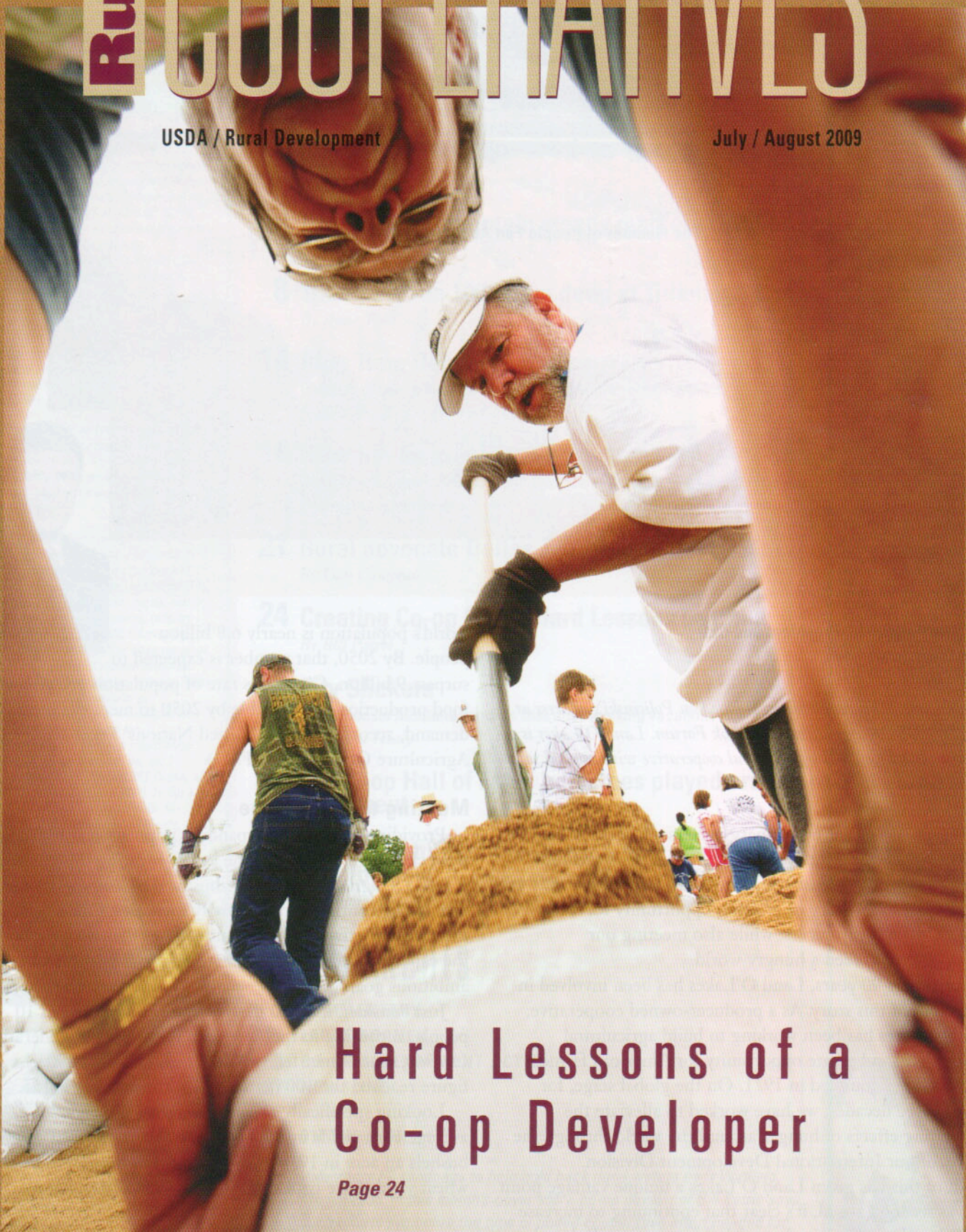


Rural COOPERATIVES

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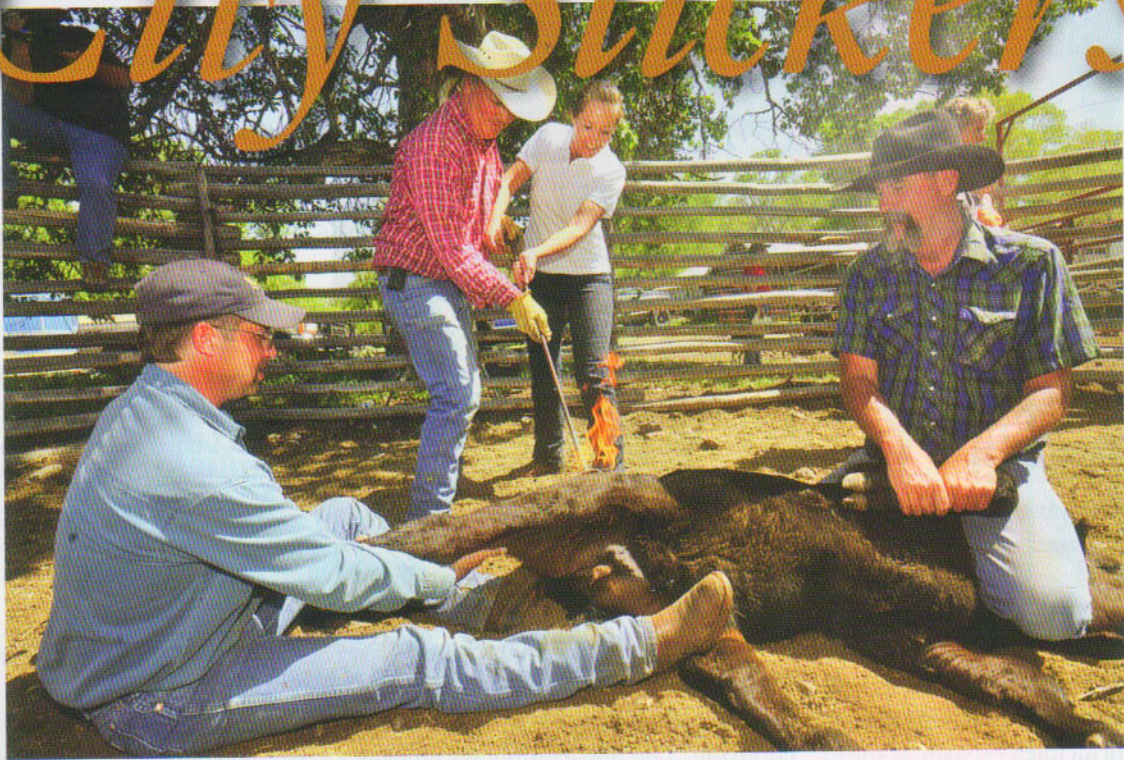
July / August 2009



Hard Lessons of a Co-op Developer

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City Slickers



Co-op boosts Montana ranches that offer working vacations

By Donna Healy

Editor's note: this article is reprinted courtesy the Billings Gazette. To see other photos and video footage, visit: <http://billingsgazette.com>.



railed by lone riders, the black Angus cattle came together along the grassy bench in slow-moving dribs and drabs.

In the valley below, a creek, muddy with runoff, cuts through a band of brush and trees. A panorama of snow-capped mountains ringed the horizon, the craggy Crazy Mountains to the northwest and the Beartooth and Absaroka ranges curling around from the south and west.

The Metcalf Ranch, along Lower Deer Creek, sits a few miles south of Interstate-90 off the Greycliff exit, east

of Big Timber. But the top-of-the-world view from the bench above the ranch house seems like a holdover from another century.

As the cattle came together, the pace quickened. Riders veered off to chase errant cows, loping away from the herd. More riders turned the herd of about 200 mother cows back in the right direction when they overshot the gate and moved them slowly down the road.

Among those riders was a lithe 32-year-old wearing a crisp white polo shirt and tight jeans. For Christine Ortjohann, from Cologne, Germany, the chance to herd the ranch's cattle at a late May branding fulfilled a life-long dream.

"I have a lot of good pictures in my mind," she said, her words nearly drowned out by calves bawling for their mothers.

In Germany, Ortjohann sells

newspaper printing ink for a living. She also spends the equivalent of about \$570 to board a horse in Germany, an expense she equates with the cost of a rental apartment.

At the rope-and-drag and into-the-fire branding in the Metcalf's corrals, the ranch's other paying guest, an ag student from a farm in Tennessee, wrestled several calves to the ground while Ortjohann watched from the sidelines.

"I don't really know how to do it," she said. "I will keep on watching and stay in the background a little bit."

But, a short time later, ranch owner Remi Metcalf, who usually prefers to let his wife, Susan, and 20-year-old son, Bret, take care of the ranch guests, steadied Ortjohann's hand as she burned the Metcalf's brand on three calves.

After many years of taking in ranch

Facing page: Rancher Remi Metcalf helps Christine Ortjohann of Germany brand a calf at the Metcalf vacation ranch in Big Timber, Mont. Below: Metcalf and Ortjohann round up cattle for branding. Lower: Kyrk Stenberg of Big Timber ropes calves prior to branding. Photos by David Grubbs, courtesy Billings Gazette



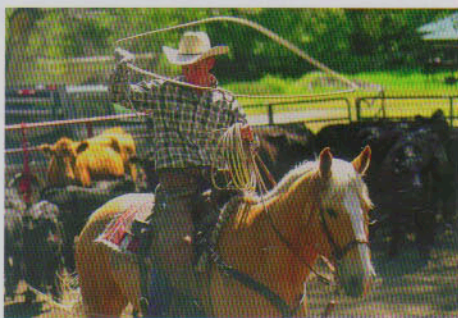
guests on their own, last year the Metcalfs joined Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations, a cooperative of more than 20 cattle ranches.

A handful of those ranches are clustered around Big Timber, although three of those ranches have temporarily stopped taking guests, in the aftermath of the Derby fire. Some of the ranches are in decidedly less touristy spots, including Harlowton and Musselshell.

The first 10 ranches banded together in 2002 to offer guests a realistic view of ranch life.

Karen Searle, the galvanizing force behind the cooperative, describes herself as a matchmaker, pairing ranch families and travelers. Searle, a former hospital administrator in Livingston, earns a commission for handling the marketing booking and some accounting chores.

The former director of a national center for cooperative business development credited Searle as having



put together the first agri-tourism cooperative of cattle ranches in the United States.

The co-op, which is actually a limited liability company, was formed after Searle returned in 2002 from a World Congress on Rural Women and Rural Issues in Spain. It's modeled along the lines of European farm holiday programs.

The basics were hashed out around a kitchen table by 10 Sweet Grass County ranchers, none of whom had ever hosted guests.

One common thread was the authenticity of the ranches, Searle said.

"We started with ranches that had been in families for generations," she said.

To keep it real, they didn't want anyone to hire wranglers to care for guests or to build a lodge to house them.

The co-op's members saw agri-tourism as a way to help preserve family ranches and to narrow the divide between ranch and city dwellers on land use and wildlife issues. Those goals have put them in the forefront of a trend in the travel industry labeled "geo-tourism."

The term describes travel that sustains or enhances the character of a

place, helping to preserve its heritage, habitats and scenic beauty. It fosters small-scale operations that strengthen local communities and tends to view family ranchers and farmers as stewards of the land.

While eco-tourism uses tourism revenue to help promote conservation, geo-tourism extends that conservation ethic to culture and history, Searle said.

In March, National Geographic launched an interactive map highlighting geo-tourism in the area surrounding Yellowstone National Park. The map includes the Bunkhouse Cooperative.

It's an attempt to spread the spotlight beyond the park's boundaries to the communities and lifestyles that help forge the character of the place, Searle said.

"The travel industry coined a word for something we've been doing forever," Susan Metcalf said. "They just kind of put into words what we've been doing: trying to keep families on the ranches and trying to preserve the integrity of the ranches and trying to teach people about our way of life and our viewpoint and struggles."

In addition to hosting guests, Metcalf works part-time as the Sweet Grass County superintendent of schools and writes a column for the *Western Ag Reporter*.

"You have to do every job you can to keep the ranch going," she said. "Last fall, we had \$4 fuel and 90-cent [a pound] calves, and that just doesn't pay the bills. You gotta do it some other way."

She has gotten used to juggling conflicting schedules.

After the branding, she gave out diplomas at Greycliff School's graduation, then went to Springdale School's picnic. The previous week, on short notice, she entertained Anthony Bourdain, the chef and notoriously prickly host of the Travel Channel series "No Reservations," for a show focused on Livingston and scheduled to air in late August.

The Metcalfs offered working ranch vacations on their own for about eight

years starting in 1991. For Susan Metcalf, who grew up on her father's guest ranch at Augusta, taking care of guests was no big switch, but her husband, Remi, found it nerve-wracking at first.

"It takes quite a bit of change to get used to having somebody tag along and ask questions," he said.

The Metcalfs bought the ranch on Lower Deer Creek themselves, but their son, Bret, represents the fifth generation on family ranches along the Musselshell River, where they summer cows, and in the Bozeman area, where they put up hay.

"Ranching's changing a lot. It's tougher and tougher for each generation to hang on," Remi Metcalf said.

This year, Bret put his "Lazy 4 Y" brand on cows he bought to start his own herd. The brand was passed down from his uncle, Elton "Shorty" Roberts, of Roundup.

Bret has wanted to ranch since he was old enough to walk, his father said.

"He'd make drawings of his ranch when he was a little bitty kid, of the house and corrals, the whole bit."

Agri-tourism is not a silver bullet that will keep family ranches going, said Bill Bryan, the director of the Rural Landscape Institute in Bozeman, an organization that examines agricultural policy issues.

For working ranches that depend on agriculture as their primary source of income, tourism is not usually a large source of revenue, said Bryan, who has been in the travel business for 24 years and co-founded the travel company Off the Beaten Path. It may generate enough income to allow a ranch wife to give up a part-time job in town or allow a son or daughter to come back to the ranch, Bryan said. Affordable liability insurance is often a major stumbling block.

Having several ranches work together on a common marketing strategy helps, Bryan said, because tapping into the right market can be prohibitively expensive. Bryan has worked on the idea of forming a seven-

state agri-tourism cooperative.

Montana Bunkhouses has a much better reach in the marketplace than would an individual ranch, he said. It offers travelers more choices and allows one person to promptly handle queries and bookings.

Although bookings through Montana Bunkhouse have fallen off significantly in the troubled economy, Searle sees encouraging signs for future growth, including the interactive map and a TV segment about the Padlock Ranch, which should air this winter, on "America's Heartland," a weekly public television program.

Bryan sees a niche for working ranches among travelers who want an authentic, meaningful experience and are trying to forge a connection to the West. He describes those travelers as looking for "transformational experiences," profound experiences that change their orientation to the world.

Although such geo-travelers make up a tiny fraction of tourists, Montana's rural, agricultural base plays a large role in attracting tourists to the state, said Victor Bjornberg, who directs the tourism development and educational program for the Montana Office of Tourism.

"It's those wide-open spaces," Bjornberg said. "We are the Alaska of the lower 48 states. What we have is the most unspoiled, wide-open spaces, unspoiled landscapes."

Agri-tourism fits into the branding effort to market the state's attributes.

Bjornberg dates the current interest in agri-tourism to the mid-1990s, triggered, as he sees it, by state-sponsored workshops on farm and ranch recreation businesses, the state's centennial in 1989 and the movie "City Slickers."

Though the movie portrayal was a far cry from the reality, city slickers seem to get a kick out of their up-close taste of ranch life.

Travelers come to the ranches as guests, Searle said. They go home as advocates for family ranching. ■