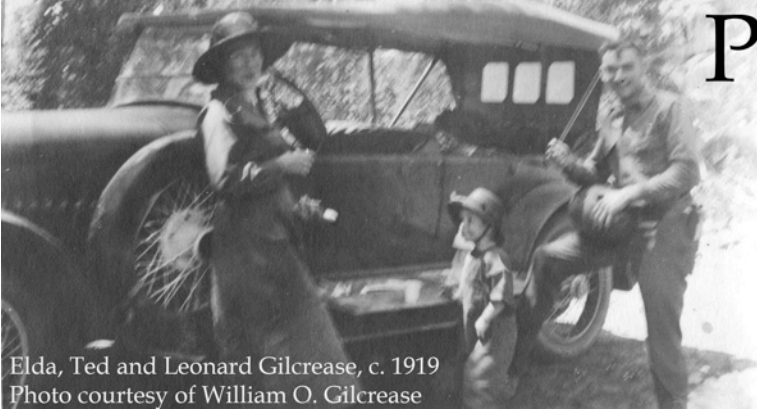


# Preservation Association of Clark County

April 2009



Elda, Ted and Leonard Gilcrease, c. 1919  
Photo courtesy of William O. Gilcrease

## The Gilcrease Farmstead

The last example of family ranching in early Las Vegas

By CORINNE ESCOBAR

You may have visited the Gilcrease Orchard or the Gilcrease Nature Sanctuary in the northern part of the Las Vegas Valley, but chances are, you know nothing about the ranch once owned and operated by Elda and Leonard Gilcrease.

The artesian springs that once dotted the valley allowed pioneers like the Gilcreases to set their roots in the desert. There were several ranches, but the Gilcrease land is the only example where there is still active cultivation ongoing since the arrival of Elda and Leonard.

The Gilcreases arrived in 1920 with their two sons, three year old John Theodore (Ted) and one year old William Orr (Bill). They started what would become the longest running family operated ranch in the history of the Las Vegas Valley, but family ranching was not a new venture for Leonard Gilcrease.

Leonard originated from Lemoore, a small central California town just south of Fresno. His family had a tradition of ranching and to this day there is still a Gilcrease Ranch near Lemoore operated by other family members. In Leonard's time the ranch consisted of a dairy, fruit trees and grapes. They also farmed cotton, corn, alfalfa, barley wheat and other crops. The Gilcreases were a prominent fixture in a small community and known for their public service.



Elda Ann Orr, as a child. Photo undated.

When Leonard left Lemoore to attend the University of Nevada Reno, agriculture was not his interest. He studied mechanical engineering and was focused on auto mechanics, machinery and a young lady named Elda Ann Orr.

Elda Ann was the daughter of a '49er from San Francisco, John Orr and Elda Williams. Her father was a successful miner, attorney and district court judge in Reno. The family lived

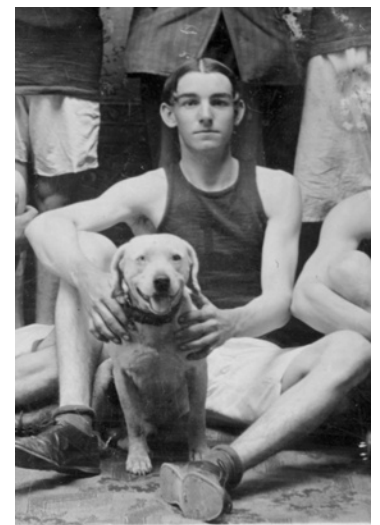
in comfortable affluence, also enjoying a prominent place in Reno society. She was an accomplished pianist and according to her son Bill, had contemplated playing for the Boston Pops while still an unmarried woman. At UNR, she studied music and trained to be an educator.

Elda's Wolf Pack heritage actually began much earlier. According to Bill Gilcrease, his grandmother, Elda Sr., was instrumental in establishing the UNR campus where it is presently located (since 1884) and had a building named after her, Orr Hall, but its name was later changed to Manzanita Hall. In fact, Manzanita Lake which is near the dormitory with same name, was created in 1911 by the damming of Orr Ditch, the irrigation canal built by young Elda's uncle. This landmark still bears his name.

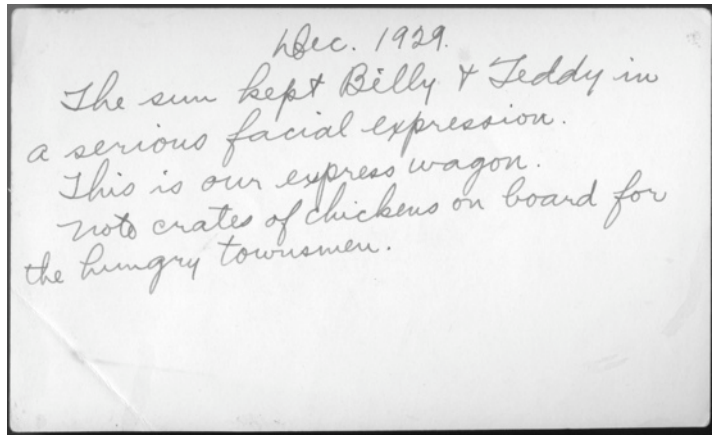
Both Elda and Leonard graduated from UNR and married soon after. When Elda's mother passed away leaving her with a sizable inheritance, the family left Reno and headed south. Leonard was influenced by one of his mentors at UNR, a Professor Scroggum, to move to Las Vegas, suggesting it was a place for opportunity because land and water were good investments in southern Nevada.

The Gilcreases bought their first piece of acreage from Bill Morgan. This initial 80 acres included what was then called Lower Tule Springs. What we know as Tule Springs today was actually Upper Tule Springs owned by the Nays. This land acquisition includes the acreage where Bill currently runs his Gilcrease Nature Sanctuary at Racel near Rainbow. They lived in the house that came with the Lower Tule Springs purchase but in 1922 this home burned to the ground and as a result, Elda lost her cherished grand piano and other belongings. Old family albums and photographs managed to survive this tragedy.

After the loss of their first home, they moved into a storage shack located further south east, closer to the land they cultivated in the area we know as Elk Horn and Rainbow. Because of its humble construction, the



Leonard Gilcrease, Lemoore High School track team photo, Feb 1909



Bill and Ted with their father Leonard. The reverse side is the description written in Elda's hand. Remnants of this truck sit at the Farmstead.

Farmstead house is not architecturally significant other than it demonstrates the ingenuity of crafting pieces together over time. It eventually became a three bedroom ranch house surrounded by a beautiful apple and pomegranate orchard Bill and Ted planted (this is not the Gilcrease Orchard established by Ted in the 1970s). There are also pecan trees Bill planted when he was only seven. Eventually Elda and Leonard's holdings grew to 960 acres.

The Gilcreases first tried growing grapes and after finding that unsuccessful they changed to raising chickens. The chicken coops that Leonard built in the 1920s are still standing at the old Farmstead. Eventually they expanded their ranch to include turkeys that were sold to towns folk and the military post that became Nellis Airforce Base. The ranch also produced corn, wheat and alfalfa.

The Gilcreases managed to make a profitable life from ranching but when the Great Depression hit in 1929, their family business suffered. Leonard wanted to return to California where his family was and made several trips between California and Nevada before he and Elda finally divorced. He remarried in 1932 and had two more children. Elda chose to stay and continued to work the ranch with her two boys until she died in 1968. She never remarried.

Of the two boys, Ted showed the greater interest in managing and expanding the ranch. He inherited his father's aptitude for mechanical thinking and design and made many of their farm equipment. He is also responsible for acquiring significant acreage during the 1940s until the family owned as much as 1500 acres. Through time, parcels were sold off to pay taxes and other debts.

Bill's interest was grafting and developing apple strains suitable for southern Nevada. He also gained a fascination for bird breeding. He was only a boy of seven when his mother allowed him to hand raise his first quail that he found on their property. About 1977, Bill helped Ted plan and plant the apple orchard that became known as the Gilcrease Orchard on Whispering Sands and Tenaya. It was Ted though that created a charitable foundation to protect the "pick and pay" Orchard for the benefit of the community in perpetuity. Bill on the other hand chose to establish his own charitable organization to rescue exotic birds. The Gilcrease Bird Sanctuary later changed its name to the Gilcrease Nature Sanctuary.

Neither Ted nor Bill married or had children. Their holdings were placed in their charitable foundations except for several acres that Ted placed in a trust in 1996 that did not give sole ownership of the Farmstead to Bill but also to Bill Allen and Mary Ellen Racel.

Bill Allan was hired by Elda as a ranch hand in the 1950s when he was just 14 and continues to be an employee working the Farmstead and the Orchard.

Mary Ellen Racel began as a volunteer and then an employee at the Gilcrease Orchard. As Ted became old and infirm, Ms. Racel took over the management of the Orchard. She became trustee of the trust for the benefit of the orchard, trustee on



The Farmstead ranch house, May 2006



Outside water spigot, Feb 2009



*Ranch house kitchen, Feb 2009*



*Ranch house kitchen, other side. Feb 2009*

the Orchard Foundation along with her two children, and Executive Director of the Orchard in addition to being an heir in Ted's 1996 trust. Bill Gilcrease, who was appointed a lifetime Orchard trustee by Ted, requested that she and her children step down from the board so that he could appoint trustees of his choice. They refused claiming "it wasn't what Ted wanted," and lengthy litigation followed.

Bill and Ms. Racel reached a settlement that gives the Orchard a new Board of Trustees, but the Farmstead is parceled out to the three heirs as a disbursement of Ted's 1996 Trust. Ms. Racel, who inherited the acreage with the ranch house, had at one time promised to make a museum at the Farmstead (PACC Newsletter Oct 2005) but this is not likely.

This old ranch exemplifies the early family ranching that spurred the beginnings of Las Vegas. For this reason the site deserves to be documented before it is lost to us.



*Orchard next to ranch house, May 2006*



*Cultivated field at the Old Farmstead, Feb 2009*

#### *References*

*Gilcrease, William Orr. Personal Communication March 2009.*

*Lemoore High School. 1999 Hall of Fame. William Asberry Gilcrease, inductee.*

*All historic photos courtesy of William Orr Gilcrease.*



*Pecan trees Bill Gilcrease planted when he was 7 in 1926. Photo Feb 2009*

# From the president's desk...

By Corinne Escobar

Our Annual Meeting and Program is scheduled for May 15, 2009, 6:30 p.m. at the recently renovated 1930s 5th Street School. We will celebrate national Preservation Week by providing a guided tour by Stoney Douglas who spear headed the restoration project. Light refreshments will be served. Admission is free but an rsvp is required to me, [CorinneEscobar@pacc.info](mailto:CorinneEscobar@pacc.info). There is metered parking next to the school. I look forward to seeing everyone there!

I have been attending the public meetings held by North Las Vegas for the master planning of Kiel Ranch. As part of the process, Coe Van Loo, the firm contracted to do the master plan, orchestrated an evening where the general public, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and City Planning actually sat down together at four tables to discuss our visions and exchange ideas for this historic site. The city of North Las Vegas deserves kudos for this unprecedented effort to bring together the community and city staffers in the same room for the purpose of preserving an irreplaceable historic resource. In June the plan will be presented to the city council. To view the master plan go to the city's website, [www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com](http://www.cityofnorthlasvegas.com).

Also take note the County is commemorating its Centennial. July 1, 1909 was the birthdate for Clark County. Find out about history and celebratory events by logging onto [www.accessclarkcounty](http://www.accessclarkcounty). Events range from roundtable discussions to exhibits. Check it out!

See you in May at our Annual Meeting and Program. Thanks for your support.

## Membership Dues Needed

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Institutional ..... 50.00

Family ..... 25.00

Regular ..... 20.00

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*Send to: Preservation Association of Clark County  
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**Join or renew your PACC membership!** Your tax-deductible dollars are used for the newsletters and programs that educate and advocate the preservation of our local history. You can make a difference!

The Preservation Association of Clark County, a nonprofit organization established in 1974 for the preservation of Clark County heritage, publishes this newsletter quarterly.

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Letters to the Editor can be sent to [CorinneEscobar@pacc.info](mailto:CorinneEscobar@pacc.info) or to our PACC address. Letters must be signed and are subject to editing.

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