

TWO BEST AND TWO WORST DECISIONS

Kory Bierle
Madsen Ranch, Midland, SD

My name is Kory Bierle and I am from a family ranch just east of Midland, South Dakota, on the Bad River. The name of our ranch is the Madsen Ranch. We use that name because it was my mother's family that settled and started the place. My great-great-grandfather showed my great-grandfather where a good place for a ranch would be, and we've been there ever since. My house is just a few yards from where the original log house was. The gal that talked to me about participating in the Range Beef Cow Symposium this year said that, from the evaluation forms from past symposiums, you were interested in hearing from a small to average size rancher, while you got him here. We are average to even below average in size and herd numbers for Haakon County. Midland is a town of about 125 people, and I graduated from a class of 13 students. We no longer have a high school and, for a bit of trivia, the former Secretary of Agriculture for South Dakota, also a resident of Haakon County, said that Haakon County has the lowest number of women of child-bearing age in South Dakota.

We are mainly a cow-calf operation. We raise our own replacements, a few yearlings, and some years we even put up some hay. We have been experiencing a very long and intense drought this decade. Since 2001 we have only put up hay three years, and they were short. My wife Robin and I operate with my folks, and we also run cattle on some land that was in Robin's family. We lease a place just a couple of miles away for summer grazing. We also put up hay on shares down the river.

The two best decisions that have been made concerning the ranch:

1. Relationships, entering into. Aside from the two big obvious ones--Jesus as Savior, Robin as wife--entering into certain relationships has been very positive for me. Professional relationships include fellow ranchers in industry groups; professionals in the industry such as vets, feed reps, pharmaceutical reps, and specialists from extension. Besides the knowledge that has been gained or gleaned from these individuals, even some increased business opportunities have made themselves available. I am thinking of the place we lease. It came about because, while the son of the owner and I were attending a meeting, I asked him how they rented the place and what were some of the general operational practices. He remembered my questions and desire to maybe someday rent it, and today we do.

The big reason I think relationships like these are important is the knowledge that can be learned. Most of the people I am thinking about have some sort of degree that says they have technical knowledge about certain things. But most all of them have the practical knowledge that makes it valuable. They live and work in the real world, so they can

relate things to me in terms that I can understand. I have a degree in business administration and accounting. So as far as the production side of ranching is concerned, I had a lot to learn. From health to nutrition to breeding to grazing management, I had a lot to learn, and the people I chose to associate with have helped me greatly.

2. The other best decision I would say has been to modernize certain equipment. I hesitate to give examples because I do subscribe to the theory that if you can't go down to the river and cut the repairs for it, you don't need it! But that being said, I do believe that certain things help us to do a better job and save time, energy, and money. One example is the computer that I am typing this paper on. Beside the fact that it corrects most of the spelling and typing errors, I use one for lots of record-keeping and business analysis. After you can figure out how to make the programs work, you can look at things in report form instead of spending all your time collecting and tabulating data. You can analyze information.

The other piece I would mention is a toss up between the 57 Chevy truck we converted to a gooseneck trailer and a post digger/driver. Needless to say, the "truck" starts every time now with out having to pull it for half a mile and stops when you press on the brakes instead of heading for a stack of bales. Again, we spent some money, but now we have a safe and reliable piece of equipment, some things are just worth the cost. As far as the post digger/driver, our place is like a lot of ranches. Grandpa built most of the fences 70 to 80 years ago and it is getting time to replace them. Here again, we feel that it was worth the money to be able to build a quality fence in way less time and with a lot less work than the old methods we used to employ. I guess the point I am trying to make here is that we use other criteria than just financial to judge these decisions. I think this is another area where a holistic approach of looking at the situation can pay off in ways other than just financial.

The two worst, it is hard to narrow it down to just two.

1. Not leaving home right after college and experiencing the outside world of other ranches or even just other aspects of the business world. Being an only son and knowing that I was needed was a strong lure right back to the place right out of college. Also the idyllic vision of the cowboy way of life was a strong influence. The stories of grandpa and great-grandpa were a great sense of pride and the feeling that the tradition had to be carried on was immense. I embraced the romantic stories of the ranch, such as the chasing of horses from up by Teeney Corner all the way to the Old Ranch on a high lope. But it was the ones about the local bank that both grandpa and great-grandpa served on the board of directors, and how and why they helped make the decisions that guided the bank through the lean years and what various customers did to succeed that I really should have been waiting on with bended ear. No specific names, mind you. That was taboo, to speak of bank secrets and they never did. But just the broad guidelines that the successful customers followed and how they did it to prosper.

Don't get me wrong, right out of college I was able to establish several changes to the management of the ranch that needed to be done and helped and continue to help to this day. A formal partnership that was changed into a Limited Liability Company, several bookkeeping changes, and the knowledge that I still had a lot to learn (this is where the relationships with outside experts helped) about cattle and range.

But I think that if I had been pushed out of the nest, so to speak, to see how the rest of the world operates, I could have really put the theories that I learned in college to work. It has been said that education is condensed experience. But we all know that the experience is necessary, and if you don't have it, how quickly you can get into deep trouble, (insert your own political statement here!)

2. The other was a combination of trying to expand the cowherd (all be it modestly) and holding on to it during the last several years of drought at the Madsen Ranch. The debt load that has been burdened by the operation is almost stifling. Having to buy almost all the hay and feed that has been consumed this decade, along with updating the existing hay equipment to put up what we did in a couple of years that we could hay. Paying for hay equipment and buying hay is not the path to prosperity. This while trying to keep a few more heifers back to increase the numbers of the herd to fully stock the place.

Notice I said updating the hay equipment. I believe this better describes what we did than modernizing. The frustration that was being felt by not being able to get anything done because of repairs and low capacity and capability was quite a bit. Coupling this with the lost quality of hay and extra time allocated to that enterprise had us seriously considering whether or not it was worth it. At the time, we didn't feel we could get a steady enough supply at reasonable prices, maybe the end of some CRP contracts might change that or even some new guidelines that allow haying every third year will help resolve those issues. But that could be one of the topics if I am fortunate enough to be able to address you at a future symposium! Thank you.