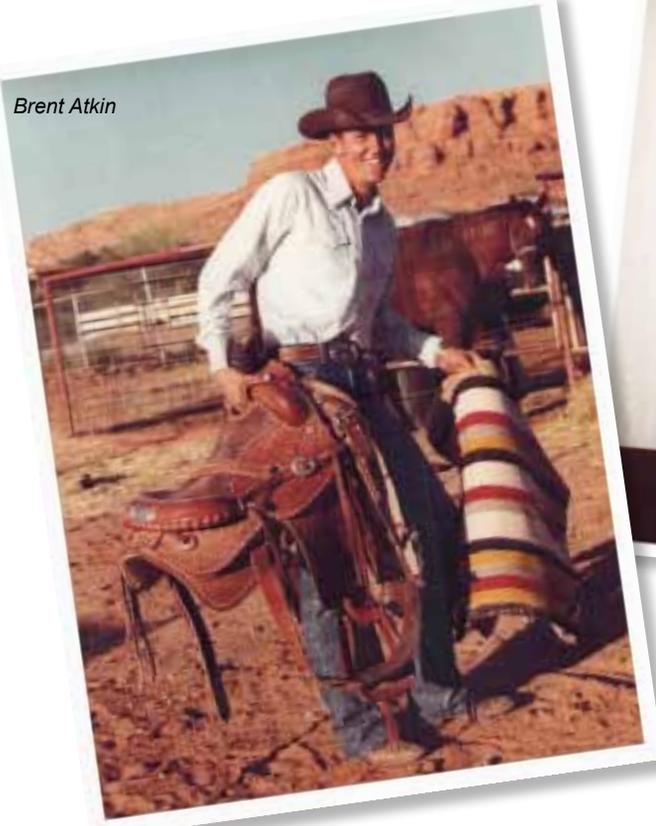


Brent Atkin



Clayton, Brent and Brandon Atkin



PIONEERS
RANCHERS
LEADERS
ARIZONANS

THE *Atkin Family*

By: JANICE BRYSON

The Arizona Strip is the area of Arizona lying north of the Colorado River. The difficulty of crossing the Grand Canyon has created a region that is more physically and culturally connected to Utah and Nevada than Arizona. The strip consists of 7,878.11 square miles; the eastern part of which is in Coconino County and the western part in Mohave County. Generations of the Atkin Family of St. George, Utah have ranched on the Arizona Strip. The family included two cattlemen, Clayton and Brent, who served their industry and the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association exceedingly well.

I interviewed Joy Atkin, the widow of Clayton and mother of Brent for this article prior to her passing away in January, 2013. She provided a detailed and interesting history of the part the Atkin family played in the pioneer heritage of Utah and Arizona.

The Atkin family originally settled in St. George, Utah in the late 1800's. In 1877, William and Rachel Atkin moved to an uninhabited stretch of land eight miles south from St. George to the east bank of the Virgin River. They owned 160 acres on which they built a limestone house and dug a 1/5 mile ditch for irrigation. The property also included a flowing stream on the north end and a shallow pond attracted numerous waterfowl and animals.

Other family members settled in the area which became known as Atkinville. William and Rachel created a sanctuary with boating and fishing on the pond for their children and other pioneers wishing to escape the heat of the harsh desert. The pond has an interesting note from Utah's Mormon history. William and Rachel did not practice polygamy but did assist fellow church members who were hiding from lawmen for that practice. Wilford Woodruff, who would later become church president, was aided by the Atkins when the law came looking for him. They would put a sun bonnet on him and he was placed in a row boat in the middle of lake giving the appearance of a woman fishing. This seemed to work and the Arizona town of Woodruff was named in his honor when he assumed the church presidency.

William and his sons were able to graze cattle and horses as the homestead was surrounded by wide-open spaces. Water was scarce in the area and whoever controlled the water controlled the grazing. The family acquired water rights from a number of springs through the years. They also went into the sheep business.

The cattle business was expanded and the family purchased Jim Sullivan's ranch near the west end of the Black Rock Mountain about 30 miles south of St. George in

Arizona. The sheep were grazed at Atkin Springs in Arizona. Through the years William's descendants traded, exchanged and sold various pieces of the ranches between each other. William's great-grandson Rudger and his brothers Joseph and Anthony were partners until Rudger's son Clayton returned from the Navy after WWII. Their partnership was divided into two ranches with Rudger and Clayton owning one ranch and Joseph and Anthony owning the other.

Clayton married Barbara Joy Vander Weyst in 1948 and the couple made their home in St. George. Joy and her family members had formed a dance band and during WWII they would go early to the Greyhound Bus Stop at the Big Hand Café to play for the young men leaving for the service. Joy said when she married Clayton she quit the band as Clayton said he wanted a wife to dance with rather than a wife who played in the band. On their first trip to the Arizona ranch after their marriage they found an old sheep wagon that they took over as their living quarters when visiting the ranch.

Joy illustrated the remoteness of the strip with the story of sheep man Wayne Gardner. He was a prominent St. George resident who grazed sheep on the Arizona Strip. A fierce snow storm hit the strip in

January 1949 and Gardner was worried about his sheep and his herder Ed Harrington. He left home early one morning to check on his sheep and his family raised the alarm when he did not return. Due to the continuing storm, Maurice Miles and Rudger Atkin flew to the vicinity of the sheep camp and dropped a note to Harrington. Through signaled replies, they determined that Gardner had not arrived and Harrington needed help. No sign of Gardner could be located from the air. Two weeks after Gardner left home, a search party traveled three days through the snow to rescue Harrington and move the sheep to lower country. Gardner's hat was located but no sign of the man. The Sheriff called off the search until the snow melted but was convinced to try again one more time. Searchers with hunting dogs traveled to the area and the body of Gardner was discovered 75 yards from the sheep camp. He had walked twelve miles from his pickup in snow up to his waist. His frozen body, covered with snow, was found leaning against a cedar tree as he had apparently stopped to rest and froze to death.

The Atkin sheep were sold in 1945 and Joy said they went in the water business with cows. The Strip had been open range with the exception of some homesteads until the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. Allotments were separated based on the water. Ranchers had to start fencing and a number of the homesteads came up for sale. Clayton and Joy purchased the homesteads as they became available. The family continued to keep their main residence in St. George. The Childress Ranch in Arizona was purchased and a decent home was located there. When their children were small they stayed there quite a bit and branded there. Joy kept the books and paid the bills and helped Clayton with all he did.

In addition to ranching, Clayton was an active member of his community. He was a member of Lion's Club, served on the St. George City Council and was a founding director of the Dixie State Bank. A member of the Arizona Cattle Growers' Association, he and Joy attended state and national conventions. Clayton was honored in 1992 as Range Manager of the Year from the American Society for Range Management and in 1994 was named was named Cattleman of the Year for the Arizona Cattle Growers'. Twenty-five members of the Atkin family attended the awards luncheon and grandson Brandon sang "Grandpa Tell Me About the Good Old Days" to Clayton. Clayton and Joy's son, Brent, was born in 1951 in St. George. He spent a lot of

summers and Saturdays working on the family ranch in Arizona. Brent received a Bachelor Degree in animal science from Brigham Young University and served a mission to Monterrey, Mexico. He was the third generation to work the family ranch. He married Nanette Smith and they were parents of six children.

Brent established the family feed yard in St. George and built a roping arena there. He served as president of the Public Lands Council for a two year term and was elected president of the Arizona Cattle Growers' in 1997. During his presidency, Brent wrote his president's column for the *Cattlelog* that he titled "Touch The Corner Post." Brent based the name on an old family story about a young cowboy. His job was to ride the outer circle and push the cows in toward the herd. The cowboy

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- Brent Atkin

was responsible to get each one in and not let any strays hide in the brush or down in a draw or out in the corner of the range. The range boss asked him each time the cowboy came in if he had gone all the way to the corner and made sure he had circled all the cattle. Getting tired of being questioned so hard, the next time he rode all the way to the corner and returned back from a hard day's work. He told the boss that he had touched the corner post. The cowboy had been Brent and the boss was Clayton. Brent believed that as an organization, the Cattle Growers' should cover all parts of the industry going to the furthest point.

Brent spent considerable time back in Washington, D.C. representing Arizona ranchers. He wrote, "When we're working cattle at the ranch and a calf breaks from

the herd, I always tell the kids to not get too excited. We have an ocean on both sides. When I started ridin' herd on Arizona, I didn't realize I would have to stand behind that comment and ride clear to Washington, D.C. to do my job."

Brent was serving the second year of his term when he died in a truck accident in November, 1998 on the Arizona Strip hauling cattle from the ranch to St. George. Sandy Eastlake, then Executive Vice-President of ACA, stated "Brent was a leader in everything he was involved in, from the Arizona Cattlemen's Association to his church. He was one of the finest men I have ever known, a true statesman who was generous in serving his industry but most of all a devoted family man. He will be missed by all who knew him."

At the time of his death, he had cattle all over and his mother Joy was the only one who knew all the locations as she was in charge of scheduling the trucks. His father Clayton, who was serving out the remainder of Brent's presidential term, was in bad health at this time and Joy would go with him to the feed yard and to the ranch to place salt where he wanted.

This was a stressful time for Clayton as Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, was in the process of making 550,000 acres of the Shivwits Plateau into a national monument. Clayton reported that the national spotlight was on the remote Arizona Strip and was a clear signal of the dramatic and rapid changes occurring across Arizona's rangelands and the accelerated push for the preservation areas affecting the cattle industry. He pointed out the fact that the cattle industry must stay united, focused and proactive as an association in our strategies and initiative. Clayton passed away in June, 1999 prior to completing Brent's term through August.

Brent and Nanette's oldest son Brandon is the fourth generation to manage the Arizona Ranch. He and his family reside in St. George. Each year Brandon and the Atkin family hold the Brent Atkin Memorial Ranch Rodeo in St. George in memory of Brent.

The latest statistics I found available show there are 117 cattle permit holders on the Arizona Strip public lands administered by the BLM and NPS. Where there were once more than 100,000 head of cattle, permits are now issued for 15,000 cows and no sheep. Few full time residents live in this remote area today.

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