



*Pauline Bassett dances with Cort Banks, son of Chris Banks of Conservation Basics. "She spoils my kids like her own."*

## CARIBOU DISTRICT FEATURE: PAULINE BASSETT RETIRES AFTER 40 YEARS OF STATE SERVICE

By Steve Stuebner

When it comes to running a soil and water conservation district in the state of Idaho, administrative support staff are the vital people who coordinate projects, keep the books and generally serve as the glue holding district business together.

In the case of the Caribou Soil Conservation District, Pauline Bassett has been a much-respected and revered administrative assistant who is retiring after 40 years of service. She's the longest-service administrative assistant in the state, officials said. She retired at the end of August. Erin Appleby is replacing her, starting on Sept. 1.

"Pauline has been a real boon to our district; she's done a superior job," says Wilder Hatch, who has put in about 35 years for the Caribou District, many of them as chairman. "If it wasn't for Pauline, I'm not sure we'd even exist. We're going to have to give her a plaque or an award or something."

Hatch, 82, is due to retire soon himself. He runs a cow-calf ranching operation in Bancroft. He was one of five inductees in the Eastern Idaho Agriculture Hall of Fame in 2017. He grew up in the local area, went to college in multiple locations, served in the Air Force for eight years, and then came back to run the family ranch.

"Wilder is a great chairman, I appreciate him," Bassett says. "He's someone I can always count on. The Caribou Board of Supervisors are like my family. They're like my big brothers. They're very wholesome, down to earth people."

In fact, the whole group of folks who work together on conservation projects for the Caribou District is like a close tight-knit family. Chris Banks, owner of Conservation Basics, natural resources consulting company, helps put projects together with landowners, and pitches them to the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality to compete for Section 319 grant funds.

George Hitz, water quality resource





*Caribou Soil Conservation District Board of Supervisors and support team: L-R, Rulon Wistisen, Wilder Hatch, Pauline Bassett, the late Darwin Josephson (passed away in March), Brett Torgesen, John Lau, Pat Lozier, and Chris Banks.*

conservationist for the Conservation Commission, provides staff support for those projects in the planning stages and in the field. And former Conservation Commission engineer Allan Johnson worked in the same office with the rest of the team.

"I called them my three sons," Bassett says of Banks, Hitz and Johnson.

"Pauline is extremely well-organized and conservation-minded," says Johnson, who now works for the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality as the regional engineering manager in Pocatello. "She's so great to work with because if you need her to chase any details down, she's right on top of it. If you need any support, she's got your back."

Bassett also works with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationists in the Caribou County office. The current DC is Larry Mickelson, and she's worked with six others: Mike Johnson, Tom Kellner, John Kendrick, Bob Clark, Tim Schroeder, and Randy Franks.

Banks has landed lots of 319 grants for the district over the years, and helps

install the projects in partnership with NRCS officials, Conservation Commission engineers and local landowners.

Banks calls Bassett "Mom" or "Mother" because of the way she takes care of Caribou District business while providing the light, caring touch that a mother would provide to their family, he says.

"Pauline is so good at taking care of everyone around her and making sure everyone has what they need," Banks says. "Pauline has one of the biggest hearts of anyone I have ever met! In fact she has quite literally claimed my two sons as her own grandchildren and spoils them as if they actually were her own!"

"Pauline has been an incredible asset for the Caribou SCD for many years," he continues. "Landowners have grown to know if they need something they can call Pauline, and she will know where or how to find pretty much any answer for them."

#### **How it all began**

Bassett was wooed into working for the Caribou District by Michael

Johnson, a District Conservationist for the then-Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS). Johnson was from Texas, a tall man with a big cowboy hat. Bassett was at a bar, watching her husband, Shuell, play music that evening.

Johnson told her that they needed someone to replace an administrative assistant who was leaving the job. Bassett was doing payroll for a mining company in Soda Springs.

"I was looking for something

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*Pauline rides horseback with Chris Banks to check out a new solar-powered water pipeline near Chesterfield.*

different,” she says. “I was looking for something that had more flexibility.”

She liked working for Johnson because he loved to tell stories, and he was particularly kind to everyone around him. “He had an index card that he kept on his desk that had 10 things he needed to do every day, starting with telling his wife that he loved her, telling his kids that he loved them, and on down the list. I thought that was so cool.”

Tragically, Johnson died several months later in a hunting accident on a local farm.

Bassett grew up in the Gentile Valley, the youngest of four children. Her family had a small dry farm. Her father worked for the power company. She remembers riding a horse down the lane to pick up the mail. She graduated from Grace High School and went to college for one year, learning data processing on the old IBM computers with the ticker tape.

When she started work for the Caribou District in 1981, she remembers spending more time in the field with the conservation professionals. She enjoyed that.

“We were installing conservation projects on the ground – improvements that would make a difference in terms of improving water quality or whatever. I remember doing a lot of streambank protection projects back then, fencing off streams from livestock to improve water quality.”

“I really enjoyed that type of work. And I loved working with the farmers and the ranchers. They are all so down to earth. It was fun to make conservation improvements on their property and see the results afterwards. Sometimes their neighbors would look over the fence and see the end product, and then they’d ask us, “Wow, I want in on that! How can I do that on my property?” “

In the world of voluntary conservation in the farm and ranch country, that’s one of the best ways to get more landowners involved in projects, officials said.

“It’s great when they can see the results on a neighbor’s property and want to get involved,” adds Wilder Hatch, Chairman of the Caribou District.

### **Conservation projects grow in size, scope**

Hatch says the size and scope of Caribou conservation projects have gotten bigger over time. He recalls doing a number of smaller projects like windbreaks and riparian-fencing projects when he started his service on the Caribou District board of supervisors.

He remembers installing a 500-tree wind break on his farm/ranch in Chesterfield, doing an open ditch-to-pipeline conversion, installing a pivot and more. More recently, Hatch has transitioned to no-till farming and invested in his own no-till drill.

When Chris Banks came onto the scene about 15 years ago, he worked with the Caribou District team to create some larger water-quality improvement projects, off-stream stockwater projects and solar-powered pipelines for off-site stockwater troughs to spread out livestock use.

Six years ago, Banks worked with landowner Max Nichols and Allan Johnson to restore a section of Whiskey Creek, a tributary of the Bear





*Whiskey Creek sees daylight after 50 years in a newly designed channel in a Caribou District conservation project.*

River, and daylight the stream, which had been buried in a pipe underneath a dairy barn for 50 years. The project was funded with a Section 319 water quality grant from DEQ and the EPA, along with cost-share funds from the landowner.

To save money on demolishing the old dairy barn structure, they took down the barn in pieces to salvage the lumber and donate that to the Boys and Girls Club in Salt Lake City. They sold the tin to a local recycling yard, and donated concrete blocks to the Soda Springs community for landscaping features.

"We saved probably \$60,000 in landfill fees and trucking fees by donating those materials to the communities," Banks said.

Johnson designed a 320-foot meandering stream channel from scratch with pools and riffles on a slope overlooking the Bear River. They planted willows and vegetation along the streambanks with about 60 volunteers from North Gem and Bancroft high schools. Bassett took care of recruiting the school kids.

Nichols' wife, Teri, bought 28 pizzas to feed the kids. The project had major water quality benefits, and the daylighted stream would provide a home for fish and aquatic life.

"It's been very worthwhile personally, and my wife thinks it's marvelous," Nichols says.

The Whiskey Creek project was a classic example of the kind of projects that the Caribou District is able to

achieve with long-held relationships with partners in conservation and the community.

"It's really neat to see long-lasting conservation improvements installed at the ground level," Bassett says.

In retirement, she'll spend more time with her 5 grandkids, camping, picking Huckleberries and watching her husband Shuell play music.

"She has been instrumental in helping the Caribou SCD be successful in every program they have ever participated in," Banks says.

"Pauline has taken very good care of us. We are going to miss her," Hatch says.

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