

Ostergard Ranch Celebrates 130 years of history

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Ranch perseveres through good, bad times.

Whether you measure the circumference of the earth at the equator (24,901.55 miles) or through the poles (24,859.82 miles), Jack Ostergard has you beat.

The 84-year-old retired rancher claims he's ridden horses more than 25,000 miles during his lifetime.

Although maybe not as far, Jack's five brothers also grew up riding horses on the ranch in the rolling hills and rugged canyons 20 miles north of Gothenburg.

To honor the land, which has remained in the family for 130 years, the Ostergards are having a public ice cream social this Sunday, from 2-5 p.m., at the Gothenburg Senior Center.

Eventually, brothers Dick, Larry and Ron went into other occupations and Jim, Jack and Don continued ranching.

The story of the ranch begins with John Ostergard who immigrated to the United States from Denmark and homesteaded 160 acres in the New Hope Church area in late 1882 or 1883.

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“He dug a cave in the side of the hill where he lived and later moved two miles east but kept the farmland there,” Jack said. “He was more inclined toward livestock.”

John started another homestead there and erected a sod house and started raising cattle and crops north of what became the town of Etna.

While accumulating property, Jack said homesteaders were required to spend a certain period of time on the land.

“He’d go over to the sod house on the new place to sleep at night,” Jack explained. “Once there was a rattlesnake in the bunch of blankets he used as a bed.”

Two of John’s children, James and Crist, also homesteaded in the area and the ranch and farm grew.

Jim eventually married Mary Rosenberg who also immigrated from Denmark, spoke five languages, and worked awhile for John Jeffers who became president of the Union Pacific Railroad.

The couple had five children of which the first was Harry, the father of the Ostergard boys.



Harry married Ilene Jacobsen, who was also of Danish descent, and settled on the ranch.

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Grandfather John started out with Corriente or mixed breed cows.

Later the Ostergards started producing and selling Hereford/Angus cross steers and heifers.

The cattle were shipped by railcar to private buyers in Illinois and Missouri to be fattened.

Jack remembers how, when the boys turned 9 years old, they could participate in their first cattle drive but they had to walk.

His first experience involved herding yearlings, calves and their mothers for two days to Sandhills pasture 35 miles north of Arnold.

“It was like a rodeo,” Jack said. “And if calves got through the fence, the boys had to follow them on foot until we found a place to get them out.”

Eventually, the Ostergards bought the Sandhills pasture.

Driving cattle back from summer pasture sometimes involved blizzards and frigid temperatures.

“Once we were on horseback, bringing the cattle home, and it was 10 degrees below zero,” he said.

During a particularly bad drought in 1934, the Ostergards and three other ranchers joined together for a nine-day cattle drive to ungrazed pasture near Bassett.

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Once there, the Ostergards built troughs from wood and lined them with tar paper to hold water pumped from windmills for their herd.

The most challenging of his years in ranching was during calving season, Jack said.

“We didn’t often use the vet,” he said, noting that meant sometimes pulling calves in adverse weather conditions.

Occasionally some were breech and “you have a lot more patience with a heifer in trouble at 3 p.m. than at 3 a.m.”

Weather in March was also unpredictable.

During the famous blizzard of 1949, Jack remembers his dad picking up 10 baby calves with a tractor and trailer.

Because cattle didn’t have identification like ear tags and the animals were covered with snow, he said it was difficult to find the right mothers the next day.

Calving was also his favorite part.

“New birth and green grass.”



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Jack is most proud of living in the greatest years of the cattle industry when production and performance testing became popular.

However he and Mary kept records on birth weights, 200-day adjusted weights and sale date average weights before it became mainstream.

Keeping the original ranch in the family is important to Jack because “we had some awfully bad years” such as drought in the '30s and more drought and rock-bottom prices in the '50s.

Low cattle prices returned in the '80s.

Still, succeeding generations added land individually to what great grandfather John originally started, Jack said, like brother Jim, who has since died.

Jim's daughter, Nan, and her family owns part of the Sandhills pasture.

Nan, who grew up on the ranch, said she's proud of the land being in the family for 130 years.

And the fact that she and her family (husband Doug and two children) are the only ones still actively ranching the land.

Sue Ostergard, who raised three children and worked on the ranch for 36 years, was married to Don who is also deceased.

“It's pretty awesome,” she said about the anniversary.

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Larry, a retired plumber who also owns cattle, said he thought ranching would be his livelihood.

“Dad wanted us all to stay out there but there wasn’t room for all of us,” he said.

A memory that stands out in Larry’s mind is the cattle drive each spring.

“We used to get out of school to do it and it was two days in the saddle,” he said. “Afterwards I was so sore I could hardly walk.”

Ron, who retired from the trucking industry, said land in the same family for so long is remarkable.

While growing up, Ron ranched and helped raise swine. He considered expanding the swine operation but said he had a chance to go into a feed business in Gothenburg.

“I elected to get off the ranch because times were tough and expansion was expensive,” he said.

Dick, who was in the automotive and ag parts business, echoed Ron’s thoughts, noting that he went into the service after high school and returned to the ranch for a couple of years.

“That was during the drought in the 1950s and I needed a monthly check so I got a job in town,” he said.

Describing the ranch as a good place to live, Dick said he learned many life lessons there and never really left as numerous sculptures he’s created reflect the land and its inhabitants.

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He's also proud of his brothers and how they shared the work on the ranch.

“And we have a relationship that has lasted through the years,” Dick said.

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