

COW CAMP TO BOOT CAMP | PLAN TO CONCEIVE | PREP YOUR HORSE FOR SALE

WORKING RANCH

HOLD 'EM OR FOLD 'EM

WHEN THE RETAINED OWNERSHIP MATH WORKS, IT WORKS

COWS HOLD THE CARDS

DISEASE RESISTANT CALVES BEGIN WITH HEALTHY COWS

SQUEEZE TO PLEASE

THE BEST FEATURES IN CHUTE DESIGN COME TOGETHER TO MAKE IT BETTER FOR THE CRITTERS AND HANDLERS

MASTER OF THE MIX

HOW TO SELECT THE BEST PASTURE SEED MIX FOR YOUR FORAGE PRODUCTION GOALS

TESTED & TRIED

VALERIE LIVINGSTON LOST HER HUSBAND AND FOUND THE COURAGE TO FORGE A FUTURE FOR HERSELF ON THE 88 RANCH



2025

SIDE-BY-SIDE

LINEUP

\$9.95 US



TESTED AND TRIED

STORY & PHOTOS
BY LORETTA SORENSEN

When Valerie Livingston lost her husband, she found the courage to forge a future for herself and three daughters on the **88 Ranch**.

It started with a horse trailer. The 88 Ranch at Orchard, Nebraska, was both a passion and a dream Craig and Valerie Livingston shared when they first met in 1984, and one they worked together to make a reality.

The two met in college when Valerie was searching for a horse trailer to borrow for the next trip home so she could bring her horse to college. Even

though he didn't know her, Craig trusted Valerie with his trailer, and that impressed Valerie.

"When I returned his trailer, he asked me out to the rodeo dance," Valerie says. "Craig's passion for God, family, and country, along with his outgoing nature and humor really charmed me. It was that night we learned we shared many of the same passions, including life on a ranch."

By the time she was in college, Valerie had already started buying cattle after collecting insurance for damage to her pickup. The insurance company paid \$1,800 for repair.

"I had \$1,500 after the damage was repaired," Valerie says. "I wanted to invest it wisely and after attending a financial workshop and doing some research, it seemed to me that purchasing a registered cow/calf pair would be a good investment."

Valerie, who worked alongside her

ranching father as she grew up, used Clay Center, Nebraska's Meat and Animal Research Center data to compare the traits of different beef cattle breeds. Gelbvieh cattle intrigued her, and she settled on that breed to get started. Craig would approve of her strategy before they married in 1989. They agreed to return to Nebraska and begin the arduous task of building their own beef operation.

WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Initially, the Livingstons rented a ranch and leased a cow herd outside of Orchard. In 1991, a local landowner knocked on their door, asking if they wanted to buy a ranch.

"We told him we didn't have the money to do that," Valerie says. "Then he offered to be our banker and allow us to pay for the ranch over time. That's how we got started."

As they selected a name for their



(RIGHT) In 2023 the 88 Ranch was ranked 12th in the nation as owners and breeders of Dams of Merit and Dams of Distinction in the American Gelbvieh Association (AGA)

ranch, Craig and Valerie settled on 88 Ranch because Valerie had purchased her first registered pair in 1988 and the number 8 was a favorite for both of them. “We considered incorporating the Livingston name,” Valerie says. “But decided if we had daughters who changed their last names through marriage and no sons, that wouldn’t work the best.”

Since building their cow/calf operation took both of them working side by side, Craig and Valerie knew it would be wise to postpone having children for a time.

“We knew money would be tight, so we delayed having a family for about eight years,” Valerie says. “We had a great eight years, enjoying working and playing together, just having fun. Cadrien was our first child in 1998, and then another 8 years passed when God blessed us with a second daughter, Carlee Jo. We were greatly surprised when, about 18 months later, Cassie came along.”

A TERRIBLE TRAGEDY

But the Livingston family’s lives, and their dreams, were rocked to the core on April 29, 2008, when Craig was fatally engulfed in corn inside a grain bin. Valerie and Craig’s mother were in nearby O’Neill, taking Craig and Valerie’s two-week-old daughter for her newborn visit at the clinic.

“Craig’s mother and I were just walking out of a store in O’Neill when we heard the sirens,” Valerie says. “My thought was I hoped I had remembered to turn the coffee pot off before we came to town.”

When they reached the 88 Ranch driveway, Valerie saw a neighbor’s vehicle parked by the front door. The neighbor was visually shaken when she came running out of the house to hand Valerie the phone. An emergency responder instructed her to return to O’Neill and meet them at the hospital.

“I immediately thought something must have happened with Craig’s dad,” Valerie says. “He was in his 80s at the time. But in just a few seconds I learned that it was Craig who had the

emergency.”

The day before the tragedy, Craig and Valerie had discussed his plan to lease a grain vac to vacuum the remaining corn out of a grain bin and onto a semi-truck since the bin auger had stopped working. It was the first time they had contracted corn for a specific delivery date. They had one day left to meet their deadline. Neither of them had any experience with a grain vac and Valerie was hoping Craig didn’t have to get inside the cone-shaped bin with the equipment. Unfortunately, that didn’t go as hoped.

“I remember Craig talked about how he had to hold the heavy vacuum hose just above the level of the corn to suck it up, and how his arms ached from holding it,” Valerie says. “We don’t know exactly what happened. If he fell into a hollow pocket within the corn and became submerged or something else went wrong. The only other person at the site was the truck driver, who had stepped away for a few minutes to move the truck ahead so they could finish clearing the bin.”

When the driver returned to the bin, all he could see was Craig’s hand sticking up out of the grain. The driver frantically attempted to pull grain away from Craig’s face, tying a handkerchief over Craig’s face to help protect him while he called for help.

Unfortunately, even though emergency responders from nearby Page (10 miles) arrived within 10 minutes, the department didn’t have the necessary grain rescue tube and had never been trained on using a tube or rescuing

anyone from grain entrapment. Since the grain vac wasn’t working, rescuers had to remove grain one bucket at a time, and Craig didn’t survive.

“I still remember so well the morning we lost Dad,” Cadrien says. “Dad always read daily devotions with me before I headed out the door to get on the school bus. That morning, I had an Eggo waffle as he read. When I headed out the door, he said, ‘See you tonight.’ While a friend drove me to the hospital that day, I prayed all the way. At the time, I couldn’t have understood all the things about our lives that would change.”

TREMULOUS STEPS

As the reality and ramifications of their loss settled on Valerie, she knew she had much to consider and many decisions to make as she walked into the future with her three daughters.

“My mom is the bravest person I know,” Cadrien says. “Four days after we lost Dad, Mom and I sat down at the kitchen table. I was just 10. But Mom didn’t want to decide the future without asking my thoughts. She explained to me that we had to make some decisions.”

Valerie told her young daughter that they had some options. They could remain on the ranch, or sell it, move to town, and get a job. As Cadrien spoke with her mother, she was certain she knew which option she wanted to select.

“I knew I wanted my sisters to have the same opportunities I had to grow up and enjoy ranch life,” Cadrien says. “It was important to me that they had a



TESTED AND TRIED

chance to learn about the rewards of determination, hard work, integrity, and grit. It was also important to me and Mom to keep Dad's legacy going."

One of Valerie's biggest challenges at the start was discovering where Craig stored small items, like the 1,000-rpm PTO shaft for the bale processor.

"I finally found it in a most unusual place," Valerie says. "It was sitting beside the oil and antifreeze jugs in the old refrigerator we use for storage."

At first, Valerie felt very vulnerable, being a woman in the bull sales market. "Craig was a much better salesman than me," she says. "I had to get out of my comfort zone to make it work. There were times when some men asked me detailed questions, testing me to see what I really knew and if they could trust me. Many of them had doubts that I could back a trailer when I delivered their bulls. I've been asked to back through trees in an S shape and through barns, missing all kinds of objects. For a while, it felt like all eyes were on me to see if I could prove myself."

Transitioning from a two-man to one-woman operation proved to be no small challenge. For several years, Valerie and the girls struggled to develop a sustainable operation. Cadrien was old enough to watch the little ones while Valerie did the ranch work. Whenever it was necessary, she found hiring day labor another challenge.

"I found it difficult to ask anyone for help," Valerie says. "A very nice church family volunteered to help work livestock whenever needed and a bull customer called me to volunteer his welding and repair abilities. So I took him up on the offer."

The volunteer made a calf cart out of an old farrowing crate to pull behind Valerie's ATV.

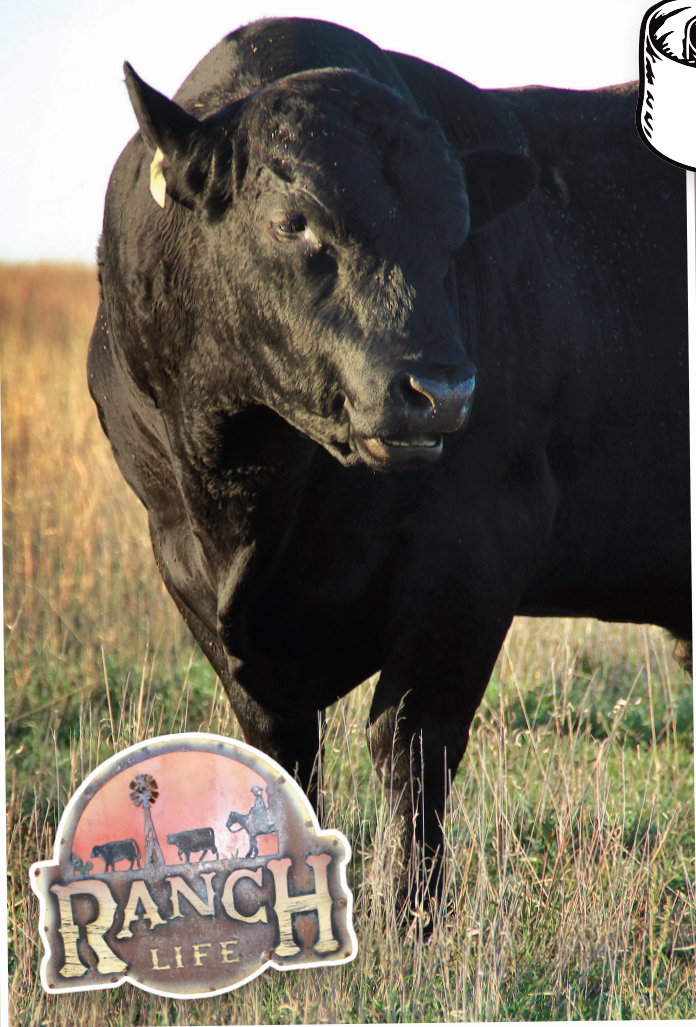
"I still use that cart a lot during calving," she says. "That was one of the best things anyone could have done for me."

Valerie believes that, after encountering so many challenges in the cattle industry, she and her daughters are prepared for almost anything.

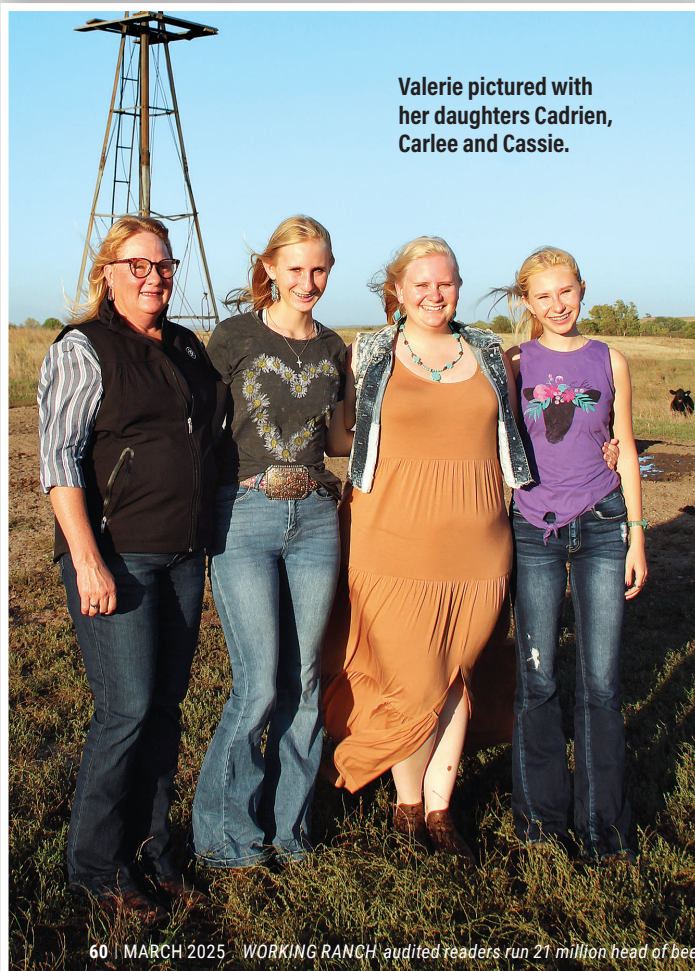
"I've learned over the years that, if you can survive ranching, you can do almost anything," Valerie says. "On the other hand, working on the land and with animals is so rewarding. For our family, working outside where we see God's beautiful creation daily and relying on Him as our main partner, is indescribable."

A NEW VISION

It would have been admirable if Valerie and her three girls had simply preserved the ranch and generated an income. But the passion that infused Craig throughout his life wasn't lost when his life came to an end. Valerie and her girls worked harder than ever to create a beef operation that, as of 2023, was ranked 12th in the nation as owners and breeders of Dams of Merit and Dams of Distinction in the American Gelbvieh Association (AGA). According to the AGA, only 5.5% of all active cows in the registry qualify for this elite selection of criteria based on early conception, regular calving intervals, and above-average performance on their progeny. Fertility and calving ease, followed



Valerie pictured with her daughters Cadrien, Carlee and Cassie.



by milk, growth, and carcass cutability have the biggest influence on profit.

The 88 Ranch currently uses a program designed to show the outcome of a specific sire's mating to one or more females in their database. This is one way to balance the EPD (expected progeny differences) numbers for a higher market value of select matings.

"It's fun to have the ability to use all the new technology that has been developed since we began our herd over 35 years ago," Valerie says. "Our goal is to show our customers the extra benefits and value in crossbreeding. We feel you gain the most by crossing a Continental breed with a British breed."

The Livingstons chose Gelbvieh as their Continental breed because of their maternal traits, marbling, and the highly successful Certified Angus Beef program. The two breeds make a beautiful cross that the American Gelbvieh Association has registered in the trade name of Balancer.

"Balancer cattle have done really well for our customers and us," Valerie says. "We call ourselves the 'Gals of the 88 Ranch.' We've worked together to expand our cow herd, develop a network of bull customers, and realize success as beef producers. We had some significant sacrifices in the first years. But we all agree the struggles were worth it."

WAGES OF HEARTFELT LABOR

Cadrien not only joined her mother in the battle to preserve the ranch and make it a viable operation, she went on to earn a degree in ag communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and ultimately pursued a career focused on ag safety.

"It's important to understand that part of my dad's story is a lack of understanding and training about working around grain," Cadrien says. "He grew up on a ranch being a cowboy and was never involved with much farming or grain handling. In the ag safety industry, we call grain Midwest quicksand. That lack of understanding, coupled with the lack of equipment and training for local emergency responders, were all part of my father's tragic death."

Over the years, contemplating all her family has experienced, Cadrien has made telling her father's story and promoting grain handling safety



practices a core piece of her career.

"I want Dad's life to count for more than just how he died," she says. "It's important to me to share his story every time I can and do all I can to make sure no other families have to go through this kind of experience."

Carlee and Cassie greatly appreciate the sacrifices their mother and Cadrien made so they could grow up on the ranch. "My mom and Cadrien are the biggest inspiration to me," Carlee says. "I could never express enough gratitude to them for preserving our ranch."

Cassie agrees with her family about the value of growing up on the 88 Ranch.

"I think Dad would be happy to know we've had this opportunity," Cassie says. "I know he loved the ranch. It's important and rewarding to me to know we're able to help Mom and help keep Dad's legacy going."

Valerie emphasizes that faith was important to Craig and every member of their family. That part of Craig's legacy is still going strong.

"Both Craig and I knew God is always in control and has a bigger plan for our lives than we can imagine," she says. "After Craig's death, I knew it was important to trust and live out our faith each day."

Cadrien works as a Midwest regional safety manager for Viterra, a worldwide company that plays a role in supplying essential food and feed products around the globe, handling

grains, oilseeds, pulses, etc.

"Every day I travel to some of the 90 Viterra grain elevator sites in this region to provide grain-handling safety training and review work practices to ensure they're done safely," Cadrien says. "It's very rewarding to me to share my expertise and experience. Agriculture is one of the most dangerous industries anyone can work in. Being able to help save lives is an important benefit of my work."

Cassie and Carlee expect to complete a college degree before returning to 88 Ranch to take up their role in the business. The gals all know that, regardless of the depth of their passion, the future holds uncertainty.

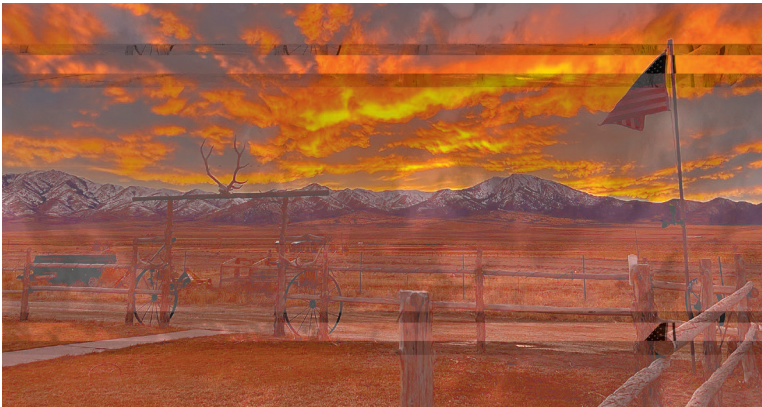
"We have to be adaptable," Cadrien says. "So much is changing and if we don't continually adapt to what customers want, we might as well get out of the business."

Valerie says she and the girls look forward to what awaits them in the future and none of them have any regrets about their decision to stay on the ranch.

"We're pretty passionate about what we do," Valerie says. "It's challenging as a woman to be in a manager role seven days a week, rain or shine, drought or blizzard. It builds character and faith, and we love having the privilege of living out our dream of being on a ranch and being involved in the cattle industry." **WR**

FEATURES

{Contents}



44

RIDING FOR THE BRAND

From cow camp to boot camp, this Texan is serving the land in many ways.

By Addie Brown

46

HOLD 'EM OR FOLD 'EM

When the retained ownership math works, it works.

By Ellen H. Brisendine

48

TIE 'EM RIGHT

The Safest Way to Tie Down a Calf.

By Terri Mason

62

A WAY HOME

Dr. Dean Fish is leading the cattle industry with vision and integrity.

By Tiffany Selchow



58



58

TESTED & TRIED

When Valerie Livingston lost her husband, she found the courage to forge a future for herself and three daughters on the 88 Ranch.

By Loretta Sorensen

{Plus}

50

RANCHER'S JOURNAL: DESERT POETRY

Feeding cows, fixing trucks, lambing, and praying for good news.

By Darrell Holden

TECOVAS

{And}

30

WR / STETSON PHOTOGRAPHY AWARD WINNER: SAMANTHA MADDOX

On The Cover:

Thank you to photographer Della Watters for our cover photo of Parker Greenwood at The Little Jennie Ranch in Bondurant, Wyoming.

