



# Old-Fashioned Change

*A North Dakota ranch family carries on the tradition of keeping proven methods and making smart changes.*

*Story & photos by*  
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They live in a log house built with their own hands using timber harvested from the National Forest in Montana. They handle their cattle on horseback; the only tractor in use is a light-duty, two-wheel-drive that has to be chained up in the winter

to get through the abundant North Dakota snow. They enjoy keeping daily tabs on a family of deer and several turkeys, as well as pronghorn antelope and sharp-tailed grouse that seem to call the ranch “home.” They treasure the tranquility of ranch life in the rugged Badlands of western North Dakota.

At first it seems out-of-character

when Wayne Gerbig and his wife, Karen, talk about the benefits of modern technology and the drastic changes they’ve made in the last decade or so.

The North Dakota Angus Association’s 2010 Commercial Breeder of the Year credits his dad and grandfather for teaching him “the old methods” of ranching and says he now works to find the “right blend of old and new.”

Wayne comes from a long line of cowmen. His great-grandfather, John Gerbig, a German immigrant, homesteaded and established a farm near Taylor, N.D. His grandfather, George Gerbig, moved west into the Badlands after deciding that ranch life suited him better than watching the backside of a plow. He paid his brother-in-law \$25 per pair for 25 head of Hereford cows with calves at side. George reportedly spoke of the 70-mile ride back to Taylor, saying it “wasn’t that bad on a good horse.”

The generations before Wayne were pioneers, unafraid of trying something new. George was the first in the region to try putting a bull with a yearling heifer rather than waiting until she was 2 years old. Wayne’s dad, Morris Gerbig, was the first one in the community to put a black Angus bull on his Hereford heifers.

Some traditions die hard. Even

**Left:** Wayne and Karen Gerbig say they try to find “the right blend of old and new” when it comes to their ranch practices in the rugged Badlands of western North Dakota.

the tradition of change. Wayne’s predecessors knew they needed to keep an open mind — to be willing to try something new in order to squeeze another dollar out of a cow.

“We’ve done some AI (using artificial insemination) and other things to improve genetics, but without a good grazing system you really can’t capitalize on even the best genetics. With today’s economics, you have to stay on top of things. You have to be willing and ready to change if you want to stay in the cow business,” Wayne says.

This, from an old-time cowboy who keeps his home warm with hand-cut wood and who displays a centuries-old buffalo skull on his living room wall. This, from a real cowman who doesn’t have to wear buckaroo gear to prove who he is, but who bundles up in a scotch cap to protect his ears from the biting North Dakota wind chill. This, from a man who raised a son and two daughters to appreciate the ranch as much as he and his ranch-raised wife.

## Utilizing potential

Karen grew up on a cattle operation just 4 miles away. Their son Neil’s horse-training skills are revered through several counties. A soft-spoken cowman with an easy smile, Wayne respects those in the “education world” who study soil and forage, and realizes that there is always room for improvement.

“We went to a class offered by Dickinson State University, then attended several seminars on grazing systems before we decided to start making some changes,” Wayne says. The changes he made have nothing to do with cell phones, computers or electronic livestock identification and everything to do with utilizing every bit of potential the native grassland has to offer.

“A lot of the newer grazing systems promote cross-fencing and real intense grazing,” Wayne says. “Honestly I think some of them are unproven fads.”

And they seem awfully labor-intensive, says Wayne, who likes to think things through and make efficient use of his day, as well as his range.

Others have noticed Wayne and Karen’s smart range management methods. In 2008 they were recognized with the North Dakota Stockmen’s Association Environmental Stewardship Award and in 1996 they received the Soil Conservation Achievement Award from the Slope/Hettinger Soil Conservation District.

## Hereford to Angus

At 19, Wayne moved to a place his

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— **Wayne Gerbig**

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dad had purchased near Amidon, N.D., on the southern edge of the Badlands. He and Karen raised a family there and continue to ranch there today.

At that time, his “summer range,” consisting of a mix of private, state and federal land, was one big pasture and he cross-fenced it seven ways, hoping to manipulate grazing and improve the grass. Wayne gradually made the transition from Hereford and black baldie cows to a straight black Angus herd. Then in the late 1990s he realized more changes were inevitable if he was to continue to make a living raising cattle.

“After deciding to make some changes to our grazing strategy about 11 years ago, we actually took out about 2 miles of fence and eventually combined seven pastures into four on our summer range,” Wayne says.

“Our improved weaning weights in the past decade have proven that we are now utilizing the grass a lot more efficiently,” Wayne says. Carefully chosen Angus bloodlines to improve both growth and maternal traits have contributed to increased weaning weights, too, but the newer grazing philosophy is a major factor.

Researchers at the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Dickinson Extension Research Center located near Dickinson, N.D., annually gather data on the effects of the grazing system. They measure milk production by weighing cows and calves before and after nursing to determine the milk transfer, and they have discovered that cows are able to produce milk for a month and a half longer than with the “old” grazing system.

The calves in the study have gained almost 3 pounds (lb.) per day late into the fall on some years, depending on other factors, including rainfall. Before changing his grazing plan, Wayne’s better steer calves would generally weigh around 500 lb. at weaning time. A load of the heavy steers now weighs close to 700 lb. when they come off the cow.

### **Simple grazing system**

Wayne’s grazing plan is fairly simple. The cattle graze the four pastures on his summer range twice during the grazing season. He “skims through” each of the pastures with his cow-calf pairs relatively quickly starting on June 1, allowing only about one-third of the grass to be grazed. Then, after the first rotation, he starts over again, this time leaving the cattle in each pasture twice as long as the first time. Wayne rotates his turnout evenly through the four pastures, so he doesn’t turn out into the same pasture every year.

“We’ve noticed that this first round of grazing encourages new tillers — or new growth — and also new leaves, which improves the density of the grass and gives us extra carrying capacity,” Wayne says. “When there is more green, there is more protein. This equates to heavier calves, which — bottom line — means we can afford to keep ranching.”

Fewer fences creates less need for water

development and more “wide open” range, which benefits wildlife and provides the public an experience of “wilderness” when visiting the federal or state lands.

According to Wayne, the increase in root growth helps break up the “claypan” (clay-type soil), which has the undesirable ability to lock out water and promote runoff. By breaking up the claypan, water infiltrates faster, improving soil health,

encouraging forage growth, and helping to slow runoff and wind erosion.

The wildlife appreciate the improved forage and added protein, too.

“They need to fatten up in the late summer and fall in preparation for winter. The protein in the grass helps with that. We try to follow the general ‘take half and leave half’ rule of thumb on our

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Wayne hopes there will be an opportunity for at least one of his grandchildren to carry on the ranching custom.

summer range, so there is quite a bit of grass available for wildlife to graze and to nest. We've noticed an increase in deer, antelope, sharp-tailed grouse and turkeys since we've changed our grazing strategy."

Wayne and Karen treasure the traditions instilled by generations before them, but they appreciate the chance to implement new ideas that can improve their bottom line.

"I've seen highs and lows in the cattle market. In the mid '70s I sold some replacement heifers for \$100 per head. And right now we're experiencing the strongest sustained market I think I've ever seen. We're getting closer to catching up with 'input costs,' but a rancher still has to be creative and keep an open mind and be ready to make changes that can help stretch those dollars."

Wayne enjoys studying expected progeny differences (EPDs) and Angus pedigrees to decide which bloodlines he will use next to meet his current needs. Right now, he says he's using some "older" semen from some proven maternal sires, and it's working for him.

Wayne says he looks forward to each new season and is always hopeful that it will be better than the last.

"Waiting for that next calf crop, watching my grandkids grow up in a rural setting, that is really what this is all about," Wayne says. His son, Neil; daughter-in-law, Kari; and four grandchildren ranch nearby, and they are able to share labor and market their cattle together — giving them both an advantage on sale day.

He and Neil sell a draft of breeding-quality heifers at Brooks' Chalky Butte Angus Ranch production sale in Bowman, N.D., each year, and the heifers command top dollar, usually well over steer price. They also market their steer calves together, often selling the top end on a video sale during the summer; they then background the rest of the steers on a light ration of grain until the first part of January and sell them at the local auction barn in Bowman.

Wayne hopes there will be an opportunity for at least one of his grandchildren to carry on the ranching custom. Surely there are changes to come. It's in their blood. It's tradition. But any changes will be carefully considered, and they won't take the place of the good old-fashioned cowboy way of life.



The Gerbig's enjoy keeping tabs on a family of deer and several turkeys, as well as pronghorn antelope and sharp-tailed grouse that seem to call the ranch "home."

**Editor's Note:** Author Carrie (Longwood) Stadheim is a former summer intern (2000) with the American Angus Association's Public Relations Department. After serving several years as executive director of the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, Carrie has started her own family, freelancing from their ranch on the border of western South Dakota and North Dakota.