

Ranching—A New, Successful Career for a Young Family

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WANTED: Managers for 9,000 acre ranch at foot of Snowy Mountains. No experience required. Timid souls need not apply.

It was to a similar call that Lisbeth Birch and her husband, David Pendleton, left careers in Houston, Texas, 6 years ago to start a new career—managing their family's ranch near Moore in central Montana.

For 10 years until 1975, the Three Bar Ranch had been leased. The year before the lease was to expire, Lisbeth, along with her husband, brother, sisters, and mother asked themselves some hard questions on running the ranch nestled in the western side of the Snowy Mountains. The family could sell the ranch, lease it again, or operate it themselves. What to do?

"The land was paid for but we had no machinery, no cattle, and no experience," Lisbeth explains. "And banks loan on management ability—we had none."

While considering their options, the family learned of the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and the technical and financial assistance that agency could provide through the Great Plains Conservation Program (GPCP).

"After we met with Sam Short, range conservationist, and Jim Rose, district conservationist, and others—it started to look appealing to run the ranch," Lisbeth said. "We felt we could do it if we had others with experience and knowledge to rely on."

"We knew the ranch was run down. When we took over, our rangeland looked like summer fallow farmland with snow on it. Our first instinct was to cut the number of cows but continue grazing in the same manner," Lisbeth remembers. "We didn't know about rest-rotation grazing. I suppose we could have learned on our own, but having people with experience helped a lot."

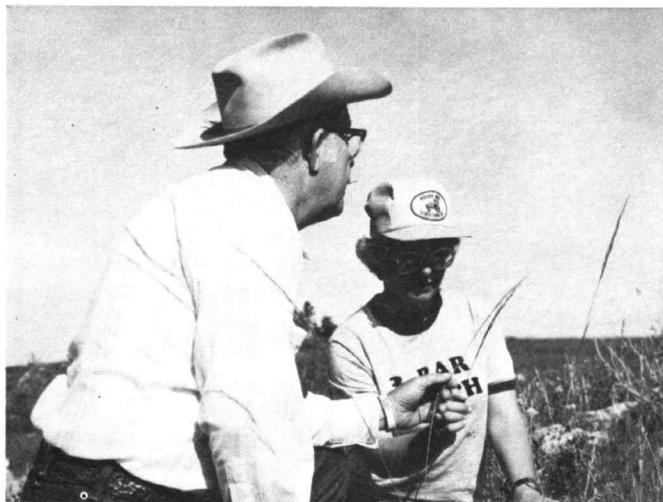
The family agreed on a plan for improving the ranch. It was written as a contract, with the family agreeing to improve and manage the ranch and the SCS agreeing to provide technical and financial assistance.

The Three Bar GPCP contract called for several items including both rest-rotation and deferred rotation grazing systems, fencing changes, water developments, pasture plantings, and better hay management.

Both types of grazing systems were necessary. In the lower elevations with less rainfall, 3 and 4-year rest rotation systems are used. In the higher rainfall elevations, it is a three-year deferred system.

"At first we had a rest-rotation system on everything, but to better utilize the timothy at the higher elevations we changed to a deferred system," she said.

"The ranch is in a block which facilitates the moves required in a grazing system," Lisbeth recently told a group who toured the ranch. "For a lot of our moves we just open



Lisbeth Birch Pendleton checks her knowledge of native range grasses with Jim Rose of the Soil Conservation Service. She and her family started ranching five years ago. (SCS photo)

the gate. Most of the water was developed and fences were already in place when we started."

She likes both the flexibility and improvements of the plan. "We're gaining. We have records that document the numbers of cattle on the ranch. We're running more cattle, and our rangeland is in better shape," Lisbeth states.

To emphasize her point, she compares 1976 to 1980. "We're running 200 more cows than in 1976 and we're not overstocked. In 1976 we grazed the meadows and this year we're haying them."

This is their driest year. "We received only 50% of our usual spring moisture. Even if the drought continues, we won't hurt as much because we have some of last year's dry grass to fall back on," she explained.

While building up its own cattle herd, the Three Bar Ranch took in other people's cattle. "The plan was flexible; we were taking in a lot of different groups of stock—yearling steers, heifers, cow-calf pairs, and in our Great Plains contract the grazing system could accommodate them all."

To Lisbeth, the highest compliment on the improvement of the ranch comes from the neighbors. "We don't have to market our grass," she says. This year they received more calls than ever from people wanting to run cattle.

Even the neighbors who were critical at first of the grazing systems are now inquiring about them.

With the rangeland improving, the next priority for the ranch is hayland renovation and seeding more spring pasture.

"We have confidence now what is necessary and right. The Great Plains Conservation Program made us feel that it wasn't just ourselves when we took over the ranch. We knew we would have assistance in helping us improve our rangeland. Ideas are the foundation of progress and profits," Lisbeth says.