

Top Mother and daughter, Julie and McKensie Innes. **Bottom** With a little coaxing, fields in the Ohio Creek Valley near Gunnison grow high-quality hay.

themselves. They bought their ranch near Saguache, got into the hay business as a way to feed their own animals and haven't looked back.

THE OHIO CREEK VALLEY, where they are working today, is a prime locale for vacation and retirement homes for the wealthy, as well as good hay-growing land near waterways that feed essential irrigation. In many of the fields here, almost unseen and narrow enough they can easily be driven over, are thin channels dug into the ground more than a century ago. Periodically, gates are opened through which water is diverted from Ohio Creek.

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During a break, McKensie and Rosie run through the cut grass. McKensie climbs on a bale. “I just like being out here with the hay even though it hurts my allergies,” she says. “My mom brings snacks for me because we won't have dinner till we get home really late.”

The summer routine consists of hard work, but Julie loves being able to get up in the morning with McKensie and go horseback riding. And McKensie's curiosity about everything on the ranch is unflagging.

“She questions everything,” says her dad. “She wants to know why something is growing the way it is. She even wanted to inspect a calf that had died. She really takes it all in stride.”

Other than the allergies, McKensie

is very healthy. “I never thought it was going to be this way when she was born,” says Monte.

McKensie was born prematurely—at 26 weeks—weighing only 1 pound, 3 ounces. Monte Innes extends his cupped overlapping hands, approximating the size and shape of a cereal bowl.

“I could hold McKensie right in there when she was born,” he says of his and Julie's only child.

To say circumstances were tough is an understatement. McKensie was in the hospital for 100 days—and Julie was there the entire time. Monte had to keep the ranch working all the while.

THE EXPERIENCE INSTILLED a new appreciation for what they have now. “Julie and I talk about how we get to look at this all the time as part of our job,” says Monte, nodding toward the mountains—as well as their daughter. As McKensie has thrived and grown, so has their family business.

In addition to making hay for more than 90 customers of their own and raising cattle, they also purchase, broker and truck hay for others. The market has been good.

“The value of hay has tripled and even increased four-fold in recent years,” says Monte. The best quality hay they cut and bale can sell for \$350 per ton to high-end horse owners. Not too long ago, the same hay would have sold for \$80 per ton.

Everyone may have been sweating an hour before, but as the sun slips below the Flat Tops range to the west, the warmth of the day turns to a quick chill. We head into Gunnison for dinner at The Old Miner.

Over mountain rainbow trout and chicken fried steak we share stories about tossed hay bales and the area's spectacular scenery. At one point, McKensie leans toward me. “I've really been looking forward to you coming.”

“We certainly have been too,” I tell her. **FL**

