

# Paradox

*A green-hand, fourth-generation rancher decides change is okay.*

*Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC*



*When Jay and Jenn Stomprud made the life-changing decision to raise cattle they had two toddlers and an infant. Now those children have grown up on the Mud Butte, S.D., ranch, learning all about the way of life while working alongside their parents and grandparents.*

Some ranchers spend their entire lives wanting nothing more than to raise cattle. For Jay Stomprud, the call was much more sudden. It only took the few minutes' drive down his family's 3-mile, western South Dakota driveway.

"When we decided to do it — which was before we hit the mailbox — I was done with my other life," Stomprud says. "Every single thought was, 'We're doing this.'"

The plans were set in motion.

He and wife Jenn and their three young children were visiting for Christmas in 2006 when his father, Larry, brought it up. He might want to rent out the Mud Butte, S.D., ranch, seeing no other viable succession plan.

"Dad had gotten a letter from an old acquaintance, and the guy was



offering to lease the place," Jay says. "It was kind of the first time it was for real, like, 'I don't know what I'm going to do here.'"

The couple dreamed together on the drive back to Bozeman, Mont., where Jay was working as a service advisor at an RV dealership and Jenn was running her own child-care facility. They had a first and second mortgage on their house and credit card bills piling up, but also a strong support system at their church and a general comfort with the status quo.

They had a 4-year-old, a 1-year-old and a newborn.

For a man with a strong reluctance to change, "just up and moving" would never cross his mind. He liked things steady and familiar. That's why he believes the pull to the ranch was divine intervention.

## A move to the country

"God was really speaking to us," Jay says. "We pulled roots and put the house up for sale and started moving; it was crazy. We sold the house in three weeks for the asking price."

Shortly after closing, the local housing market tanked and the global economy started trending downward.

"Our life in Bozeman would have been a real struggle with what

happened next,” Jay says frankly. “I worked for an RV company, and you know what people don’t buy when a depression hits? They had to lay off a bunch of people. We walked away from the house, paid it off. We moved out here owning our vehicles, with almost zero debt.”

By April, they were living out of his parents’ basement, figuring out ranching and rural life in tandem.

Unlike most in his current occupation, Jay didn’t grow up on the ranch. He spent much of his childhood as an “Army brat” moving from Wall, S.D., to Germany, Virginia, Montana and Hawaii, where he met his high school sweetheart and later wife of 21 years.

While Jay was in college, his parents moved back to South Dakota where his dad started his third career, after first using his wildlife and fisheries degree and then spending 15 years in active-duty military service.

## ‘What do we do?’

It became something of a standing question during those first months on the ranch, while Larry started teaching everything from branding to basic animal husbandry.

The elder Stomprud knows that learning curve well.

He came back to a Hereford-Limousin cow herd in 1995 with several decades of missing knowledge about the workings of a ranch.

“The vocabulary had changed. I had no idea what BCS (body condition score) was,” Larry says. “AI (artificial insemination) was new to me. EPDs (expected progeny differences) were new to me.”

He filled in the gap by reading and enrolling in university short courses.

When his son came back, hands-on learning opportunities abounded.

## ‘What’s a cow?’

The couple started their herd off with a few bred heifers that Jay’s grandparents, Calvin and Mable Stomprud, bought from Mable’s brother and neighbor, Hugh Ingalls.

The next step was getting an operating note from the Farm Service Agency, including mandatory credit counseling. That’s when they met Stacy Hadrick.

A fellow South Dakota rancher and extension employee, she was helping to launch the first-ever beefSD class. It’s a two-year program specifically designed for cattle producers with 10 years or less management experience.

The program “became a crucial learning tool for the couple,” and the timing couldn’t have been better.

“It is learning about the industry as a whole,” Jay says, recounting experiences from Washington, D.C., and touring a Whole Foods store to

*“I was shocked,” Larry Stomprud admits, but he didn’t have to think twice when his son and his son’s young family wanted to return to the ranch 10 years ago.*



seeing a high-end fabrication facility and learning about the feeding sector.

Throughout the program, there were two-day sessions in South Dakota, where they learned from seasoned cattlemen on various topics. When an Angus producer started talking EPDs, Jay knew he was in over his head.

“I remember stopping him about five minutes into his talk saying, ‘Can we start with like, what’s a cow?’” Fellow classmates laughed and nodded at the same time. “He was speaking a foreign language.”

Today, the terms and decisions get a little more familiar each year.

## What about consumers?

The cows are separate on paper, but managed together with his parent’s herd, all on the same 6,600 acres of native prairie. The ranch still contains the original 1909 homesteads of his great-grandparents Ollie Stomprud and Winnifred (Shryock) Stomprud, as well as Winnie’s brothers Mark and Delbert.

“I wasn’t as fussy as I am now,” Larry says. “When I started my bulls, at first it was all on appearance, and then, as I learned about EPDs, I started using them. I’ve gotten pretty fussy.”

He wants to be above average in growth, carcass and efficiency, while keeping birth weight low.

“The EPDs are available, so you should use them. The menu to select from has expanded,” he says.

Developing water resources — including a 3,700-foot-deep well — and cross-fencing were big undertakings during Larry’s initial management. That’s also

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when the herd became more uniform and all Angus, something the next generation appreciates.

“I do firmly believe not all cattle at the barn are going to be the same,” Jay says. “We use the Angus breed for a lot of reasons: they’re hardy, they’re good mamas, and they live well in our environment. But also, the Association has really done good marketing.”

It’s easy for him to identify with the average consumer.

“Being as I didn’t grow up on the ranch, I lived in the regular world, I guess you’d say. Also, being a people person myself,” Jay says, “when it comes to viewing our industry, I do try to look at it through the eyes of what a beef consumer would say.”

That, along with a natural tendency for harmony, led to a strong emphasis on low-stress cattle handling. It has changed the crew they’ll use for day help on the ranch and how they do May brandings.

## What’s next?

They save a few purebred calves for bulls, but wean most in the fall and market through the local auction, a video sale or private treaty.

“I’d like to take our cattle all the way through,” Larry says, and his son agrees.

“We’re constantly looking for a package deal, and we want a good carcass,” Jay says. “But we don’t retain ownership or sell on the grid, which is something that we probably need to look very, very hard at.”

It just hasn’t been the right time yet.

In 2012, they faced a historic drought. In 2013, they lost one-sixth of their cows in the Atlas blizzard. They recovered, with the help of friends and strangers from across the country who sent money and supplies.

“People that were financially worse off were being very generous. It was a really crazy time,” Stomprud says. “Atlas is part of our story.”

In 2017, drought returned in a big way. All hay stores were gone by May. Less than 10 inches of moisture fell

from January to the end of November, and cows moved to leased pastures in the eastern part of the state.

“This is going to be my first tough year financially,” Stomprud says, but experience and faith says it’ll all work out. **AJ**

## The unconventional route

“I always enjoyed ranching.”

The first time Larry Stomprud thought about joining the Mud Butte, S.D., operation, his dad seemed open to the idea at first.

“He slept on it overnight and got to looking at the books and said, ‘It’s not going to work,’ ” Stomprud recalls.

It wasn’t until decades later when his parents started slowing down that there was room for Larry and his wife, Eileen, to move back.

Nearly 12 years passed before his son, Jay, called to say his young family — that included wife Jenn, sons Elijah and Joshua, and daughter Kaira — wanted to move to the ranch.

“I didn’t have to sleep on it a bit,” Larry says. “It was something I’d always hoped for, but never expected.”

They no longer needed to look at moving closer to the grandkids.

The younger couple started with a small herd and supplemented income by keeping parts of their old lives alive, from teaching music at the neighboring school to working as a taxidermist’s assistant. Today,

Jenn is a Steeped Tea consultant, jewelry designer, full-time mom, and “a pretty good stock handler,” Jay says. He fuels his creative side by operating V Lazy J Custom, a leatherwork business where he makes everything from holsters and flasks to portfolios and belts. The entire family is musically inclined and worships at their local church.

Larry has been able to follow his own passions, too, taking on some leadership positions that he says wouldn’t be possible without an extra person on the ranch. In 2017, he was president of the South Dakota Cattlemen’s Association and a director of the South Dakota Farm Bureau. Eileen loves spending time with her grandkids and keeping the family’s IT needs met.

“We came out to the ranch later in life, and we have really come to love the lifestyle and what goes with it,” Jay says. “In the process, we’ve learned a lot about conserving the land, taking care of the grass, and how

to try to make a living doing it and raising kids at the same time.” **AJ**



*Jay Stomprud didn’t give up all of his old life when he moved to his family’s ranch. His leatherwork shop, set up in the living room, gives him a creative outlet.*