

Ranchers' Resolve

After a devastating flood, this young North Dakota Angus couple is determined to rebuild.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor



Firm determination to do something” is the dictionary definition for the word resolve. It’s a term ranchers know well. No matter what circumstances are thrown their way — from uncontrollable market prices to weather woes — ranchers innately have the resolve to persist, overcome and prosper.

For Jamie and Gee Knopik of Halliday, N.D., located about 40 miles northeast of Dickinson, N.D., that determined, can-do rancher attitude is helping them count their blessings and recover after torrential rains and unexpected flooding mangled their corrals, equipment and barn beyond repair Aug. 15, 2014.

Their herd of 150 Angus cattle, which they’ve been building the past eight years, along with several horses, was able to get to high ground, but their cattle facilities and hay were damaged or completely washed away by the flash flooding.

Despite the significant losses, Gee is thankful she, her husband and their neighbors — including an 80-year-old couple rescued from the roof of their house — are safe.

“We’re so fortunate that no life was lost,” she says. “You can rebuild fences and buildings, and that’s what we hope to do.”

Ranch dreams

Jamie Knopik grew up at Gladstone, N.D., and began to build his own herd of Angus cattle alongside his parents Tom and Susie Knopik. Jamie then left for the military, while they continued to care for his small herd.

While in the military, Jamie met Gee, and they fulfilled their active-duty military service. Eight years ago they both were discharged as disabled veterans and returned to Halliday to pursue their dream of ranching. They rented a section of land about 15 miles from Jamie’s parents and started building up their Angus herd numbers.

“Jamie is the fourth generation of the Lazy K brand. I take a lot of pride in that because I didn’t grow up with that,” says Gee, who is a native of England.

They’ve been diligently building their Angus genetics and working to purchase their rented land. Gee has been working as a farrier to add income to their operation.

Open the flood gates

Then, Aug. 15, 2014, came the very unexpected flash flood. She says the magnitude of flooding they experienced was unfathomable.

“We have a dry creek that runs through our property,” Gee explains. “The Knife River is a couple miles downstream from us.” Their large red barn had never been severely flooded in its 60-year history.

She recounts the day’s events: She arrived home late in the day Aug. 15 after being in Bismarck for a farrier job. The rain came down all day and continued into the night. By 11:30 p.m., the water in their yard was 4 feet high. She and Jamie headed to their barn so she could get their pickup truck out and he could get the 4-wheeler moved to higher ground. Gee recalls water coming through the floorboards as she drove out.

Jamie then went back to try to get the second pickup and stock trailer moved. By this time the truck was floating, but the stock trailer helped keep it on the ground, and it was moved to safety.

The cattle and horses were still in the

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corrals. With no electricity at this point, flashes of lightning were the only source of light. Gee says with each flash she could see live trees floating by. As they tried to reach the corrals, her boots were sucked off her feet.

To ensure their own safety, Gee and Jamie returned to their house, which was already flooding in the basement. Jamie disconnected their power in the basement, and they went upstairs, uncertain what daylight would reveal.

The next morning, they were shocked to find their barn had been shifted off its foundation; a tractor was overturned; and a 4-wheeler, welder and fuel tank, as well as hay, a feeder and round pen had been swept away by the water. Their continuous fence corrals were mangled in trees and some pieces were found 4 miles downstream.

► **Below:** "Jamie is the fourth generation of the Lazy K brand. I take a lot of pride in that because I didn't grow up with that," says Gee, who is a native of England.



Fortunately, the cattle and horses found a way to swim out and find safe, dry ground. Because the Knopik's road was also washed out, they weren't able to get to their livestock right away. It was a gut-wrenching experience.

"We don't have children, so our animals and the little equipment we have is precious to us," Gee says. "We've spent eight years breeding Angus cattle, and we are proud of what we have."

A total of 16 farmsteads in the county were severely damaged by the storm, along with several roads and bridges. To add insult to injury, an early September hail storm also pounded the area, damaging remaining crops. To date, those impacted were still waiting for Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance.

Prepare and persist

One month after the massive flooding, Gee and Jamie were working to put a few

pieces of their equipment and corrals back together and preparing for winter.

"We'll need facilities and pens to get through winter and calving," Gee says.

They have received some donations from the ag community and were moved by the donation of a box of food from a local church food pantry.

"Even the

small things help. We are fortunate the ag community sticks together and takes care of their own," says Gee.

They were continuing to look for a semi-pod that could work as a makeshift shed to store some horse feed and tools in. The couple was also seeking donations of panels, railroad ties and continuous fence.

"We did lose hay, but we have enough to get through the winter, and we had a load of flax bales donated to help as a windbreak. It could have been so much worse; we are so fortunate it wasn't," says Jamie.

Gee concludes, "We're thankful calf prices are good. We are hoping when we sell calves this fall that will help carry us through."



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Editor's note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D. The Knopiks can be contacted at knopik@ndsupernet.com or 701-260-8708.