

Just Let Us Do Our Job

Water and land conservation keeps historic Berger Ranch thriving.

By Rebecca Colnar Mott

Saratoga, Wyo., at 6,792 feet, lies surrounded by mountains including the impressive Elk Mountain, the Snowy Range and the Sierra Madres. Although the beauty and restorative hot springs attract a variety of tourists including artists, hikers, fishermen and photographers, this country has been home to large ranches settled by families more than 100 years ago. Roots and family values run deep.

In the case of the Berger Ranch, great-grandfather John Aden settled in the Spring Creek area in 1909. One piece of the ranch is 12 miles down a bumpy dirt road to the west of Saratoga with the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forest bordering the west end of the ranch. The lower part is further east and located a few miles outside of Saratoga. Besides deeded acres, the ranch has private, state and federal leases and spans almost 24

miles from the lower end near town to the west end of the forest allotment in the Sierra Madres. Pastures vary between 6,800 and 8,500 feet, which is not for the faint of heart when it's time to move cattle in or out of high-altitude, verdant mountain pastures.

Fifth-generation rancher Kyle Berger has taken a 17-year journey to circle back to the home where he was raised (although he jokingly points out that the house has been remodeled since then) with his wife, Stacy, and their five children. Kyle's father, Jack, and his wife, Diana, live "down the creek."

When Kyle and Stacy were married in 2009, they lived and worked on Stacy's parents' ranch in Laramie for eight years. However, when the couple wanted to plan for the future, addressing a succession plan proved difficult.

"We really wanted to work on a transition

plan with my dad, but he wasn't at the point where he wanted to do that," says Stacy, who herself is a fifth-generation rancher. "I have a sister in North Carolina, so it's just the two of us. Dad thought we should just figure it out ourselves. Estate planning is a lot more than that." Stacy still has a very good relationship with her parents and hopes to work on future planning with that ranch at some point.

When an opportunity arose in Montana, Kyle, Stacy and family loaded up the truck and trailer and headed north; as providence had it, the timing was right. Although the young couple stayed in Montana for only a year, the brief respite from Wyoming was what was needed to eventually bring them to Saratoga.

Kyle's twin brother, Kirby, and younger brother, Hadley, were the first to come back to work on the family ranch. After college

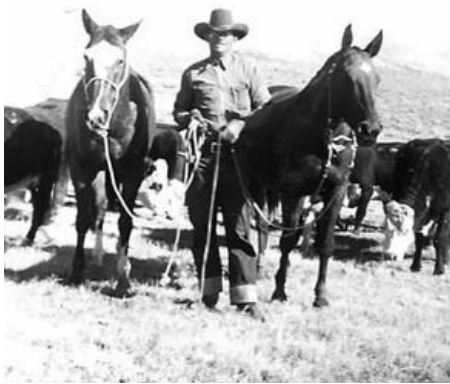
PHOTOS COURTESY BERGER FAMILY



The Berger family boasts three generations currently helping on the ranch—all with the last name of Berger. BACK ROW: Stacy, Bexton, Kyle, Kaden, Jack, Diana, Jace, Hadley, Dixie, Thayne and Kirby. FRONT ROW: Bayla, Bryndal, Aubrey, Emilee, Neacy and Burris.

Hadley spent several years gaining experience including time on a yearling operation north of Laramie, as well as working construction and fabrication for about six years. He and his wife, Emilee, came back to the ranch in 2016.

"Then Kirby started a business which necessitated him not being on the ranch anymore," says Kyle. "He had made a lot of improvements in the 14 years that he was on the ranch which made my transition much easier. When the house I grew up in as well as working on our family's ranch became available, we jumped at the chance to go back. Being gone for that long really made me appreciate this ranch all the more. I've seen a lot of different ways people have done things and realize that my dad has always done an



excellent job of managing the land and cattle."

Kyle, 41, has always loved ranching. "We grew up working all aspects of the ranch and started when we were pretty young. We rode a lot as well as hunted and fished. Honestly, this place hasn't changed much since I was a kid. We're still a family business and we still have multiple generations on the place."

Stacy manages the bustling household with aplomb, homeschooling active children ages nine, seven, four and two. (Kyle has an 18-year-old son as well who helps out on the ranch.) The Berger kids take an active role as they become more adept at age-appropriate skills. The parents never miss an opportunity to use daily ranch experiences as part of the homeschool curriculum. The tall, attractive mom rattles off the lessons: kids can practice math skills counting cows through a gate or hay bales being fed; horseback riding counts as physical education class; science lessons are everywhere, from the hay field to the calving shed.

"Being together on the ranch gives us time to be together as a family," the vivacious mom explains. It's apparent watching the family ride together that the kids are learning a lot while horseback. "While we work, we have

"I love ensuring that the water is running, the grass is growing and the cattle are fed."

KYLE BERGER

time for the kids, teaching them a work ethic and that we're doing something truly bigger than ourselves. We have busy seasons and slower seasons, but there are always teaching opportunities."

Although the parents are inclusive for most ranch activities—their eldest, now nine, started roping at age seven—there are times when it's best for the "itty bitties" to remain behind. Kyle's family has been exceedingly helpful by hiring a babysitter when Stacy wants to rope and brand, or Diana will watch them while Stacy assists with other cow work.

"That's been really fun for me and as the younger kids grow older, they will be able to come out with us," Stacy says. "The two little boys really want to help. Sometimes we need to slow down because they want to learn what to do to help."

Looking over the abundant green grass and fat cattle shows that caring for the land is a value instilled in generations of Bergers.

"I take care of the land through careful irrigation and managed grazing. I love ensuring that the water is running, the grass is growing and the cattle are fed," notes Kyle, who is always happy to share what he does. He explains that the upper end of the ranch, which gets plenty of snow, has good shelter with cottonwood trees. Despite some trends in the area to calve later, the Bergers need to keep their calving dates—mid-March for heifers, late March for cows—due to their grazing in the national forest come July. Every management decision has its advantages and its drawbacks which is something the Bergers evaluate as to what works best for their ranch.

The Bergers have ready help with the family, including Kyle's younger siblings, Jace and Aubrey, who are currently attending college,

and two employees. "Right now, we have two guys, the best I've ever worked with," says Kyle. Instead of one or two large big-production "ya'll come" brandings, they hold six or seven brandings in the spring. "It's nice that we don't have to plan too far in advance. We can brand 300 and have it wrapped up by lunchtime."

Calves are marketed and shipped in late October, although Kyle admits sometimes they have to hustle to get cattle off the mountain. "For instance, this year we didn't have any snowy weather to bring the cows down, so we had to hurry up there many days in October and hustle getting them down in time to ship. We usually start gathering the high country in late September and trail them down over a few weeks to the lower end of the ranch where we will ship. This year was a mild



Aubrey drags a calf to the fire during spring branding. LEFT: Lloyd Aden in the early '50s with a couple of favorite horses and his Hereford cows. Lloyd's father, John, settled in the area in 1909.

fall and we enjoyed some nice weather gathering. This isn't always the case. We have been horseback in some very wintery conditions but that's part of the deal sometimes."

The family believes in advocacy; they are active in the Wyoming Farm Bureau, the Wyoming Stockgrowers, and in their local community as well as marketing their own beef to local consumers. This has allowed them to further capitalize on generations of beef genetic development. Their website, stewardoftheland.com, and Facebook page, Berger Beef, shares tales of their historic family ranch and day-to-day life.

"We saw the need for local beef along with people wanting to know where their beef



Springtime comes to the upper end of the ranch. BELOW: In 2020, Jack and Diana were inducted into the Wyoming Ag Hall of Fame for their work on conservation. "The government needs to just let us do our job," Jack says. "We're here to take care of our land and have 111 years of stewardship in our family. We're not here to take advantage of anything or anyone."

comes from and how it was raised, and we hope to meet those needs," says Stacy. "In an age where information is at our fingertips, there is still information that is best learned by a conversation. We want to have those conversations with our customers."

Any ranch that has survived 111 years must have conservation-minded stewards. Jack Berger explains conservation of land, water and grass makes good business sense for livestock and wildlife. The Berger Ranch has increased the amount of cattle it is able to graze by changing the timing and areas of grazing their cattle.

"What we're doing isn't intensive grazing because we run in big country, but we do keep our cattle in larger bunches and move them from private land to BLM land and to national forest. We'll move to another area every month to six weeks and change the rotation each year. If we graze one place more trailing out, we'll reverse that the following year."

Their stewardship and work in the ranching community has been recognized: in 2020, Jack and Diana were inducted into the Wyoming Ag Hall of Fame for their work on conservation as well as being involved in numerous organizations. Jack has served in his local conservation district

for 12 years and was state vice chair for the Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts for six. He is quick to praise Wyoming's conservation districts as being very active, conducting water development projects and streambank rehabilitation. He's adamant that enhancement is a lot better term for these projects than rehabilitation.



Irrigation in conjunction with streambank rehab is Jack's hot-button issue and he's always ready to educate anyone interested. "People try to blame agriculture for degradation of streambanks, but it's the diversion of irrigation water that reduces the volume in the stream, therefore reducing the turbulence on the streambanks. So many people say flood irrigation is wasteful, but it actually leads to water storage in the ground. Flood irrigation allows water to come back over weeks and months. It's such a huge benefit to the fish because it's providing cool water in August and September when stream flows are low. My favorite quote is from Dr. Quentin Skinner, University of Wyoming, who says, 'It's the inefficiencies of flood irrigation that make the whole system work.' It's a fact. I don't think many people realize how well flood irrigation works in the upper basins. We don't have the luxury of knowing how much water we have for the next season like the irrigators below the reservoirs do."

Natural resource providers in the West know plenty about the sage grouse and management plans developed at the state level over the past 10 years. In the 1950s through '70s there were huge numbers of sage grouse in Wyoming, but with the decline into the



*Strong genetics and heifer development have always been a part of the Berger Ranch.
BELOW: Bexton, three, and Bryndal, six, sit in the feed bunk and stay clear of the action.*

2000s, the government said cutting back grazing was key.

“You know what people don’t think about? The amount of sheep that were in our area in the 1950s through 1970s,” Jack says. “The way sheep graze was good for sage grouse and mule deer. Carbon County, Wyoming, was one of the biggest sheep counties in the nation then. Now there are very few sheep left.”

Numbers of sage grouse are still up and down, and Jack says his ranch has tried to do its share with fencing and water projects to protect the sage grouse. “It helps a little bit, but nothing makes a huge difference.” As a member of the local sage grouse working group, Jack realized that early on in the sage grouse discussion, there weren’t enough studies on the impact of predators on sage grouse among which are ravens, which are well documented for raiding sage grouse nests. “With knowledge gained from the studies of sage grouse, predation should have been at the top of the list of what’s

hurting the sage grouse population.”

The greatest threats to ranchers, as Jack sees it, is overregulation. He worries that the next four years could see the resurgence of policies like the harmful Waters of the United States rule.

“The government needs to just let us do our job. We’re here to take care of our land. We have 111 years of stewardship in our family. We’re not here to take advantage of anything or anyone; we’re here to prove we can keep caring for the land and providing beef to the world.” ■

Rebecca Colnar Mott is a freelance writer, first-generation cattle rancher and public relations director for Montana Farm Bureau. She might don insulated coveralls for checking heifers one night and wear high heels and a dress for a conference the next day. As if that’s not schizophrenic enough, she calls Custer, Mont., and Sheridan, Wyo., home, and owns a tiny cabin on the family ranch in Miles City, Mont.

