

## Departments

# NAME THAT ELK COUNTRY

Gentry Hale



### **Name That Elk Country: John Jarvie Historic Ranch — Browns Park, Utah**

In 1909, a man's body riddled by bullets was found floating in a dory along the shoreline of the Green River in northeastern Utah. It marked the end of a visionary immigrant's life but launched a chapter in the history of this landscape that's still being written today.

The story begins on a pastoral stretch of the Green in the Three Corners region where Utah, Colorado and Wyoming meet and elk, moose, pronghorn, mule deer and more than 200 species of birds dwell.

Known as the John Jarvie Historic Ranch, it's now stewarded by the Bureau of Land Management. Abundant wildlife and a remarkable history draw visitors willing to travel bumpy dirt roads to get there.

The 35-acre ranch sits in a breathtaking, secluded valley known as Browns Park that stretches 40 miles, split almost equally between Utah, Colorado and a sliver of Wyoming.

A wreath of mountains grab passing precipitation to create a verdant oasis for wildlife. That made it a hunting haven for Native Americans and later a rendezvous for mountain men, a popular stop for pioneers and a hideaway for outlaws.

Born in Scotland in 1844, John Jarvie found his way to Rock Springs, Wyoming, by 1870. In 1880 he married a young woman named Nellie Barr and moved to Browns Park. They built a dugout with a door made from a single piece of tree trunk and opened a general store—the only one in a 70-mile radius.

Within the year they built themselves a proper above-ground home with floors made of planks instead of packed dirt. But their dugout didn't stay vacant for long. It became a hideout for some of the Wild West's most famous outlaws— attracted to Browns Park tri-state boundaries, which made it easy to hop jurisdictions to evade pursuing lawmen. Jarvie knew it wasn't in his best interest to sound the alarm, and even hosted a formal Thanksgiving dinner in 1895 attended by Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, Billie Bender and Elza Lay.

Hardworking and hospitable, Jarvie opened a post office and began operating a ferry across the Green River. He also built a blacksmith shop, a corral, another home and a water wheel. As if that wasn't enough he held mining and livestock interests, played the organ, read the classics, was an avid runner and ice-skater and was known for cooking the world's best oatmeal.

He met every challenge with creativity. While prospecting for mining opportunities in Red Creek Canyon, the strap on his saddle snapped and he

fell down a cliff, breaking four ribs. The doctor at Rock Springs wrapped him in adhesive tape and sent him home.

Plagued by itching, he ripped it off, taking his chest hair with it , and instead donned one of Nellie's corsets to help his ribs heal. Pioneers traveling between Vernal, Utah, and Fort Bridger, Wyoming, commonly spent the night at his ranch. So it was not out of the ordinary when Jarvie welcomed in and offered dinner to George Hood and William King after they arrived on July 6, 1909. Jarvie never ate that meal.

Hood and King marched him at gunpoint to his store and forced him to open the safe . Inside lay a pearl-handled revolver and a single \$100 bill. Jarvie seldom kept money there for long and had just recently deposited his cash in a Rock Springs bank . As the men gawked in dismay , Jarvie broke free, bolting out of the store toward an irrigation ditch. He was shot twice from behind—once in the back and once through his skull.

The men drug his body to the Green, lashed him into a wooden boat and shoved it into the current, assuming the evidence would disappear into the rapids downstream. Then they ransacked the general store.

Jarvie drifted 25 miles before the boat got tangled in willows. That's where his son, Archie , discovered him eight days later. Jarvie had never actually owned the ranch that carried his name, or even homesteaded it. After his death, though, the State of Utah granted the land to his sons. Two of them lived on the property sporadically until 1924 when the family sold it to Charles L. Sparks.

A North Carolinian, Sparks had come west and is reputed to have been instrumental in creating the large elk herd that now roams Colorado's Cold Spring Mountain on the northern border of Browns Park. Dismayed by the scarcity of elk, he is said to have hired a stage driver named Ollie Preece to gather elk from Jackson Hole to haul back to his ranch.

He raised them in a large enclosure, growing the herd to nearly 200 before setting them free. Today the Three Corners region is home to more than a thousand elk, drawing hunters from three states and beyond.

The legacies of both Jarvie and Sparks can still be felt in Browns Park, which remains a symbol of wild America filled with natural beauty and a history of both vision and notorious deceit.

