

Sarah Barchas
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Cienega Watershed Partnership "Back Then" Oral History Project
Interviewed by Monika Glowacka-Musial, Alison Bunting, and Shela McFarlin
Transcribed by Monika Glowacka-Musial

Interview Summary: Sarah Barchas was born in 1938, in Los Angeles. Her father Samuel Barchas, a trial lawyer, experienced a severe heart attack at the age of 44. While recuperating at the hospital, he got captivated by the book "Midnight on the Desert" by J.B. Priestley and his descriptions of the spectacular beauty of the Sonoran landscapes. He decided to take his wife Cecile and their eight kids to Arizona, and start a new life as ranchers. In 1957 they bought their first ranch, OY, at Brown Canyon from Roy Rambo, who became their ranch manager, mentor, and lifetime friend. Unable to run cattle operations effectively due to continuing health problems, Samuel and Cecile gave the ranch to their eldest daughter, Sarah, who from the very start fell in love with the place, animals, and the new lifestyle. Her deep sensitivity towards nature allowed her to embrace and practice the principles of cattle gentling that Roy Rambo taught her. His philosophy of respect, patience, and flexibility in relation to all living creatures became the foundation for the thirty-seven years of Sarah's successful ranching, artistic, educational and conservational endeavors.

Her deep appreciation for nature, wildlife, and cattle comes through Sarah's stories focused primarily on land stewardship. In this interview, Sarah recalls a variety of events that illustrate how she has lived with the land and taken responsibility for it. Among the most memorable of her stories are: introducing new cattle breeds into Hereford country, gentling a peculiar cow, adapting cattle grazing and calving patterns to the mountain lion behavior at two of her separate ranches (namely Brown Canyon and High Haven later bought in Sonoita), building additional ponds for endangered Chiricahua leopard frogs and migratory ducks, propagating preservation of native grasses, shrubs and trees, collaborating with ranchers, scientists and Forest Service agents in their common fight against screwworms, developing educational youth programs at local schools and the Brown Canyon Ranch, and writing poetry and songs that reflect her daily work, struggles and dreams, in which preservation of natural beauty of deserts, mountains and grasslands seems to be of primary importance. To this end, the principles of gentling that inspire cooperation among people of different statuses and vocations should replace arrogance and force that in turn only breeds resentment, and discord. These principles of cooperation in the service to the land are Sarah's great legacy.

Her collection of songs "Living With The Land", and "Leave These Mountains Alone: A Song Opposing an Open Pit Copper Mine" add more remarkable stories.

For the complete interview transcript, please contact outreach@cienea.org or Shela McFarlin at shela_mcfarlin@yahoo.com