

**N**estled near the confluence of the Dismal and Middle Loup rivers is the village of Dunning, Neb. A few more than a hundred souls reside in the town billed as "Gateway to the Sandhills."

It's the first community welcoming travelers of U.S. Highway 2 as they enter Nebraska's unique and phenomenal grasslands.

Tourists seldom leave the highway to cruise Main Street. Out on the two-lane, the local service station enjoys a seasonal business boost from vacationers who pause for fuel, a few groceries and soda-pop.

But tourism doesn't drive commerce here. Like the handful of merchants down on Main, the proprietor knows his bread is buttered by beef.

There are a few hog producers and a notable turkey

operation in this area, but this is ranch country where economic well-being is tied to the cattle business. That's been a simple fact of life since Dunning was founded in 1887.

Back then, settlers were just beginning to make their marks on the Sandhills. Sodbusters found that plowing and planting in the sand was often a disappointing proposition. Cattle producers, however, found the grass-covered dunes did offer opportunity. Ample forage and water made the grazing of cattle the area's only significant industry.

Among the settlers with a vision for a future in the cattle business was George Conrad Zutavern. A veteran of the Texas trail drives to Kansas and Nebraska, Zutavern first settled in eastern Nebraska. Along with his son, William G., he farmed and raised livestock. Within a

few years after Dunning's founding (1887), the Zutaverns were summering steers in the Sandhills. Just after the turn of the century, they moved their families to the area and, in 1917, relocated their headquarters to a site near the Dismal River. Soon after, William's son, Russell, joined his father and grandfather's partnership.

Today, Russell's son, Bill, represents the fourth generation of Zutaverns to graze cattle on these rolling hills. With him in partnership is his own son, Shawn. Operating as William Zutavern Cattle Co., they still headquarter along the banks of the Dismal, just eight miles west of Dunning. But the country has changed since Bill's great-grandfather first unloaded his wagon.

When Bill's forebears settled here, many people considered the area to be barren and

desolate. "Because of the frequency of prairie fires, even the river valleys had no trees or brush," he explains. But ranchers fought the fires and planted trees. Today, trees along the rivers and well planned shelter belts reduce wind erosion and offer protection for cattle and wildlife.

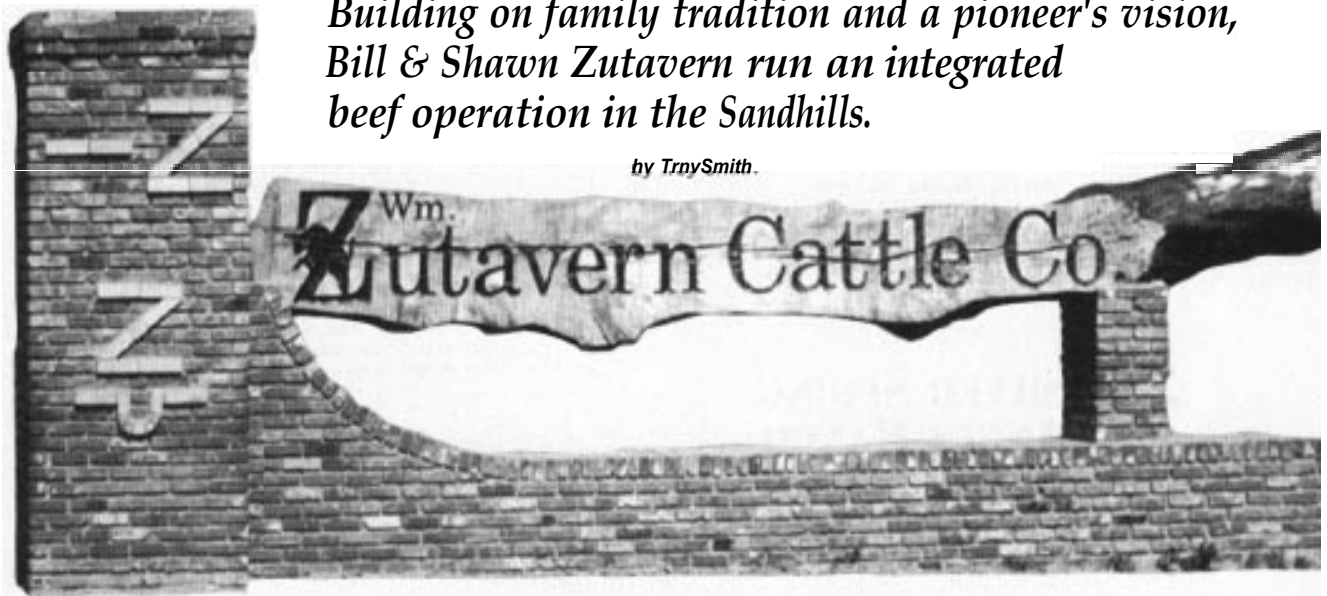
"I can't even tell you how many trees we've planted, but I think that's just part of running an environmentally sound operation," says Bill. "And we try to promote wildlife. Our ranch supports large populations of grouse, prairie chicken, pheasant and deer."

From a business standpoint, the ranch's 30,000 deeded and leased acres support a spring calving, cow-calf operation. Goals include raising marketable cattle for a retained ownership program and heifer replacements. Bill and Shawn

# Ranching on the Dismal

*Building on family tradition and a pioneer's vision, Bill & Shawn Zutavern run an integrated beef operation in the Sandhills.*

*by TrnySmith.*



believe Angus genetics are the best avenue to attaining a balance of performance, carcass and maternal traits.

Years ago, like many traditional Sandhills outfits, Zutavern ran straightbred Herefords. Bill admits their cows were first exposed to Angus influence when the neighbor's bulls jumped the fence. The resulting black baldy steers outweighed Zutavern's Herefords, prompting a crossbreeding program that began more than 25 years ago.

"Later on, we used some Gelbvieh bulls on baldy cows, but since 1980, we've bought only Angus bulls," says Bill. An occasional brockled face peeks out from among the cows, but the herd is now "pretty black."

The rule-of-thumb in this part of the country calls for 10 to 12 acres per pair and most Zutavern pastures are large. Some include 2,000 to 3,000 acres. Cows run in large groups of as many as 500 head. With an average bull to cow ratio of 1:25 a sizable bull battery is required. And with some rough country to cover, Zutavern prefers to use bulls that are at least two years old.

"We do buy and use some yearlings," says Shawn, "but we don't baby them any. I really believe that yearlings

used under our conditions never do reach their full growth potential. But two-year-olds are getting pretty hard to find."

For the last several years, Shawn and Bill have found groups of closely related, balanced trait bulls from two Nebraska sources who do offer some two-year-olds. They've been well satisfied with purchases from Summitcrest Angus, Broken Bow, and Connealy Angus, Whitman.



Shawn and Bill Zutavern partner up in the cattle and haying operations.

"We like to study the numbers first," says Bill about picking bulls. "We look for performance, so we think a bull's own average daily gain ought to be up towards four pounds. For expected progeny differences (EPDs) we like to see a value of 30 or more for weaning and 50 or higher for yearling weight. And since we're going to want to keep some heifers, we want a milk EPD of at least 10 but probably no higher than 20."

After narrowing the field by the numbers, Bill and Shawn like to eyeball the candidates. Sound feet and legs are essential, but as Shawn adds, "so is depth of rib and a big butt."

Asked about their concern for birth weight, Bill confesses that they don't worry about it very much. Over the last eight years, they've calved 2,000 of their own heifers and had only one C-section. Their mature cows, averaging 1,150 to 1,200 pounds, just don't experience much calving difficulty. They might assist two percent of the cows but only due to mispresentations.

"The one consistent problem with our bull selection criteria," says Shawn, "is that a lot of other people seem to pick them the same way. There's usually a

lot of competition for the ones we like and that makes them cost quite a bit."

Considering the sorry state of cattle prices, the Zutaverns have tried even harder to be low-cost producers. They have cut corners wherever possible, but they won't scrimp on bulls.

"We try to buy from the top 20 percent of the offering and with prices like they are now, you wonder if you can justify it," says Bill. But we've steadily improved our genetics. We're satisfied it will pay us back through consistent feedlot performance and the bred heifers we've been selling."

Each October, Zutavern calves are preconditioned two weeks prior to weaning. Weights are taken then and steers weighing at least 580 pounds will go to the feedlot first. After weaning, they are backgrounded on the ranch for 45 days. Weighing an average of 650 pounds, they are shipped to a custom yard to be finished. That first bunch will be sent in December, while the lighter steers are backgrounded to about 800 pounds. Sorted into uniform groups, they go to the feedyard during the months of May, June and July.

Close-outs on the last bunch of calf-fed steers showed

The Sandhills are known for their productive hay meadows. For Zutaverns, harvesting native hay is a summertime ritual.

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average gains of 3.5 pounds per day and dry matter conversion of 6.02 pounds of feed per pound of gain. After 180 days on feed, the steers had an average carcass weight of 780 pounds. Two percent of the total graded USDA Prime, 84 percent graded Choice and 13 percent made Select. Fifty-seven percent were yield grade 3 and 37 percent were 2.

"And they didn't make any money," says Bill. "But I think they were the kind that will, once the industry works through this oversupply situation. We're satisfied with numbers like those steers had."

Feeding some as calves and sending subsequent groups to the feedlot as yearlings spreads fed cattle marketings over several months. Starting three years ago, the Zutaverns further diversified their marketing schedule by selling bred heifers in the fall and early winter.

"From the better heifers, we'll pick our own replacements and some to breed and sell. The rest are fed to finish like the steers," says Bill.

**Four center pivot** irrigation systems provide alfalfa and some cane for the purpose of backgrounding calves. In their ration of ground hay and cane, steers receive three pounds of shell corn per day. Heifers get four pounds of corn until six weeks prior to breeding time when those to be bred are sorted. These will receive an additional pound of corn until breeding time. Synchronized and heat detected, heifers are bred artificially for four days. Clean-up bulls are then turned out for 45 days.

"We've been getting about 60 percent bred AI and about 92 percent conception overall," says Shawn. "We haven't sold any \$1,000 heifers yet, but last year's averaged \$760. The demand for good commercial Angus heifers has stayed surprisingly good

and when the cycle turns, I think it will get even better. We'll be ready when it does."

To keep costs in line, the Zutaverns try to keep feed costs as low as possible while still meeting the nutritional requirements of their cattle. Cows graze winter range and are supplemented with native hay, but no hay is wasted. Lower cost, 15 percent protein supplement (wheat midds) is provided when cow requirements are lower, but higher quality, 32 percent protein range cake is fed during periods of peak requirement.

Another cost-cutting maneuver involves the use of corn-steep. A by-product of ethanol production, the sticky liquids energy value is approximately 80 percent that of corn. As a replacement for part of the corn normally used, steep can cheapen ration costs.

"Steep is about half the cost of shell corn," says Bill. "We sure like it for that reason, but it adds moisture to our dry ration, reduces the dust and improves feed intake. The calves really love it."

**Looking for ways** to cut costs or improve efficiency is just part of survival in the cattle business. It's particularly challenging right now, but the Zutaverns wouldn't trade for a different lifestyle. And while most tourists speed through the Sandhills taking little notice of villages like Dunning, a recent and memorable event lured a surprising number of visitors up the river road to the Zutavern Ranch.

Last June, Bill and Shawn, along with their wives, Meredith and Lori, and extended family, hosted Nebraska's annual Cattle Baron's Ball. The ball is a joint project of Nebraska's beef industry and the American Cancer Society. During the six years it has been held, the Cattle Baron's Ball has showcased



some of the state's most beautiful ranches, but its real mission is to raise funds for cancer research, education and patient services.

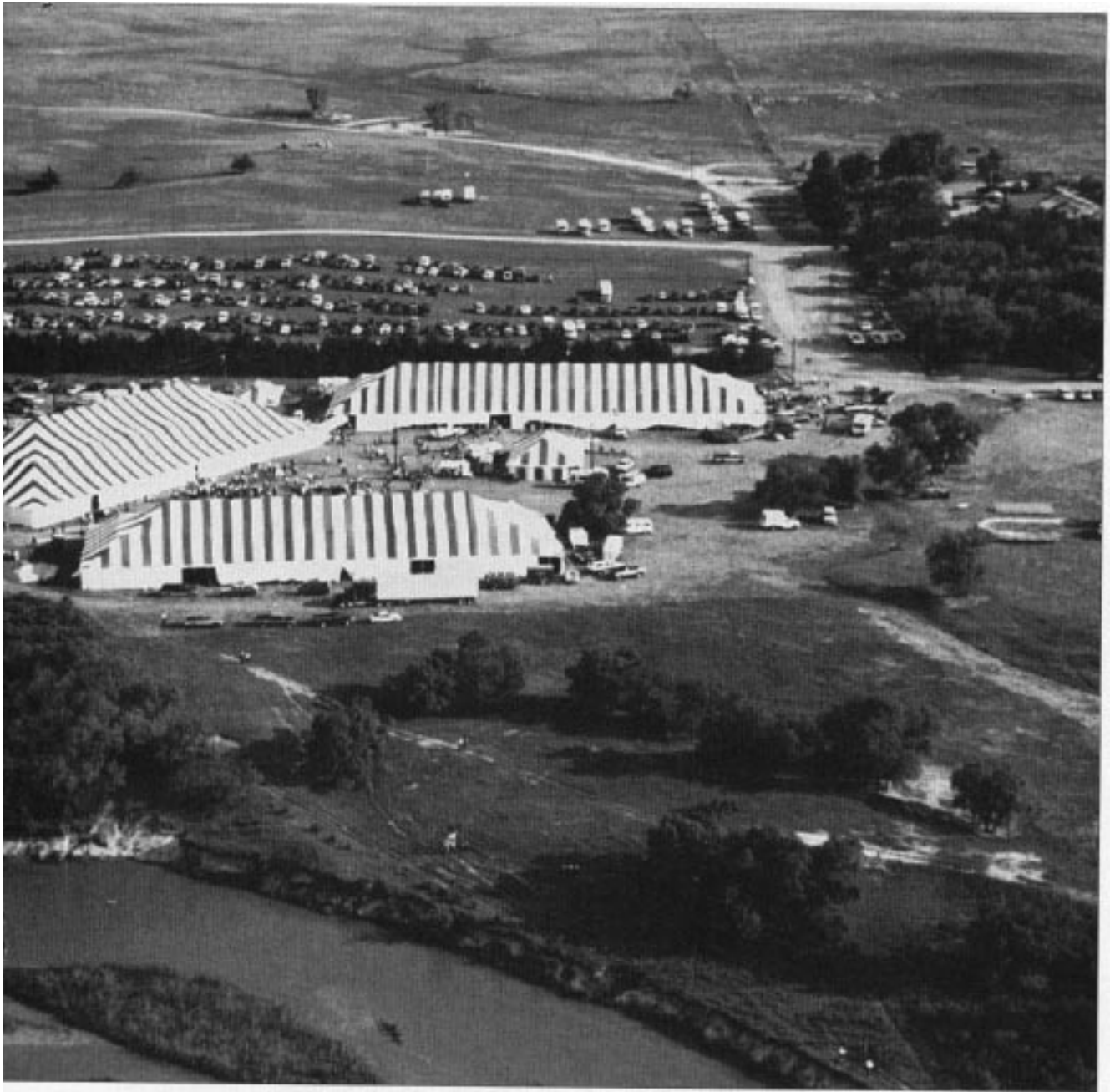
More than 3,200 people attended this year to support the cause while enjoying good Nebraska beef and a variety of entertainment. Charlie Daniels headlined the musical performances. Day-long activities also included style shows, displays of western art, horse-and-buggy rides and even helicopter rides offering a view

of the Dismal River Valley.

Those looking for a challenge tested their aim at sporting clays, rooted for their favorites in the pig races or tried the casino-style games. Three auctions also were held to help raise money for the worthy cause.

Bill Zutavern says both his father and grandfather were cancer victims, making his family particularly eager to host the fundraiser.

"Thanks to more than 400 volunteers who organized the Baron's Ball and did the work,



about \$200,000 was raised," says Bill. "We hope that will help bring about a cure for cancer. Raising money for research is the main reason for doing it at all, but it's also a chance to welcome urban folks to ranch country so they can see where and how we raise beef. We have a vested interest in promoting beef as an affordable and healthy food, so we like to think this kind of thing is good for our industry."



The Zutavern Family hosted more than 3,200 people for the Cattle Baron's Ball held last June. Held in Nebraska ranch country each spring, it offers food, entertainment and a glimpse of the cattle industry while raising funds for cancer research.