



Emily Fagan

# Nevada Ranch's Colorful History

By Emily Fagan

Fifteen miles west of the Las Vegas strip, just past the last tidy housing developments along Route 159, the stunning Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area lures tourists away from the glitz and glamour of the gaming tables to some of the best thrills of nature. Thrusting out of the ground as if punched through the earth's crust by a giant fist, the Wilson Mountain Range is craggy, forbidding and dramatic. A divine hand seems to have painted its rugged gray features brilliant shades of red and burnt orange.

Las Vegas draws visitors from around the world so you will find people from everywhere at the many scenic pullouts in Red Rock Canyon. I learned a little bit about Slovenia from the tourist standing next to me as we gazed at the red rocks, lending the moment an exotic air.

Spring Mountain Ranch lies just a few miles south of the Red Rock Canyon Visitor Center on this road that parallels the mountain range. It is a special state park that is easily overlooked by visitors caught up in the awesome views along the drive. I knew I was in for a treat when I turned down the long driveway to the ranch and was greeted by three burros. Signs back along Route 159 had suggested they were present everywhere in Red Rock Canyon, but they had completely eluded me during my stay until now. As the burros stood in lush green grass, muzzles happily buried in tasty greens, it was obvious why I hadn't seen them on the desert laden with Joshua trees—the landscaping at Spring Mountain Ranch made a much better lunch.

## Begun in the 1870s

Approaching the main ranch house, I found it surprisingly humble, given the illustrious names that had been attached to the

property. Originally homesteaded by two partners in 1876, the ranch was first called Old Bill Williams Ranch, named after an infamous mountain man who had passed through the area. Back in May 1840, Bill Williams had participated in a series of Ute Indian raids on the Mexican ranches that dotted California's landscape in those days. Since the California territory was under Mexican control, these raids were easily justified by American ruffians. Bill Williams would rush his stolen horses across the harsh desert and rest them at a wash fed by an artesian well at Red Rock Canyon.

In the 1920s, the sons of the original homesteaders needed a financial bailout to cover a mortgage on the ranch, and family friend Willard George stepped in with the funds. He renamed the ranch Sandstone Ranch and added a chinchilla farm to the cattle ranching business. He had a ready market for his fine furs in Hollywood, and in the 1940s he found a buyer there for his ranch. Chet Lauck, who played Lum on the radio comedy show "Lum and Abner," purchased the property after first leasing it.

Stepping into the farmhouse I was greeted by a friendly docent who was seated comfortably in an easy chair before the fireplace in the brick-lined living room. There is so much history wrapped up in this little state park that the tour guides go through extensive training so they can offer tours with as much depth and history as visitors want. I was still trying to figure out who Lum and Abner were when I heard the names Vera Krupp and Howard Hughes as other owners of this property. Howard Hughes? He was the last owner of the property and made the final changes to the home, outfitting it with appliances and furnishings from his Las Vegas hotels. Formica countertops might have been the rage in 1967 when he bought the property, but they seemed oddly cheap for a man of his means by today's interior decorating standards.

I was led to a back room lined with movie posters and publicity shots from the various owners. I discovered "Lum and Abner" had been a hugely popular radio show that ran for some 5,000 episodes from the 1930s to the 1950s. It featured characters based on the actors' experiences growing up in small town Arkansas. Lum and Abner were hillbilly shopkeepers of fictional Pine Ridge, Arkansas, and rural America took a lot of comedic jabs during their show. The comedy team had been deep into making movies during the time that Lauck (Lum) owned the ranch, and he used it not just as an operating cattle ranch but also as a vacation escape from Hollywood, renaming it Bar Nothing Ranch.

## Ranch Expansion

In 1955, the German movie star Vera Krupp purchased the ranch from Lauck. She was the former wife of Alfred Krupp, an infamous Nazi supporter who inherited Germany's mammoth Krupp manufacturing enterprise, which had been a major munitions supplier during the war. There wasn't a lot of work in



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The ranch house has a cozy living room.

Hollywood in the 1950s for German movie stars once married to Nazi supporters, and this beautiful ranch must have been a soothing retreat for her. She invested her full heart and soul into the property, adding a swimming pool, expanding the farmhouse and increasing the cattle operations. She also renamed the property Spring Mountain Ranch.

I wandered into her bedroom, a bright and airy space with a large dressing room at the back. She enlarged the house to accommodate not only this Hollywood-quality dressing area but also a secret doorway to a hidden room. Just to the right of the dressing table my guide pushed open what seemed to be a closet door to reveal a narrow, crooked hallway. Sneaking through, we arrived in another bedroom with large windows facing the mountains to one side and the pool to the other. When Vera Krupp told her staff she was going to her private room, this was a broad hint to leave her alone, and she apparently spent many happy hours of solitude in this little oasis. In her final dying days in 1967 she spent all her time here, lying in bed gazing out and saying goodbye to her beloved ranch.

She must have been somewhere else in the house on the day eight years earlier when a pair of armed thieves barged in and stole her ring from her finger. No ordinary ring, this one held the famed 33-carat Krupp diamond. In a scene right out of the movies, the thieves wheedled their way into the house by posing as workers offering to blacktop the long driveway. They tied up Vera and her attendant back to back, wrenched the ring from her finger and ran off with it. Some six weeks later the diamond, without its setting, was recovered by the FBI and returned to her. After that incident she preferred to wear it pinned to her undergarments.

#### Love Token

Not long after Vera's death in 1967, the diamond was in the news again. Actor Richard Burton bought the diamond for a record price of \$305,000 at a Sotheby's auction and gave it to Elizabeth Taylor. She owns it to this day.

Vera Krupp's personal assistant is still alive, and she visits Spring Mountain Ranch periodically. She had stopped by just a few months prior to my visit to deliver some of Vera's clothes, which now hang in a closet in what had been her bedroom. Strolling back through Vera's rooms I paused for a moment in the bathroom. Fully tiled in tiny green squares, it must have been lavish in its day, but appears old and antiquated now.

In the spring and fall, Spring Mountain State Park offers living history programs in which actors don period costumes to play characters from the ranch's early history. The expansive picnic area on the grounds makes a great setting for an outdoor meal where one can ponder the varied history of the ranch. During the summer months the Super Summer Theater offers outdoor performances of plays and musicals under the stars as well.

It is fortunate that in 1974 the Nevada State Parks system preserved this unusual property for the public. During the early 1970s, developers produced detailed plans for construction of condos on the site. A master plan for this development hangs on a wall at the ranch and shows just how this historic and scenic area was nearly sealed off to visitors forever.

RVers will find a perfect spot for exploring the area at the Red Rock Canyon BLM campground. There is ample space for smaller RVs around the main campground loop and there is a private gated



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A burro munches grass at the ranch's entrance.

area at the back with sites for four big rigs. At \$10 per night, it is a dry camping bargain, offering water spigots and flush toilets on each loop. Just make sure that during your stay you pull yourself away from the stunning red rock canyon views long enough to stop in at the historic oasis of Spring Mountain Ranch. ■

*Emily Fagan and her husband, Mark, have been full-time RVers since May of 2007. You can read about their travels at their website, [www.roadslesstraveled.us](http://www.roadslesstraveled.us).*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Spring Mountain Ranch State Park: [parks.nv.gov/smr.htm](http://parks.nv.gov/smr.htm)

Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area:  
[blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/lvfo/blm\\_programs/blm\\_special\\_areas/red\\_rock\\_nca.html](http://blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/lvfo/blm_programs/blm_special_areas/red_rock_nca.html)

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