

Big Sky & Big Dreams

"I hope that we have gravel roads forever," Kyle Middlemist.

Words and photos by Larry Turner.

An old cabin rests in the distance, halfway up the mountain overlooking the green Montana White Earth Creek Valley. The isolated place, west of Polson, is pretty much void of trees, as are the foothills halfway up the mountain. East of the valley are the snow-capped Mission Mountains. White Earth Creek Valley is great country for cattle and grazing. It is also the land of

ranch lane road and place them in a new pasture for grazing. Horses are then trailered and everyone heads to their homes, some as far away as Ronan. Kyle, Emily and their two children wrap up the day's final chores.

Kyle and Emily have managed the Nash ranch for six years. They dream of having their own ranch one day. "Emily and I have been transitioning into registered cattle our-

a week for the butcher shop. Kyle says, "It is great to see beef that we raise go from ranch to table with no middleman."

Black Angus and Black Angus-cross are the main cattle on the ranch. French Salers and Optimizer bulls are also used. Optimizers are a composite breed, generally five-eighths Salers and the remainder Angus. "Salers are known for their maternal



Nash Ranch cattle make their way to the spring branding corrals with Montana's Mission Mountain Range looming in the background. OPPOSITE: Kyle and Emily Middlemist pose in front of an old ranch shed with their children Jolee and Kace.

no pavement. Kyle Middlemist hopes that it will always remain that way.

Bellows and moos fill the air on this spring branding day at the 4,000-acre Nash Ranch. At least 20 cowboys and cowgirls are busy roping, branding, vaccinating and ear tagging. The calves are roped in the corral and dragged outside in the open to be branded and vaccinated, just like it was done during the 1800s. The air is filled with cows bawling for their calves and their babies bleating back. Dust envelops the entire proceedings. Meadowlarks can occasionally be heard between the cacophony of sounds.

The branding, including the roundup, lasts most of the day and ends with a late lunch, provided by Kyle's wife Emily and her mother Paula Morigeau. After lunch, seven horsemen push the cattle down the main

selves and we sell around 20 bulls and 20 replacement heifers each year. We raise Angus and Salers-Angus cross cattle called Optimizers." Part of Kyle's wages are paid in cattle.

The Nash Ranch is owned by Dave and Sue Nash and their son Max and his wife Taylor. The ranch has a spring calving herd and a fall calving herd of commercial cattle along with a feedlot. Originally from Great Falls, Dave and Sue are pretty much retired, spending most of their time on the ranch. The Nashes also own the Town & Country Lounge in Missoula.

Now in his 80s, Dave once played football for the Montana State Bobcats. Max, who lives on the property in a separate house with his family, co-owns the family butcher shop (Montana Marbled Meats) with his parents in Polson. The ranch provides two to three beef

instincts," Kyle says. "They milk well and are great in the cold so we don't have to babysit them as much. Most customers prefer Angus. Salers are harder to market but, through tenacity, we are getting it done!"

As ranch manager, Kyle also has to do the farming. "I prefer being with the cattle, but I spend about a thousand hours a year on the tractor. Five hundred would be better," he laughs. "The Nashes are super good folks and they give me total rein on caring for the ranch."

Ranching is not easy. There are predators and insects. There is too much government red tape. There are water issues, sometimes pitting neighbor against neighbor. "The Tribes can claim well water and we survive on well water," Kyle says. "We have drought like this year which will cause us to wean early.



You always have to have a Plan B. There are a litany of things that we have to deal with, but we wouldn't trade our lifestyle for anything. There is no worse way to make a living but no better way to make a life."

Coyotes, bears, mountain lions and wolves frequent the ranch. "This year I've seen 11 bears and two mountain lions. Coyotes live

old sister Shannon and 41-year-old brother Reese both ranch. The three siblings represent the fourth generation in Montana. "Our dad tried to discourage us from going into ranching—just as his dad did with him," laughs Kyle, "but it hasn't worked!"

Their great-great-granddad Robert Middlemist and wife Mable arrived in Dixon in



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kyle and daughter Jolee break up congealed cattle minerals on the Nash Ranch's upper elevation pasture.

► Local ranchers and neighbors come together to help with local spring brandings in this neck of Montana. They are pictured here on the final push bringing the Nash Ranch herd of cattle into the branding pasture and corrals. The formidable Mission Range is in the background. ► Spring branding day on Montana's Nash Ranch. ► While two-year-old Kace chases his hat, Kyle, Jolee and Emily exit the horse corral on the Nash Ranch. Emily had gone for a ride. ► Proudly, Jolee shows off her prize heifer, Blackstrap.

on the property and they pretty much stick to squirrels and other small varmints. Wolves are around but we haven't had problems with them yet. The grizzlies have not killed any stock but they get into everything, especially destroying bee hives."

They have more problems with the deer and elk. "We are the last in the valley without a fence around our haystacks and are debating whether to fence or not," Kyle says. "We love wildlife—especially the variety of bird life—but it is important to manage so they are not destroying the profit margin."

Kyle comes from a multi-generation ranch family in nearby Dixon. His 43-year-



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1913. Robert was a veterinarian and they owned a livery stable. Their son Bill and his brother Duke started ranching up Revais Creek outside Dixon. Bill’s son Bob (Kyle’s grandpa) and his wife Roberta purchased 120 acres of land in 1949, starting the Bull Mountain Ranch, which grew to 1,200 acres. “My father Ross purchased 102 acres adjoining Grandpa Bob’s ranch in the spring of 1974. This was the start of Revais Creek Ranch. The two ranches are now combined into one working ranch currently run by my folks, Ross and Terri. When ranching years were good, dad would say, ‘It’s time to get some new Levis.’”

Kyle attended college on a wrestling scholarship at the University of Great Falls. He earned a major in health and human performance (physical therapy) and a minor in communications. After returning home, he met Emily in the spring of 2011 when she was working at a Hot Springs vet clinic. Married in 2013, they ranched on his folks’ home place in Dixon until 2019 when Kyle accepted the ranch manager position for the Nash Ranch.



They have two children, Jolee, eight, and Kace, two. Along with managing the ranch, Kyle has a small firefighting business, is a brand inspector and also first vice president of the Western Montana Stockmen’s Association. Emily does bookkeeping from home while homeschooling Jolee. Emily and Jolee also help on the ranch.

“Jolee has the ranching bug big-time,” says Kyle. “She will be the fifth generation. She already has five cows and a horse named Corndog. And a couple of dogs!” Jolee’s favorite heifer is named Blackstrap. She shows her at a variety of jackpot events in the region.

The Nash Ranch is at the terminus of a dirt road, located in White Earth Creek Valley where there are no paved roads. White Earth Creek is on the Flathead Indian Reservation which empties into the Flathead River. “I hope that we have gravel roads forever,” says Kyle. “When pavement comes, I’m outta here!” Cowboy Kermit Clary adds, “If things get too Californicated in Ronan where I live, and Polson, I’m moving to Augusta on the east side of the Rockies!”

The takeover of ranch and farmland in Montana is disturbing to Kyle: “The nearby Flathead Valley and Polson are experiencing a quickened death of ag land. Open space is shrinking and being turned into ranchettes and houses, disrupting wildlife patterns, ranching and farming forever. Even here in this more isolated valley, we see new homes being built every year. Unfortunately, the Montana that I love is changing, especially the solitude, which is being bought up by big money.”

Kyle refers to a nearby Buddhist Retreat that lies on the west side of the mountain from the Nash Ranch. “It was formerly a ranch and now they have plans to build 300 units on the 9,000-acre property. I have no opposition whatsoever to their philosophy or religion. I have opposition to the stress that they are putting on the landscape and the well water resources, along with more traffic on the roads. The natural beauty of that part of the valley will be changed forever, too. One of the beauties of ranches, and especially large ranches, is that they preserve wide open country.”

Kyle and Emily are determined to have their own ranch. “We’re putting down the foundation toward realizing our dream,” Kyle says, “just as my great-grandparents, my grandparents and my parents did. Right now, it is a pleasure to work on a ranch that supports our dreams. One day they will come true.” ■

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