

TOUGHING IT OUT ON THE KNIFE RIVER

Roundup time, and memories, at the Wannan ranch in North Dakota.

By John Christopher Fine

The cattle are rounded up, calves separated from their mothers and weaned, mooing in corrals, waiting to be shipped to the cooperative weighing station in Glen Ullin, 25 miles away on dirt and gravel roads.

But the truck is late. Ranch owner Ron Wannan is calm and quiet. He and his wife Lois have worked Knife River Ranch for most of two decades. They have seen drought and flood batter their North Dakota ranch. They have battled low beef prices and escalating

costs and raised three children. Still, concern shows in Ron's face as he tries to figure out how to prevent a big loss that they just can't afford this year.

"The triple axle is just not coming," he tells his son Adam, opening the phone directory.

"How are we going to get those hundred steers moved? Let me talk to them," Adam speaks quietly to his dad. "We got a contract that says pick them up at the ranch."

Adam is 21, a senior at North Dakota State University. He drives 500 miles round-trip from Fargo to Golden Valley and back every weekend to help on the ranch. Adam is angry.

"You know what they've been doing," Lois says: "They bought beef at satellite auction when the price was higher than it is now. Buyers delay the trucks for hours so the calves stand around and drop weight once they're weaned from their mother. They're dropping weight every hour."

"How was the road when you came in?" Ron asks his son. It had rained hard the day before, but no one in the family complained when 400 head of cattle had to be rounded up on horseback amid the downpour.

"We need this moisture," Lois says. "It's been so dry."

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The Knife River Ranch is located in Golden Valley, N.D., population 183. Depending on who's driving, the ranch is about 90 minutes west of Bismarck, the state capital. This is a land of wide prairies and rolling hills, distant buttes and river bottoms. The Wannans live where the Knife River coils itself in a series of loops.

"My grandfather was German-Russian," Ron says. "He came to North Dakota in 1905. They were homesteaders. He had friends in Hebron. By that time a lot of the good homesteads were already taken. There were two couples. Granddad wanted to find a place where there were two homesteads together. They found a section the Northern Pacific Railroad called Eagle's Nest seven miles east of Hebron. They got off the train at Eagle's Nest and had two side-by-side quarters. The land was rocky and hilly. They made a rock home from stones lying on the prairie."

His father John was born in 1908, the first of eight children. "Dad had one of the first tractors in the area. Grandfather asked him, 'Why do you want a tractor? We have horses to pull that plow.' One spring Dad got the tractor stuck. Grandfather said he might as well leave it. They couldn't pull it out with a team of horses; they'd have torn the harnesses. Eventually by jacking and laying in planks, Dad got it unstuck."

Ron is the second youngest of eight. "My parents were able to give us all college educations. Dad instilled love of the land in all of us. I always knew I wanted to farm and ranch."

When Ron graduated from NDSU in 1977, he married Lois, who says, "I'm the fourth of 10 children, three younger broth-

PHOTOS COURTESY WANNAN FAMILY





Ron and Lois (opposite) bought their 8,000 acres in 1987. They raised sheep for 10 years and slowly increased the cow herd. They raised horses. They established a full-time cattle ranch, raising and training their own horses and tending a herd of 400 Angus and black-whiteface cows. In 1996 the Wannerns built cabins and invited guests to share their ranch experience. Folks who lived in cities and loved the wide-open spaces would have a chance to farm, ride horses, and mend fence. And pay for the privilege. This is branding day, 2003, with help from neighbors and guests.

ers and six sisters.” Her parents were both born in Richardton, N.D. “My grandfather was German, my grandmother Russian. When they wanted to get married my great-grandmother asked him, ‘What do you want with a Russian?’” The union worked, Lois’ family thrived on a farm about 10 miles south of Richardton.

Lois says she was small for her age. In the fourth grade she only weighed 45 pounds. “I wasn’t growing. The three older girls were stronger and worked out in the fields. Mom was a registered nurse and worked in the hospital in Richardton. The others were working in the fields, so I had to cook. My first meal was fried chicken and mashed potatoes. We got through it,” Lois says with a smile. “I learned to sew at a really early age. I watched my mom. I designed and sewed my own wedding dress. I made all of Ron’s western shirts. When we got married I was always out in the field. We didn’t have a hired hand. That’s why we cre-

ated this business, so I wouldn’t have to be away and could raise my kids.”

Ron and Lois bought their 8,000 acres in 1987. On a cliff where native people ran buffalo off the edge to slaughter them on the plain below, there’s a view of the ranch, which stretches to each horizon. When his dad retired, Ron took over. They raised sheep for 10 years and slowly increased the cow herd. They raised horses. They established a full-time cattle ranch, raising and training their own horses and tending a herd of 400 Angus and black-whiteface cows.

In 1996 the Wannerns decided to build cabins and invite guests to share their ranch experience. Folks who lived in cities and loved the wide-open spaces would have a chance to farm, ride horses, and mend fence. And pay for it. It worked. Tourism gives the Wannerns willing and often eager hands to help with roundups, branding, mending 35 miles of fence, haying, and working cattle.

But the vacation business was slow to

develop. “The first summer we had a total of nine guests,” Ron laughs. “We were on the Internet and would get an e-mail every three weeks.”

They sold minnows to buy a horse. Lois chuckles: “We asked 25 cents a dozen. For every dozen 10 died. We eventually bought Lady for \$150. We sold minnows one more summer to pay the stud fee to have a colt. Then the boys wanted a motorcycle, so we sold more minnows and did car washes.”

The spring after their guest cabins opened, they were nearly wiped out by a 100-year flood.

“There was a major snowfall by Halloween in 1996. We had a phenomenal snow for deer season. It continued to snow in January and was bitter cold. It made it difficult for feeding,” Ron says. “We decided to sell cows. We culled 70 head so we wouldn’t run out of feed.”

Ron takes a breath. “We had a February thaw, and the snowmelt was coming down



The Wanners were nearly wiped out by a 100-year flood in 1997. “We decided to evacuate where we lived and get on the side of the river where the cattle were,” Ron said. “We spent the night at the lodge and cabins. As the river continued to rise, we pulled the planks off the bridge and dragged them to higher ground.” The suspension bridge had been put in by the former ranch owners using cable from an old mine. The Knife River looped around a peninsula where the cabins and lodge had been built. “The water was coming in faster than we ever thought possible.”

the river. One-and-a-half feet of water ran down the river on top of the ice.” Freezing temperatures created an ice jam. Then in late March, several days of 65-degree temperatures started the river flowing again—and rising.

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The suspension bridge had been put in by the former ranch owners using cable from an old mine. The Knife River looped around a peninsula where the cabins and lodge had been built. Ron and his family began preparing the lodge. Everything was brand new. They put couch cushions on tables and set what they could on counter tops.

“We retired at midnight,” Ron says. “I lay on the floor right here with my youngest son. Lois was in the cabins with our two other children. The water was coming in faster than we ever thought possible.”

The next morning at daybreak the water rushed over the bank by the bathhouse. They knew they had to evacuate quickly. They had the four-wheel-drive pickup, a four-wheeler and a car. The water was up to the headlights but Lois made it

through the rushing ice water.

Ron jumped on the ATV and made a run for it. “The current was so strong it was carrying me away. I reached higher ground just before I’d have been swept away.

“Our daughter wanted to go back to get her clothes. I took the tractor. We took off what we could. Water was coming over the porch of the lodge. Luckily I killed the power. We went over to the shop. Adam said the cattle have no place to go.”

The corral was full of water and there was a danger that the cattle would drown. Ron took the end loader. The kids held the calves in the bucket as they drove through the water.

“We were having a devastating loss. But we couldn’t do anything. We took what we could to higher ground. We camped on a place overlooking the ranch. I remember a full moon glistening on the water. I walked down to see our dream and investment being taken over by the river. There was a thunderous roar of the river making new channels. It took two hours to get to the lodge. We hitched two tractors together and had two friends with pipes sitting in the loader checking water levels. My brother was in the second tractor for safety.”

As the river receded the Wanners began the task of cleaning up. Two weeks later, a three-day blizzard struck. Winds whipped up

to 45 and 60 miles per hour. “It was the worst time for a rancher to be calving,” Ron sighs. “After the flood our barns and sheds were in no shape to take cows. We tried to rescue the calves. We failed. We went out in a driving blizzard. Could hardly see. Saw a lump under the snow and put that one calf in the loader bucket. It still haunts me—the wailing of the cows for their calves.

“I said, ‘Lois, there goes our cattle operation.’ We lost 50 calves and several cows. The herd bull was buried in a snowbank. I didn’t find him for two weeks. He was frozen standing up, wedged in deep snow.” Ron shifts in his chair and becomes quiet for a time.

“Then came the battle of strength to rebuild.” He puts photographs of the flooded ranch buildings back into the envelope. “The corrals were gone, the bridge was gone, fencing was gone. I got into a little accident with a cow and was injured for awhile.”

“He broke three ribs and injured his wrist,” Lois says. “With the bridge out we didn’t have access to our house. A choir group from a church, people we didn’t even know, heard about it. They came out, their wives brought lunch, and they put the planks back on the bridge.”

The Wanners refinanced with a small business loan. They cleaned out the lodge and cabins and were able to welcome guests by the second week of June.

“Even though we went through tragedy,” Ron says, “it gave us strength and courage. Another 10 minutes and we would have been washed away.”

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The same hard work had gone into rounding up the cattle and sorting them. It is dark before the horses are unsaddled and wet clothes removed. Everyone takes a hot shower and gathers for a hot meal. After grace, the food is devoured. Then Ron is on the telephone.

The large triple-axle truck is definitely not coming. The semi, however, will show up. Ron calls neighbors asking for their help. He needs trailers to haul the calves to the weighing station at Glen Ullin. Once calves are weaned from their mothers they don’t eat. The anxiety of being penned and held in corrals, mooing for milk, causes them to lose weight quickly.



ABOVE: Adam, 21 in 2003 and a senior at North Dakota State University, drove 500 miles roundtrip from Fargo to Golden Valley and back every weekend to help on the ranch. BELOW: Daughter Rebecca knows it is often dark before horses are unsaddled and supper can be started. She works as a parts coordinator for Bobcat but always shows up for the roundup. Younger brother Justin, a high school senior, also helps.

"It's hard. I didn't give them any advance notice," Ron says of his neighbors. With Adam he tallies the number of calves he can load on their two trailers and those of the neighbors who said they'd help.

Morning breaks, and the sky is clear. At first light, the family starts hazing cows and calves into corrals. Then they move the herd to the barn area, and Ron skillfully pens the bovines in groups.

The cattle are pushed into pens, the calves are separated from their mothers, and the cows are then driven out of the corral. Deep mud and muck make every step inside the pens a foot-sticking, boot-pulling process. Riders on horseback push the cows away once they are released from the separating pen.

As the sun warms the morning air, neighbors arrive with their trailers. There are hands to help. Calves are sorted, heifers and steers separated. Lois serves hot coffee, sandwiches, and brownies on the back of a pickup.

The triple axle finally shows up, late and not large enough, but welcome anyway. Once the cattle are weighed, the price will be set. "It's our best year ever," Ron says. The calves weigh an average of 677 pounds. The contract called for 625. Over 635 a sliding scale will reduce the price eight cents a pound.

"The driver won't take them all." Ron doesn't raise his voice. He holds close discussion with the buyer's representative while a brand inspector does his work.

"We'd lose \$50 a calf if we sell them at today's price. The triple-axle driver says he'd be overweight and they are strict in Minnesota," Ron says. "Take those three calves off," he orders. "How many are left?"

"Twenty," his daughter Becky answers. The last livestock through the weighing corrals are pigs. Thick mud and pig and cow manure splashes everywhere as the calves are herded into the trucks. Becky is covered with splotches of muck.

"They'll cover some of the fuel," Ron says. He has to drive his trailer 500 miles to the feedlot in Minnesota. He'll follow the triple axle. It is getting late. The sun is dropping, and the wind begins to blow. Ron shakes hands with Adam, hugs Lois, changes his working vest and shirt for clean, grabs his dress felt hat, and heads out.

"Stay overnight someplace. Be sure," Lois tells him as he turns the diesel pickup out onto the highway from the gas station.

Ron isn't there to join them, but after the family uses the gas station's window scraper to remove some of the mud and manure from their boots, they head into town for a traditional after-roundup restaurant dinner.

"It's the best weights we ever had," Lois

says. The same thought is echoed by Adam.

"If you have pride of land ownership," Ron had said the night before, "pride of livestock, you put a hundred percent into it. It's self-esteem. Plant a seed in the spring and harvest the fruits."

Family ranching in the United States is a constant battle. The elements of nature in a harsh environment often deal an unfair hand. The upper hand cattle buyers take interpreting the contract that reads "FOB the ranch" can add stress. Every waiting hour means the calves lose weight. Beef prices fluctuate.

When an adjoining ranch property came up for sale the Wanners bought it. Adam is coming home to continue the family tradition. When he settles on the new spread, he will in turn likely inspire another generation to raise cattle along the Knife River. ■

John Christopher Fine grew up on a farm in upstate New York where the place was worked with horses well after everyone else used them for decorations. He rode the rangy ones bareback and barefooted and learned their ways. He is the author of 23 books.



POSTSCRIPT: Shortly after this article was written in 2003, Ron Wanner died tragically in an accident on the ranch. Driving his pickup across the suspension bridge between the cabins and the barns, a cable snapped and the bridge collapsed. Ron was found in the river inside his upside-down pickup, drowned. The incident illustrates the dangers inherent in ranching. The sheer distance from emergency services and quick responders and the isolation adds to an already difficult job. The entire community responded to the Wanner tragedy, proving that neighboring is a way of life in ranching areas. Lois and her children continue to operate the ranch and guest cabins, fulfilling Ron and his family's dream.

Lois Wanner can be reached at Knife River Ranch at 1-701-983-4290, or visit her Web site at <www.kniferiverranch.com>.