

# Holding Fast to Their Vision

## Couple Overcome Challenges Raising Bison

by ANDREA WATTS

*"I've always wanted to live on the land," he said ... "That's interesting," I said, "I've always wanted to live on a ranch."* (Standing into the Storm by Kathy Lindner)

The story of Lindner Bison and Heritage Ranch is more than just the typical tale of a couple deciding to pursue their dream – it is also a tale of a couple who is part of the movement to change our relationship with the animals we consume.

The decision to raise bison was more of a "self-preservation thought," Kathy Lindner admits. Unpleasant experiences eating beef left her wary of eating red meat, but on a whim, she tried a bison burger at a restaurant in Montana. When she didn't experience any unpleasant digestive side effects, she thought it was a fluke. Eating another burger a couple days later yielded the same outcome, and sparked an unexpected idea. "I realized that raising bison would be an incredible business," said Kathy.

That thought stayed with her through 10 years of working for the corporate world and marrying Ken Lindner in 1996. Two years later, as they discussed their vision of retirement, Kathy broached the idea. After sampling bison for himself Ken agreed, and with that decision they knew what their retirement would involve.

Though Kathy has ranching in her blood – her great-grandmother, Margaret Carlston, was known as the "Cattle Queen of Montana" – she and Ken had no hands-on ranching experience, much less bison ranching. Ken specialized in developing quality control documentation for medical equipment company startups and Kathy worked in marketing and administration. But this background proved useful in developing business plans, navigating USDA regulations and networking



Kathy and Ken Lindner operate Lindner Bison based in northern California.

expertise that their future ranching business would require.

While their careers bounced the couple between several states for the next three years as the startups they worked for got off the ground, expanded or were bought out, Kathy and Ken researched and prepared for the next phase of their lives. This meant joining the American Bison Association (which later became the National Bison Association) and learning about the industry.

The herd that roams on Heritage Ranch owes its beginning not only to the four cows and calves purchased, sight unseen, in 1997, but also to the rancher who served as the Lindner's mentor and managed their cows while they lived back East.

"Originally we didn't have the money necessary to buy property and everything else, so we decided to get into it with our big toe first before jumping in altogether," said Ken. "So we did what's called an absentee ownership program."

Art Crowley was a third-generation South Dakota bison rancher who knew just about everything about the

animals, and he took really good care of our small herd, Ken says, with Kathy adding, "We learned so much from him."

*"Wherever the ranch was, we needed to be able to earn a living. And not just during summer months, but year-round since our bills are year-round."* (Standing into the Storm)

Upon returning to California, and after experiencing yet another buyout, the Lindners decided to finally retire and focus full-time on their dream. The first order of business was finding a market for their bison meat and bringing their bison out to California. Commercial distribution wasn't an option because of volume and packaging requirements, Ken says. Having enjoyed visits to the Santa Barbara farmers' market, they turned to farmers' markets as an option for selling their bison. The first farmers' market that accepted their application was the Pasadena Farmers' Market, and Kathy proudly says that they "pioneered" red meat into the L.A. farmers' markets. Part of this pioneering work also involved educating consumers about what the term *bison* means. *Bison* is the



Heritage Ranch is home to a herd of about 130 bison.

correct species name for describing American buffalo, because the generic term *buffalo* could also refer to Cape buffalo or water buffalo.

While finding a marketplace for their meat proved relatively straightforward, the work involved in finding property and acquiring a loan was anything but during 2004. A 227-acre parcel in northern California met their requirements of being within their price range and having a good well, along with bison having roamed its fields during the 1500s, with the remaining land being homesteaded. The only drawback was the 10-hour drive from Valencia where they lived.

"We had an incredibly hideous time acquiring our ranch," said Ken. Even with their good credit, 10 different banks found a reason to say no, and he adds, "The only reason we have this land at all is because we put so much of our own money into it, and a lot of other people put their own money into it, and we finally found a bank in South Dakota willing to give us a loan."

Though the process of moving their herd to Heritage Ranch proved uneventful, the Lindners couldn't join their herd on the ranch as quickly as they intended. With the housing market crash, their condo languished on the market, and the Lindners had to remain in Valencia.

"For eight years, every 11 days, we would drive 600 miles up to the ranch,

drive on Monday, work Tuesday and Wednesday, drive back on Thursday, pack for the farmers' market on Friday, and then spend Saturday and Sunday at the farmers' markets," said Ken.

And while others might have questioned their sanity or even their dream, the Lindners didn't.

"I think the faith got strengthened because we didn't know if we could do it, and we found that we could," said Kathy. "As long as we had the animals, we had hope."

*"Later, all Ken and I could say to each other is that we never thought that this was something we would ever be doing or considering doing for a living, and left it at that. We knew it was an inescapable part of the business."* (Upon witnessing the harvesting of a bison, *Standing into the Storm*)

As part of his mentoring, Crowley ensured the Lindners witnessed all aspects of ranching, including the slaughtering and the work associated with handling bison. While bison don't have the temperament that domestication creates in cows, they have other positive qualities that lend themselves to sustainable ranching.

Bison are more efficient grazers and drink one-third less water than cattle, Kathy says, with Ken adding their only requirements are having enough room to run (which they love to do) and access to food and water.

"Since the animals evolved here on this continent, they don't have dif-

ficulty with either the harsh winters that this continent has to offer or the very hot summers," said Ken. "Unlike cows in the summertime, they don't need to seek shade ... they have very efficient winter coats to withstand the blizzards and snowstorms that occur on the Great Plains which would kill a lot of cattle."

Bison's lifespan is around 30 years and females may remain reproductive for nearly that entire time. Roaming on the Heritage Ranch are three of the original four cows they bought almost 20 years ago.

"They are remarkably resilient, very durable animals," said Ken. "That's one of the things we love about bison, and we wish there were more people raising them in this country."

To keep the stress levels as minimal as possible for their herd's entire lives up to the point of harvest, the Lindners practice a completely hands-off approach of no-handling, which, according to their customers, is evident in their meat.

"We have sold in the farmers' market for 10 years, and people are so grateful," said Kathy. "We chose a model of keeping the bison in family groups, following a recommenda-

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tion of Hugh Fitzsimmons, whom we spoke with years ago when deciding to raise bison."

This recreates the life they would have experienced on the Great Plains, and it creates a setting that both Kathy and Ken describe as peaceful. The Lindners don't even place ear tags on their bison, because they can tell the age and sex from the size and shape of the horns and individual animals because they know their animals intimately. And when harvesting time comes, Ken describes it as a single shot in the field, and the initial processing occurs right on-site.

"We harvest on an as-needed basis to meet customers' demands, but a percentage is taken off each year for the overall healthful management of the herd," said Kathy.

Right now they estimate their herd size to be around 130.

*"Staying faithful to our course, we faced each obstacle we encountered, we didn't turn away and we didn't quit. We continued, not knowing when or even if we could succeed. Stubbornly, and sometimes in spite of evidence to the contrary, we clung to the notion that somehow we would prevail."* (Standing into the Storm)

In her book, *Standing into the Storm*, Kathy recounts their journey from corporate America to ranchers through 2011, but it is what happened two years later, in spring 2013, that is testing their ranch's future. Unexpectedly, their 37-year-old irrigation well failed, leaving them without water for the pastures and forcing them to feed their bison hay.

While their initial plan was to use their savings to solve the problem themselves, the Lindners found that their personal resources were insufficient, forcing them to turn to their customers to help raise money to fix the well.

"This whole fundraiser idea [*Water for Bison*] came from a customer, Mark, who kept nudging us," said Kathy. "Once we started, we found we had so much help we could hardly believe it."

The Lindners especially credit three customers who helped pro bono: Felix, the website expert and Lindner spokesperson and professor at UCLA; Rita, a successful marketing expert with her own company and Cheri, a talented



Kathy and Ken Lindner sell their bison meat through various outlets including farmers' markets.

graphic artist as being the impetus for their Water for Bison fundraiser.

With the estimated cost of \$150,000, over 500 people contributed money to raise that amount within 60 days. Unfortunately the Lindners have since learned that having the money won't solve their problem. Stabilizing the well proved more costly and lengthy than expected and re-drilling is necessary. However, with water in short supply throughout California, well drilling companies are booked solid and the repair costs are now an additional \$65,000-\$75,000.

"At this point we're pretty much out of money so we'll probably going to have to go back and ask for help, which is pretty embarrassing as you might imagine since we thought we were done," said Ken. "But it's turned out to be much more difficult and much more expensive than we ever expected."

If they can get water back this year, the Lindners estimate that maybe by 2017 their ranch can return to the way it was, with grass hay production possible and green fields for the bison to roam. Yet despite these challenges, the Lindners remain steadfast in their decision of purchasing the land and ranching – there are just so many reasons bison belong back on the land, Kathy says.

Having experienced the difficulties in navigating the

labyrinth of federal, state and local regulations regarding food safety and legislation of smaller food producers, the Lindners are advocates of revising the "one-size-fits-all" food-safety regulations because small producers who sell face-to-face to their customers operate differently than large producers who sell through traditional commercial distribution channels.

In *Standing into the Storm*, the Lindners devote several Call to Action sections, because "We so badly need smaller, ethical farmers who are willing to pick up the banner because our food system is compromised," said Kathy. And their advocacy is being noticed.

The Lindners spoke at a 2012 TEDx Miracle Mile event, the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco and were awarded 2nd place Farmer of the Year in Santa Monica. This year the Lindners spoke at the September 2014 National Heirloom Seed Expo in Santa

Rosa, California. With their passion so evident in their work and words, attendees will likely come away inspired to purchase 100-percent grass fed bison or maybe even start a bison ranch of their own – a future the Lindners would be proud to witness.

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