



A Story of Flooding & Friendship

When floodwaters rose at North Dakota's Spickler Ranch last April, the entire community came to their rescue.

by Kindra Gordon

Having grown up on their family's ranch in the scenic James River Valley near Glenfield, N.D., brothers Justin and Nathan Spickler are accustomed to dealing with a little flooding now and then.

The ranch headquarters, which was established by the boys' grandfather in 1943, is just 50 feet (ft.) off the river, and Justin says their pastures run along "several miles" of the James River.

Today, Justin, wife Sara and their three young children and Nathan, wife Emily and their 1-year-old twins are partners in the family Angus operation. They manage nearly 600 Angus females, with about 450 calving from March 15 to May 15 and the remainder of the herd calving in the fall from Aug. 10 to Oct. 10. Their annual bull sale takes place at the ranch on the first Monday in May.

1993 and 1997 were both bad flood years, Justin recalls, with water over their road and lots of wet spots, but 2009 will forever be remembered as one for the record books. "Flooding in the past was always just an inconvenience, but it's never been to the extent of what we experienced this past April," he adds.

90-plus inches of snow

The North Dakota winter saw a lot of snow accumulation, which began to set the stage for the large-scale spring flooding. But, Justin says, "The snow didn't seem that far off of what can be normal here. After 90 inches, we stopped keeping track."

Dealing with that much snow can be a chore in itself.

"There were times it was taking us all day to feed the cows because we had to move so much snow just to get to them," Justin says. Some of their herd winters 7 miles away from the ranch.

"We are somewhat accustomed to a lot of snow here, so we just take it in stride and do the work that needs to be done," he says.

The trouble began mid-April. The weather switched from winter to spring during a three-day warm-up, and the mountains of snow to the north of the Spickler Ranch were now melted and flooding the James River.

But with the quick warm-up this year the water was flowing much faster than in the 1997 flood. Some estimates put the water flow at 11,000 cubic ft. per second. On Thursday, April 16 — with their bull sale just two weeks away — the water began to rise at about an inch an hour around the Spickler Ranch.

The Spicklers had already moved several groups of their cows out to pasture a week or so earlier, but their sale bulls and heifers, 100 cows with newborn calves and 70 cows that were left to calve were still around the ranch headquarters. As were a pen of steers on feed.

With the flooding becoming more apparent, the Spicklers decided to move the group of sale heifers to higher ground. "We trailed them through water that was 1 foot deep, and when we got them out on top of a small hill, we realized how bad things were getting," Justin says.

Friends, neighbors pitch in

At about that same time, friends and neighbors started showing up to offer what help they could.

"Our cows are used to swimming, so we got the heifers and cows moved through the water. Then we began to haul the real young calves out with trailers hooked to tractors," Justin says.

As they drove across the flooded road, the aluminum trailers would even float a little. "The floors in the trailers were slicked clean by the water flow," Justin adds.

While several people were helping move the heifers and cows, other friends and

► **Above:** Lots of snow and a quick warm-up led to flooding and moving cattle to higher ground.

neighbors were pitching in to move hay and add height to a dike originally built in 1993 to protect the ranch buildings. Sara and Emily loaded their computers and valuables into the loader buckets of the tractors and hauled them across the flooded road.

As the darkness of Thursday night set in, the bulls and fats were left in their pens. "We couldn't do any more that day," Justin says.

He and Nathan stayed at the ranch that night, while their wives and children stayed 2 miles away with Justin and Nathan's mom, JoAnn, and stepdad, Elroy Ellingson. They would stay there the next three days as the flooding continued.

By Friday morning the river had swelled 2 feet higher in the past 24 hours, reaching its crest. However, there was still uncertainty. A bridge and road about 3 miles upstream were at risk of being washed out. Should that happen, the Spicklers would get even more floodwater, but no one could predict how much.

The bulls' pens were also now underwater, so the decision was made to evacuate the entire ranch. "We couldn't drive a tractor through the water on the road anymore," Justin says. So, using horses, the bulls had to swim through 3-4 ft. of icy water for about one-eighth of a mile.

"They didn't want to do it, so five cows were held on the road on the other side of the water to try and tease them. We got the fall-born bulls to try it; they were able to walk in the water until the last bit, when the current was so strong it would sweep them into the ditch where the water was deeper and they had to swim. ... It was like a John Wayne movie," Justin says. The bulls were moved across in two different groups and the fat steers were also moved across, so the only thing left on the place were a couple of brood mares and a cow with twins.

The cattle were then held in portable corrals on a nearby hill. "We didn't know there were that many corrals in the countryside. People brought them from everywhere," Justin says.

Amidst all the chaos, no cattle were lost. Only one cow and one bull had injuries.

"During the actual evacuation we had all of our cattle mixed together, which we would never normally do, and we had all those people handling our cows, which made me kind of nervous, but it all worked out," Justin says.

Nathan also credits the smoothness of everything to the team effort between him and his brother and their wives. "All four of us were on horses in the icy water chasing bulls out of here," he says. "It's truly a family ranch."

On Saturday, the cattle were moved from the portable pens to more permanent

► "It was like a John Wayne movie," says Justin Spickler of the cattle having to swim through the icy water.



fences — and just five days later the road was passable enough to bring the sale bulls back to the ranch.

Back to work

Fortunately, as the water subsided, the bridge and road upstream held, and none of the Spickler Ranch buildings sustained too much damage — other than water in the basement of one house and a backed up sewer in the other. Fences were also washed out, but Justin and Nathan consider they were pretty fortunate overall.

They also aimed to have their sale as planned — on May 4 at the ranch. "It was still pretty muddy, and a few of the bulls looked a little beat up, but everything went OK. The cattle sold and we assured people that we would stand behind any bull or heifer that wasn't all right," Justin says.

Today, looking back on this lifetime event, both Justin and Nathan say the one thing they and their families will never forget is the help that was provided from the community.

"We saw incredible support from the community. That was as helpful as anything

in getting through this. We will never be able to pay all those people back. They all had cattle to take care of too, and it was amazing to see how they came to help us."

Nathan adds, "I hope we never have to go through something like this again. But the most amazing thing worth remembering from all of this was how quickly people came over to help."

In addition to all the help with the livestock, women from the community were also generous in bringing food to those pitching in on the ranch.

"There were a lot of people here to feed, and there were always gals bringing food over. That was very helpful," Justin says.

In mid-July the Spicklers welcomed neighbors and friends back to the ranch for an appreciation dinner cooked by Emily and Sara. It was a way for them to say thank you and, Justin adds, "It gave us some closure."

While they hope flooding of this magnitude never happens on their ranch again, they've taken some small steps to

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Spickler Ranch history

In 1943, Howard and Cora Spickler purchased the initial land that makes up Spickler Ranch near Glenfield, N.D. Their son, Harold, and his wife, JoAnn, took over the ranch in the 1970s. They had four children: Heidi, Justin, David and Nathan.

Originally, in the 1940s through the 1970s, the ranch had Hereford cattle. But in 1983, Harold decided to disperse the Herefords and manage commercial cattle, which would allow him more time with his family.

Then in January 1997 the commercial cow herd was dispersed and the Spicklers began to focus on building a herd of registered Angus genetics and selling bulls private treaty.

In the spring of 2000 they had their first Angus bull sale at Carrington, N.D., selling 56 bulls in mid-May.

When Justin returned to the ranch in 2001, more Angus were purchased to build the herd to 250 cows. Today, Justin and Nathan have expanded the herd to nearly 600 cows.

In February 2003, Harold lost his battle with cancer, leaving the three boys to run the ranch. They have built up the cow herd numbers, as well as moved their annual sale to the ranch.

Today, Justin and Nathan are full partners in the operation with their wives and young children. David stays involved in activities at the ranch, has his own cattle-feeding enterprise and is the commodity manager at Blue Flint Ethanol at Underwood, N.D.

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prepare for any future flooding. The local township received funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to raise the road that gives access to the Spickler Ranch. “We tried to raise it to the level of where the water was. This gives us an exit strategy, and if the water starts to creep up on the side of the road, we know we need to start evacuating,” Justin says.

Justin says there is also the possibility that someday they may move their ranch headquarters to higher ground, but, he adds, “It’s not easy to just pick up a ranch and move it.”

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► Justin says they may move the ranch headquarters to higher ground someday.

