



Wyoming Life

Gilbert Oedekoven smiles down from the seat of a John Deere tractor in the faded, sepia photo hanging on the barn wall. Even in death, he watches over his ranch property 10 miles south of Gillette on Highway 50, which he left to his wife Rita Whalen. His step-daughter Erin Galloway and husband Mike have since taken over the day-to-day operations, and she wonders what Gilbert would think to know his ranch has gone viral.

He'd get a kick out of that, she believes, knowing that more than 80,000 subscribers from all over the country and world tune in each week to their YouTube channel to watch the family work the ranch and carry on his legacy.

In many ways their instant fame is surreal, even to them, considering that up until a decade ago, neither had even been within three feet of a cow let alone raised any. Back then, they were on fast-track corporate careers in radio and loved the

urban life in Cheyenne and Boston.

A call from Gilbert changed all of that. His health was getting worse, and would they mind coming home to help feed the cows that winter? Though Erin was technically from Gillette, she'd been in college when her mother married Gilbert, and other than brief stints home during the summer, she'd only tagged along on ranch chores and never participated. Nonetheless, they quit their jobs and made the move to northeastern Wyoming.



Their first winter almost did them in. Mike can still remember the wheezing wind and cold as it seeped through the seams of their flimsy trailer and the bone-aching soreness from his first real dose of manual labor. That, and all of their bumbling and mistakes.

Somehow, though, when winter ended, they remained on, and nearly a decade later, can't imagine raising their three kids anywhere else.

YouTube fame kinda came out of nowhere. Just over two years ago, Mike was playing around with his GoPro and videoed himself feeding the cattle. He'd recently learned that more than 75 percent of people wanted to know where their food came from, so he put together a rough, four-minute video and posted it online as a way of educating people.

Almost immediately he began getting alerts on his phone, so he put it another room and went to bed while his phone continued chiming away. In the morning, he woke to more than 300 views. After putting it on Reddit, it continued to take off, and before he knew it, he had 20,000 views and 1,500 new subscribers to a channel he hadn't even planned to create.

So, they decided to put together a channel for their videos and dubbed it "Our Wyoming Life" and their brand slowly began to develop. With the intent of giving people an idea of what ranching life is like, Mike made videos of everyday chores while Erin focused on the garden, and the kids, 7-year-old Mackenzie, 5-year-old Grace and 3-year-old Lincoln, also made cameo appearances, including joining in on their Sunday live chats.

Mackenzie, who adamantly wants to be a police officer, has even received badges and hats from police all around the country.

Part of their appeal, the Galloways believe, is that they're novices themselves and on a lot of days are learning new things along with their audience. That they were outsiders to this world seems to resonate with their viewers. That, and their raw, down-to-earth style that shows the realities – good and bad – of ranching life on a small homestead in northeastern Wyoming.

Since converting their attic into a recording studio with computer for video editing, they now put out three videos a week, including a live chat, in which they respond to viewers questions as well as a podcast. Mike does videos focusing on cattle and other ranch chores and Erin's focus is on gardening and cooking. They talk candidly about some of the



hard days as well as the good, and keep track of a running chore list, which they slowly tick off items as months go by.

Last year, Mike attended a YouTube seminar in Cincinnati to learn more about marketing and making their videos and channel stronger. Things like taking off their sunglasses, for starters, while Mike was told leave on his Stetson, because without it, nobody could recognize him.

Many channels decide to monetize their videos, which entails allowing YouTube to put ads in the videos. In order to do so, a channel needs to have at least 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours in the previous year. For every 1,000 views, you earn a dollar.

“It’s a full-time job on a part-time salary,” Erin said.

In recent months, however, they have figured out how to market their brand, selling merchandise on their webpage and signing up affiliates on Amazon, which is more or less a product recommendation.

Small add-ons seem to be paying off, like the window cam that looks out onto the pasture, where for a \$1 a month, people can watch cows all day long.

In a million years, Mike never conceived anyone would be interested in that and has been pretty blown away by the positive reception. Some people comment on the wide, blue sky and vastness of the flat, treeless prairie, and sometimes on the clouds.

“One guy asked me what those white streaks in the sky were,” Mike said. “He had never seen a contrail from a jet because he’d always lived in the city.”

The weird thing about having your life broadcast into strangers’ homes all over the country and world is both flattering and daunting.

As a former radio DJ Mike is a natural, but it took Erin a while to feel comfortable seeing herself on video and she still struggles. The live chats are a little strange, too, as people write in with questions.

Some of those can be pretty comical, like when viewers ask why they don’t milk their cows or why there are no trees in their yard.



Every day, their email in-box is flooded with correspondence from viewers, and they frequently get packages and letters in the mail. That day, Erin returned home from the post office with a padded envelope from a female viewer in Texas.

Inside were three Easter baggies for the kids full of pastel jelly beans and chocolate eggs along with a handmade ornament, ornately decked out with sequins and fancy lace edges.

She just loves their show, the woman wrote, and appreciates their lifestyle and the old-fashioned values they're raising their kids with centered around family, faith and hard work. The ornaments aren't much, the woman continued, but they're made for your children with love.

"It's so touching that people watch our shows and see us like family," Erin said.

Most of their subscribers aren't from the area, and off screen in Gillette they are rarely recognized, though once in a while someone makes the connection.

Last week, Mike knew his wife had been to Albertson's when a viewer posted a photo of her - "Mrs. Our Wyoming Life" - out shopping with the kids.

When Mike told her that, Erin was horrified because the kids had been particularly bad that day and she wasn't sure what part of that "horror show" the viewer saw and if the woman had seen her yelling.

Those are the somewhat unnerving moments, Erin laughed.

Sometimes people even stop by, like the Italian couple, who on a visit to Yellowstone and Mt. Rushmore, decided to take a trek out to Campbell County to track them down. They stopped by on their way to Mt. Rushmore then returned afterwards to give Mike \$100 to take his wife out.

They had found their show on YouTube and were big fans.

Another time, while they were livestreaming a branding, a couple strangers turned up and asked how they could help. They'd been watching the show unfold on YouTube and figured they'd come over and lend a hand.

That's the bizarre part of doing their channel, the sharing of their lives with strangers, who often turn up in real life.



They're flattered that their lives appeal to so many people, and that they are able to put Wyoming and its rich ranching heritage on the map. For many, it's a foreign and widely misunderstood world that some - like PETA activists - take umbrage to with their negative comments on their site about mistreatment of animals and carnivores in general.

Those posts are few, Erin acknowledged, and they try to use their channel to help educate. But in those cases, it's a moot point.

While Mike gears up for a calving series - some of the more popular videos, along with taking cows to market - Erin heads up their one-person gardening crew with a massive four-garden spread, including two hot houses, that like their

channel, continue to grow. She'd been in charge of running Gillette's farmer's market for years and had a regular booth for her produce. Now, she's stepping down and instead the couple plans to start a roadside market on their property off of Highway 50, where they'll sell produce, jams and meat.

They've also since renovated a home on their spread they plan to rent out as an Airbnb, a tie-in with the channel to allow first-hand access to the filming and production. In August, they're hosting a ranch rodeo for viewers to get a first-

hand glimpse and be a part of filming, which has already sold out months in advance.

And though their success was largely accidental, they're easing into their new roles as they continue expanding their brand and channel. It's definitely a new era of ranching for them in more ways than one as they share their life from their little sliver of northeastern Wyoming.

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