The Saratoga Sun's 2023 Hats Off to Ag

Our Annual Salute to Agriculture

"Facing the Storm"

2023 Hats off to Ag

Iron Creek bison face the ongoing winter with their majestic heads pointed towards the wind. Les Barkhursts' herd have proven hardier than his lifelong experience with cattle.

Facing the Storm

Like the bison it raises, Iron Creek Bison Company weathers the long winter of 2023 head on

By Virginia Parker

Massive animals blanketed in snow and foggy breath surrounding their snouts might spark wide-eyed wonder and, possibly fear, in most of us.

For Les Barkhurst, it's something he embraces and feels blessed to experience. The magnificence of a bison is undeniable and Barkhurst would be the first to say so. Raised in the Valley, descended from generations of ranchers, his family has been ranching here since 1887. It's only been the last few years they've started raising bison instead of cattle.

Dealing with a tough winter like this year wasn't as difficult as it would have been with cows because, according to Barkhurst, bison love the storms. He said when a storm comes in they get very excited and run around, almost jumping like a rabbit.

Barkhurst said because the bison's head and shoulders are covered with more fur and thicker hide than their rear end, they tend to face the wind.

"That's why the Wyoming flag has the bison facing the pole," said Barkhurst.

They don't hide in the willows or behind windbreaks because this is a normal environment for a bison.

Barkhurst said they are so intelligent and awe inspiring, he is constantly learning from them. As far as caring for these majestic animals, his family treats them with respect and yields to them, staying out of their zone. It's a different dynamic than cows. Fences need to be taller and stronger for when their fight-or-flight mode kicks in. They only work them once a year, bringing them in to wean calves, tag them and check the females for next year's breeding.

Winter hasn't thrown a curve ball at the Barkhurst spread because this is nothing new. Preparing for the worst weather has been a way of life for this rancher.

Barkhurst said "the moisture that we have received in the past two years has been very valuable to this valley. This is more of a normal year, like when we were kids."

While water is important to all ranchers, Barkhurst on knows the oldest water right in the Valley—which dates back to 1878—and the beginning of irrigation in the area. This was about the time ranchers started developing hay meadows from acres of sagebrush.The Valley ranchers began using the sun, water and soil to produce proteins and energy to feed livestock, which they in turn convert into protein and carbohydrates for human consumption. That's what is a part of the economy in this Valley. Without that this community would be very different.

"The ranchers learned very quickly to store up feed to get through the worst possible winter," said Barkhurst. "They also stored up a little extra for the variables such as severe temperatures and wind, and even the predators that compete with livestock for feed."

Wildlife are having a tough time this winter and Barkhurst believes there is more wildlife than there is feed available. He said as the snow melts more dead animals that couldn't live through this winter will be discovered. In Wyoming, it's common for wildlife such as deer, elk and antelope—which can't survive on just sagebrush—to forage on ranchlands.

Barkhurst said it's hard for ranchers to calculate the resources needed to get their livestock through the year when wildlife come in to take refuge and find feed. While he doesn't believe in starvation as population control for wildlife, the large numbers of antelope, deer and elk looking for food is definitely taking a toll. He believes that it is one of the things which has affected many of the small ranchers in the area.

Barkhurst said he has recently sold hay to locals who didn't have enough to get through the winter, and he's honored to be able to provide it and grateful for the abundant harvests of hay he had last year. The silver lining to the intense snowfall is it will likely produce another bumper crop of hay this year.

Just like the bison he raises, Barkhurst will face the storm and be prepared for what comes.

2023 Hats off to Ag

A heifer and calf find a cleared area in the pasture to share the warmth of the sunshine. Ranchers like Cheryl Munroe spent much of the winter plowing snow to provide their livestock a place to calve.

Bringing in the herd

Weather permitting in Cheryl Munroe's vocabulary

By Virginia Parker

Every morning this winter, a frozen chain on a gate latch awaits ranch owner Cheryl Munroe when she goes to let the cows out.

Munroe came to Encampment in 1982 to teach at the Encampment School. She has been ranching all her life beginning on the Wind River Reservation. She taught at Fort Washakie for several years before coming to the Valley where she met her husband, Monte Munroe.

They ran sheep as well as cows for quite a while. They had so much trouble with predators they finally sold the sheep and just kept a few for the kids to show at 4H. When the kids went to college, they sold the rest of the sheep and used the money for tuition. Munroe taught at the Encampment School for many years and only recently retired.

She is affectionately known by most of the locals as "Mo".

Each morning, Mo moves the older cows out of the barn and into the pens to make room for the first calf heifers to come out and get water and, hopefully, sunshine. Her dog, Tilley, is immediately alert and ready to work, on the heels of the cows directed by Mo shrill whistle. She said this dog has a lot of natural instincts and follows directions very well. Her older dog, Jigs, whines while sitting beside her. Too old to chase cows, she still goes out and coordinates from her perch in Mo's side-by-side. Depending on the chores, she gets back to the house around 2 p.m.

At night, she brings the cows and heifers into the big barn. To prepare for winter, they bed the barns heavily with straw or grass hay because it gets so muddy and mucky. They continue bedding throughout the winter.

"It's a little snug in there but, with it being so cold and icy, it's better for them. I prefer they calve outside but at night it's better this way," said Mo.

The Munroes have lost a few calves this year. Recently, a pair of twins were born premature but couldn't be saved. Each calf lost means less money for Mo and her operations when its time to take the cattle to the sail barn.

She feeds the first-calf heifers, those pregnant for the first time, grain to give them a little boost. They stand at the fence staring at her and waiting for their treat. She also has two steers in the barn which belong to her granddaughter, Peyton.

The snow at Munroe's ranch is crusted over with ice and measures three feet on the level. They've had to plow snow this year just to make places for the cows to eat and for them to lay down when they calve. These areas usually last a few days. This has been a difficult winter with so much snow coming in.

The wind is not unusual, but this year has brought a lot of snow.

Mo keeps about 350 head of cows now, with a few bulls. Her son, Lisle, helps as much as possible. Once they can get more pasture cleared of snow, they will be moving cows to another area to make more room. Until then, quarters are a little cramped.

Poached, fried, boiled or frozen

Just like other livestock, raising chickens in the winter means hard work and early mornings

By Virginia Parker

Eggs so fresh you can hear the crackle is a truth in my kitchen.

Blessed with five to seven eggs each day, I eat a lot of these chicken "nuggets." I have five Barred Rocks which just turned a year old and lay four eggs per day, sometimes five. There are three other hens in the house that are hybrids and have passed their second birthday. Wintering chickens this year has been an even bigger challenge than usual.

With deep snow, high winds, and severely low temperatures I have worried about them sometimes. They are in a hen house with a nesting box built on the side. I add straw about every other day and sometimes alfalfa hay goes in, which is a big treat for them. I don't clean it out until spring because the mixture of manure and straw creates the heat needed for my poultry crew.

This year I covered the side of their apartment with a tarp. I left room for them to get out, but it gave them a little more room to move around when the snows came. They greet me with a "brrr" and scold me for being late as soon as I lift their little door to let them out.

Water being essential to any animal's good health, it's the first thing I deal with in the morning. They don't care if it's 10 below zero and I can't feel my face, they need a drink of clean, fresh water. Heaters for water containers are not very efficient when the mercury takes a dive into our near-Antarctic winter wonderland, so refilling water is essential. Once the temperature stays around 15 degrees, a heater base works wonders.

Filling their feed trough with 20% protein Layer feed is also essential because they expend a lot of energy keeping warm. I don't usually feed in the evenings but, during the cold weather, they need it.

My chickens don't care about the snow or the cold. Not even the wind. I try to shovel a path at least eight feet long for them to come outside and get some fresh air. I throw down some straw so they aren't walking directly on the snow, but they really don't seem to care. I've watched them fly up on the drifts which are over my head and just stand there, lifting one foot, then the next, back and forth, looking around at the big world they can't see from the ground.

This year I didn't lose any of the hens to the cold, but I did have to butcher one that was sick. Unable to diagnose the problem, I couldn't take the chance of something passing through the flock.

Never a pleasant experience, it was made worse by blowing snow, and sub-zero temperatures but was necessary to preserve the flock. All in all, the girls survived one of the worst winters I can remember and now they're enjoying the mud mixed with straw and the one dry spot they found to take a dust bath.

As long as they're happy—even with the cold and snow—I'll still have fresh, crackling eggs in my kitchen.

Photo by Virginia Parker

Chickens brave the snow, wind and cold to hang out on the porch waiting for their treats. Often pecking on the glass door to remind their staff that it's time for breakfast.

Nothing for free, little for sale

With deep snow and lost calves, Big Creek Ranch hopes the silver linings of a tough winter is a wet summer

By Virginia Parker

Where's the beef?

There are 2,500 tenderloin-producing bovine milling around at Big Creek Ranch cared for by Mark Dunning, the ranch manager, and his crew. Dunning came to the area in 1976 and started working at Big Creek about 1986, right after college.

Big Creek Ranch is one of three ranches operating under the umbrella of the A-Bar-A Ranch with the other ranch being Stateline Ranch, which straddles the Wyoming/Colorado Border. With nearly five decades in the Valley and more than 30 years of experience at the ranch, Dunning has some historial context regarding this winter.

He said while it has been a little above average, things could still change.

> ***"We don't get anything for free here, and damn little for sale"***
>
> ***said Mark Dunning, Big Creek Ranch Manager***

"It's maybe one of the top ten as far as snow depth, and such," said Dunning. "We're used to the heavy snow, we make sure we put up a lot of hay, keep the equipment up and running and live with winter."

The crew at Big Creek Ranch approach winter feeding similar to how other ranches in the area do. One part of the crew goes out to plow the snow while another follows, delivering hay to the cattle. According to Dunning, this is just a daily routine and is one of the ways they are set up for winter.

One thing they don't typically do, which they've had to do this year, is take care of the road at their sister ranch, the A-Bar-A. According to Dunning, this year his crew has had to use snowblowers to clear the road for A-Bar-A employees.

One issue some other ranchers have had which Big Creek hasn't dealt with is game getting into their hay.

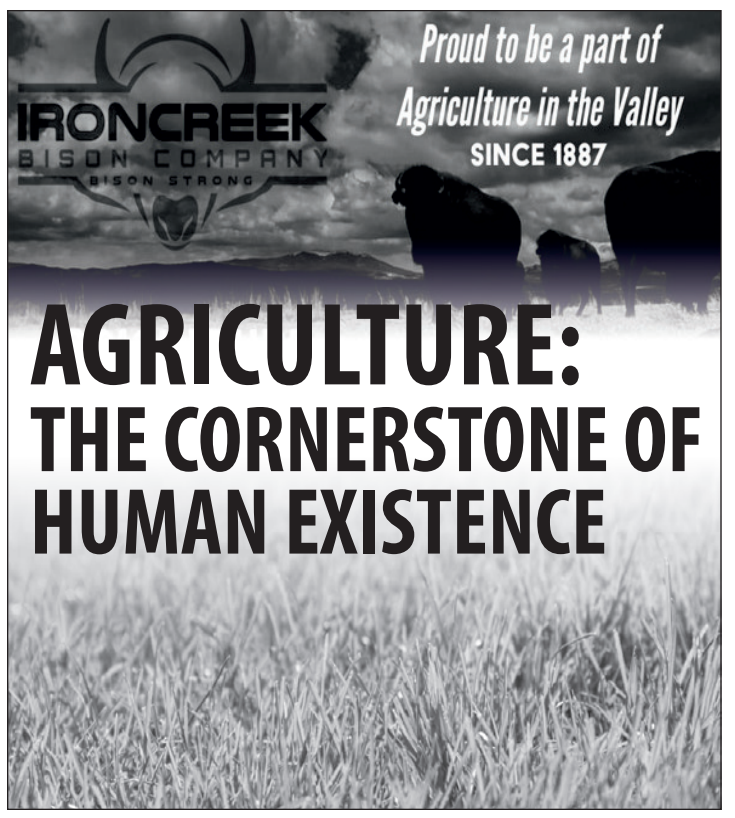
"The game migrate in the fall and head north, so they don't have too many issues with animals in their hay," said Dunning. "There's a few elk, but no deer or antelope."

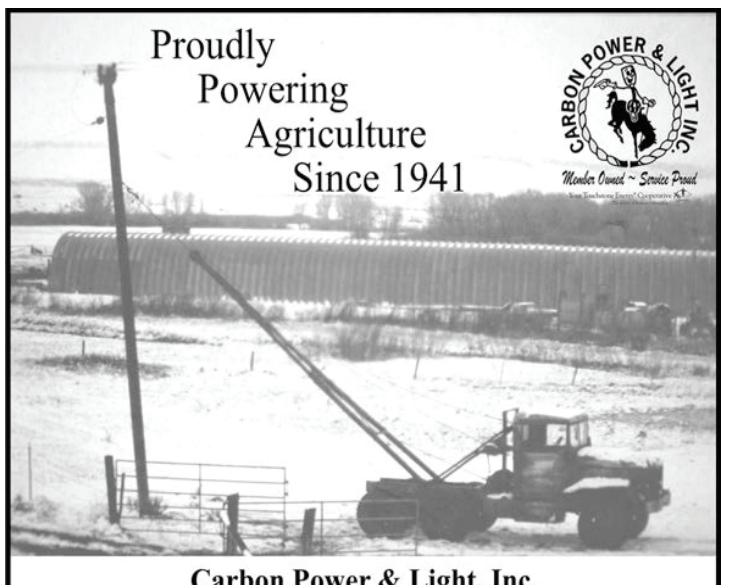
According to Dunning, the biggest challenge this winter has been with the herd in the Saratoga area, up near Sheep Rock. The snow is so deep and crusted over, it's been tough to get to the cattle. Both the first and second calvers are on this spread. Given that there are 800 head out there, they don't have a barn big enough to bring them all in every night. They do have some traps built which have lights on them so it's easier to check them.

Even with the calving barn, they've lost some livestock. The crew at Sheep Rock hasn't been able to go in on horseback this winter, so they were using a snow machine for a while to get out to the herd. Dunning said there's bare ground out there now, so it's made it much easier, especially since the heifers have started dropping calves.

The silver lining Dunning is looking for with the amount of snowfall is more irrigating water.

"We don't get anything for free here, and damn little for sale," said Dunning. "If you don't have a tough winter, you're probably going to have a tough summer."





A real cowgirl faces the Wyoming winter

Konnar Knotwell braves cold and snow to watch over heifers and their calves

By Virginia Parker

Sliding into the cab of her pickup at 7 a.m. every morning, Konnar Knotwell heads out to feed cows, check on the newest additions to the herd and scoop up the tiny ones that need a little more help to get started. The pickup heater blows freezing air which turns warmer eventually, and tries, to keep the ice on the windshield at bay.

Konnar has been on ranches her entire life, starting very young helping her dad. She graduated from Encampment High School and went on to Texas A & M, returning to her hometown after picking up her diploma. She went to work with her brother, Ridge, at the Silver Spur.

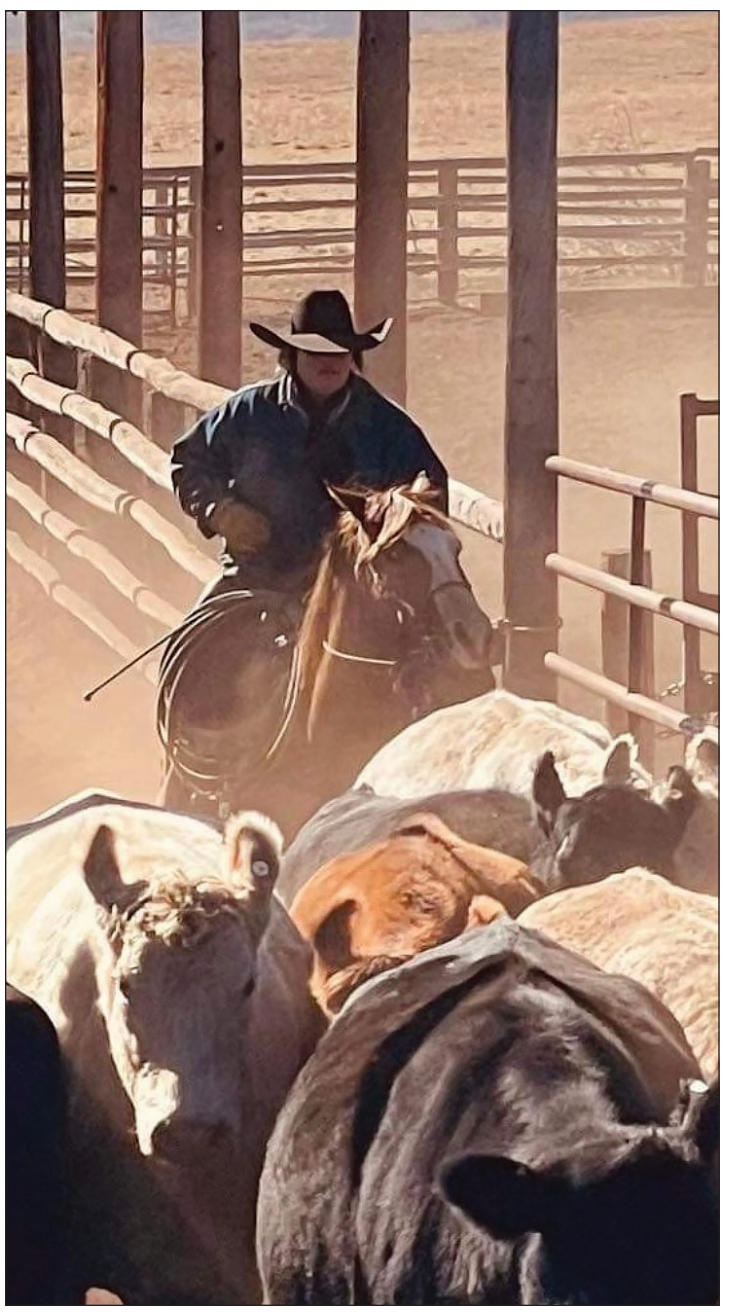


Photo courtesy of Tatum Russell

Though technology has changed the way ranches can operate, Konnar Knotwell still uses the traditional method of a horse and dog to herd cattle.

She decided it was time to grow up, work full time and live on her own. She called it weaning herself off. Ridge drives through all morning and tags the calves. He'll work all night and when it's really cold, he drives through all the cows and checks for calves that need to be warmed up in the hot box. Everyone works about 12 hours a day.

No stranger to the cold, or to the harshness of the Wyoming winters, Konnar said this one has been a little tougher than usual. This year they have 200 first calf heifers, 200 second calvers and 750 cows. The cows calve outside in the two pastures near the calving barn. Konnar has four other people who work with her.

When she goes out in the morning with two huge round bales of hay to feed the cows, sometimes they won't unroll properly because the snow is so deep. Konnar drops the front bucket and plows her way across the pasture, slowly unrolling the hay bale, followed closely by the herd. She said they will ambush you if you don't pay attention.

While other girls her age are planning for spring break, Konnar doesn't look much farther than the end of the driveway at this time of the year. Once or twice a month she'll make it to the post office and, maybe, the grocery store but her focus is on her four legged charges waiting in the cold for fresh water and hay.

Like many local ranchers, the first calf heifers are kept near the barn, usually penned, so they are easy to catch. During calving season, Konnar will find a new calf with its mama which she moves into the barn where they are bedded down with fresh straw and have some time to warm up. There are hot boxes which provide a comfortable and safe place for the newborn calf in the first few hours after birth. Calves that don't get up right away can freeze to the ground. They try to find them as soon as possible because they don't recover well past a certain point.

Konnar will scoop up a baby that's shivering in the cold and not doing well and put it on the floor board of her truck to warm up.

"This can be tricky because a calf can go from barely moving to tearing your truck up," said Konnar.

She can't use her dogs during the winter, but once the ground starts to thaw and the bogs and ditches fill up she uses them quite a bit. They can go places that she can't to get a calf moving out of a ditch.

For now, though, she'll push through the snow to find those calves which need a little extra mothering.

A Rustic, Rugged Poetry

All across America, the barn represents a history of pioneering and the frontier way of life. Many are still used, others are now a ghost of their former selves

By Virginia Parker

Shades of golds, browns and silvers shine on the Neal's barn as the afternoon sun slides across it's wood surface

What is it about barns? Whether close to the road, or far in the distance, it's difficult not to take a good look as you pass by.

The Thomas Moulton Barn in Grand Teton National park has been called "the most photographed barn in America." With the mountain range positioned perfectly behind it, there is often a moment of complete wonder when gazing at it.

What causes this wonderment with barns? Is it the history and the sense of tradition that oozes from their weathered boards or is it imagining what it would be like to play in those dark, cool chambers? Can you hear the giggles and screams of children playing tag and hide and seek? Picture the pioneers who lived near the barn, their struggles and triumphs in a challenging land.

From any barn's beginning the farmer or rancher who used it would most likely have adapted it over the years to fit his changing needs. Some barns start out as hay barns, perhaps evolving into a heifer barn—to protect first-time calvers—or a place for horses to find shelter.

In the past, the barn was more important than the house. Without a barn, where would you store seeds and have shelter to work away from the elements?

Some barns had basements where animals, manure, and feed could be stored. Being warmer, and probably dryer, in the winter months this would have been an efficient use of space.

There are many barns sitting silent, orphaned long ago when the owners moved away or a newer version was built. Some barns are small, maybe 1000 square feet, but most are at least twice that size. Over time, the barn suffers, with boards warping and buckling, rafters rotting away to the point that repairs are not an option.

Barns have personalities, there's poetry about them that stirs our imagination. The variety of barns in America is staggering. In Pennsylvania many barns are built against a hill, calling them bank barns. There were two levels with one side higher on the embankment. With giant doors, wagons could drive right through, into the hayloft on a path which went to the upper part of the barn. The animals entered from the lower side right onto the main floor. This would have made loading and unloading very efficient. Hay could be thrown down to the livestock from the upper floor.

In places like Minnesota or New England, the roofs are very high in order to store more hay.

Barns were sized for what they contained. Cows and hay required larger buildings than sheep or goats or those built for storing crops. In the South, ventilation was imperative because the tobacco would be hung from racks to dry.

Ventilation is important in any barn. When summer comes, the sun beating down on a barn roof where grain is stored could result in an explosion. Barns have slits running vertically along the walls for air; or a cupola. Stone barns often have a star-shaped design cut out of the stones. Farmers appreciated these little entries into the barn because the owls would come in and roost, taking care of the rodent population.

Barn raisings are still held in some parts of the country. Building a barn is a big project and, years ago, many built their own. The focus was on working as quickly as possible so everyone could get back to their own chores. Meals are served and kids play, helping when they can. In some New England areas, barns were attached to the farmhouse or had a covered passageway. This way the family could feed the animals, milk the cows, and take care of other chores without fighting their way through a blizzard.

Despite their rich legacies and strong timbers, many of these structures are left behind, empty, with doors swinging in the wind, as a new generation moves forward.