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Contamination threatens family's history on ranch

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For Jeri Osborn the condition of her ranch is especially difficult.

Osborn's great grandmother, Elydia C. Winters, homesteaded there around 1908, and the ranch has a long history in her family — several family members were born and died on the ranch. Now the Osborns fear it may have become so heavily contaminated they may have to abandon it.

"(They) all died right out there," Jeri Osborn says of the ranch she and her husband Clay now call home. "It means a lot to us."

Osborn said she grew up at the ranch. The original homestead is still standing, which the Osborns now use as a storage area. The old house has

had room after room added to it over the years. Its rough and rugged ancestry shows in the slanting, do-it-yourself-or-do-without style floor.

Outside an old windmill still stands, though the wooden water tub blew away in a recent windstorm. Jeri Osborn added that several of the original outbuildings — a shed and a barn also received some damage in the same storm, along with several cottonwood trees.

The trees were also victims of the rising salt levels in the water, with the storm delivering the coup-de-grace.

Osborn said the house doesn't even have a foundation, but resists directly on the ground. She added they have thought of trying to save the old building, but the costs of raising it

are too high, and they fear it may fall apart in the process.

Osborn said she has a lot of memories of living out on the ranch, and recalls meeting Winters when she was nearing the end of her long life — she died in the 1960s at age 99.

Winters must have been tough as nails to survive in a desolate place long before comforts like electricity and good roads made their way to this dusty spot of the world.

Osborn said Winters' first husband, Jon Ball, died shortly after they arrived. Osborn wears the ring he gave her with the initials J.B. inscribed on it.

The Osborns began buying up the property from the other heirs, most of whom she says were willing to sell. "I always wanted to come

back," Osborn said.

Osborn said she wants to keep up their fight to get their land and water cleaned up because they like the place, not only for its long family history — but because it's just a beautiful spot.

Both Osborns speak lovingly of the wide-open clear view they have in several directions and the star-bedecked night sky that arches over their ranch.

"We like it here, it's nice and quiet," Jeri Osborn said.

She still hopes they can find a way to get their property restored, but admits that she sometimes worries that it may not be possible.

"Yes. That thought is out there," she said of having to abandon the property, "but we sure don't want to."