



Gerald (Jerry) Anderson with his daughter, Anne Bennett.

# For long history in cattle and land conservation, look no further than Flying A

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By southwest Iowa standards The Flying A Cattle Company is a big operation. 1,200 acres of row crop land in Montgomery County, 300 more of hay and pasture, plus a 1,500 head feed lot, 27,000 acres in two locations in Nebraska, and 1,500 stock cows. Controlling ownership of the Security State Banks in Red Oak and Stanton, Oakland State Bank in Oakland and the First National Bank in Paonia, CO.

But still it's a family business, and it's now in the third generation. It had its beginning when an orphan boy, a teen-ager from Sweden, found work herding other people's livestock on open rangeland north of Red Oak.

Jerry Anderson doesn't look it but he's pushing 70, carrying on a tradition that goes back to a time when his grandfather loaded market cattle onto railroad cars in Hawthorne, shipping them to stockyards in Chicago. Jerry's daughter, Anne Bennett, works part-time for her father and has an eye on the future; ideas about the beef industry her great-grandfather would find curious.

Gustav Edward ("Ed") Anderson was born in Sweden in 1856, orphaned when a plague took the lives of his parents, and at the age of 11 set out for America. He went first to Page County, perhaps because of the large number of Swedish emigrants who had settled in the area. During those years following the Civil War railroad lines were expanding, and young Anderson found work as a water boy for a railroad construction crew. He didn't speak English, but he was a hard worker and he got along. He was promoted, and for a while drove a team of horses moving dirt for the railroad grade, and later still found farm work with a Swedish-speaking family that helped him learn English. His schooling was minimal, but he was making \$36 a month and learned all he needed to know about farming and raising livestock.

In 1871 Anderson, then 15 years old, came to the Hawthorne vicinity and worked for a farmer named B.F. Runnels. By the mid 1870's he was tending livestock owned by local farmers who let their herds of cattle and sheep graze a large area of unsettled prairie north of Montgomery County. It was lone-

some work and a lot of responsibility for a boy of his age, but he liked cattle and had ideas that went beyond just drawing a wage. He made arrangements to receive his pay in cattle, developed a herd of his own, and in 1878 bought a piece of land in Garfield Township. Four years later he married Jane Runnels, daughter of the farmer he had worked for earlier.

Ed Anderson and his two sons (Gordon, Jerry's father, was born in 1896) grew the farm into a major operation. An article about him published in a 1930 edition of the Red Oak Sun calls Ed a "cattleman extra ordinary." They expanded land holdings in Garfield and West Township, and bought a ranch in Cherry County, Nebraska.

The Iowa operation became the "Flying A" in the 1920's as the result of a problem Ed and Gordon were having in Taylor County. They'd leased some pasture land, and at least a few of the cattle they grazed there were stolen. Gordon fashioned a home-made branding iron in the shape of an "A", and the operation took on a new name and a brand it still uses today.

Gordon Anderson had grown up raising crops, cattle and hogs, farming with his father in an era before horses

were replaced by gas and diesel powered machines. He married Helen Ash and among their children were two sons, Jerry, born in 1932 and Gordon Edward in 1927. The older son died in 1932.

A story handed down in the family is that Ed intended for the Nebraska ranch to be

divided between his three children, but when he died in 1936 he left no will. To resolve the matter Gordon made a division of the land into three sections of approximately equal value, and a few weeks after Ed's funeral the three siblings met to determine which would receive which. They broke out a new deck of Bicycles, marked three aces with the three brands associated with the ranch, each representing a section of it, then shuffled and dealt. Gordon then assumed management of the Iowa operation and his portion of that in Nebraska.

Jerry was raised much as his father had been; born on the Flying A he went to work young and often. By the age of 12 he was regularly taking the train to the Nebraska ranch near Thedford, where he spent summers putting up hay, with most of the power provided by draft horses.

Jerry was just four years old when his grandfather died, so knows him mostly through his work and what he's read and been told about him. The old man loved horses as well as cattle, didn't care much for sheep, and passed those preferences along to Gordon. Jerry remembers when a large part of the work on the Flying A was still done by horses, says his father was "The best

horseman I or anyone else ever knew; the 'Horse Whisperer' of his day."

Jerry married Mary Anne Edmund in 1961. They have two children, Anne and Gordon.

Jerry took over management of the Flying A when his father Gordon died in 1963, and just as did his father and grandfather, he's seen a lot of changes. Some of them didn't come easily. He speaks of the 25 year period of declining average per capita beef consumption, a problem neither of his predecessors had to deal with. It was a trend he and his daughter, Anne, believe was largely brought about by resistance to change. "People wanted more consistency, more convenience, but some of us thought beef was great just the way it was," Jerry said. "Poultry changed, and pork products, but we were slow to do so with beef."

"One of the things people want," Anne said, "including me, is to be able to get home at 5 o'clock, do all the other things that have to be done, and still have a nourishing and delicious meal built around beef ready to put on the table at supper time. That's happening now; excellent pre-cooked beef dishes that can be microwaved."

Jerry agrees. "There's a lot of tradition in this business, and we're not necessarily anxious to do things different-

ly. But it's happening. Beef's always been quality, but now it's a lot easier to put on the table." He believes the new wave of consistency and convenience in beef products is responsible for what he sees as early indications that the consumption pendulum is starting to swing the other way.

Environmental issues are a growing concern, and it's not hard to understand how increased controls, and the likelihood of more, can be frustrating to Jerry Anderson. His family has produced beef cattle on the same piece of land in Garfield Township for three generations. They've provided stewardship to the home place for over 125 years, a period spanning three centuries, and Jerry knows they've taken good care of it. Many of the new regulations, he believes, are the result of mistakes made by a few mega pork corporations, mistakes for which all producers will have to pay.

But overall he thinks the outlook for the beef producer is promising, and he's confident the operation his grandfather began will be a family farm for a long time to come. Anne learned the cattle business from her father and confirms that she, her husband Doug and their daughters, Maggie and Leatha, will be a major part of the future of the Flying A.

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