



featured

NATRONA COUNTY FAMILY SETS DEEP ROOTS, REAPS

A river truly has run through this family's long-time affair with agriculture

Donna Hoffman

Natrona County family farmers with beginnings as ranchers have diversified into raising hay, growing vegetables for sale at roadside stands and farmers markets, and offering drift boat and guided fishing opportunities.

Meet This Farm Family

Ron and Stacey Richner in Natrona County have been farming and ranching together since they married in 1986. The two had known

each other long before that; their families had been friends in Golden, Colorado. They became reacquainted when they were both in Granby, Colorado, with their families and started dating soon afterward. The result? Marriage and two children, Weston and Kailey, who have grown to be part of the family enterprise.

Ron and his parents purchased the Miracle Mile Ranch when he graduated high school in 1976 and moved to Wyoming. This ranching operation focused on cattle production

and a small store with 10 cabins for vacationing fishermen or families who enjoyed being off the beaten path on a section of the North Platte River. The family knew in the late 1980s they would need to grow their own hay – or purchase it at a high price – so they purchased a farm for that. In 1990, the family moved to the new farm and in 1997 got out of the cattle business and sold the Miracle Mile Ranch.

Stacey's parents also joined in on the family farming in 2000 when they moved to an adjoining property and began sharing the farming duties and time together along the banks of the river that has run through this family's life for so long.

Setting Deep Roots

The Richners have great pride in the quality of their hay. The alfalfa, just like the family, has deep roots and is a big part of their operation. Ron plants the hay and, with family help, grows it to premium harvest quality. Ron does most of the swather work and shares raking duties with Weston. Ron and Stacey have "his and hers" tractors with balers and work the fields together to get the crop harvested.

Ron has perfected his technique over years of hay crops and multiple annual cuttings. He leaves the hay until flowers are in the purple stage so the nutrient content is not too high for horses and cattle. Baling is the



Stacey Richner sells produce at a farmers market.

landowner

RESULTS OF HARD WORK AND DIVERSIFICATION



The drift boat and guided fishing enterprises add diversity to the family business.



Ron and Stacey Richner

most crucial step for quality of the final product because proper moisture influences final nutrient content.

He says he can tell when the hay is ready to bale at the right moisture content. Once he decides the crop is ready and tests for nutrient content and moisture, he says his estimates are usually only off by a percentage or two.

The Richners continue to produce small bales because of their field size and equipment. Changing bale size would require new equipment, and they like to sell to people who use smaller bales. Their hay has won blue ribbons in local hay shows like the

Central Wyoming Fair and Rodeo and, in 2007, hay from the Richner farm won at the World Forage Analysis Superbowl in Madison, Wisconsin.

Blue Ribbon Diversification

With all the family members surrounding the 577 acres of farmland, they began to think of ways to diversify from the alfalfa crop to winter grazing lands for neighboring cattle producers and then growing sweet corn to sell at a roadside stand.

When that was so successful, they decided to diversify by adding summer squash, beets, turnips, carrots, and green beans. Alcova Sweet

Corn has been a tradition in the North Platte Valley for generations, and they have kept up a high standard over the years.

The crops gave the whole family something to do together along the banks of the river and provided a crop for the kids to sell to passing motorists. The kids also helped with planting and then weeding these farm crops. They have plenty of fresh produce to share with family and friends, to sell at the roadside stand, and also at local farmers markets.

One of the 4-H projects Weston took up years ago still runs around the farm. They raise chickens and enjoy



Wildlife is abundant along the North Platte River.



Beautiful sunsets are a country living perk.



The Richners prefer offering small bales to their customers.

having fresh eggs they share with neighbors and people from town. Ron says he likes all of the rural lifestyle except the chickens. "But he does like having fresh eggs," Stacey adds.

Where the Deer and Antelope Play

With various crops along the North Platte River, the farm abounds with wildlife including deer, antelope, Canadian geese, ducks, and turkeys. They are joined by raccoons, skunks, and other wildlife that the Richners would rather not have in the fields. Watching wildlife is important. Binoculars are always handy at the living room window, and many stuffed birds and big game adorn the

family room walls from Wes' hunting excursions.

One more way they have diversified their business is by adding Lone Tree Drift Boats and guiding fishing trips as a recreational component to the farm.

The Seasons Ahead

Weston has hopes of continuing his fishing and guiding work as a way to return to the family farm and make a living alongside his parents. He first wants to go to college and study business before coming home to the farm and would like to continue the haying operations.

The farm saw big changes over the past year, as Ron and Stacey each

lost one of their parents. Kailey left for her second year of college last fall, and they know Weston will be heading off to college next year, so the family dynamic and list of family members available to help with projects will have to be adjusted.

Ron and Stacey plan to stay on the farm and continue enjoying this rural lifestyle. They remain active in their community and enjoy the opportunity to come to town for farmers markets, sporting events, and many other activities, but they always look forward to returning to their quiet little place along the river they call home.

At the end of the day, when the clouds are just right, they can sit back and enjoy the amazing sunsets.

Donna Hoffman may well have partaken of some of the Richner produce at their truck stand or at farmers markets to ensure she had conducted proper research before writing the article. Hoffman is the county horticulturist in the Natrona County office of University of Wyoming Extension. She can be reached at (307) 235-9400 or at dhoffman@natronacounty-wy.gov.