

Outside the BOX: Lessons that last

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There was silence — quiet borne in the great blessing of a historic market high none of us could have imagined. My brother spoke first, “Boys, this is an amazing day, and we need to remember those who came before us and built this ranch with sweat, tenacity and

unyielding faith. Because of them we get to experience this moment.”

Indeed, we could not rightfully claim the success of the day to our own generation. It had begun long ago with two families — one situated in the prosperous countryside of England,

and the other in the midst of the Irish famine. America would beckon to them both.

As we reflected on the vision of our ancestors, our attention focused on post-Civil War Maine and a great-great grandfather who had survived the horror of that conflict only to return home and watch months later as his beloved wife succumbed to disease. In grief, he turned westward and eventually found himself in an Oregon timber camp, where he buried the pain under hours of backbreaking work.

One day, a letter arrived informing him that a comrade from the cavalry had homesteaded in the high country of Colorado, and there was an available adjoining parcel. Thus, our family’s path was established. Each subsequent generation persevered, applying their talent, imagination and effort. None of them was perfect, but each left an indelible legacy and a handful of timeless lessons.

Each family is the result of a unique epic journey framed by both ordinary and extraordinary people and events. In a time when society seems to value self-centered and self-serving approaches more than anything else, each of us ought to turn our attention for a time to our ancestors in search of truth and answers for a chaotic world. What follows are the lessons I hope my family will take to heart from those who paved the way.

Sacrifice in the short run to attain long-term gains. Prosperity is built from a long-term perspective coupled with a willingness to pay the price in the short run to attain a worthy vision. Sweat, grit, failure, a few tears and frustration are the aggregate used to pave the path to success. While there are no guarantees in ranching, we can most assuredly be confident that we will be tested in the pursuit of our goals.

Change is a given, so learn to deal with it. Conditions are going to change — you can count on shifts in weather, markets, technology, people, relationships and competitors. Pull on your boots and deal with it.

Risk is part of the game. Every generation is confronted with risk on a number of fronts. Opportunities will also be available, and taking advantage of them will require the acceptance of risk. Sooner or later, progress depends on action, and, in some cases, it means leaving the known behind. Whether it was the decision to get in a boat and emigrate to the United States or to get in a wagon and come West, acceptance of risk was required. Why should it be any different now?

Manage costs. In this case, there are two lessons to be balanced against one another — “You have to spend money to make money,” and “You can’t spend your way to prosperity.” In short, invest wisely and remember that there are big differences between

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investments and expenses. For example, we own land, but drive used trucks; we invest in good genetics, but work hard to control purchased feed costs; and we try to keep wants and needs in separate categories. Scenario planning is done with one eye on the market trending favorably and the other with an assumption that prices will take a downturn.

Choose your partners wisely.

Good partners are worth their weight in gold, and a bad one has all the value of a concrete life jacket. Our family has been blessed through the years by the opportunity to be in business partnerships with truly great folks. Of all the lessons, this one has been invaluable. Broken relationships are a burden to both the business and the people involved.

Be a good steward. Take care!

Be respectful of things (equipment, facilities and tools), people (family, employees, neighbors, customers and suppliers), places (communities, land and natural resources), livestock and legacy.

Be accountable. Earn the opportunity each and every day while having the conviction to be accountable for our actions and decisions — the good and the bad.

Learn from history, but do not let it become an anchor. Each of the generations that came ahead understood how to bring the best of the past forward and when to leave the old ways and outdated thinking behind.

We are blessed to be in this business, and if we will listen to the lessons, we might just be able to add to the foundation that will bring comparable joy and fulfillment to those who follow us.

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