

Housewarts named Rancher of the Year

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Cynthia Housewart never thought she'd be a rancher. She grew up a city girl in Denver who was an art major in college, but then she got invited by her college friend to visit Crawford and help on a cattle drive, and she fell in love with ranching.

It turned out that her college friend's parents were Steve and Rachel Allen of Crawford, and before long Cynthia moved in and became a ranch hand. She started Princess Beef in 1999 with a cow, named Princess, and her calf — gifts from Steve and Rachel.

Later, Cynthia married Ira Housewart and they moved to the Housewarts' fifth-generation family ranch on Rogers Mesa outside of Hotchkiss where the Housewarts will be celebrating their 100th year on the ranch this coming year. On the ranch, Ira helps with the ranching and also pursues his passion for metal working in his grandfather's shop using many of his grandfather's tools. You can learn more about Ira's metalwork at Coloradoblacksmith.com.

With the move, Cynthia and Ira used both the Allen ranch and the Housewart ranch for their cows. During the 2012 drought year when there wasn't enough feed, they also leased from David Herz and Pam Ellison on Stewart Mesa near Paonia.

Princess Beef kept growing and now has 120 customers per year and is expecting 50 calves this year. None of these animals will receive hormones or antibiotics nor will they be fed corn or grain. The land they graze will not see herbicides, pesticides or chemical fertilizers. The beef is Animal Welfare Approved, which means that the ranching process is humane from birth to slaughter. Their management practices are also certified by the American Grassfed Association. For more information go to PrincessBeef.com.

Cynthia learned to care about conservation from her dad who ran the Plains Conservation Center east of Denver and The Grasslands Institute in Pawnee National Grassland in eastern Colorado. One of Cynthia's conservation passions is using her livestock to improve soil health and pasture quality. To this end she moves the cows every couple of days to a new, temporarily fenced part of the pasture. This forces the cows to eat all the plants in the area rather than overgrazing the favorable ones (which eventually results in the unfavorable plants taking over). It also gives the plants time to rest and rejuvenate before they are grazed again. Cynthia reports that one result of such methods is that in some older pastures where it was almost gone, alfalfa is now coming back strong without replanting. She also reports that the soil organic matter in her grazed pastures is at 5.8, several points higher than it is in the hay fields that haven't been grazed.

Another interest of the Housewart family is water conservation and irrigation efficiency. To this end, with the help of NRCS, Cynthia and Ira have installed a center pivot sprinkler on their ranch and upgraded drier portions of the property to gated pipe. Also, partially because of the influence of younger generations, Ira's dad Bill has also installed two central pivots on his land and is working on a third. Cynthia is currently figuring out how to best do rotational grazing in coordination with pivot movements. She is eager to see the results on the land.

While we were at the Housewarts to do the interview for this article, a couple of neighbors showed up to talk or get a metal part fixed. There was talk of the daily morning coffee, where neighbors and family gathered to talk issues and potential. There were stories about West Elk Mountain Rescue for which Ira serves as vice president, and talk about local schools where Cynthia volunteers and substitute teaches. A chicken nest with eggs was discovered in the metal shop, and Cynthia and Ira's two daughters, Izzi and CeCe, enthusiastically trained dogs with a clicker. It was clear that community matters to the Housewarts and that they were right at the hub of it. It was clear, too, that they were committed for the long term to conservation and had high standards for themselves.

Their summary: "We are very proud to be receiving this award. But we know we have lots more to do and a long way to go."

Delta Conservation District will honor the Housewarts at its annual meeting, 6 p.m., Saturday, April 19, at the Orchard City Town Hall. Guest speaker Dave Dearstyne will talk about soil health. The dinner will be catered by Davetos. Cost is \$15. The public is invited to attend. Please RSVP to dawn.marah@co.nacdnet.net or call 874-5726, ext. 100.