



April 2023 Newsletter

Clover Amongst Cattle: A Farming Family's Flock

By David Seymour

In Oakdale, California, a community well-known for cattle and cowboys, one family who bucked the status quo and raised sheep were the Dickerson's. In some parts of the country, sheep ranchers were once cattle ranchers' number one enemy (look up 'Sheep Wars' on the internet to learn more on this topic), but locally in tight-knit Stanislaus County, things have long been mostly friendly. Still, the Dickerson family was distinctly different in raising sheep, rather than cattle. The MM&HS had the pleasure to interview Robert W. 'Rob' Dickerson, Jr., now in Southern California, to tell the history of his family and their flock.



Bill, Gil, Brett, Glenda, & Rob Dickerson



Why did Oakdale make the ideal location for raising sheep? The answer might surprise many. It was because of a ground cover planted in the area called 'ladino clover.' Clover patches can readily be found in Stanislaus County lawns today. Oakdale is known as the Cowboy Capital of the World now (and in fact, the annual Oakdale Rodeo is the second weekend of each April here), but in the first half of the twentieth century, it was known as the 'City of Clover', and the famed rodeo was named the 'Oakdale Clover Round Up'. Pioneers of Oakdale had looked for the proper vegetation to lure livestock ranchers to the area. Farming over the first hundred years proved disastrous in the region. Wheat was briefly cultivated in the southlands to send flour to the Mother Lode, but that crop soon died out.

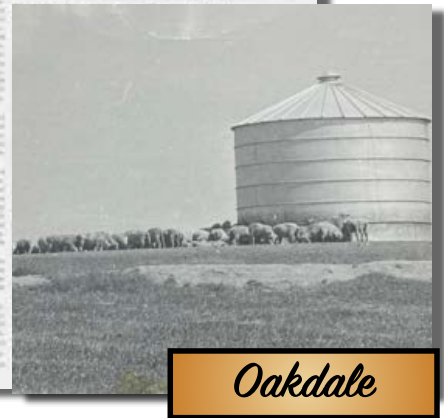


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When these areas were taken into the Oakdale Irrigation District, an attempt was made to plant trees, alfalfa, vines, and other crops. However, these crops lacked a needed rich soft layer of topsoil, and they ultimately failed. In the 1920s, residents began to take note of a small patch of ladino clover cultivated by Oakdale pioneer, A.L. Gilbert (1871-1947), on his ranch north of the Stanislaus River. By February of 1928, ladino clover planting became an official venture; and by 1939, with over the 40,000 irrigated acres in Oakdale, ladino clover plantings made up 25,000 of these.

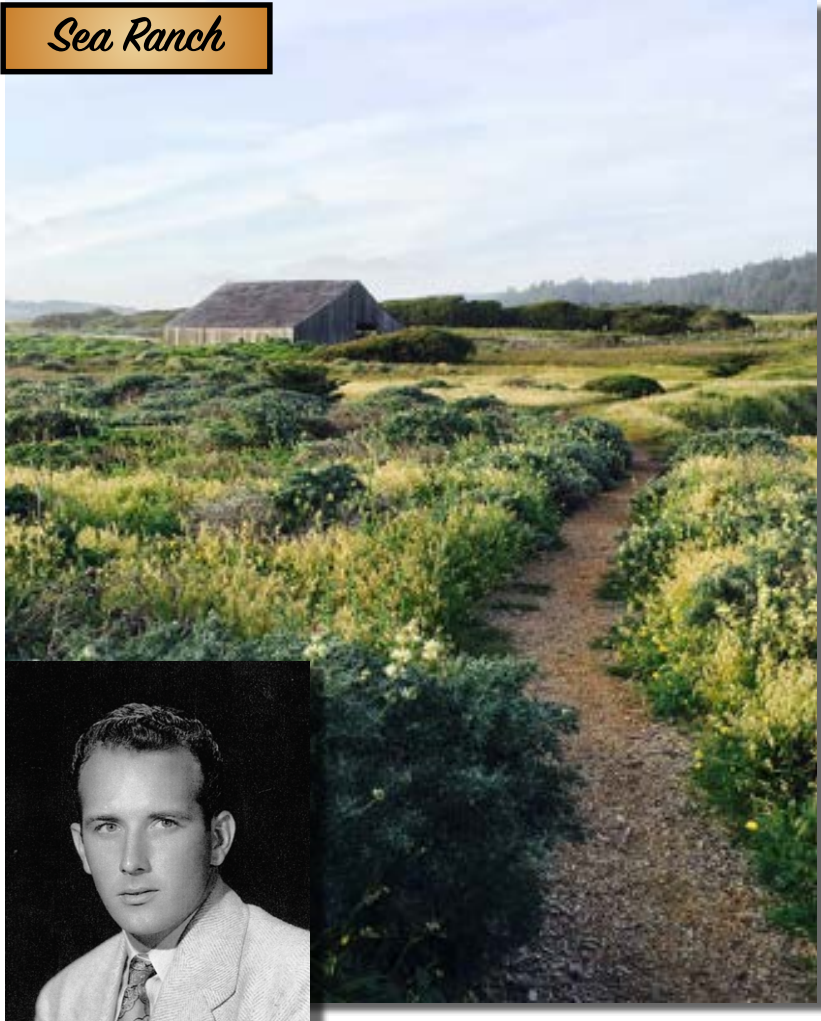
It was this clover which brought the Dickerson Family to Oakdale. With a long-established presence in the United States, dating back to their immigration from England in the late 1600s, the Dickerson's were transported by covered wagons to Weiser, Idaho, in the nineteenth century. William Marshall 'W.M.' Dickerson was born in Idaho in 1887, but by 1900, W.M.'s family moved to the West Coast and laid roots in Humboldt County, CA. As a young man, W.M. found work making deliveries with a horse and wagon to logging camps. On a delivery of a large slab of beef, he met Elva Fulwider (1894-1980). An Oregon native, Elva and her family settled in northern California, and she and her sister were employed cooking for men in the logging camps. One evening, W.M. delivered beef to the camp where Elva and her sister were working. As the Fulwider sisters attempted to carry in the large slab of beef from W.M.'s delivery wagon, it fell to the ground. Fearing they may be in trouble, W.M. snuck the dropped beef into the kitchen. Elva invited him to dine with them, and the conversation led to dating, and later, marriage. Together, they raised four children: Marshall (1915-1999), Gerald (1917-2001), Robert William 'Bill' (1919-2011), and Catherine (1920-2017).

W.M. Dickerson began the family sheep business at the historic Del Mar Ranch, now known as Sea Ranch, in Sonoma County, around 1930. By 1937, after several visits to Stanislaus County, W.M. decided to take advantage of the abundant sheep-nutritious ladino clover. He moved the livestock business and family to Oakdale in 1940. Sheep are prone to bloat, and ladino clover is very digestible for the animal.



Oakdale

Sea Ranch



Robert William "Bill" Dickerson

*Sea Ranch Photo, Thompson, Chris. Digital Image, LALH, www. <https://lalh.org/place-studies/sea-branch/>, (Accessed March 26, 2023).



Bill, Catherine, Gerald, & Marshall

W.M. never purchased his own land, opting for leasing instead. Dickerson and Sons Sheep operated at the Wyatt and Dunn Ranch on Twenty-Six Mile Road, two and a half miles north of Oakdale. W.M., Elva, and their children, moved into a house on Laurel Street in town. Marshall, Gerald, and Bill were raised to work alongside their father. Marshall aided more in the early days, as Bill and Gerald were drafted into the armed services during World War II.



Bill Dickerson, Air Force

While serving his country in the Air Force in the 1940s, Bill took the opportunity to visit major cities during breaks from duty. One day, he and a buddy ventured to Detroit, Michigan. Upon departing from the bus in the city, he noticed a beautiful brunette: Gilda 'Gil' Chiarini (1923-1999). Of full Italian descent, she was born in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

In 1944, this striking beauty was crowned "Miss Windsor War Worker," a war-time beauty contest in Canada. She happened to be in Detroit working with her sister, preparing to take the bus back to Canada, when Bill Dickerson noticed her. Bill had planned to press on to Canada once he arrived in Detroit anyway, so Bill and his friend approached the Chiarini sisters and asked, "Is this the bus to Canada?" Once the sisters realized the men were harmless, they told them 'yes.' On the bus, they began a long-term and long-distance relationship. After spending most of the war stationed in Guam, Bill returned to Canada, and brought Gil to California after their wedding on June 29, 1946.

Together, they raised three children: Glenda (1948-2014), Robert William Jr. (b. 1950), and Brett (b. 1957). They worked alongside older brother Marshall's family; Marshall had married Lacy Swanson (1919-2005), and they had two children, Marshall Jr (b. 1943) and Ellen (1945-2006). Younger sister, Catherine married Captain Harold Smith (1913-2002), and they had two children, Karen Smith-Beckwith (b. 1943) and Michael Smith (b. 1947), neither of whom lived in Oakdale or worked the ranch.



Bill, Gil, Elva, W.M., & Gerald



Miss Gilda Chiarini of 1687 Highland Avenue, who was named Miss Windsor War Worker at the summer musical show held by the Windsor Lions Club in Jackson Park last evening. She is 20 years of age, a brown-eyed brunette, and spray paints land mines at the

"Miss Windsor War Worker"



*William Robert Dickerson & Gilda Gloria Chiarini
Wedding
June 29, 1946*



The Dickerson Family

Now in Oakdale, Gil would leave a lasting beauty mark. One Oakdale history's most iconic photograph's is of Gil Dickerson riding a horse named "Daisy Mae" in the 1947 Oakdale Clover Round Up. It may have been her one and only time on a horse, and it might be evident from the photograph that she was not comfortable riding one! Husband Bill, on the other hand, was ever the sportsman. He played baseball locally and was offered a contract to play professionally by a scout, who came to Oakdale to specifically sign Bill. However, he was already married and had started a family; his roots were too firmly planted in raising sheep to go off and play ball on the road.

*Gil & Horse Daisy Mae
Clover Round-Up Rodeo
1947*



Bill and his brothers had more work on their hands after the unexpected death of their father, W.M., in 1951. Bill and Marshall took over the business, and were later joined by Gerald, who had now returned to Oakdale from the Army. Within four years of their father's death, the Dickerson brothers expanded their business to feed around 7,000 lambs. The brothers did most of the work themselves. Their lambs originated from as far north as the northern California coast, and as far south as Bakersfield. They sold most of their sheep to the Swift and Modesto Meat companies. At its peak, the Dickerson's had 15,000 - 20,000 sheep in the pasture. Bill, like his father, never purchased property, leasing land in Oakdale as well as several parcels in the Turlock area.

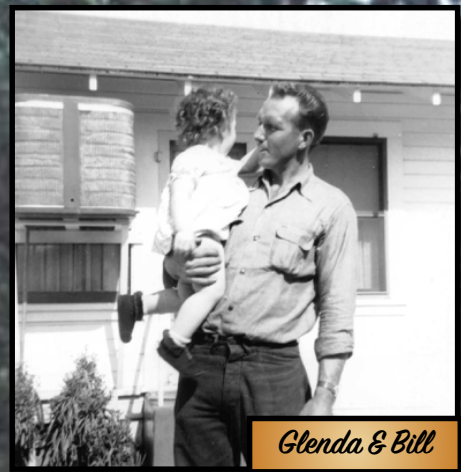
At the time, on the opposite side of Stanislaus County, the towns of Newman, Patterson, and the foothills of the 'West Side' were all well-known for sheep. Bill Dickerson was widely respected in the sheep-raising industry and was elected President of the California Woolgrowers Association. So prominent in the industry was Bill that at a large sheep auction in Ukiah where Bill would regularly attend to buy lambs would not start the auction until his arrival was secured. He was usually the principal lamb buyer.

Besides the obvious use of sheep for meat, wool was steadily in demand during and after WWII.

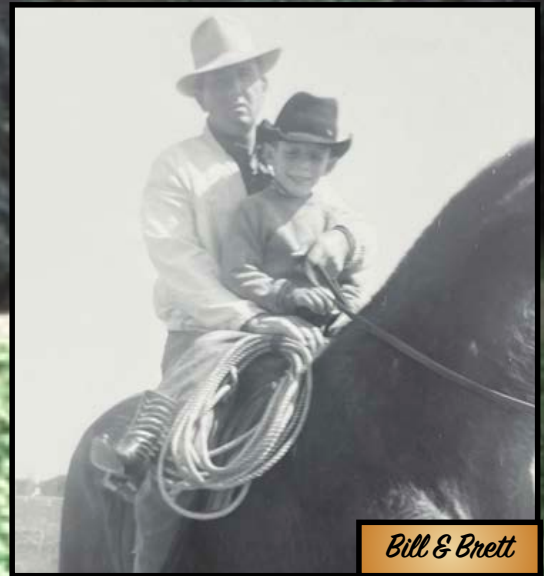


Brett & Rob

Then, Congress declared wool a strategic material in 1954 and passed the National Wool Act, providing a subsidy. Selling wool from their pastured sheep was an important revenue source for the Dickerson's, often yielding hundreds of bags of wool annually. At age twelve, in 1962, Rob Dickerson's (Bill's son) first job was herding sheep into pens for the visiting sheep shearing crew at fifty cents an hour. Around that same time, wool was removed from the government's strategic material list. The industry in the United States was negatively impacted, with more lamb now coming from foreign countries, mainly New Zealand.



Glenda & Bill



Bill & Brett



Bill

Bill Dickerson did not believe foreign lamb had the same quality as that in the United States, but ladino clover has a limited lifetime, and other grasses eventually overtook the pastures in Oakdale. As the 1960s progressed, the Dickerson operation moved from the Wyatt and Dunn Ranch for the newly planted ladino clover pastures south of Oakdale, including a large ranch owned by singer and actor Bing Crosby (1903-1977), east of Turlock. By the end of the 1960s, though, the sheep business was dying out nation-wide.

Moving with the times, Bill Dickerson began to incorporate cattle into his livestock business, finally joining along in the venerable Oakdale tradition. To boot, son Rob Dickerson's first aspiration in life was to be a rodeo cowboy following in the footsteps of Bill's good friend, John Bowman, a World Champion Rodeo Cowboy, who let Rob ride with him around the Oakdale Rodeo Arena prior to the rodeo's start! When that didn't work out, Rob sensibly settled on practicing law, as did brother, Brett. Sister, Glenda, worked as a school secretary, and all three raised families.

Bill Dickerson's main cattle ranch was east of Turlock at the southwest corner of Santa Fe Drive and East Avenue. Due to its proximity to the tracks, he called it Railroad Ranch. He leased the land until the mid-1980s when he retired from the livestock business. Gil Dickerson passed away on June 18, 1999, and husband, Bill, who had long since left the cattle business, died on December 15, 2011. Sheep ranching might not be what one expects to find in the heart of cattle country, but the Dickerson family's namesake business has certainly found its place in the rich history of the community.

Edited by Keith Highiet



*Bill, Glenda, & Gil
December 14, 1968*



Bill, Gerald, & Marshall (1963)



The Cattle Transition (1973)



*Bill, Sig Michenor, Dave Ramont, Rob, & Nick Gretchen
(1970)*

*Information and select photographs for this article comes from a phone interview with Robert W. Dickerson Jr., March 6, 2023. Further information and photographs come from Brett Dickerson and Justin Dickerson. Various Modesto Bee and Oakdale Leader articles were also used for further information. Further proof-read by Denyse Miller. We would like to thank Don Riise and Barbara Torres of the Oakdale Historical Society for their assistance in



Family Album

Grandson Justin, Son of Rob shared some of his treasured memories.



*Gil & Bill
With Grandson Justin
1987*



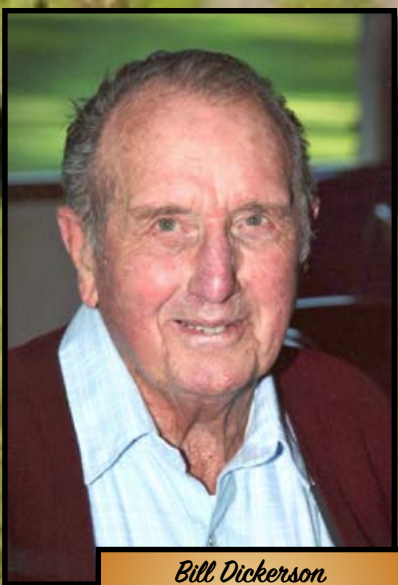
*Back: Justin (son of Rob), Brett, & Rob
Front: Bill
Bill's 90th Birthday,
2009*



*Rob, Justin, & Bill
2002*



*Justin & Bill
2005*



*Bill Dickerson
90th Birthday
2009*



*Brett Dickerson poses with his
Mother's iconic image
March 23, 2023*

*Background photo of the Oakdale Recreation area by Bob A, <https://www.yelp.com/biz/oakdale-recreation-area-oakdale> (accessed March 26, 2023).

Society Updates



Marie Alvarado-Gil



February Newsletter



Molly Withrow Cox

- On March 16, 2023, MMHS Board President Ben Sivils, Board Member Ken Bryant, and Executive Director David Seymour, met with the City of Modesto to begin new discussions on a Memorandum of Understanding.
- On March 16, 2023, State Senator Marie Alvarado-Gil toured the McHenry Museum prior to her ceremonial swearing-in in the board room of the Modesto Irrigation District. She was joined by several dignitaries including Modesto City Council Members, Chris Ricci, David Wright, Eric Alvarez, and Rosa Escutia-Braaton.
- The MMHS Board of Directors met on March 28, 2023.
- Welcome to Molly Withrow Cox as our newest board member, and our new treasurer.
- We thank outgoing treasurer Michelle Gallagher for all her hard work and dedication to the MMHS over the years. Michelle, you were a member of our family, and we will miss you very much.
- The February 2023 Newsletter Article *the McHenry Museum: 40 Years as Apartments* has been printed in magazine form and is in the Museum Store for members who do not receive the digital copy.
- Thanks to Cambria Pollinger, the outgoing Recreation Coordinator for the City of Modesto for all the support she lent to the MM&HS, we wish her well in her future endeavors.
- A Docent Appreciation Lunch will be held on Monday, April 24, 2023 at 11:30am.

It Happened When

On April 5, 1923, it was reported in *the Oakdale Leader* that A.L. Gilbert was once again planting the risky crop of rice on his ranch. Just five years later, he had moved on to planting ladino clover.

On April 11, 1973, *the Oakdale Leader* reported the biggest Rodeo ever, with Dr. Frank Santos of Portola Valley, CA winning the top prize, 'The John Bowman Award,' at the twenty-second annual event.

On April 14, 2013, *The Modesto Bee* reported on the sixty-second Oakdale Rodeo and on Bull 'Johnny Ringo' knocking out rider Myron Duarte out cold for more than a minute.

WILL PLANT RICE ON GILBERT RANCH
100 years ago
Dr. Frank Santos Wins All-Around
50 years ago
Part of the deal. I feel a little lightheaded but for the most part I'm all right. We know the danger before we get on.
10 years ago



Get Involved Today!

The McHenry Museum Historical Society (MMHS) is the support organization of the McHenry Museum, *your* community museum.

• **Volunteer!** Our docents volunteer in four-hour increments to assist visitors during our open hours. Our acquisitions committee explores and evaluates items for the museum to obtain and retain. There are more behind-the-scenes opportunities to help as well!

Email david@mchenrymuseum.org or visit <https://www.mchenrymuseum.org/contact>

• **Become a Member!**

MMHS members are invited to our annual summer Meeting & Donor Dinner, and our December Soup & Sandwich supper. Donors are recognized on our website for their contributions. Join now: <https://checkout.square.site/buy/Y3HL6WU4QLSOHPNPGXWHIDU>

• **Get the Newsletter!**

Connect to the past regularly with our free, monthly newsletter, featuring fresh articles on local history. Did we mention that it's free? <https://www.mchenrymuseum.org/contact>

Your participation helps bring local history to life. Get involved today!