

MONTANA Gene Etchart, 97

Seventy thousand meals.

Gene Etchart's parents settled in Montana in 1912. "My dad, John Etchart, at age 20, came from the Basque Pyrenees to run sheep in partnership with cousins." They herded bands from Montana to Southern California from 1900 to about 1911. The next year, John returned to his native France and married Catherine Urquilux. The newlyweds settled on Montana's Missouri River grasslands.

Gene, his sister, and three brothers were raised on that remote ranch which grew to 250,000 acres, running 30,000 sheep together with Hereford cattle. "Our introduction to school included an admonition that our parents quit speaking Basque as our English was very poor. Mom never spoke Basque in the house again." They grew up involved in the ranch. "As a 10-year-old, I was part of the crew that drove 25 teams putting up hay. By my early teens, I accompanied railcars of cattle to Chicago markets, trips scheduled to fit Notre Dame football games. At 97, the Fighting Irish are still my favorite."

Growing up, airplanes fascinated Gene. His mom's brother had died as a military pilot, making his parents reluctant about his interest. "In spite of that, I was a flight instructor and owned an airplane by age 20." His parents gradually came to appreciate that "high-lying buckskin's" ability to help on the ranch. "Dad's regular journey in a heavily loaded buckboard to scattered sheep camps would take a week or more. One day, I gave him an aerial tour of all those camps, landing at some. We were back at headquarters by lunchtime."

Convenience, and coyote control, soon made the airplane essential. That flying experience led Gene to buy and operate three flying schools in Montana before World War II. "When Pearl Harbor came we went into the Army Air Corps as flight instructors. During that time I married my Glasgow sweetheart Elaine Newton in Las Vegas."

Gene's dad died suddenly in 1943, and Gene and Elaine returned home to operate the family ranch. In the late 1940s, as

before a sweep of the Baltimore Orioles starting their run back into contention."

Like his father before him, Gene was involved in the politics of the livestock industry and public-land management. His father, John, was a confidant of Farrington Carpenter and part of the committee that implemented the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act. During the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Gene chaired the BLM's National Advisory

Helena Branch of the Federal Reserve, and is still an active member of Montana's Federal Reserve Water Compact Commission.

Family, ranching, flying, history and storytelling are his loves. Gene maintained his flying status until age 95. He interviewed and recorded old-timers as far back as the 1960s. Those tapes became

PHOTOS COURTESY ETCHART FAMILY



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Gene and Elaine with, from left, John, Jacque, Michele, Janeen and Joe in 2010 at Carroll College. Gene was a student there in the 1930s and was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1976. ▶ Leonard, Mitch, Ferne, Gene and Mark with Basque parents, John and Catherine, in 1940.

▶ Gene with favorite horse, Croppy. ▶ Gene and hunting buddy O.E. Markle with some of their airplane coyote harvest, winter of 1939-40.



the basis for several books he has compiled about ranching, flying and Montana lore.

Gene and Elaine still live in Glasgow and celebrated their 72nd wedding anniversary last May. "We have enjoyed some 70,000 meals together, most of them beef," Gene says. "That recipe is a good one for longevity." Gene's younger brothers—92-year-old rancher/pilot Mitchel and 86-year-old physician Leonard—are more proof of that. Gene credits his success to his faith, to Elaine's support, to never asking his crew to do something he couldn't do, and to his father's insistence that he treat others as he'd want to be treated. Oldest daughter, Michele, and her husband, Steve Page, still operate the original Etchart Ranch.

"Dad is a proud man," Joe says. "Proud of his family, his Basque heritage, the country he calls home, and his chosen profession—rancher."—Joe Etchart

Gene's brothers returned, Gene and Elaine sold them their interest in the Etchart Ranch and together built another substantial ranch, the Hinsdale Livestock Company.

"Dad was innovative," son Joe says. "He developed one of BLM's early Allotment Management Plans and one of the first silage operations and automated feed yards in the Milk River Valley." His beef promotions were also creative. "The Stockgrowers sent the cellar-bound 1959 Yankees Montana steaks," Gene says, "steaks they had for breakfast

Board Council, the Federal Land Law Review Commission, and served as an early Public Lands Council president. His survey of Montana grazing districts documenting additional costs associated with grazing on public lands in the 1950s was integral in the development of today's Public Rangeland Improvement Act grazing fee formula. Gene was recognized by the Department of Interior as "conservationist of the year" in 1975. He has served on numerous boards including the Montana Stockgrowers, Montana Livestock Ag Credit, the