



Movie stars Joel McCrea and Frances Dee on their ranch land, circa 1940's.  
The tree line in the far distance behind them would become Thousand Oaks Boulevard.

# The Joel McCrea Ranch

Where California's Ranching History  
Meets Hollywood's Past

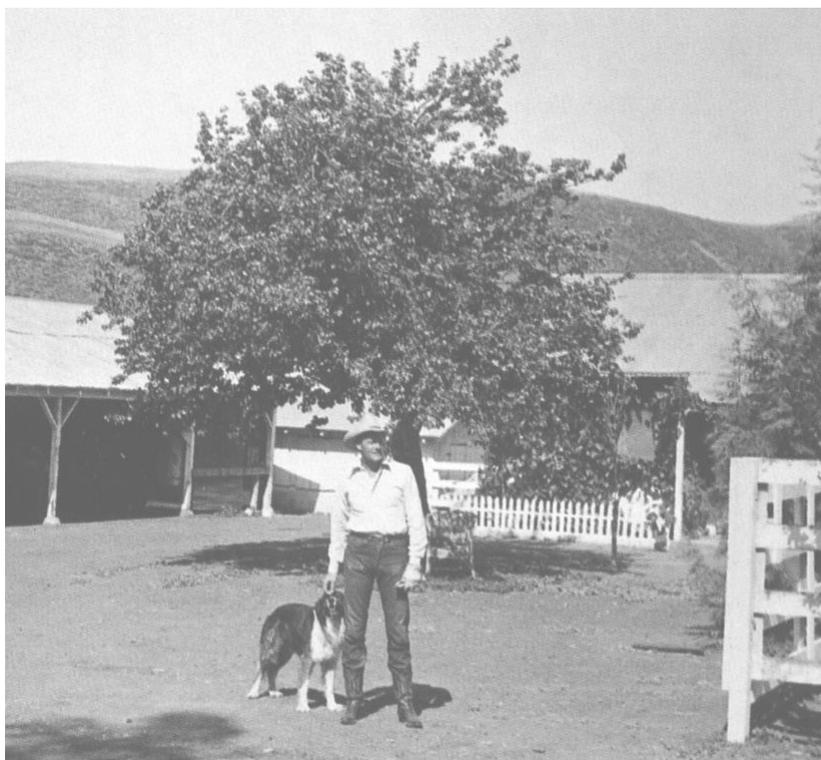
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Most people know of Joel McCrea as a famous movie actor. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, Joel appeared opposite many illustrious stars including Humphrey Bogart, Barbara Stanwyck, Ginger Rogers and Loretta Young. He worked with top directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Cecil B. DeMille. However, as much as Joel enjoyed his successful acting career, his *true* passion was working his cattle ranch at the foot of the Norwegian Grade, where the Santa Rosa and Conejo Valleys meet. Many Ventura County folks helped Joel learn to become an accomplished hands-on rancher, among them was Adolfo Camarillo.



Movie poster from Joel's acting career: *Union Pacific* (1939) with frequent co-star Barbara Stanwyck and directed by Cecil B. DeMille.



Joel McCrea on his ranch pursuing his true passion. The Bunkhouse and Shop behind Joel are still visible today from Moorpark Road and available for tours once the ranch reopens.

## Childhood Dream

Joel McCrea was born in 1905 and grew up in Hollywood when most of the area around the budding movie industry was still very rural. Joel came from pioneer stock so the love of the land was in his blood. He knew early on that he wanted to be a rancher. Joel once wrote:

“When I was a boy growing up in Hollywood, my dreams were not of acting, or the motion picture business, but of big, open country, of ranches, of streams and meadows and fields of new-mown hay . . . and I looked forward to the day when I could buy land of my own.”

Joel bought his first horse when he was 14 and worked on ranches during his school vacations. He attended Hollywood High School where his classmates were children of notables in the growing movie industry. While a student at Pomona College, Joel took some acting classes. His drama professor, knowing Joel’s dream of ranching, told Joel he had the talent and Hollywood connections to succeed in the movies and earn enough to buy a ranch.



Young Joel with dreams of becoming a cowboy and a rancher.

## Fulfilling a Dream

After a few lean years breaking into movies, by 1930 Joel was offered good acting roles. He made two movies with the legendary cowboy humorist Will Rogers. Will liked that Joel was a cowboy at heart and became a mentor to young Joel, encouraging him to buy a ranch sooner than later. In 1933, Joel obtained a loan from Will Roger's banker and purchased a ranch located, in Joel's words, "among the gentle, open land and those grand and beautiful oaks" of the Santa Rosa and Conejo Valleys.

1933 was a big year for Joel McCrea who turned 28 in November. He bought his ranch, built his ranch house and married the talented, beautiful actress Frances Dee. The ranch would be the couple's home throughout their 57 year marriage and where they raised their three sons Jody, David and Peter.



Joel with mentor Will Rogers who encouraged Joel to buy a ranch saying, "Land's a good thing to buy – after all, they ain't making any more of it!"



Young marrieds Joel and Frances McCrea on the steps of their newly built ranch house in 1933. Today, the house is open for tours during the annual Cowboy Cookout at the McCrea Ranch.

## Ranch Life

Joel was a bit of a novice when he first started working his ranch but he was eager to learn. Wyatt McCrea, Joel's eldest grandchild, recalls:

"My grandfather became friends with many of the long-time ranchers and farmers in the area and would occasionally seek out their advice on cattle or crops. Among those was the very prominent Adolfo Camarillo. My grandfather would many times stop and visit with Mr. Camarillo about the weather, cattle prices or which crops may be bringing the best yields. Mr. Camarillo was always willing to share thoughts from his many years of experience! My grandfather would also frequently help the neighboring ranches work cattle, as was the custom in those days for neighbors to help neighbors, and he learned much from watching how different ranches would do things. He became well respected among the locals for his willingness to learn and do things the right way."

Through the years, Joel was able to acquire more land, doubling the size of the ranch to nearly 2400 acres. He ran an average of 150 head of mother cows. He grew barley, wheat and oats. Despite his busy movie career, Joel was able to do much of the work on the land himself with the help of his foreman and the McCrea sons. A local newspaper reporter observed:

"On his ranch, Joel McCrea raises beef, barley and boys!"

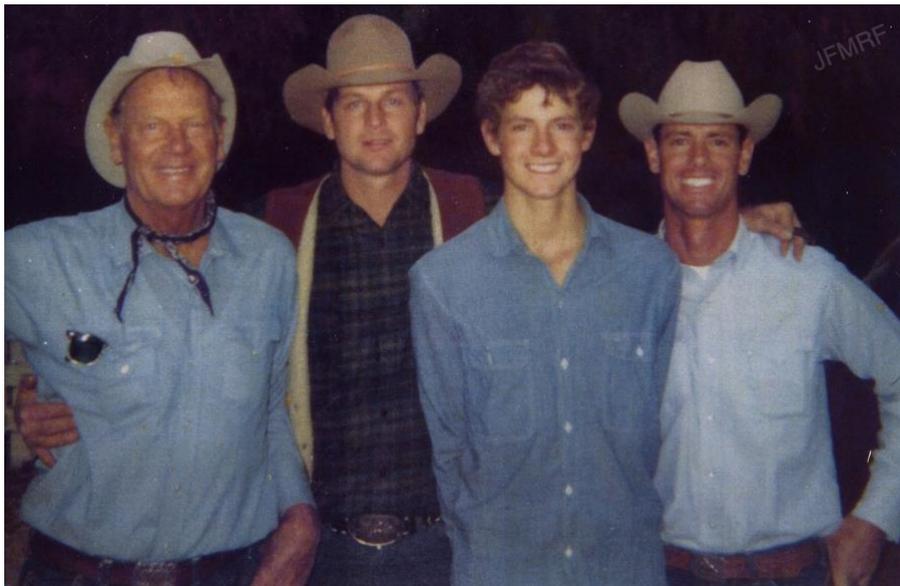
As was the practice among farmers and ranchers in the area, Joel did dry land farming relying on Mother Nature to irrigate his fields. The horsemanship Joel learned as a youth served him well when, routinely, he rode on horseback for miles around his ranch to check on the cattle's water troughs and the fences. And in his early days of ranching, all his farm equipment was horse drawn. By the 1940's, Joel was using tractors. Today his 1947 John Deere tractor and some of the original horse drawn equipment are on display at the ranch. By the way, Joel's horsemanship also served him well in Hollywood where he was considered one of the finest riders in Western movies.



Joel ranching the old fashioned way with horse and wagon in the 1930's.



No “gentleman rancher” was Joel McCrea – he was “hands-on” !  
Here he is quenching his thirst while baling hay.



Joel with his sons Jody, Peter and David who helped at the McCrea Ranch and neighboring ranches as they were growing up. Later, Jody and David had ranches of their own.

The McCrea family was happy to help with cattle round-ups at the neighboring ranches. These were festive community occasions with hearty bar-b-ques after the work was done. And folks stopped by the McCrea Ranch. Local ranchers came to talk shop and Hollywood luminaries came to enjoy the privacy and tranquility. Celebrity visitors included Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Taylor, Maurice Chevalier and Joel’s close friend Gary Cooper. When famed director Alfred Hitchcock visited he was very fond of the freshly churned butter from the McCrea Milk House!



Joel and his close friend Gary Cooper who was a frequent visitor to the McCrea Ranch. Cooper grew up on a Montana ranch and enjoyed the wide open spaces of Joel's land.



Frances Dee co-starring with Gary Cooper, one of her many famous leading men, in *Souls at Sea* (1937).

## Frances, the Rancher's Wife

Frances Dee was an A-List movie star in her own right whose leading men included Gary Cooper, John Wayne, William Holden -- and Joel McCrea! Frances was a city girl raised in Chicago who had no experience of rural life when, as a young bride, she came a to live with Joel on his ranch. Fortunately, the neighboring "women folk" took Frances under wing and gave her pointers about being a rancher's wife. Once she and Joel started their family, Frances knew that the ranch was the ideal place to raise their sons. She decided to scale back her movie career and devote herself to her husband and children. Also, Frances participated in numerous community activities that included volunteering with the local Red Cross and directing student plays at the nearby Santa Rosa School. It was at Frances' urging that Joel became involved in many local philanthropic causes such as supporting the Camarillo Boys and Girls Club and the Conejo Valley YMCA.



Joel McCrea and Frances Dee in *Wells Fargo* (1937), one of four movies they made together.



Frances, the devoted mother, on the ranch with two of her three sons, David and Peter.

## Later Years

By the late 1950's cattle ranching in our local valleys was increasingly a financial challenge so Joel sold much of his acreage to developers and bought ranches in the Central Coast and Nevada where ranching was still feasible. Joel's son David helped run those ranches. But Joel's heart always belonged to his homestead at the foot of the Norwegian Grade. After retiring from acting, Joel and Frances continued to make the original ranch their main home. They remained an integral part of the community, helping their neighbors as they had been helped so often through the years.

Fiesta held on Sunday, May 24, 1964. Oxnard Press-Courier dated Tuesday, May 26, 1964 [1 of 3]

TUESDAY, MAY 26, 1964 THE PRESS-COURIER—PHONE 483-1101 PAGE THIRTEEN

### Camarillo Ranch presents fiesta setting for crippled children's party

**EAGLE DANCERS ENTERTAIN FIESTA CROWDS**  
The Camarillo home, which has over much of its grounds for the benefit of the Ventura County Society for Crippled Children, was the setting for a lot of old Cal-ifornia Sunday when the Camarillo Ranch

**JOEL MCCREA GIVES A FELLA A RIDE**  
Mr. McCrea, Belle Holmway, center, of Thousand Oaks, and Mrs. Ted Boscher of Oxnard, join a fascinated youngster, Belle

**HISTENSES JOIN IN THE FUN**  
Mrs. Carmen Camarillo Jones, left, daughter of the late Adolfo Camarillo, and Mrs. William Clark of Oxnard, take time out from their business duties Sunday afternoon to enjoy a bit of fiesta fun. Mrs. Jones is enjoying a taco, of course.

Joel and Frances were very supportive of local causes, especially ones that aided children. Joel (center) helped with a benefit event at the Adolfo Camarillo Ranch in 1964.



Joel and Frances (circa 1972) remained active in the community.



In his later years, Joel enjoyed relaxing outside the Bunkhouse and waving over passersby on Moorpark Road to come and "sit a spell" with him.

## The Joel McCrea Ranch Today

Joel passed away in 1990 and Frances in 2004. Approximately 355 bucolic acres of the ranch remained and were donated to the Conejo Recreation and Park District. Grandson Wyatt McCrea explains:

“It was important to all of us as a family to try and preserve what was left of the original ranch and all that my grandparents had spent so much time building up. Working with our local Park District just seemed to make sense, as my grandfather had previously donated 75 acres to them to be set aside as a wildlife preserve and we had developed a great relationship with them over the years. We made the last large donation of land to them in 1995 and the following year we had the ranch and all the buildings placed on the National Register of Historic Places which was no easy feat but one of which we are all very proud. In 2011, I formed the Joel and Frances McCrea Ranch Foundation whose mission it is to raise funds and awareness of the property in order to help in its restoration, preservation and rehabilitation. The Foundation is also actively involved in many of the interpretive and educational programs that take place at the ranch in a normal year. With the help of the Park District staff and our many dedicated docents and volunteers we continue to strive to preserve the memory of my grandparents as well as the local ranching and farming history that was once so prevalent here.”

Once the McCrea Ranch can reopen after the pandemic, docent led tours will again be offered at the facilities including the historic Bunkhouse (circa 1890), the Shop and Milk House (1937), the Foreman’s House (1911), and the family’s Main House (1933). A Visitor Center was built in 2011 in the style of the original buildings. The Center is the setting for a variety of scheduled public programs, including monthly screenings of Joel McCrea and Frances Dee movies.

When you visit the Joel McCrea Ranch we know you will feel the presence of the family who loved living there and who cherished their surrounding community. Joel said of those neighbors, including the Camarillo family:

“They were some of the most wonderful people I ever knew.”



Wyatt McCrea (in cowboy hat) and raffle winners after a screening of the Joel McCrea movie “Cattle Empire” at the Visitor Center.



Docent Terry gives a tour of the McCrea family house during the annual Cowboy Cookout that includes a bar-b-que, tours and live music.

For updates on the McCrea Ranch, go to:

[McCreaRanchFoundation.org](http://McCreaRanchFoundation.org)

or

[facebook.com/McCreaRanch](https://facebook.com/McCreaRanch)



Special thanks to Wyatt McCrea and the Conejo Recreation and Park District.  
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#### References

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*The Conejo Valley: Old and New Frontiers* by Carol A. Bidwell – Foreword by Joel McCrea  
*Frances Dee: A Film History* by Ed Hulse -- Foreword by Wyatt McCrea  
*Joel McCrea: A Film History* by Tony Thomas -- Foreword by Wyatt McCrea

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