

Where the buffalo roam in Hinsdale, N.Y.

Bison ranch replaces dairy farm on 300 acres one family has worked for five generations

By Jim Slonoff

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During my trip to Hinsdale, N.Y., I was surprised by the similarities between their town and ours.

They have a Hinsdale Central. We have a Hinsdale Central. They have a Hinsdale Historical Society. We have a Hinsdale Historical Society. They have a Hinsdale post office. We have a Hinsdale post office. They have a bison ranch. We have a — OK, we don't have a bison ranch.

Finding the Maple Ridge Bison Ranch in the Town of Hinsdale shouldn't be difficult, but it was for me. It's those Enchanted Mountains — hills, really, that got me. So I spent at least 45 minutes driving around. I wasn't lost. Really.

After stumbling — I mean, finding — my way back to the Hinsdale Post Office, I spoke to the postmaster. Who brought out the letter carrier. Who cleared it all up.

"Head up Gile Hollow Road," she instructed. "Just when you think it's at the end, veer right and keep going to the top of the hill. You'll see the buffalo."

Huh?

Turns out her directions worked, and I found myself at the ranch, more than 300 acres of rolling hills, where the buffalo do roam — grazing on natural grasses such as rich clover, Timothy-grass and alfalfa. A high wire fence ensures they don't roam too far.



A calf, born a day earlier, takes her mom on a trot across a field covered with the natural grasses the herd grazes on. The calves weigh between 30-40 pounds at birth. Jeff Goodyear is the fifth generation of his family to work the land. This is one of the two bulls Goodyear keeps for breeding purposes. (Jim Slonoff photos)



The ranch owner, Jeff Goodyear, is the fifth generation of his family to tend the land, which was once a dairy farm. However, being a dairy farmer wasn't his plan.

"I did not want to milk," he said. "My uncle ended

up with the farm. I ended up moving and working in New Hampshire."

He spent 15 years at Uraseal, a fiber optics company of which he was part owner. As the company worked with seven regional

Bell companies, he traveled all over the country.

And while running a dairy operation and working 365 days a year was not something Goodyear was interested in, a phone call from his aunt changed his mind.

"My aunt called me when I was in New Hampshire and she was thinking about selling the farm and wanted to know if I was interested," he recalled. "I'm the fifth generation. I couldn't see this place being in anybody else's hands. My great-great grandmother is buried in a small cemetery up on the left hand side of the road, going up to the top of hill."

He didn't realize until later that his travels across the United States with Uraseal had created a road map for his future.

"Any time you are west of the Mississippi, they had bison on the menu, and I got



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This is the last in a four-part series on our visit to Hinsdale, N. Y.

so I really liked it," he said. It was heart healthy. It was better for you than boneless, skinless chicken. Out in Seattle they had it in your finer restaurants — they had bison steaks," he said. "You get in to Colorado, Wyoming and Montana, different places like that, the bison burgers were one of the first things on the menu."

With his aunt's phone call, he realized it was time to return to Hinsdale and the land that been home to generations of his family. But the 47-year old wasn't going to be a dairy farmer. Instead bison was going to become the family business.

While land was plentiful,

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It was a family affair getting the ranch ready for the herd. From clearing land to stringing wire for fences, everyone pitched in.

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there was plenty of work that needed to be done before he purchased his first bison in 2001. With the help of wife Julie, children Jeff and Lisa and their spouses, along with his brother and sister-in-law, they cleared the land and fenced off hundreds of acres.

"It's a family business," he said. "We've had our share of trials and tribulations. You know, it's like anything else — some, maybe a lot of people wouldn't get into business if they knew what they were getting in to," Goodyear said, laughing.

When it came time to build his herd, he traveled to Rapid City, S.D., to bid on animals at the Black Hills Classic. He was in for the surprise of his life as he discovered he was, like so many first-time business owners, under-capitalized to begin his venture.

"The prices were very high when I started bidding," he said. "And my son and my wife and I decided that we wouldn't be able to get any animals because the prices were so high."

The first few animals sold for anywhere from \$4,000 to \$11,000. When the next lot of animals came up for auction, the price started at \$450 and never went up. Not one person at the crowded auction bid against him until he had purchased 30 bison.

He said he was smiling ear to ear when he was ready to

leave.

"If it hadn't been for the great American people seeing somebody that wanted to be doing something, and maybe didn't have all the finances to do it, the dream would have died right there."

He later bought another 26 bison.

Over the years, he's learned a lot on the job. It took his herd a decade to adjust to the new climate, which was much wetter and had different types of grass than the herd was accustomed to. There were occasional bouts of illnesses that were addressed naturally and quickly.

He has never fed his bison anything but grass. He avoids grain or animal byproducts in their food and does not use growth hormones or antibiotics, either.

He's learned animals, like people, sometimes display personality disorders.

"It's taken 15 to 17 years, but we got the genetics down," he said. "We didn't concentrate, really concentrate, on genetics until after the first three or four years.

And then I realized, you know, a bad cow is a bad cow — kind of like people. You don't want some people. You're going to change some people, not going change some.

"You've got good mothers, you've got bad mothers. You have the same thing



The view from the Goodyears' front yard takes in multiple hills in the Enchanted Mountains — and seems to stretch forever.

here. They've got a pecking order. They've got a social structure. They've got good verbal and non-verbal communication skills. They've got brains — they're a thinking animal," he said.

As an example, he told of a mother's behavior after her calf is born. During this most vulnerable time for both animals, the mom will take a few of the herd with her for protection until the calf is up and walking. Goodyear believes over the generations it has become instinctive for the mother to seek that protection.

He only keeps two breeding bulls in his operation and has learned the hard way that two's company but more than that creates "nothing but problems" when breeding season arrives. Currently he has about 50-60 in his herd, and in mid-June 12 new calves

were born.

And while owning a herd of bison is not nearly as difficult as being a dairy farmer, there are plenty of chores to keep a family busy.

One of the unexpected demands Goodyear discovered is the need to build a market for bison meat. To that end, he spends his summers visiting local fairs and festivals, cooking bison and giving away samples to enthusiastic crowds.

He enjoys the work, but it's not easy.

"It's a tough market to build," he said. "I started out sitting at farmers markets trying to sell meat. I couldn't sell enough meat to pay the taxes.

"So then I decided, you know, if you don't eat it and taste it, you're not going to create a demand, so I started cooking at festivals."

At the nearby Cuba Garlic Festival, he thought he'd have time to sit back and relax while cooking the meat slowly. The 7,000 who attended changed that plan.

"We never could stop cooking. Everybody wanted it. Everybody wanted to taste it. And once they did, they wanted to know how to get some," he said.

His next plan is to turn a building on his property into a restaurant that would be open Fridays and Saturdays and offer a bison roast and tour in the fall.

"And I'm only about eight years behind schedule," he said, laughing. "The way to create a market is to cook it and feed it to people."

By creating that market and running a successful ranch, he's guaranteed Goodyears will be on the land for many more generations to come.



Like many communities, the Town of Hinsdale has several cemeteries. Among the many veterans buried in the Hinsdale Cemetery is Benjamin Gifford. He fought in the Civil War and was awarded a Medal of Honor. The graves of Enos, who fought in the Revolutionary War, and his wife, Sarah Ludden, are there as well. (Jim Slonoff photos)

