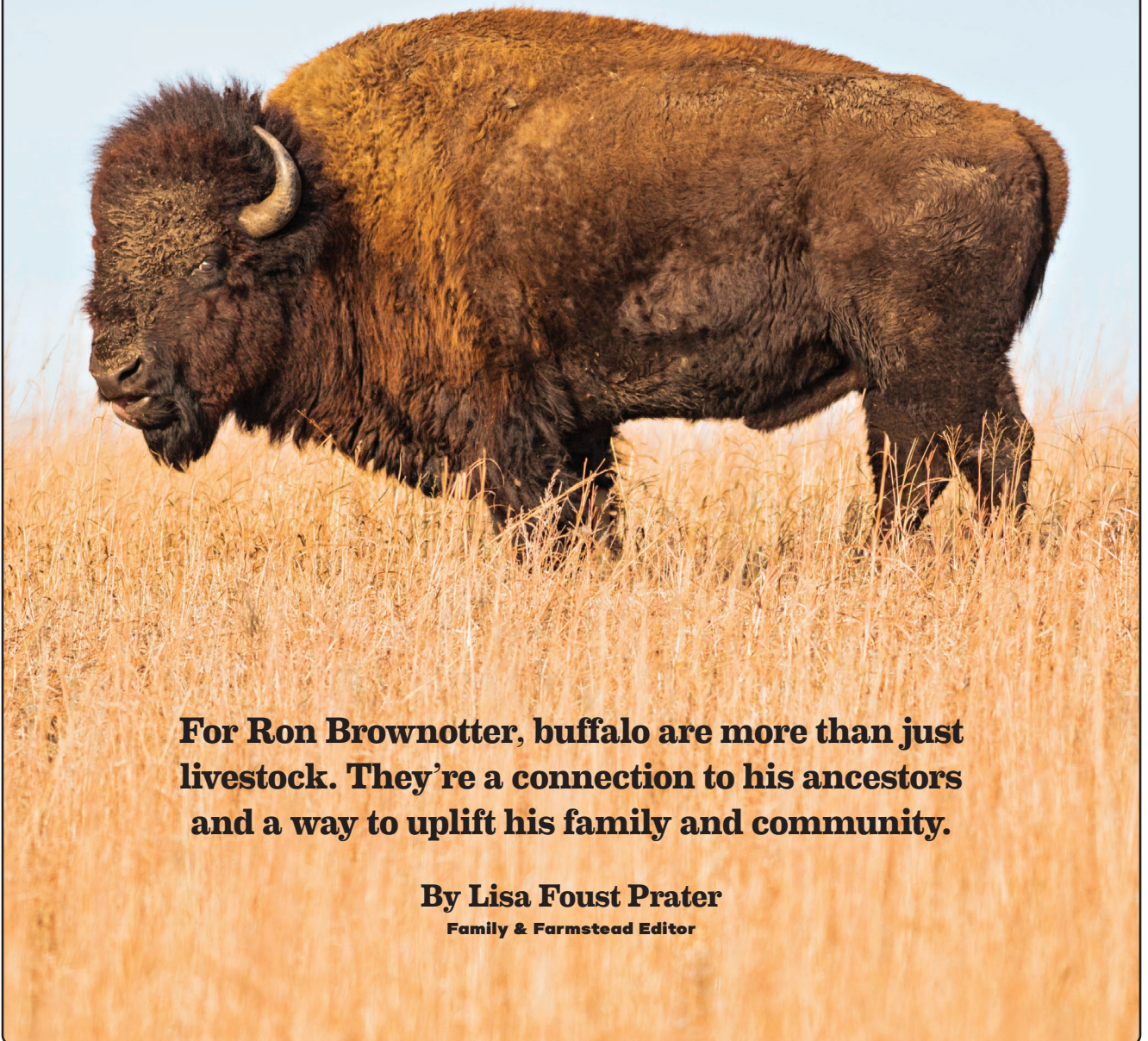


BRINGING BUFFALO BACK TO STANDING ROCK



For Ron Brownotter, buffalo are more than just livestock. They're a connection to his ancestors and a way to uplift his family and community.

By Lisa Foust Prater
Family & Farmstead Editor

Ron Brownotter stood at the edge of an overlook, gazing for miles across the rolling hills, ravines, and plateaus of the Grand River Valley on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in northwest South Dakota. In the distance, the largest buffalo herd solely owned by an American Indian in North America — Brownotter’s herd — were tiny, dark brown dots.

“Sitting Bull lived just over that ridge,” he explained, pointing to his left. Then, extending his arms and taking in the view, he said, “This is my office.”

Brownotter, a Lakota-Yanktonai person and member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, came from humble beginnings to own that herd of 600 buffalo and the 20,000 acres on which they roam.

But the path to the top of that overlook was a winding one, and Brownotter didn’t walk it alone.

A Long Road

Brownotter was one of nine children, and although his parents had plenty of love, financial times were very tough. Some of the children — including Brownotter, at age 7 — were sent to a boarding school for Natives more than 200 miles away. “It was brutal,” he recalled. “But the kids in the late 1800s really had it hard, and many of them died in boarding schools.”

Back at Standing Rock and attending a nearby high school, Brownotter knew he wanted to be a rancher. He used his \$40 monthly check from the Bureau of Indian Education Johnson-O’Malley Program to buy supplies such as tools, shovels, and axes. The program was created in 1934 to reduce boarding school enrollment and place Native students in public schools. “They cut me a check every month, and it had my name on it,” Brownotter said. “I thought that was the coolest thing.”

By that point, Brownotter had developed an alcohol addiction. According to the National Institutes of Health, American Indians have the highest rate of alcohol and other drug use disorders of any ethnic group.

“I didn’t realize I was an alcoholic at a young age; I just knew that’s what my peers and I were doing, and it just seemed to get progressively worse,” he said. “I was getting in trouble, and my excuse was that I was drunk. I could sense that something was wrong with me, and something pushed me to get out of this place.”

Brownotter went to a military center in 1982 and talked to

the Army recruiters, but their delayed entry program meant he wouldn’t be able to join for nine months. “I couldn’t wait nine months,” he recalled. Instead, he left 45 days later for the Marines, where he received inpatient treatment for alcoholism, joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and became a drug and alcohol counselor for other Marines.

After serving for 10 years, Brownotter left the military. He stayed in California, where he had been stationed; met his wife, Carol; and earned an agronomy/crop production degree from California Polytechnic State University.

While attending Cal Poly, Brownotter started a cattle herd back home at Standing Rock on his family land and some leased pasture. He had helpers in South Dakota, but would go back and forth whenever he could to tend to his herd in person.

Decisions and Disappointment

In 1997, Brownotter had around 100 head of cattle when a four-day blizzard

dumped 2 feet of snow with 65-mph winds. “We had a little 2WD tractor with chains on the back tires and a little goofy bucket in the front, but it was useless,” he recalled. “We had no snowmobile, or ATV with tracks, because we couldn’t afford it. Our cows were down in the ravine, and they were starving.”

According to the National Weather Service, that storm killed 100,000 cattle in South Dakota, 10% of the state’s herd. Brownotter lost around half of his herd as well.

After graduating from Cal Poly the next year, he and Carol made their home at Standing Rock and had five children.

Brownotter decided to switch from cattle to hardier buffalo. He applied for a loan with the USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA), which was preapproved at the local level but rejected at the state level. Agents at the state office explained why the application was rejected; Brownotter made those adjustments and reapplied.

Months passed. →



A sign marks the original land area allotted to Brownotter's grandmother via the Dawes Act.

Thinking the funds were on their way, he secured a range unit, which is a section of grazing land on a reservation that can be rented with a permit from the Tribal government, and started building fence for his future buffalo herd.

"I had no money, but I was finding whatever tall stick in the ditch I could find, or an old clothesline pole at somebody's house. I was constantly scavenging," he said. "I was just doing the best I could. In the Marine Corps, you learn to adjust, adapt, and overcome. I'm not a quitter, so I just kept finding stuff to put in the ground and I put those two wires on top."

The invoice for the rangeland came, and Brownotter still hadn't heard anything from the state FSA office. Payment was due in 30 days. "The 30 days came and went and I lost the range unit, so I had to go back and pull up all those posts and all the wire,"

Brownotter said. "I was so frustrated."

About that time, he heard about *Pigford v. Glickman*, a class-action lawsuit claiming that the USDA had discriminated against Black farmers. "I wrote a letter to the Office of Civil Rights at the USDA explaining my story. They sent a reply and basically said, 'We can't help you,'" Brownotter recalled. "I was going to rip that letter up and throw it in the trash, but something told me to put it in my important-letter box."

In 1999, Brownotter was elected to the Standing Rock Tribal Council and assigned to the land committee. While the council was at a meeting with members of other tribes, visiting attorneys asked anyone who felt they had been discriminated against by the USDA to come forward with their documentation. Fortunately, Brownotter had his rejection letter with him, and he became a plaintiff in the class action suit

Keepseagle v. Vilsack.

"So fast forward, we got the case settled, we got our FSA loan written off, and we got cash on top of that," he said. "That was part of our agricultural history here, and it's an important story to tell. Remember: The FSA had shot us down to raise buffalo."

Becoming a Buffalo Rancher

In 2000, the Brownotters brought home their first six buffalo from the annual Custer State Park bison auction in the Black Hills. "As Carol and I were driving out of Custer State Park afterwards, the sun was just getting ready to go down," he recalled. "And as we're driving slowly up that little windy hill, with all the ponderosa pines, this golden eagle flies right beside us, like 15 or 20 feet away, really slow. Then, he glides right in front of the truck as we're driving, almost even with the top of the truck," he said.

"That was a sign that this is what we're supposed to do."

After that, Brownotter sold more cattle and bought more buffalo each year until his herd was 100% buffalo. "It has been an interesting road, and we had a lot of miracles happen along the way," he said.

A few years after starting his buffalo herd, Brownotter, who was a board member for Sitting Bull College, shared his story with two new friends while at a board meeting. They asked to come see Brownotter's herd, which had grown to 30 or 40 head.

"Within a month or two, they came out, and I took them out to our little buffalo pasture, and showed them the buffalo and the fences, and I told them the story of the area," he recalled. "They said, 'We've seen the fences and they're straight and they're tight. We know you like what you do. We invest in Native American businesses, and money's not an issue.'"

Brownotter went to a Tribal land committee meeting with a \$500,000 check from the investors to lease more land so he could expand his herd. "I told them my plans, and I was ready for them to ask how I was going to pay for it, and I wanted to reach into my pocket and pull out that cashier's check with my name on it. I was champing at the bit, but nobody asked," he said. "They just gave me the leases." Overnight, Brownotter's ranch grew from 2,000 acres to 20,000.

He returned the check to the investors. "That's →



“Sitting Bull lived just over that ridge. This is my office.”

- Ron Brownotter

how we started our business relationship,” he said.

While he no longer needed their support to lease land, Brownotter worked with the investors to buy buffalo. He went back to the Custer sale that fall with their support. “I was the only brown face in the whole audience. My mission was to buy every buffalo that came through that sale, but other people didn’t know that,” he said, with a laugh. “Once I started, they realized I was going to buy every one of them, so I didn’t even have to raise my card anymore, I just nodded my head and the auctioneer would get my bid. We bought every buffalo. I enjoyed buying the buffalo like that because I knew they were coming here.”

As part of Brownotter’s mission to bring buffalo back to Standing Rock, he has taken cropland out of production and worked on returning it to native grass. He has restored 2,000 acres and is working on 1,500 more. “Some of that land was farmed for 50 or 60 years straight,” he said. Groups such as the Nature

Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund have helped with seed and other needs.

Financing the Fence

When that big herd of buffalo from the Custer sale first came to the ranch, cattle fence still surrounded the pasture. “I drove my little truck up onto the plateau to pray, and asked God for direction. Those two friends said money wasn’t an issue, but buffalo fence is so expensive: every railroad tie, every clip, every 7-foot steel post, the fuel, the food, the gloves, the water, the labor,” he said. “I was getting ready to leave, and looked down at the ground and there was an eagle feather right there. I opened the door and reached down and grabbed that eagle feather and said: ‘I’ll fence it. I don’t care what it takes.’”

Brownotter, at the time a member of the Indian Land Tenure Foundation Board, attended a meeting in California. There, the executive director told him the group was attempting to give a \$100,000 grant to a

Native rancher who wanted to convert from cattle to buffalo, but he wouldn’t return their calls. “I said: ‘Why are you wasting your time? Why don’t you work with people who want to do things right?’” he recalled.

Brownotter shared his story and left the meeting with the grant, which he used to start the fencing project without calling on his investors. When the money ran out, he approached that executive director again and was given another \$100,000 grant. “And today, it’s all done,” he said. He has also received other grants, including funding for a cake feeder, and a down payment on a skid steer.

Brownotter encourages other Native farmers and ranchers to seek and apply for USDA and other grants, and to consider partnerships with outside investors.

“Don’t be afraid of capital,” he said. “Normally, we go to a bank off the reservation, and they’re nice to you and everything, but then you get this letter saying they can’t help.”

Adding to the Herd

Brownotter received another 251 buffalo from an unusual source: Catalina Island, California. According to the National Park Service, a movie crew brought several American bison to Catalina Island in the 1920s while filming “The Vanishing American” and left 14 behind when production ended. By 1969, the herd had grown to nearly 400.

In 2003, a grassroots effort in California raised funds to purchase and ship bison to reservations in the Great Plains. “They said these buffalo need to go back to the people that originally had them, and that was us, the Native people,” Brownotter said. “We didn’t pay a penny for them.”

Brownotter has also received buffalo and grants from the Tanka Fund, a nonprofit whose mission is to restore buffalo to Native lands, along with the Nature Conservancy and the Minnesota Zoo. He is vice president of the Tanka Fund’s board of directors.

The Buffalo Business

Brownotter maintains a herd of around 600 head of buffalo, selling calves and bulls each November at a live online auction that is simulcast at a nearby casino. Last fall, he sold 380 calves and 14 yearling bulls.

Another business venture is wild buffalo hunts, with Brownotter as guide. Unlike hunting packages offered by some ranches, where the animals are on a few →

Buffalo from the Tanka Fund are released onto Brownotter's property.



hundred acres and are used to human interaction, Brownotter's herd is wild, and may take days to track.

"Every hunt's different, every hunter's different. Every buffalo's different. Every day is different. It could be snowing. It could be 60°F. They get the full South Dakota experience," he said. "What I like about it is they get quality meat that their families and extended family and friends can consume."

While the buffalo are Brownotter's livelihood, they are also a connection to his heritage and a way to help support his community. He is one of four producers taking part in a USDA pilot program that provides local ground bison meat to Tribal communities. "We're moving to another level as far as being big enough to fill this USDA contract," he said.

The buffalo Brownotter raises are field harvested, "right there, while they're chewing grass looking at you," he said. "We don't

put them in trailers. We don't haul them two hours down the road where they're excited, stressed out, and head-butting each other with their horns and getting bruised up just to get killed somewhere else. That activity is being put into the meat that you're going to eat."

Once the animal is harvested, there is more for Brownotter to do. "The buffalo was everything to us and still is. It kept us alive all those centuries, and we have that relationship with the animal," he said. "An elder told me, 'When you kill a buffalo, you say a prayer, and then you put sage in the mouth' — that plant we use in our ceremonies — so that's what I do. I say a prayer and thank the buffalo. He's going to feed families."

Brownotter currently uses a butcher 45 miles away in Mobridge, but the tribe is building an on-reservation packing plant 30 miles closer, in McLaughlin. This will bring much-needed jobs to the community, as well as

opportunities for marketing Standing Rock-branded meat.

From the Roots Up

The land on which Brownotter's buffalo graze includes the original allotment his grandmother, Annie Leaf, received more than 100 years ago as part of the Dawes Act.

Dawes assigned ownership of 160- or 320-acre allotments of Tribal land to individual members, and opened the "surplus" of what was left of the reservations to non-Native settlers. Accepting an allotment and agreeing to the division of tribal land was the only way Natives could become American citizens.

According to the National Park Service, Dawes cost tribes 65% of their land nationwide. While data on allotment century farms is not well documented, they are certainly rare. Many Natives were forced to sell their allotments due to financial difficulties, and some allotments now have

hundreds of owners after being divided among heirs.

Although hunting by non-Natives was the major reason behind the loss of wild buffalo, Dawes contributed by dividing the vast expanses of land that was their habitat.

When Annie Leaf died, her allotment went to her son: Brownotter's father. After his death, the land went to Brownotter's mother. When she wanted to sell, Brownotter purchased it but gave her a lifetime estate, which meant she remained in her home and received income from the land for the rest of her life. Brownotter and his family live in that home today.

What would Brownotter's ancestors think if they could see the animal that meant so much to them roaming the restored plains around the Grand River Valley?

"If my ancestors were to come back, if my grandmother were to come back today and see what's going on here, she'd be happy," Brownotter said. "She'd be crying, I think, to see one of her grandchildren doing this." She would also see her legacy carved in steel. A sign at the entrance to the ranch reads, "Brownotter Buffalo Ranch, Leaf Allotment."

Brownotter honors his ancestors by restoring the land, helping buffalo thrive again, and uplifting his community. "I don't want to hurt people. I want to build bridges," he said. "If I would've listened to all my critics when we got this buffalo deal started, where would I be?" •



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