

Chasing *the* Dream

Nebraska's Gray family is at home on the range.

BY TROY SMITH

Since the spring of 1997, Rod and Laurie Gray have been living a dream. It's one they've shared since both were college students with aspirations of a life together raising kids and cattle. They envisioned a Western ranch setting as the best environment for both endeavors. Coming from families rooted in the Corn Belt, ranching was a dream for the Grays—a dream they chased until it came true.

Today the couple and their five children raise registered Angus cattle in northwestern Nebraska. Located near the Sioux County seat of Harrison, their panhandle ranch shares a common boundary with the state of Wyoming. These are the wide-open spaces of Western lore, where pronghorn antelope scamper across the short-grass prairie. Wind, water and time have scarred its face, and rock outcroppings peek

through the sod. Few trees obstruct the view or slow the wind that blows most of the time.

At an elevation of nearly 5,000 feet, the growing season averages a short 90 days, with frosts likely to occur as early as September and as late as June. The average annual precipitation is 13 inches (in.), often dispensed in small doses of rain, but heaping helpings of snow. Winter's habit of coming early and staying late prompts Rod to jokingly dub Sioux County as "the Alaska of Nebraska." All jokes aside, this is productive cattle country where every livelihood depends, directly or indirectly, on the ranching industry.

It's just the kind of place where the Grays have prayed to be. Strong in their Christian faith, they trust God to lead their lives. It seemed to take a long time for Him to lead

them here; but when it happened, the pieces fell together for a near-perfect fit.

Neither Rod nor Laurie were strangers to the cattle business. Laurie grew up on a corn and cattle farm in eastern Nebraska. Rod's forebears tilled the rich Iowa soil and established an Angus herd more than 100 years ago. Family members still breed Angus cattle near Tama, Iowa. The registered cows owned by Rod and Laurie descend from the original Gray herd.

Handy with clippers and comb, Rod fitted show cattle while attending South Dakota State University. It was there he and Laurie met. After graduation Rod spent three years as a professional fitter while his bride sought her degree. In 1979 the couple moved to Harrison, Neb., for the first time, as employees of Windy Acres Ranch.

After two years there, opportunity beckoned them to Iowa as partners with Rod's brothers. The crop-and-cattle venture proved to be ill-timed. The farm crisis of the early '80s forced dissolution of the partnership.

"Laurie's folks told us about 40 acres and a farmstead for sale near Mead, Neb.," tells Rod. "We bought that in '83 and rented a little more to start on our own. Over the next several years we bought more small parcels, but we never could accumulate much pasture. There just wasn't much grass to be had."

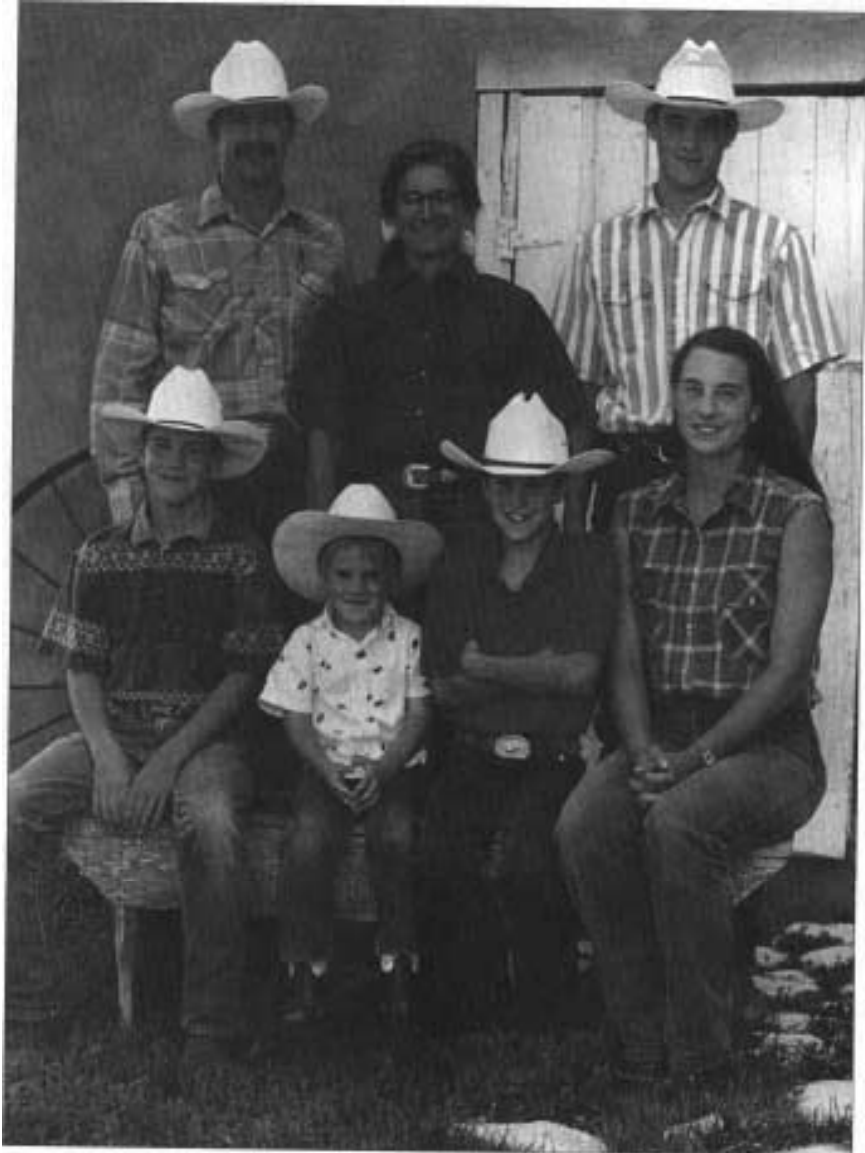
With their nucleus of registered cows, the Grays applied extensive use of artificial insemination (AI), gradually increased herd numbers and marketed seedstock as Gray's Angus. The farm provided cash crops and a feed base for wintering cows and developing calves, but the breeding herd had to be summered away from home. Through acquaintances made while at Windy Acres and contacts gained through their own Angus business, the Grays arranged for summer grazing in western Nebraska and in Wyoming.

Taking paris out West each summer fueled the old longing for a ranch of their own — a longing now shared with the couple's growing family. At every opportunity the Grays investigated ranch properties. Unfortunately, the small ranch they sought was the same kind that plenty of other people were seeking.

"We looked for years," grins Rod, "checking into anything that sounded like a balanced place that would cash-flow. We looked hardest in western Nebraska, thinking we could hang onto our bull market from there. We had some good customers in the Sandhills. If we went farther west, we'd have to develop more new ones. But we checked out places in Wyoming, Colorado and one in Idaho."

Sometimes visits to properties revealed less potential than descriptions promised. Other times, price didn't suit their pocketbook. More than once the Grays came close to making a deal only to have it fall through. They made several offers on a Wyoming spread and thought they had it bought, but the seller backed out. They negotiated seriously for a well-kept Nebraska Sandhills ranch offering a nice balance of wet meadows and upland range, but lost it to an offer of more money,

Ironically it was on a trip to view Wyoming properties that the Grays heard about another ranch just over the line in Nebraska. Headed for home and disappointed by a fruitless journey, they stopped in Harrison to visit friends from



The Grav family is finally at home on the range. Standing are Rod, Laurie and Levi. Seated are Colt, Garrett, Heath and Naomi.

the old days at Windy Acres. Learning that a ranch located southwest of town might be for sale, the Grays called the owner and made arrangements to see it. Negotiations were short and a deal was made, contingent upon the sale of Grays' farm at Mead.

"In just a few days, we got a call from people who wanted the farm," says Laurie. "Things just seemed to fall into place."

Their new ranch has the resources the Grays needed, being one of a few in the area with irrigation. Barring too many hail storms, 260 acres under center-pivot systems yield ample feed resources. About 100 acres of corn provide **24** tons of silage/acre. After that, Rod fall-seeds rye for spring grazing prior to next year's corn planting. The remaining irrigated ground is under alfalfa, yielding 3-3 1/2 tons of hay/acre.

"We can raise enough winter feed to supplement 250 cows on winter range and grow about 450 calves," says Rod. "That's more than we need for our 200 cows and our young stock; but until we build numbers up a little more, we've been backgrounding some calves on a custom basis."

"That opportunity just fell in our laps, too," he adds. "We hadn't been here very long when a neighbor asked if we'd be interested in growing some calves."

Of course, the majority of the ranch is rangeland, and to the Grays' advantage most was already divided into half-section pastures. Supplementing windmill-powered stock wells is an underground pipeline. The setup was ready-made for distributing cattle to single-sire breeding pastures and

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— Laurie Gray

application of a rotational grazing system.

Severe, fast-moving spring storms often sweep through this country, and the Grays calve during February and March. Concern about a lack of natural protection led to the first major improvements to the ranch rebuilding windbreak fences and constructing a new calving barn.

“Those March and April storms can be tough during and right after calving. We’ve already made good use of the barn—especially with first-calvers,” tells Rod. “Most of those storms don’t last very long, so a lot of the cows can calve out in the open and get along fine. I like keeping them spread out as much as possible, and I don’t miss calving in a confined area and the mud we fought before coming here.”

Nature offers frequent reminders that its forces shouldn’t be taken for granted. Even as the Grays were settling into their new home, in April 1997, there came a warning of the challenges nature throws at those choosing a home on the range.

“We had just moved in, and Rod had gone to a bull sale in Montana when a blizzard hit,” remembers Laurie. “There’s hardly anything else out there to stop it, so snow drifted around the buildings and tilled the corrals. The kids and I were snowed in for three days. Thankfully, we hadn’t brought the cattle here yet, but it reminded us that you can’t take the weather for granted.”

Summer brings the threat of range fire, usually kindled by lightning and fanned by hot winds. Rod has responded more than once to telltale smoke on the horizon. Now a member of the local fire department, he is taking training with other volunteers whose families and livelihoods depend on a strong sense of community, even in such a remote area. Because of the remoteness, neighbors are particularly important.

“It’s several miles to the nearest neighbor, 14 miles to Harrison, and 40 miles or more to a big town. Neighbors depend more on each other in emergencies and for help with cattle work,” adds Laurie. “Our neighbors really welcomed us into the community. Of course, Rod and I weren’t strangers, but that friendly acceptance helped the kids adjust quickly too.”



Gray’s Angus Ranch is one of the few area ranches that support irrigation. In the foreground is one of two center-pivot systems that yield supplemental feed for the Gray herd and a custom backgrounding operation.

The Grays homeschooled their daughter (Naomi) and four sons (Levi, Colt, Heath and Garret) even before relocating. Living far from town isn’t a problem in that regard, except that Levi now attends high school in Harrison and participates in athletics. The whole family remains active in church activities. Trips to town are necessary but planned and made to count.

Through private-treaty marketing of seedstock, the Grays had developed an eastern Nebraska clientele. Consigning cattle to events such as the Nebraska Cattlemen’s Classic and the Midland Bull Test added buyers from farther west. Despite a 450-mile shift in their location, both are served yet. To attract new interest, however, the Grays also shifted marketing focus to an annual production sale. Their first was held in April 1998.

“We decided that an auction might be our best introduction to new, potential buyers in this area,” explains Rod. “We had it at the Crawford sale barn, selling 50 bulls and a package of yearling heifers. We had a pretty modest sale budget, concentrating most of our advertising within an 80-mile radius. We thought it went well for a first-time effort. The bulls sold to ranchers in Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota.”

The heifers brought about 10c/pound over market price, he adds. “I see a real demand for Angus females in this area, so we’ll be offering more heifers and maybe a few mature females in future sales.”

Rod believes a long-time emphasis on breeding functional cattle has made their herd adaptable to a Western, range-based environment and acceptable to local buyers. According to Rod, most look at phenotype first, then at the numbers. They like to see as much weaning and yearling weight as possible in combination with birth weight expected progeny differences (EPDs) of 3.5 or lower and moderate milk reflected by EPDs ranging from 12 to 15.

“I’m seeing more rancher interest in carcass traits— especially cutability,” adds Rod. “We’re trying to respond to that, too, and still keep the eye appeal.”

After two decades of searching, Rod and Laurie Gray have found the right combination. They believe they have a resource base and the genetics to be competitive in the beef industry . . . and they are enjoying their chosen lifestyle.

“I don’t know that it’s any easier,” smiles Laurie. “Making a living with cattle still is a lot of work, but we’re all enjoying it a lot more. We praise the Lord for the opportunity to live our dream.”

