

All in the Family By Sheila V. Sybrant

Note from Sheila:

When Patty was ready to rework the Barstow Angus website, she asked me to edit the copy on the family information page.

I asked her what message she wanted to send with that copy. She didn't have to pause for even one second to respond: "Family," she said. She said that the Barstow Angus Ranch is a family operation; and she wanted to stress that partly because that's what defines their operation and partly because when she and her family do business with other people, they like dealing with family operations.

I said that would be easy enough to do, but I wanted to expand the copy and create more than a timeline of events: I wanted to talk to the family members and hear their stories and feelings about working together and being together. She told me to go for it.

It turned out to be lengthier than I'd anticipated, but, after I finished, there really wasn't anything that I wanted to cut. One, rather negative, expression says that "the devil is in the details." I prefer to think that the family is in the details. Sometimes those two things are the same thing, but mostly—and especially in a loving and close family like the Barstows—they're not.

It All Began with (Gasp!) Herefords

Barstow connections to cattle actually began with Herefords instead of Angus. Back in the early to mid 1900s, Paul and Jenny Barstow, Marlan Barstow's parents, were mainly wheat farmers, but they dabbled in cattle, too. They had Hereford cows and calved them, raising the calves, feeding them out, and shipping them to Kansas City by railroad.

Not in Kansas Anymore

Marlan and Shirley continued ranching on the family place in Kansas. However, another state began to look appealing to them: Nebraska.

During the years that they raised Herefords, they would travel to South Dakota and Nebraska sales in the winter to buy feeder cattle. Those trips piqued their interest in Nebraska as a potential new home.

In particular, they liked the Springview area: with its river and trees, it was an attractive contrast to the flat landscape back home. In 1976 they purchased the home place near Springview, where Neri and Patty live and where bull sales are held.

Fun Fact: Marlan and Shirley also went to British Columbia, Canada, to scout out a potential new home. They thought it was beautiful, but there were too many trees for Marlan's taste. "Marlan said he'd go nuts with all those trees," said Shirley. "We're really glad we landed here instead."

The place didn't become home right away, though. The Barstows moved up in fits and starts. For a year, Marlan and Shirley leased out the ranch. It wasn't until 1978, though, that at least some of the Barstows—and some of the cows—moved to Nebraska. That was the year that Marlan sent 80 to 100 commercial Hereford cows from Kansas to live on the Nebraska ranch. That was also the year that Neri, who was in his senior year of high school, moved there, with Shirley's parents. Marlan and Shirley followed in 2001, although Shirley didn't move permanently until quite a bit later: she actually commuted for seventeen years between Kansas and Nebraska because she was a pharmacist for the state of Kansas and wanted to work until her retirement date.

The son of a neighbor in Kansas leases the family farm now.

A Cow of a Different Color

Up until about the 1980s, Marlan and Shirley continued the Hereford tradition on the family farm in Kansas as well as on the new place in Nebraska. However, Marlan was growing disillusioned with the breed mostly because they had a lot of eye problems. Thus, when their daughters needed cattle for 4-H, Marlan bought some black Angus heifers—“and that’s how we got started” in the Angus business, said Shirley.

Marlan started doing a lot of reading and studying about the Angus breed. He was impressed with their genetics and their hardiness and felt that they were easier to calve out than Herefords.

He started building a registered Angus herd and learned how to AI. Why registered? Marlan “just fell in love with the registered business,” said Shirley. And certainly, in the early 1980s, there was an opportunity to build a registered herd because a lot of ranchers were selling out, so Marlan went to purebred dispersal sales and began acquiring cows.

The Dating Game

The year 1978 was also significant because it was the nascency of the second generation of Barstows in the family business. That was the year that Neri and Patty met.

When Neri moved to Nebraska, he was in his senior year of high school, and he met Patty, who was also a senior, at Keya Paha County High School.

Patty grew up between Springview and Valentine on a ranch 25 miles northwest of where she and Neri live now. Her parents ranched, and her father was a fur dealer. Patty worked in the fur shed after school, so she became quite handy with the tools of hunting. (Yes, “I can take care of myself,” she laughed.) More than that, though, “I learned a lot from my dad watching him work with people when making the deals for fur,” she said.

The first time that Patty took Neri to see the fur house, it was right after her father had just installed a new alarm system—a loud one. Patty didn’t know how to turn it off—they had to wait for a cousin who worked there to “rescue” them. Neri said that he can’t really remember *exactly* what he felt right at the moment, but he certainly remembers the incident!

Fun Fact: Patty’s father wears a size 16 ring. His ring fits over both the pinkie and ring finger of Patty.

Neri was drawn to Patty because she was attractive and nice. Likewise, Patty thought that Neri was nice; in addition, he had a sense of humor and “some of those Southern manners that I liked,” she said. In fact, he still has those southern manners—and made sure that their sons do, too, she said.

After high school, Neri worked full-time on the ranch. Patty attended college and took accounting classes for a year before she and Neri married and she moved to the ranch.

Out with the Old, In with the New

In Nebraska, Neri and Patty were working with the Hereford commercial cow-calf operation that originated in Kansas. However, eventually, Marlan got rid of the Herefords—and the commercial cows—entirely. In 1987, the family moved the Angus herd, consisting of 80–100 cows, from Kansas and started an AI program, eventually replacing the commercial cows.

In 1988, Neri and Patty acquired their first registered Angus heifers from Marlan. Running registered Angus cattle was a financially sound decision, according to Patty, because “we were never going to be able to afford to buy 400 to 500 head of [unregistered] cattle, enough to make a living,” whereas they could buy fewer head of registered Angus and get a premium on sale day. However, said Neri, “I was always more partial to purebred cows once I got involved in it” because of getting to know the pedigrees and bloodlines and “the challenges of trying to build a purebred herd—it was fun.”

Today the Barstows have a herd of 250 registered cows.

That’s a Lot of Bull

The Barstows sold bulls privately for several years, but they always had a goal of building a large enough herd to have production sales. That goal came to fruition in 1992, when they had their first sale on a very cold day in March.

Fun Fact: The Barstows had their first sale in the new (current) facility in 2015.

Sales are held on the second Monday each March.

Like Father, Like Son

Marlan and Neri worked together for years, until Marlan retired about ten years ago. Working with his son meant a lot to Marlan, according to Shirley, and both she and Marlan are “proud of what Neri’s done with the ranch. And Patty has been a big part of it, [doing the] bookkeeping and record keeping. They’ve really done well, and we’re so pleased that Wyatt and son, Wylie are there now.”

Although Marlan was “an older-generation guy who didn’t do much talking,” Neri enjoyed working with him. Marlan was supportive and eventually let Neri get more involved and take over more management. Marlan believed in hard work and instilled that in Neri. “I learned a lot from him,” said Neri, “mostly about putting your time in. If you don’t put your time in, nothing comes of it.”

Fun Fact: Marlan’s philosophy was that “you have to be there. Nobody takes care of your business like you do.”

The transfer from one generation to the next is continuing with Wyatt. “I always hoped that at least one son would be able to come back. It was pretty neat when Wyatt decided to come back and be on the place.”

Learning the Ropes

Wyatt Barstow, the oldest son of Neri and Patty Barstow, and his wife Amanda live in Valentine, Nebraska. Wyatt works on the ranch with Neri, and Amanda is an occupational therapist.

Wyatt and Amanda lived in Texas for a few years while Amanda finished school, but Wyatt “always had it in mind to come back” to the ranch.

Fun Fact: Wyatt’s earliest memory took place in a pasture. “We used to hand feed about three or four bulls in a pasture. Me and my dad and my granddad would feed them in a bunk, and my dad would set me on a bull that was really gentle.”

What Wyatt enjoys most about working with his dad is being able to talk about the cow herd. “It’s fun to talk about cows. We both know what cows we’re talking about.” However, Wyatt enjoys both the cow and the bull sides of the operation. “I have to like both to be successful. It’s a pretty integral process,” he said. “I don’t look at tag numbers—I don’t look at it unilaterally.”

Wyatt’s relationship with his dad has evolved from the time when Wyatt worked on the ranch as he was growing up: “I learn a lot from him [Dad]—more now than when I was younger,” said Wyatt. That is partly because “I’ve learned how to get information from him” and partly because “[a] teacher teaches you what you want to know, and now I want to know. He’s good at answering questions.”

Wyatt’s most frightening memory? The weather before bull sales. “I’m scared that we’re going to have a storm, and nobody will come,” he said.

An Imperfect World

Austin Barstow, the youngest son of Neri and Patty Barstow, and his wife, Sierra, live in Belgrade, Montana. Austin is a catastrophic insurance adjuster who travels to storm areas, and Sierra is a lawyer.

Austin, who still has a stake in the ranch, has fond memories of growing up there. There is no single defining memory from his childhood but rather a defining experience of being involved in the ranch. He can remember a lot of times “moving cows on my pony when I was just a little bitty kid.” As he got older, his job was primarily to get the cattle out of the pen, down the alley, and into the tub.

Although the majority of mealtime conversations revolved around horses and roping, he probably spent more time working with cows than roping. “I’d like to think I spent more time working [anyway],” he laughed. “My dad might say different.”

Fun Fact: Mealtimes, aside from the conversational element, had a working aspect to them: “I don’t think I could count on two hands [the number of times we were] sitting down eating lunch, and someone called and said, ‘Hey, you’ve got a calf out’—and everybody’s forks would hit the table and we’d all run out the door,” said Austin.

What Austin loved the most about ranch life was “being with the people that you know and love and enjoy being around [and] doing ranch stuff, cowboy work—that’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.” In fact, he said, in a perfect world, he would return to the ranch.

At the End of His Rope

Bulls lead a blessed life at the Barstow ranch. As the Barstows’ bread and butter, they get royal treatment. Case in point: Although the Barstows are a roping family, once the bull calves are branded and put out the grass, they don’t get roped. If they need to be brought in for any reason, Neri and his family will spend half a day setting up panels if necessary to get them in instead of roping them so they won’t get hurt. Austin noted that he and his brother and cousin Carl Frauen always wanted to rope a bull calf, “but Dad wouldn’t let us.”

That was a hard-and-fast rule . . . except for one particular occasion. Austin said that Carl told him that about two or three years ago, the calves got out one night. Neri called Carl in the morning to help gather them up. One particularly uncooperative one, however, wouldn’t go with the group—it headed out across the pasture. Frustrated, Neri said, “To hell with it. Let’s rope him.” Carl, who had wanted to rope a bull calf for thirty years, wasted no time in whipping out his rope and taking off

after the calf. Neri was on a faster horse, though, and soon caught up with him. “If anybody’s going to rope this *?#!,” he said, “it’s going to be me.” Then Neri roped the calf—and, obviously, Carl was pretty disappointed.

Roping in the Roping Talent

Ranching is the first priority for the Barstows, but the family spends considerable time on the road for rodeo.

The Barstows’ rodeo origins began with Neri, who started rodeoing when he was just eight years old and was a Little Britches World Champion in the junior division. In high school, he was a champion saddle bronc rider. Later, he competed professionally in rough-stock events, becoming the Mid-States Rodeo Association saddle bronc, bareback, and all-around champion in 1982.

“At the time I was rodeoing, it was the early ’80s, and the cattle market was crap. Rodeoing put food on table for a while—but I did it because it enjoyed it,” said Neri. “It was something that I really had a bug for at the time. I wouldn’t have not done it for anything.”

Shoulder surgery on both shoulders put an end to the rough-stock riding in 1989. However, Neri team roped (header) after that. “Rodeo wives like to say that ‘old bronc riders never die; they just start team roping,’” noted Patty.

Patty never rodeoed competitively but rode horses and was a member of a rodeo club in her younger years. And as the mother of two budding rodeo competitors, Patty ran gates and pushed cattle for years—until the kids became old enough to do it.

Wyatt and Austin began their rodeo careers on Shetland ponies when they were each about one and a half years old. Growing up, both boys roped, and Wyatt also competed in rough-stock riding. In high school, Wyatt qualified for national finals in team roping his junior year; and Austin qualified in team roping his sophomore, junior, and senior years and in calf roping his junior and senior years. Football won out over rodeo as Wyatt’s sport of choice in college: he played for the University of Nebraska at Kearney Lopers while earning a degree in exercise science. Austin chose to rodeo—calf roping and team roping—during his college years, first in Texas and then in Montana at Montana State University, where he earned a degree in ag education/relations; he qualified for the College National Finals Rodeo in calf roping his junior and senior years and in team roping his senior year. Currently, both boys rodeo professionally in their spare time: Wyatt focuses on saddle bronc riding where her has been crowned champion in both the Texas Rodeo Cowboy Association and the Mid-states Rodeo Association, and Austin focuses on calf roping.

Although it was difficult to help the boys with rodeo and run a cattle business, the sacrifice was worth it because rodeo was “something I could help the boys with that they enjoyed doing it, and I liked seeing them progress,” said Neri. In addition, said Patty, rodeo was a great activity because “my kids grew up around adults. I think it taught them how to behave, not to be childish and whiny. They heard cussing and saw drinking, but that was an opportunity to instill expectations in them. Not that the boys were always perfect, but . . .”

In particular, though, both Neri and Patty stressed how much they enjoyed rodeo because it was family time.

However, added Neri, “Do I miss hauling them around? No. We put our time in. But I wouldn’t have traded it for anything.”

By the Numbers

Although Patty has helped over the years with various aspects of the cattle, she leaves the bulk of that business to Neri and concentrates on her own business: Barstow Tax/Accounting.

Patty loves numbers. Math was always her best—and most favorite—subject in school, so it's no surprise that she turned that talent and interest into a business.

"Some people can get really stressed over taxes," she said. "They give me their stuff, and I can help them be successful." "We have a lot of businesses out here," she noted, "and you have to crunch numbers to be successful."

It can get a bit stressful for Patty, though, since tax season coincides with the Barstow Angus sale. It gets to be a little hairy. However, she has a lot of good office help. "I used to come home from the office at 8:00 p.m. and be on the computer until midnight," she said. "That's fine when you're under 50," she laughed.

Fun Fact: In Patty's accounting class in high school, the students had to write a paper about where they'd like to be in ten years. Patty wrote about owning her own tax preparation business. She noted, though, that it took her twenty-three years instead of ten years to reach this goal.

A real benefit to the tax business, besides the fact that "I get to be inside when it blizzards," is that summers are somewhat carefree. This gives Patty time to focus on other things that she loves to do, such as gardening, jumping in the pickup with Neri when he delivers a bull somewhere, and spending time with grandson Wylie.

Never a Dull Moment

Neri and Patty both believe that volunteering is important. To that end, Neri served on the board of the Nebraska Angus Association and is currently a Nebraska Delegate for the American Angus Association. Patty served on a number of economic and community development boards for thirty years, but she resigned from those positions when cancer struck because, she said, "the time that I had I wanted to spend with family and work."

In Sickness and in Health

"I knew what it was," said Patty of what she felt when doing a breast self-exam. What she felt was a dent—not a lump—but her sister had felt the same thing before her own diagnosis of breast cancer.

This was in 2012, and Patty's first thought was of Neri and the kids. "Amanda was pregnant at the time, and I thought, 'I've got a grandbaby coming,'" said Patty.

In April of that year, after performing a double mastectomy, Patty's doctors were confident that all of her cancer had been eradicated.

Patty's next year was a blur of a staph infection, chemo, and reconstruction. But after that harrowing experience, life was uneventful . . . for a while.

Then, in the fall of 2015, Patty didn't feel very good and had a hard time keeping food down. The doctors determined that cancer had returned—to her liver this time. Over a three-week period, the cancer had already covered half of her liver.

"That diagnosis was a surprise," said Patty, "because I'd been doing so well."

After overcoming that hurdle and being cancer-free for a couple of years, Patty received more bad news: malignant cells in a lump under her armpit. Heavy doses of oral chemo followed.

Now, Patty is enjoying good health again. The frequent doctor visits and cancer tests (every three months) are just a fact of life, and she doesn't let them or the possibility of future diagnoses drag her down. "It sounds cliché, but you honestly do appreciate the here and now," she said.