant called Demar the next day and said yes, we are going to Washington, "from sea to shining sea."

Grant's son Travis Gerber says that his father "left an army of us armed with more knowledge and experience to carry on the battle for our rights and for the values of America. I have been practicing law with him now for 12 years, and was as close as anyone to him, having spent nearly every day of the last 12 years with him. I worked with him on his various projects, giving him support and ideas, and being inspired by him. It was great to be able to work in his shadow. He educated and trained me, and many other people around us. He had a good team of supporters," says Travis.

A few years ago, Grant came up with the idea of Smoked Bear (in contrast to Smokey the Bear of years past, the symbol of protecting the land from fires). Smokey Bear teaches people to be careful about

sparks, but Smoked Bear focused on the excessive fuel that fires feed on, and the millions of animals that die in the fires.

“Dad was very alarmed by the changes in land management over the past several decades that led to the increasing number and size of the fires across the West. He knew that this devastation was a direct result of federal management policies that curtailed grazing and logging, and the resultant fuel buildup led to more and more catastrophic fires,” Travis says.

“These fires are a culmination of 40 years of federal land management policies that have failed to effectively manage the land. Now federal land managers are doing the reverse of their original intention; they are damaging the land, the habit, wildlife, and industry. This was all much better managed when it was under more private control and management. The land had greater yields in forage, lumber and animals,” says Travis.

The historical record reveals these facts. “History speaks for itself, especially in northern Nevada where we live. The game numbers have been in decline over the past 40 years. The largest number of deer, sage grouse and other wildlife coincided with when there were much higher numbers of livestock on these lands. I’d like someone to research these numbers and create a graph correlating the numbers of livestock and the increase of wildlife during settlement, and then the decrease of livestock use and corresponding decrease in wildlife during the last 40 years under increasing federal management,” Travis says. The grazing animals and agriculture create habitat and a symbiotic relationship with wildlife.

A Life of Hard Work and Service: Grant was a great advocate for the continuity of ranching communities and the right to use our lands and resources for the benefit of all. He was a strong believer in the value of families, hard work and honesty. He was born June 11, 1942 in Elko. His parents, Claude and Laura Boyd Gerber, purchased the Mountain View Guest Ranch in Starr Valley near Wells, Nevada in 1956 and Grant helped with the ranch. He guided hunts in the Ruby Mountains where he soon developed a love of wildlife and the beauty of Nevada.

In high school he loved to rodeo. After graduating in 1960, Grant attended Weber State University and then went to Arizona State University where he lived with his Uncle Elmo. Grant served an LDS mission to the New England states from 1963-1965. He enlisted in the Army to serve his country in Vietnam, and applied for and was accepted into officer training school and became an intelligence officer. In Vietnam he interrogated prisoners and trained local mountain people in the central Vietnam highlands, where his experience as a hunting guide in his youth served him well. He had several close brushes with death and later kept a piece of shrapnel in his law office as a reminder of his service. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his valor in that war.

After returning home from Vietnam, he attended Brigham Young University and joined the rodeo team. One of his best friends, Grant Clawson, introduced him to his sister, Lenore Clawson, who lived in Ramah, New Mexico. They were married February 2, 1969. Lenore was the supportive foundation for his life, enabling him to follow his desires to serve his country in many ways. He joined the National Guard and became a Green Beret in the Special Forces. When his children were young he told them many exciting army and cowboy stories at bedtime.

After receiving a degree in political science at Brigham Young University, he moved his young family to Tulsa, Oklahoma to attend 3 years of law school, and then practiced law in Elko for 36 years. During those years he served many callings including a 2-year humanitarian mission in Egypt where he and Lenore administered a neonatal resuscitation program, training Egyptian doctors. They also traveled to the Sahara desert to help with eye surgery campaigns in oases villages, served at a leper colony, and organized the distribution of wheel chairs.

Grant’s favorite quote was “Make no small plans. They have no magic to stir men’s souls.” He lived by that credo and boldly stood for the cause of freedom, serving others. He organized many campaigns, coalitions and grassroots efforts including the Wilderness Impact Research Foundation, Kelly Springs, the Jarbidge Shovel Brigade, Klamath Bucket Brigade, Smoked Bear, and the Grass March Cowboy Express. These efforts were all aimed at protecting private property rights, public land access, and our Constitutional principles.

His public efforts all started half a century ago when Congress began to set aside the nation’s first wilderness areas, including one in Elko County. Grant stood up for the people in wheelchairs who would be denied access (due to restrictions on motorized travel). He then fought against federal land managers who ordered a rancher to remove a water pipe at Kelly Spring; he organized local citizens who replaced the pipe and sealed off the area, boldly signing their names on the fence posts.

A bigger battle occurred after a flood washed out the road to a popular recreation site at Jarbidge. The Forest Service placed a huge boulder in the road to keep people out, but Grant organized a work party to remove the boulder, and almost 2000 people showed up to help. When the Forest Service tried to stop this "Shovel Brigade" Grant reminded them of citizens' right to assemble. He told a federal judge, during a conference call, that "You can't stop people from demonstrating on public property," and the judge agreed.

Then when wildfires began consuming large areas of Nevada rangeland, Grant fought against the grazing restrictions that allowed fuel loads to accumulate. He created the character called Smoked Bear, whose goal was to save all the animals being destroyed by the fires. He drew attention to the death of thousands of wild animals and the massive air pollution caused by the fires. He pointed out that allowing livestock to graze the fuel buildup would save wildlife and improve air quality.

Next came the threat of listing sage grouse as endangered; the federal government began halting productive use of land that they considered sage grouse habitat. Grant became the main organizer in the county's pilot sage grouse conservation program, which focuses on protecting the birds with less fire (utilizing grazing to protect habitat from wildfires) and more predator control (to protect the young birds) rather than needlessly restricting use of the land. He suggested a sage grouse habitat map on the meeting room wall to show people how much of the county would be adversely impacted by listing sage grouse as endangered. He realized that this looming decision would be one of the biggest threats to the county's economy, similar to the spotted owl fiasco in the Northwest.

An editorial in the Elko Daily Free Press after his death stated that he never stopped fighting to protect our freedoms. "With all of his activity we were surprised a few years ago when Grant visited us to announce he would be running for county commissioner. He had decided to work within the system as well as from the outside."

"Whatever problem surfaced on public land, Gerber would come up with a potential solution and then struggle to make it work. For that reason, many considered him an agitator. Yes, he loved a good fight, but his motive was to serve the people whose livelihoods were gradually being encroached upon through federal restrictions."

"He genuinely cared about the people who would not be able to enjoy Nevada's outback because of wilderness restrictions. He genuinely cared about the small number of residents in Jarbidge whose livelihoods were impacted by loss of access to campgrounds along South Canyon Road. And he genuinely cared about ranchers who were losing the use of forage that ended up feeding dangerous, pollution-causing wildfires," the editorial said.

His final act was to carry petitions coast to coast from Bodega Bay, California to Washington D.C. and on to the Atlantic Ocean as a statement to support ranchers in their battle against federal encroachment on private land and water rights. His tireless efforts in serving his fellow Americans as a modern-day patriot and advocate of liberty are an inspiration to all of us. He truly lived by Patrick Henry's statement, "Give me liberty or give me death!" and died in his unrelenting pursuit of liberty.

The Elko Daily Free Press editorial told about the plan he made for the Cowboy Express ride from coast to coast, "gathering petitions from other embattled entities along the way. He set a timeline that sounded impossible, but at no point did we doubt that Grant Gerber would achieve his goal. Not even a fatal injury would stop him from reaching the nation's capital with petitions in hand. Even people who disagree with his goals and methods have to respect that kind of determination. It's citizens like Grant Gerber who made America strong, and his loss will be felt by generations to come."

The Grass March Cowboy Express rode in his honor in the Elko Sesquicentennial Nevada Day Parade October 31. His saddled horse, with his boots backward in the stirrups, was led in that procession. His funeral was held the following day, and his casket was carried to the gravesite in his chuck wagon pulled by a team of white mules.

During his funeral, his son Travis stated that even in the face of great adversity, "Dad did not back down, and he was a happy and joyful warrior. He was always going up against Unbeatable Odds. My cousin Olin said to me this week, 'Your Dad never picked a fair fight. If it wasn't a David and Goliath situation, it would not even pique his interest.' I grew up to love and trust his direction and instincts even when reason was against it," said Travis.

"He lived like Ghandi, a lawyer-turned-activist who untiringly fought for independence of his country and gave his life in liberty and love. Grant was as clever and joyous as Huckleberry Finn. He was always a friend to the Indians and people of other cultures and religions. He was as shrewd and political as Sam Adams of Boston. Sam Adams was his ultimate hero and Dad studied the book "John Adams and the

American Revolution” as his political playbook. And finally, Dad died like John Wayne—a folk hero with his boots on.”

Travis told a story about an injured, wild stray cat that his father fed and cared for. “He made that cat’s life a little bit better. He was kind to even the least of our Heavenly Father’s creatures. Like Old Cat, he loved the underdog, the fighters... If he were here today, he would want to speak at his own funeral and tell us what we should do next. My mom joked that he would have a petition for everyone to sign, next to the guest book...

“I want to thank the Cowboy Express Riders for your courage in riding coast to coast with Dad... I have such great respect and honor you for your personal sacrifices in making this ride. Dad didn’t make it home from this big ride, but I am grateful that he was able to get as far as Salt Lake City. Our family was able to gather around him, and the time in Utah was a time for us to grieve and reflect on his life.”

Waddie Mitchell posted this comment about Grant’s final accomplishment: “He made his idea of a cross-country trip horseback a reality. He kept up with all the logistics that entailed, toughed the elements and laws and politics it took to accomplish. He did all this for no self-gain or fame. He grew up on a ranch and knows and appreciates the business, lifestyle and people in ranching. I, for one, believe no one in Nevada has done more for the industry and tradition.”