

Scott Berry brings hometown talents to Raton City Hall

By Tim Keller – For the Comet | Posted: Wednesday, October 22, 2014 9:03 am

RATON – Like anyone who's grown up in a ranching family, Scott Berry knows how to work. Like most ranchers today, and like his father before him, he established an outside career so he'd have a reliable income. As both a civil engineer and a rancher, Berry knows a thing or two about "one step backward, two steps forward"—there are always setbacks, but you keep working and you overcome the setbacks. There is progress.

It's a lesson Berry is excited to bring to his new job: since October 1, he's been Raton's city manager. Weekdays he's suit-and-tie, deep inside City Hall, but weekends he still loves to drive the 17 miles from his home on Raton's north side to the old family ranch on Johnson Mesa. With his two-year-old border collie, Woodrow, and sometimes his wife Cindi or son Bryan, he'll tend his two horses. Sometimes he'll ride. If there's nothing else to do, he'll fix some fence.

"It's a quick trip up there," he says, "but it's a different world. I go up there and I'm not within a mile of another person."

His great grandfather, Patrick Berry, settled there around 1900. He'd come with his brother from Ireland via Scotland, attracted by work in the thriving coal mines. They worked in the Dutchman mine at Blossburg, near today's Raton Country Club & Golf Course, until the brother was killed in an explosion. Patrick moved up to the mesa and became a farmer. His family had escaped Ireland's potato famine by becoming coal miners, first in Scotland and then in America; Patrick would go back to growing potatoes.

As Patrick proved up his homestead, the west end of the mesa quickly saw many more Berrys settling in; most of those families—all Scott Berry's relatives—are still around. Patrick's son, Frank—Scott's grandfather—built his home nearby in Bear Canyon, where Scott's father Kenneth Berry was born. Farming had given way to cattle ranching and mesa families had started building houses downhill toward Yankee Canyon, refuges from the mesa's hard winters at 8600 feet.



Scott Berry at the family ranch

New Raton City Manager Scott Berry brings important skills, experience and a can-do attitude to his job. He is also a fourth-generation Johnson Mesa rancher; his great grandfather came from Ireland to Raton for the coal mines but soon turned to farming and ranching, homesteading at 8,600 feet.

Scott Berry's father, Kenneth, worked construction jobs to support his share of the mesa ranch. Scott was born in 1961 at Miner's Hospital in Raton, but he grew up near his dad's construction jobs in Albuquerque's South Valley until the family returned to Raton in time for Scott to enter seventh grade; he graduated with the Raton High School class of 1979.

"I started on some construction jobs like my dad, but he convinced me that I needed to go to college and build something more substantial. I moved to Las Cruces and studied civil engineering at NMSU. When I graduated as a civil engineer in 1985, I came home to look for work but times were hard and there was no work. I ended up working on drilling rigs in the oilfields near Oklahoma City, then I worked on feedlots all over the Texas panhandle."

When a ranch accident injured his dad in March 1986, Scott came home to help with the ranch work. "I looked around and the City of Raton had an opening for an engineer. I worked here from 1986 to 1993, first under Eric Honeyfield and then as the city's only engineer."

He worked on countless projects—water, wastewater, solid waste, drainage, dams, and street improvements among them. "The city was dedicated to street improvements at the time. A certain percentage of tax revenue was dedicated to streets. At the time, the only route to the high school was 4th Street or 5th Street, so they were congested. I was in charge of building a new road up from the Clayton Highway. We built Tiger Drive in 1987-88."

In 1993, Berry was lured to the mines himself, becoming the Environmental Engineer at York Canyon Coal Mine, working for Pittsburgh & Midway Coal Company, a division of Chevron.

"The mine had 400 employees with good-paying jobs that allowed them to be Raton homeowners. The railroad had 25-30 good jobs moving all that coal. Fairmont Supply had 6-8 good jobs just supplying the mine." All over town, there were good jobs.

In 2000, Berry left the mine to start his own business in the healthy economy. "I hung out my shingle: KS Berry Engineering. We worked on hundreds of projects; in fact, we ended up with more business than we needed." He was chief engineer in the design and construction of the Cimarron Solar Facility, the biggest such facility in the U.S. at the time.

But York Canyon Coal Mine closed in 2002, triggering a downward spiral for Raton as all of those jobs were lost.

"We've had some tough years in Raton," Berry says now. "People get depressed and jumpy. It takes a long time to climb out of that." In 2011, the citizenry purged government, using recall initiatives to expel school board members and three of the city's five elected commissioners. City government was in shambles. It needed stability. The remaining leaders lured Scott Berry to be their acting city manager until they could find someone up to the job.

He stayed seven months, until Raton's former Superintendent of Schools, Butch McGowen, agreed to

step in—for a fee that he insisted be just one dollar. McGowen helped right the ship and later accepted a full salary. When he finally made good on his retirement last month, the commission asked Berry back.

Looking at Raton's decade-long depression, Berry says, "I think we've come out of that, but there's a lot still to do. We need to get those jobs back. People expect us to work on economic development. We need to encourage and help local entrepreneurship, especially in the downtown area, which is a big asset for Raton. The architecture and history are amazing. The city needs to play a role in revitalizing the downtown area, working in partnership with groups like Raton MainStreet, the Shuler Restoration Commission, Raton Arts & Humanities Council, Raton Museum and Raton Chamber of Commerce.

"We should promote Raton as a clean community that people will want to move to and live in. We need to clean up derelict properties, abandoned homes and businesses. In addition to providing good basic services—water, waste, streets, parks and the like—the city can play a role in clean-up and economic development.

"We need continuity. I've told the commission that I'm going to stick around. I'm talking to lots of property owners, asking what we can do."

The city can't do it alone, Berry says. "In a small town, a lot depends on people getting involved." The trends are good: in the past three years, Raton has grown an impressive cadre of local leaders and volunteers, but there's always a need for more.

Berry cites the Santa Fe Trail Balloon Rally and the Masters of the Mountain (M.O.M.) Adventure Race as "leading-edge examples of how we can draw people to Raton. Those events have huge potential for growth." They help keep Raton on the map, and people sometimes need a map to find their way.

Berry sounds like a workaholic. What are his hobbies? He laughs at the question. "Cindi would say I'm a workaholic, yes. But when you're self-employed, you work all the time. It may come from my dad and ranching. When ranchers want something to do, they'll go fix some fence."

He calls himself a homebody but Cindi, his wife of 25 years, likes to travel. "I'll compromise," he says. "Last year we went to Las Vegas to see a Jimmy Buffett concert. That was on our to-do list, and it was absolutely the best concert we've been to." So Cindi must be one of Jimmy Buffett's crazed "parrot head" fans? He laughs again. "No, Cindi's not the parrot head. I'm kind of the parrot head."

So he won't admit to hobbies but he's a parrot head and, it turns out, a baseball fan. As he and Woodrow, the border collie, tended the horses in the cold fog atop Johnson Mesa last Saturday morning, he reflected on the job ahead of him—and ahead of Raton—back downhill in town. He didn't put it in terms of one step backward, two steps forward; instead, he used a baseball metaphor.

"It's going to take time to revitalize Raton. We're probably not going to hit a home run. We're going to string together some singles, some walks. It's called 'small ball.' We're going to build on a long string of small successes."

Like the legendary baseball managers, or like a rancher, Scott Berry is in for the long haul.