

Princess Beef— Growing a Family Tradition

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Cynthia Houseweart markets grassfed beef from her ranch near Hotchkiss, Colorado, selling direct to customers all over the state. She and her husband, Ira, practice Holistic Management on their family ranch, and received the Delta County Conservation District's award for Ranchers of the Year in spring of 2014. It was gratifying to these young ranchers to know that awards like this can be given to people who think outside the box.

"We are in a great area here. Our valley has the most organic farms in the state of Colorado," says Cynthia. More people are beginning to understand the movement toward Holistic Management and raising food more naturally. It's an on-going challenge to educate consumers about where their food comes from and how it is grown.

"This is why I started a newsletter about our product a few years ago. People told me it was impossible to educate people but I think we can. It just takes some time and effort. I have some great people who help me out, including a friend from college who does graphic design for my newsletters. I have another friend who does all my editing; she used to be in broadcast journalism." This focus on building customer relationships is one of the reasons that Princess Beef is so successful.

Cattle Drive Beginnings

Cynthia grew up in Denver where her parents were teachers—but their roots were in ranching, on the plains of eastern Colorado. By a stroke of luck, fate or coincidence she realized that she had a passion for ranching and raising cattle.

"Amy Allen is a friend from Colorado College. She majored in art studio and I majored in art history—and her parents (Steve and Rachel Allen) had a ranch in western Colorado near Crawford. I thought it would be fun to go on a cattle drive. After finishing my undergraduate degree I didn't have a job so Amy lined me up with her family to take part in a 2-day cattle drive. I ended up staying on their ranch and working with them for 12 years. They had been to an Allan Savory class in the 1980's and this is how I was introduced to Holistic Management," says Cynthia.

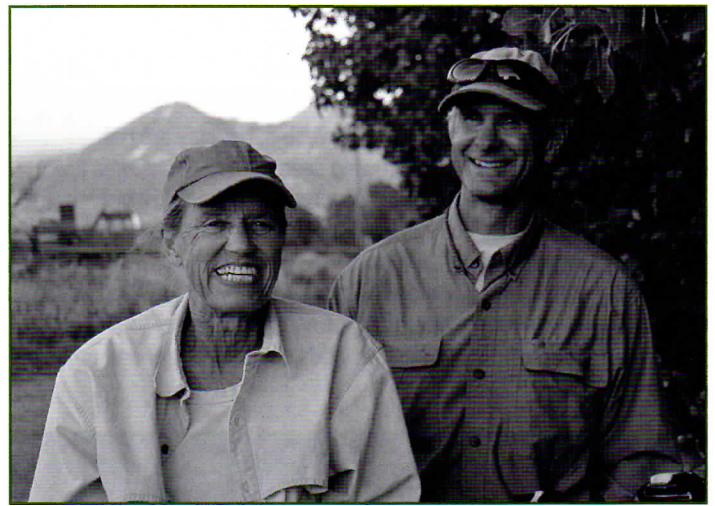
"I learned everything from the Allens. I did the cattle drive at their ranch in the spring of 1993 and stayed on as a ranch hand for 12 years. I married my husband Ira in 2003. Ira and I lived on the Allen ranch for 2 years. I loved the cows, and it all made sense to me," she says.

"Steve and Rachel sent me to several Holistic Management classes, and Steve took the classes with me. I can't say enough good things about Steve and Rachel Allen; they were my mentors. We all went to a Bud Williams stock handling class, and from then on we were very quiet moving cows. Steve got so good at it that he began to teach some stock handling classes. He is also a good stock dog handler and has been helping people with that for years," says Cynthia.

Steve and Rachel gave her a cow that became the foundation of her own herd. "When I began working for them I would feed the cows, and this cow was always the first one to come to the feed wagon. I got to where I could pet her, and I called her Princess. That winter they gave me Princess and her calf as a gift."

The Allens had Red Angus crossbreds. "For the last 10 years Ira and I have only had red or black Angus bulls, but we still have some Allen ranch and Houseweart family ranch cows in our herd—and they are a mix: red Angus crossed with Gelbveih, Simmental and Limousin," she says.

She and Ira have been breeding for moderate size cattle. "When we



Rachel and Steve Allen have been important mentors and collaborators for the Housewearts.

select bulls we don't want any that are larger than a 4.5 frame. We are really trying to get their frame size smaller for our grassfed beef." The majority of cattle today, in almost all breeds, have been selected for larger frame size and have gotten too large.

Moderate frame cattle are more feed efficient than large ones. "We have been really working hard on our grassfed genetics," she says.

It all started with Princess, however. "I started selling Princess's steers as beef to family and friends, and kept her heifers to start my herd. At that time I was hearing about the benefits of grassfed beef, and the Allens subscribed to the *Stockman Grass Farmer* magazine and I was reading that. It all made sense to me; I did not want to put my animals in a feedlot," says Cynthia.

She started selling beef to friends and family—starting with one, then three, then five. "This year I'm selling 40. I didn't grow my business quickly. I think it was good to start out small and learn as I went along. The mistakes I made were not so huge."

The Allens had a grazing permit in the West Elk Wilderness. Steve formed a holistic goal to involve the U.S. Forest Service, the community and the permittees. "It took some time, but they eventually formed a grazing plan and got quite a bit of recognition for it. They were fortunate to be able to work with Dave Bradford, a very innovative, open-minded local Forest Service representative. Because of this plan the permittees were able to turn out quite a few more yearlings, go out earlier and come home later, thanks to the Allens. It is amazing what can be done with innovation, and how friendly people become when they realize they can work together—and discover that they are all trying to achieve the same goal." The people who came to those meetings represented many different interests.

Improving Land through Grazing

"When I started my grassfed beef program I grazed my cattle on the outskirts and edges of the hayfields—all the places where we couldn't cut hay. There were wooded areas and gulches, and I could utilize all those places with my cows. Now as my herd has grown, we graze the hayfields as well," she says.

"I think this is an exciting thing. The norm is to not graze the hayfields, but they are so much healthier if they have the cattle impact. This year we did soil samples for the first time, and the organic matter in the places I've pastured was so much better than the pivots where we grow hay. We put

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

cattle there in the fall after the hay is harvested, but they are not intensively managed during the growing season like our pastures are. This is a new thing for me, because now I am going to figure out how to graze the pivots as well. I've looked at Jim Gerrish's methods for fencing pivots for rotational grazing," she says.

Properly grazed, there is more forage production on hay ground than when it is simply put up for hay, and grazing is much better for the land. The animal impact and trampling/litter adds natural fertilizer and organic matter to the soil.



The Housewearts have their beef certified by the American Grassfed Association as well as Animal Welfare Approved to give them more of a marketing advantage.

"A few years ago, Steve and Rachel sold their grazing permit and their own cows and switched to goats. Now they just have our mother herd for Princess Beef, which this year will be 55 cows, and they have their goats and some sheep. Where they live there is a lot of knapweed and the goats will eat it. They also had a little patch of leafy spurge but the goats eliminated it. Currently their ranch pastures their goats and sheep, and our cows," says Cynthia.

"Here on our own place we pasture our beef calves after they are weaned. We also bring the young, first calving cows down here at calving time where we can watch them a little more closely," she says.

"We move them to new pasture every 3 to 5 days during the growing season. In late fall and winter we open everything up so they can graze it all. But we feed in the fields, on the ground to accumulate more litter and manure, rotating the feeding areas around the field to get it all covered with natural fertilizer. In early May I put up my yearling fence and start the 3 to 5 day moves. Up at the Allen Ranch the season is a little slower and we start the moves about 2 weeks later."

A couple years ago their area went through a severe drought. "The Allen Ranch receives irrigation water from one of the smaller ditch companies in this area. With the devastating lack of rain and snow, we knew we were in trouble. I belong to the Valley Organic Growers Association and I sent a note to them. They put it online and their group e-mail. The note said that Princess Beef needs help and won't make it through the season without finding new pastures. I had a great response from a couple in Paonia. They wanted to improve their ground with cattle and invited us to bring ours. So for 2 summers in a row we went there," says Cynthia.

This was a win-win situation, providing forage for the herd, and adding animal impact to improve the land. "This year they put a pipeline through their place and it was going to be too complicated with my fencing, so we aren't using their pasture this summer, but we have a great relationship with them. They were fantastic to work with. They were educated about the environment and knew that animals and planned grazing could improve the land," she says.

"We have good pasture here now and are all set on our own place, but it is interesting how many people have approached me and said they wished they could have had us come to their place. I would love to have a situation in the future where people would pay us to bring our cattle to improve their land. I think that could happen, once people realize how beneficial it can be, and how proper grazing can improve the soil."

In earlier years we were taught that it took centuries to make an inch of topsoil, but it can be done much faster than that with animals to trample/fertilize and add organic matter to the land. It's sad and frustrating that there's a certain element of public opinion that feels cattle are damaging and need to be removed from the land. "They don't understand the benefits, and how cattle are a great tool for improvement. It's a tool that uses solar energy and doesn't take fossil fuel, but you have to do it right," says Cynthia.

Princess Beef

Cynthia and Ira live about 20 miles (on a dirt road) from the Allen Ranch. "It takes about half an hour to drive it. When we move the cattle back and forth we haul them," she says.

Their beef is sold without the need for much advertising. "I have a mailing list and send out a newsletter once a year which includes a brochure and order form, but most of our customers learn about it by word of mouth. I do a little bit of advertising locally, but not much," she says.

Another marketing tool is the fact that Princess Beef is now certified by the American Grassfed Association (AGA) and the Animal Welfare Association (AWA). "I was always a member of the American Grassfed Association but never went through the certification. What changed my mind was how popular grassfed beef has become, and the fact that it's now being sold in the grocery stores. I wanted one more way to separate myself from the crowd and stand out, so last year we became certified," says Cynthia.

"You pay a fee (\$300) for the AGA certification, but the AWA certification is free. We were doing everything they required already, and it just made sense to become certified. Ira has had clients tell him that they would rather buy beef knowing it was humanely treated during its life and slaughter than buy grassfed beef. That was interesting, and we realize it is becoming more and more important to consumers." Many people in the cities are removed from rural life and agriculture but they are concerned about animal welfare issues. They want to know how their food was raised.

"I always invite people to come see our place. I want it to be transparent; they can come here anytime. Not everyone can do that, but the people who do come here to see it then keep buying our beef year after year. So I think that the label is important for many people," she says.

"At the grocery store I buy food that's organic. When I have no idea where it came from, I go with that label. For my Princess Beef, however, I chose not to do the organic certification. Even though we are basically organic—it's what we are and what we believe—we can't use that word in our label. We follow all their standards, but organic certification is considerably more expensive. I also don't like the fact that a person can have certified organic beef finished in a feedlot. I have problems with that, and I explain that to people. We follow all the organic standards (we don't use de-wormers, antibiotics, synthetic fertilizers, etc.) but we don't



Beef delivery on the ranch is a family affair with the girls helping out sharing cookies.

have it on our label.”

With the Holistic Management and planned grazing there is no need for dewormers or fertilizers. “So to look at the whole picture, to put these animals in a feedlot does not make sense.” The grassfed beef is healthier meat.

“We sell mostly quarters, half and whole beef. It all goes to the butcher in September and the meat is ready for delivery in October. The calves are butchered at about 18-plus months of age. We tried keeping some an extra winter but it didn’t pay; we couldn’t afford to feed hay to them another winter,” she explains.

“Our climate doesn’t allow us to graze cattle all through the winter. We feel fortunate when we can graze into early winter. This year we actually grazed until the first of February, down here with the yearlings; we harvested one cutting of hay and let the cattle graze what would have been the second cutting—lasting partway through the winter. Up at the Allen Ranch the cattle have to be fed earlier, usually starting in December. This is one of the disadvantages of a mountain climate, and we always have to be prepared in case it snows a lot in the fall,” says Cynthia.

“Down here we are in a beautiful valley where we don’t get huge snowstorms, but it can happen. We calve in March-April.” Allens calved earlier when they used the grazing permit, to have the calves old enough to go to the range, and to have at least part of the cows bred to their own bulls before turnout. It’s impossible to selectively breed the cows on community pasture, and the other permittees complained about the small frame bulls.

Healthy Land, Animals, and People

“I see our program as looking at the whole picture. The big thing for us is the fact we are on a place that has been in my husband’s family for a century. Our girls are the 5th generation, and we really want to see it

continue. One of the big things is the fact we need to be profitable, to continue on and make it work. It takes the fun out of it if you make nothing,” says Cynthia.

“Ranching is a seven day a week job, but we also want to keep it fun. Our immediate group—Ira and I and the girls, and his parents—want to see it continue but we also want to enjoy doing it. We have to make a profit to make it work, and we also have to keep the land in good shape for future profitability,” she explains.

“We’ve seen that improving the soil improves the grass and legumes, and improves the animals. It’s all interrelated. We work the animals calmly and this also makes it fun. Our animals are easy to handle because we select for good temperament and we handle them quietly. Our 10-year-old sorts cows on foot and we have no fear of her ever having a problem or getting hurt,” says Cynthia.

“When we work cattle everything is calm, no one is yelling or screaming. It’s easy and its fun.” This makes it much easier on the cattle, as well as the people, with no stress. The meat is also much better when the cattle are not stressed and the animals don’t get sick.

“It may seem inconvenient moving the cattle back and forth between two ranches, but they get trailered and haul calmly and they go very nicely when it’s time to haul them to the butcher,” says Cynthia.

Cynthia and Ira have a nice blend of enterprises, with the grassfed beef and Ira’s metal work. They also have a few horses they use on the ranch. “We have 7 horses and one mule. We have some really great kids’ horses, including one from the Allens that I used to ride on the range permit. Our girls like to ride, so even though we don’t need the horses very much to move cattle on our operation, we sometimes make a fun day of it with the girls. We usually just move the cows with dogs. Steve has some great dogs and we have a couple, so the dogs generally help us move cows most of the time. But we do make time to take the girls riding, to move cows. We make a special occasion and take the day to do it.” This is part of having the work be your fun.

A Family Affair

While working for the Allens, Cynthia met a local young man whose family had a ranch nearby. After their marriage they lived on the Allen Ranch for 2 years and then moved to Ira’s parent’s ranch in 2005. Cynthia and Ira have two girls, CeCe and Izzi. The girls are getting big enough to be a lot of help with the animals. “They are 8 and 10 years old now, and are very enthusiastic helpers. We have chickens, ducks and pigs as well as cows,” says Cynthia. Izzi is in 4-H, with archery and duck projects.

“I have to give Ira’s parents Bill and Betty a lot of credit for helping make this family project work. They have cows, and I was very cautious about moving down here and bringing my herd, but they have been very generous about it. We use about half of the Houseweart place for our Princess Beef. Another

great asset is the fact that Bill is a veterinarian and Betty is a vet tech,” Cynthia says.

“When we moved here, Ira’s father was very accommodating. Knowing that I didn’t agree with spraying and fertilizing, he quit. This was very impressive and I was grateful. We have a neighbor whose daughter wanted to raise grassfed beef. She had done it on the Front Range and moved back here 2 years ago and was hoping to do it here with her father, but he would not change. This was so sad, whereas Ira’s parents



The Houseweart Family (from left to right): Ira, Izzi, CeCe, and Cynthia.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

have been very generous to let us do what we wanted to do," she says.

"They didn't do it without some fussing, but they have been really very good. I think some of that goes back to wanting to keep the land in the family. They are willing to bend a little bit to accommodate us so we can continue ranching here." This is what families are all about. Ira's parents still have about 25 head of their own cattle, and are very comfortable with having the rest of their place utilized by Princess Beef.

Ira does some artistic welding and metal work. "We live on the original place, so his shop was his grandfather's shop. It is filled with all the old harnesses and tools that his grandfather and great-grandfather had," she says.

"Ira is an ornamental blacksmith. He went to college to learn welding and fabrication but he met a professor there who did ornamental iron work, and found his passion. He's an artist now, and quite good at it. He has a huge business and sells a lot of his work, but I must say that Princess Beef is catching up with him in terms of income," says Cynthia.

Cynthia's father was another great influence on what she and Ira are doing today. "I mentioned this when we received the Conservation award in April. My parents, Ed and Judy Butterfield of Centennial, Colorado, were

teachers but they are both outdoor people. My mother got her degree in outdoor education and my father ran the Plains Conservation Center east of Denver for many years and taught people about grasslands ecology. He also ran the Grasslands Institute for the Audubon Society at Pawnee National Grassland in northeastern. People love my story—about the city girl turned rancher—but I already had some of that ranching blood in me." (Cynthia's great-grandparents, Amos and Rosanna Butterfield, homesteaded a cattle ranch in 1886 in Holyoke, Colorado).

In a recent letter to his daughter, Cynthia's father aptly captured her ranching spirit. He wrote: "As I reflect on our family history I think of the early Butterfield homestead and the pioneer efforts to live on the high plains raising cattle. Also, I could never have imagined that the imperative philosophy of land conservation and the magic of the Grassland Institute which we shared would be recaptured for our family. How wonderfully you and Ira embrace that pioneer spirit in the way you raise our granddaughters and meet with knowledge and enthusiasm today's ranching challenges while enhancing the environment in the process."

With parental support from both sides of the family tree and strong mentoring in Holistic Management from Rachel and Steve Allen, it seems like Cynthia and Ira were destined to make Princess Beef a great place to raise a family as well as healthy beef. And with a growing consumer interest in land health as well as healthy food, the Housewearts are poised to address consumer concern as well deliver the product they want. ♪

Livestock Management for Coexistence with Large Carnivores

continued from page seven

stress livestock handling methods, as well as strategic placement of supplements and rotating access to water sources. These are means to an end, and to be effective, must be used creatively and adaptively, based on ecological and behavioral processes.

Synchronizing Breeding Cycles

The most vulnerable stage in the life cycle of both wild and domestic ungulates is young-of-the-year, especially the very young. Wild herbivores generally employ a strategy of predator satiation through synchronized birthing seasons, which maximize the adults' collective defense of young, and produce many more young than predators can kill—maximizing the proportion of young that grow beyond the most vulnerable age. Shortening livestock calving seasons may reduce the likelihood of predators switching their focus from wildlife to livestock. The timing of calving may affect predation, but also depends on other factors.

Many ranchers may have the ability to calve in low elevations where large carnivores are still uncommon, or where livestock can be kept on feed in small pastures close to ranch headquarters. This may only be practical with winter to early spring calving for ranchers who use higher elevation rangelands with higher carnivore density beginning in late spring to early summer. Winter calving may reduce losses to bears, which typically emerge from hibernation in March and April.

However, where large carnivores cannot be seasonally avoided, calving at the same time as wild ungulates in late spring (green-grass calving) may reduce losses. When the calving seasons are distinct and consecutive, predators can focus on livestock from the onset of calving to late spring, and then switch to wild calves and fawns. If all wild and domestic calves are born simultaneously, predators are more

likely to remain focused on wild ones.

For cattle, green-grass calving contributes to a shorter calving season, and more efficient use of forage in general, because it matches the physiological cycle of the cow to the forage cycle of the range. When these cycles are matched, cows are in better condition all year, come into first postpartum estrus sooner, and are more likely to breed successfully on the first attempt, allowing for a shorter breeding season and therefore a shorter calving season.

These factors may translate into significantly higher profits for green-grass calving. Later-born calves are younger at weaning, but tend to grow faster than their winter- or early-spring-born counterparts, so that they are not that much smaller by fall weaning time. Because the forage and cattle cycles are better matched, and because the calves are smaller, late calving allows more total cows and calves on the same forage base, and less winter feeding cost. More, smaller calves are more profitable than fewer, larger calves if the total weight of weaned calves is similar.

Ultimately, ranchers can apply many of the same management approaches that work for land health and livestock production to prevent conflicts with large carnivores. Livestock management, specifically holistic planned grazing, herding with low-stress livestock handling, and synchronized calving, can directly and synergistically reduce predation, while establishing a management context in which other predation-prevention practices and tools can be used more effectively. ♪

Matt Barnes is Field Director for Rangeland Stewardship at Keystone Conservation, which partners with land owners and managers to develop and apply solutions for holistic stewardship and coexistence with large carnivores. For further information, visit: www.KeystoneConservation.US. Matt can be reached at: MBarnes@KeystoneConservation.US. This work was supported by grants from Patagonia Inc., the Dixon Water Foundation, and the Volgenau Foundation.