

The Cowboy Way



Leave the interstate highway at exit number 23 and travel a few miles up from Whitewood before making a left turn back into time.

It's a surprisingly short journey to where the Ridley Ranch headquarters rests, cradled by the hills. Turn-of-the-century structures include a two-story frame house, blacksmith shop and great stone barn. In the yard set all manner of rolling stock fitted with tongue and doubletree.

By way of the interstate, ever increasing numbers of people are lured to the Black Hills of South Dakota. Gamblers flock to the gaming rooms of Deadwood. Bikers rally in Sturgis. Tourists seek their glimpse of the historic Black Hills, once held sacred by the Sioux.

But just over the ridge, the Ridley Ranch offers a refuge. Here, time-honored traditions survive and a piece of western history lives on.

On cold winter days, Andy Ridley forsakes his customary black cowboy hat for the comfort of headgear equipped with earflaps. Breath rising on the crisp air and footsteps crunching in the snow, he performs the morning ritual of barn chores. He catches

Andy Ridley ranches with draft horses, Angus cattle and time-honored tradition.



up a team of grays and while the big horses pursue their morning ration, Ridley throws on the harness. With movements unhurried, measured and deliberate, he snaps the team into place. With ears flicking forward and back, listening, the horses wait for his command. He speaks and they lean into their collars.

The snow is not deep nor has it been during the winter just ending. So far, there has been no need to switch from wheels to sled-runners. The path is packed and the rubber-tired hitch cart follows freely as the team strikes a trot. In the crisp stillness of early morning, the only sounds are muffled hoof beats, the crunch of wheels rolling on snow and the rhythmic clinking of tug chains. All combine melodiously to Andy Ridley's ear.

At the stack yard a bale carrier, hitched to the cart, awaits the team. Ridley maneuvers his horses into position and winches a 1,200-pound alfalfa bale onto the carrier. Loaded and moving to the feed ground, the rancher calls to his cattle. The steers are gathering as he steps from the cart and lowers the bale to the ground. Taking up a pitchfork, he clucks to his team. As the

PHOTOS & STORY BY TROY SMITH

horses step out, the alfalfa unrolls and Ridley prompts its smooth delivery with judicious use of the fork. Then, whoa! Returning for another bale, the process is repeated.

The daily repetition of feeding a few hundred head of cattle proves monotonous to some. Accustomed to the convenience of tractor and cab, draft horses seem slow and awkward. Ridley basks in the simplicity of his choice. Admittedly, the horses are slow; awkward, never!

Ridley is a fourth-generation rancher with a spirit nourished by a love for horses, cattle and ranching in the old-time way. More than objects of recreational pleasure, Ridley's horses and harness figure into the economy of this grass operation. And let's emphasize grass, because the horses which work for a living are the only beasts receiving grain on this outfit. Ridley cattle grow and gain on grass right until they're driven to market. More often than not, the cattle driven to the auction yards will be Angus steers nearly two years old.

"A lot of people think we're pretty backward, using horses **like do and running** big steers," admits Ridley, "but I've always wanted to run a true grass outfit. I'm not saying everyone can, or should, but it works for us."

The first to make it work here, was Ridley's maternal greatgrandfather Anderson. The patriarch homesteaded along the fringe of the Black Hills in 1883. The work accomplished with horse power and human sweat was admirable. Teams brought hand-quarried stone to the headquarters site where Anderson built a fine barn. The barn came first, then he replaced his claim shack with a more comfortable domicile for a young wife and family.

Anderson believed in diversification, or perhaps the hard years demanded it. He managed a cattle operation, farmed a little, and was an accomplished blacksmith. He was a respected horseman who shod nearly all of the area's draft horse teams. To further diversify, he raised a pair of sons kept busy with a barn full of milk cows.

Frank and Albert Anderson grew up quickly and were still in their teens when they became partners and assumed management of the

homestead ranch. Their wives were sisters and both couples shared the same ranch house. Their frugal ways helped them to survive during the Depression years while many neighbors dried out, starved out and left.

The Anderson brothers managed to buy adjoining properties and expand their grazing range. They stocked it with steers, once the coyotes showed how sheep were risky business. And eventually, the brothers emptied that milk parlor.

Bat Ridley knew about running steers, but it was rodeo that brought him to the Black Hills. Ranch-raised in Oklahoma, the cowboy liked the country around St. Onge. He also favored Frank Anderson's daughter, Rosie. In 1947 Rosie won the first ever Miss

South Dakota pageant and soon after her reign, became Bat Ridley's bride.

The couple settled on a nearby place and in addition to raising steers, established a herd of registered Angus cows.

Bat was a talented cowboy and horseman. Those tendencies run true in his son, Andy. Old home-movies reveal that the senior Ridley had his son handling a draft horse team at a tender age. In the practice pen, he inspired young Andy to develop cowboy skills in bulldogging and calf roping. It was by traveling to rodeos that the younger Ridley also met his wife, Kim.

Andy and Kim gave up the rodeo circuit several years ago to concentrate on ranching. Living at the old Anderson headquarters, they maintain a small herd of mostly straightbred Angus cows, in addition to their steer enterprise.

"Mom and Dad ran some nice registered cows and sold bulls privately for many years," says Ridley. "They liked the purebred bull business. It holds less appeal for me, but I really do appreciate the Angus cattle."

Ridley buys calves to run with those produced at his ranch. While he sometimes buys cattle of varied background, he always prefers Angus and Angus crosses. He claims they work best for his program. It might be typical of many ranches once found in the West, but Ridley's program is now outside the mainstream of modern beef production. It does, however, serve a niche market that is international in scope.



Andy and Kim Ridley live at the old Anderson headquarters on the ranch, which was built by Andy's maternal great-grandfather in the 1880s.

"I grew up around my dad, but also around my mother's father and uncle," adds Ridley. "Those two old gentlemen were the ones who really made something of this place. I really admired them and other operators who made money on grass. That's what we're trying to do now. It's a really low input deal."

Ridley owns almost no machinery that can't be hitched to horses. The ranch's 350 acres of hay ground is swathed and baled by neighbors who do custom work. Ridley buys extra hay and always hopes he won't need it. In an area where a considerable portion of the 15-inch annual precipitation comes as snow, however, winters do require supplemental hay.

"We get along with as little supplement as possible, saving pastures for winter grazing with a dab of cake (processed cubes) for added protein," explains Ridley. "When we cover up with snow, the cattle will dig out a little grass, but you have to feed some hay."

After weaning his own calf crop each November, Ridley starts checking the local auction barns for more. He will buy cattle through the winter, building numbers until time to go to grass. He can sell some yearlings during the fall if market conditions dictate. However, he would rather wait.

"I still like to run them over to two (years)," says Ridley. "It doesn't cost much more and those big steers will put on a lot of weight during that second winter. Then, in January, we'll sort off a load or two of bigger steers and ship them to town."

Last January Ridley's steers went across the St. Onge scale weighing 1,054 pounds. They sold for \$73 per hundredweight, on a \$72 fed cattle market. He will hope for a price as good when the remainder of the steers are shipped during early summer. By then, some will come off grass weighing close to 1,250 pounds.

Ridley's big steers fit specifications for cattle that will ultimately be processed and consumed in Japan. One of the western Nebraska feedlot buyers who often bids on the steers has explained how it works to Ridley. He says the steers go the feedlot, where they are fed to approximately 1,400, pounds. Then they are shipped to the West Coast and readied for an air freight shipment to Japan. There, they are pampered and fed all the way to 1,600 pounds before being



Wintertime Ranch Ritual —



... then It's back to the barn to load another bale.

processed at a packer and marketed.

So, for the present, there's a market for the kind of big steers grown on the Ridley Ranch. The market remains pleasing to Ridley. Still, he believes the key to making it work is keeping costs at a minimum.

How, some may ask, can anyone afford to keep three teams of horses on a ranch today? It can be a mighty expensive hobby.

"It would be, if that's what it was," says Ridley. "I like horses, but they really aren't my hobby. I don't even have a

tractor to feed with, so they're an important part of the operation. I'm glad I like the cheapest way to do it. The last work horse team I bought cost \$1,000 a piece. That won't buy much of a tractor or even much fuel. Horses are cheap, dependable and slow. But when the snow gets deep, they are cheaper, more dependable and seem to get a little faster."

You can be sure the tug chains will be jingling on the Ridley Ranch for some time to come.

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