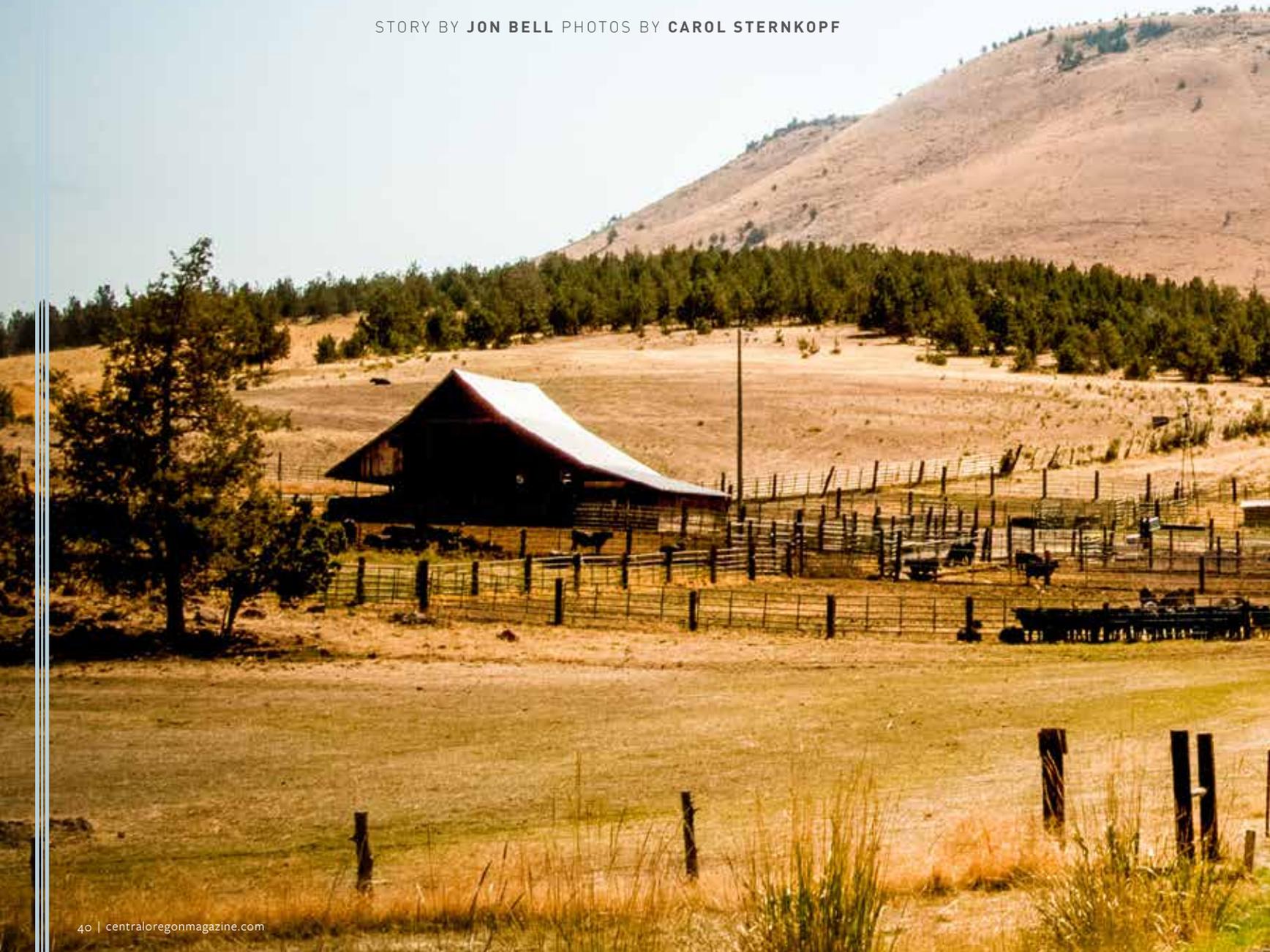

HOME ON THE RANGE

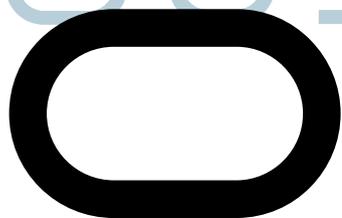
STORY BY **JON BELL** PHOTOS BY **CAROL STERNKOPF**



FOR LONG-TIME RANCHERS DIANNE AND KENNY READ, BAR KD
RANCH IS EXACTLY WHERE THEY WANT TO BE



OUT HERE, THIS IS REAL COUNTRY



Out here, dry, golden grasses color the land, dark junipers accent it, the Cascades—Three Fingered Jack, Jefferson, Hood—tower above it far off on the hazy horizon. The morning's blue sky slowly pales with the rise of the sun, which warms chill air that just a few hours before had condensed breath into the first signs of impending autumn. Slightly east of the gray asphalt of Highway 97 past the tiny town of Culver, a campground appears on the right, green alfalfa fields on the left. A lake comes into view—Haystack Reservoir—and beyond its southern shore, a sweeping butte of the same name.

And then, just as Dianne Read had described, the first few telltale signs that the destination is here, out in this real country: the weathered old barn, the lone house among the sagebrush and grasses, the wagon wheel adorned with a signature brand and, most telling, the dark, inquisitive eyes of the Black Angus cattle of the Bar KD Ranch.

It's just past 7:30 in the morning, maybe a little later than Kenny Read, Dianne's husband, normally gets his day started, but no matter. There is plenty of history to cover over coffee first, as would be expected at any fourth-generation cattle ranch, let alone one that started its days as a 19th-century stagecoach and freight stop. Back then, the Bar KD property was known as Perrysville—named after Kenny Read's great-grandfather, Perry Read—and was home to a hotel, a school, a general store and a collection of 25 houses. Those are all gone now, though the barn and the main part of the Read's characteristic house, both built in the 1860s, remain as homestead originals.

But what's still and unmistakably intact is the authentic ranching life that's gone on here for generations. There have been changes, for sure. What once was a major stagecoach stop between Shaniko and modern-day Bend evolved into a dryland wheat farm with commercial Hereford cattle. More recently, it transitioned gradually into a certified Black Angus seed stock operation that today abides by a gentle, holistic approach to its animals while tapping into the latest in genomics and genetics. The present-day Bar KD is no destination ranch for the bed-and-breakfast crowd, but instead a real-deal, working cattle ranch that ties its very existence to the animals bred and raised on its 1,500 acres.

Kenny Read almost seems typecast for the role of Oregon rancher. There's no big belt buckles or Stetsons—though he does wear Lee Jeans

and a baseball hat from the 2013 Red Bluff Bull & Gelding Sale—but he's got the natural ease of someone who's been doing what he knows how to do—and enjoying it—for his entire life. Born and raised on the ranch, Kenny, 60, remembers sliding down the barn's long rooftop and climbing to the top of the old windmill to steer clear of his siblings. He grew up going to school in Culver, where he had 13 people in his class from elementary school through high school, then studied agronomics at Oregon State University.

Kenny solidified his path while managing the family ranch from 1970 through 1978, when his father had gone into town to become a juvenile judge.

"That's when I decided that I liked cows a lot better than wheat," he says. "Cows intrigued me. They are a really intelligent creature if you know how to communicate with them."

The ranch was too small for Kenny to officially join along with his father and brother though, so he headed north to ranch on his own in Wamic, Oregon. It was there that he met Dianne in 1990.

The daughter of a military father, Dianne had lived all over the country, from North Carolina to Texas and Washington. She grew up riding horses and living amongst her family's orange and peach groves in Florida and a landscaping business in California. A farm girl at heart, Dianne worked for a ranching operation in Yakima, Washington, that ran 15,000 head of cattle, then joined the Forest Service before meeting Kenny. The two married in 1991 and now have three grown children, none of whom are presently involved with the ranch.

When Kenny's brother died unexpectedly the next year, the couple came back to the ranch in Culver and decided to transition it from a farm and commercial cattle ranch into a seed stock producer of certified Black Angus cattle. Today, Kenny and Dianne raise and breed only Black Angus cattle on the ranch. They sell about 45 certified bulls every year to beef producers, largely from California and southern Oregon and primarily at a couple major livestock sales in January and February.

"My father darn near disowned us when we decided we were going to be Black (Angus) rather than red and white Herefords," Kenny says. "The whole family was just up in arms, but eventually my father did finally admit that we were doing okay."

First things first in the morning—the bulls need to be fed.

Kenny fills five-gallon buckets with a special feed blend and spreads it into long cement troughs by hand. The black bulls, huge even at just under



a year, lumber over to get their share. Normally leery of humans, these cattle show no fear of Kenny, who pets them and talks to them just as he does the ranch canine, a friendly black Scotty named Wyatt. Since these cattle were born, they've gotten nothing but gentle attention from Kenny and Dianne, who've taken this kind of approach to keep them calm and cooperative.

"If you cowboy 'em around and chase 'em, you get a whole different kind of animal," Kenny says.

The cattle respond to Kenny's commands, all delivered in a lively rancher's drawl; they go where he tells them to go, stay where he wants them to stay, even when it comes time for them to enter a hulking hydraulic chute for branding and vaccinations. He can identify almost every single animal by name or number.

"We call him the cow whisperer," Dianne says.

Once the bulls are fed, Kenny moves one group of heifers—young females who've not yet had a calf—across the way for their own feeding. There are about 200 females on the ranch; close to 130 of them are out in another pasture, pregnant and approaching the October calving season. Kenny stops to chat with a salesman who's eager to get him into a new tractor, his spiel bolstered by the air seeping out of the old tractor's tire nearby. The rig had sprung a leak the night before while Kenny was out mowing grass.

"It's always something around here," Dianne says, "whether someone runs through the fence down on the road, someone's trespassing, something

needs to be fixed. We've had cattle stolen—27 pair once. We've had cattle shot. It's something different every day."

After moving a select handful of females into the barn—the best-looking of the bunch, the ones who get washed and brushed daily, the ones who will most-likely be sold as show cattle—it's into the pickup and off to a nearby pasture to check on the pregnant cows. Like the bulls, they are calm and cool even as we walk among them just inches away. In a few more weeks they'll be moved to an expanse textured with juniper trees far behind the house. There, they'll have their calves—all within a 10-day window thanks to artificial insemination—and raise them through the winter among the protection of the trees.

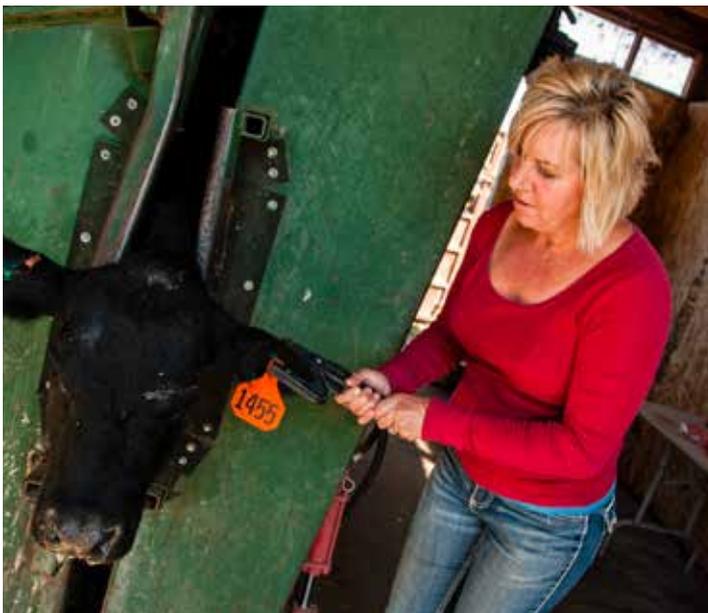
To ensure that only the best cattle are part of Bar KD's offering, cows that can't deliver without assistance are culled from the herd; so are calves who need to be pulled out and bulls who don't make the grade. Some who come up short go to town—Kenny-speak for "sold at the auction." Others earn the nickname Dinner. Dianne says about 40 such cattle are harvested for beef, sold privately or sold at the local auction each year.

While scouting out the rest of the ranch in the pickup, Kenny stops to repair a water pipe and Dianne hops out to grab an intact buck skull off the ground. Wyatt shoves his shaggy head out the window, taking in the sights and smells: the eagles' nests up on the butte, the pungent yellow rabbitbrush, the swooping magpies and the glaciated summits to the west.





IT'S ALWAYS SOMETHING
AROUND HERE.
WHETHER SOMEONE
RUNS THROUGH THE
FENCE DOWN ON
THE ROAD.





“We live in the hole,” Kenny says of the protected location of their house, “but when you actually get out to where the ranch is and see all the mountains and the different colors, it really is a pretty place.”

After a late and long lunch, it's back to it. The group of heifers that had been moved earlier in the morning needs to be tagged, tattooed and branded. Kenny rounds up a small bunch using little more than his voice, saying “heifers get up” and moving them along with simple shushes. They group together and, for the most part, do what Kenny says, working their way into a single-file line that leads into the hydraulic squeeze chute, a green cage-like contraption that restrains one animal at a time.

The first heifer skitters into the squeeze and Dianne cinches the walls tight with the pull of a lever. Working as a team, the Reads check their records to see if she's a keeper or not. There's a quick moo when Kenny tags and tattoos her ear. Dianne then opens a side door of the squeeze and grabs the branding iron, an electrical rod that glows hot orange. She plants it precisely on the heifer's flanks. Flames lick up from the burning hair, then a trail of smoke, a smell of singe and another moo. It's all over

fairly quickly, and when Dianne opens the squeeze, the heifer trots off into the sunshine, the Bar KD brand now marking her origins for good.

The process, designed to be much less stressful than the traditional branding method, repeats again and again until this group is done. There are plenty more who need the same treatment, but it's also time for Dianne to wash and brush the show ladies. Kenny's got to go pick up the repaired tractor tire, and Wyatt, apparently, needs a nap. The work, the ranch life, seems never ending, and it's hard not to wonder if Kenny and Dianne Read ever get the chance to really relax, if they might ever dream of sitting on a tropical beach somewhere far away from Bar KD.

“I don't really want to,” Kenny says. “Every day's a vacation to me and every day's a holiday, okay? Every day. Even the worst days. There are some days when I'm packin' a hundred hand pipe, it's like what in the hell am I doing this for? But I'm doing what I wanted to do, and these are all my babies. There's not much I'd rather do in life than this.”

Dianne agrees, almost wholeheartedly. Almost.

“I mean, the beach in Mexico is a little appealing, you know, piña colodas or something,” she says. “That'd be kinda fun. But I could only do it for a couple days. I'd be too worried about what was going on at the ranch.” 🏔️

BAR KD RANCH

www.barkdranch.com

EVERY DAY'S A
VACATION TO ME
AND EVERY DAY'S
A HOLIDAY

