

# Ranching, Idaho Falls-Style



**It's a tough job, but someone has to do it.**

By Lisa Jensen  
Photos by Susannah Newsome

**R**anching has been big business in Idaho for generations. Even before the Gem State officially gained statehood in 1890, livestock production in the Idaho territory was hitting a high point. Fast-forward just over a century and you'll find that ranching as a business as well as a lifestyle has survived, carving out a place for itself in a world that relies on electronic communication and "right now" results.

With only about two percent of American families involved in farming and ranching, it's heartening to learn that ranching endures in the Idaho Falls area, providing a living for some, as well as food and byproducts, such as leather, wool and fertilizer, for others. If you've never ventured off of the interstate or the main roads of the city, you'd never know that there are a number of ranches in the Idaho Falls area.

Steve Harrison is the commercial operations manager for Riverbend Ranch, owned by Frank and Belinda VanderSloot. It's one of the largest seedstock and cow-calf operations in the U.S., and the seventh largest Angus purebred operation in the country. Harrison has been with Riverbend Ranch for eight years, but ranching has always been a part of his life.

"I've been involved in cattle ranching and pig farming my entire life, and it's what I've always wanted to do," he says.

Ranchers have never lived a nine to five existence, and that is one of the few aspects that hasn't changed over the years. Livestock doesn't take a holiday, so there are always the standard tasks that need doing every day, 365 days of the year, such as feeding, cleaning, maintaining fences, branding, irrigating and putting up hay.

"Riverbend Ranch is a large operation, too," Harrison says. "We have ranches in Montana, Utah and Texas. So I also spend time traveling to the different locations to help out at the other ranches."



Asked how ranching differs from the past, Harrison responds without hesitation.

"Technology has changed the business greatly. We rely on three sets of software to manage the cattle. We have procedures such as artificial insemination, genomic testing and embryo transfer available to us. We are starting to map 50,000 genes of beef cattle and are using that information along with other data to make decisions on breeding and other issues."

With everything ranchers have had to endure throughout the history of the business, it's remarkable that any have held out and remain in business today. They've always been at the mercy of weather conditions, water and food supplies and the threat of illness. Then, when the meatpacking and feedlot businesses became streamlined in the 1950s for efficiency, beef prices dropped, and the ranchers' profit margins shrank considerably. Although the price of beef has been a roller coaster of highs and lows over the past 60 years, Harrison points out that the volatility in the cattle market today is unprecedented. The unpredictability of cattle prices along with the high cost of feed makes for tight margins.

"People have more at risk," Harrison says. "With the amount of capital it takes, the margin between risk and reward is a lot slimmer."

Feed and cattle prices notwithstanding, Harrison says that the biggest challenge going forward is getting the younger generations involved in ranching to sustain the business on into the future. Harrison has two teenagers himself who have been brought up around the ranch. Ranching doesn't interest his 13-year-old daughter, but his 15-year-old son loves working on the ranch on weekends and during the summer. Still, Harrison doesn't know for sure that ranching is the career path his son will take. There are so many other professions that are more certain and profitable from the start. It's difficult to pique kids' interest in a business in which there are so many variables.

Even so, agricultural programs continue to be popular with Idaho youth, and that may be the key to keeping the younger generation interested and active in ranching.

"4H programs are still big in getting kids involved, and Riverbend Ranch supports these types of agricultural programs however we can, whenever we're asked," Harrison says.

The unconventional and demanding hours, along with the constant challenges certainly keep ranching from being classified as a "cushy" job. But it's more than just a job. Ranching is a way of life, and once it's in your blood it's not something easily left behind. For as many challenges as there are in the business, the rewards are what keep the ranchers going.

"Utilizing the resources, trying to improve cattle, bringing quality food to people's tables."

Those are the rewards Steve Harrison values, along with being in the elite two percent who stick with it to keep the country's cattle industry going. **IFL**

