

Five Dot Ranch— Surviving Housing Development Pressure

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

The Swickard family has been ranching in California—producing grain and livestock—since 1852, and is now working into the 7th generation. Todd Swickard is 6th generation, raising natural beef and marketing a branded product, and some of his children are helping with the business.

Silicon Valley Ranch

The original family homestead was in the Santa Clara Valley, which has now become Silicon Valley. Todd's great-great-great grandfather Andrew Swickard came to California by sea, sailing from New Orleans via Cape Horn in 1852. At that time there was very little overland travel across the western half of the country.

Andrew Swickard, his wife Susannah, and their two children homesteaded in the valley upon their arrival in California. It was there that their son Harvey met and married Isabel McQuene, whose family had come to California from Indiana via ship, crossing the Isthmus of Panama on foot.

Later, Harvey, Isabel and their eight children expanded the family ranch's horse breeding operation to supply the booming city of San Francisco with transportation.

Harvey and Isabel's son John eventually took over the ranch and married Mary Ellen Cothran. Her family had come to California by wagon train in 1859, leaving Kansas with 1,000 head of cattle. Only 250 head survived the journey.

John and Mary Ellen's son, John Abraham Swickard, and his wife Evelyn Boeger later took over the ranch and had two sons, Jack and Tom. In 1949, Jack Swickard (with guidance and direction from his father) at age 15 became one of the youngest purebred cattle breeders in the nation and the youngest commercial breeder in the Santa Clara Valley.

Later Jack married his wife Margret and was joined by his brother Tom in the day-to-day operations of the ranch. "My dad and his brother developed successful cattle, haying and farm operations. They actually had three crops besides the cattle and hay—prunes, apricots and walnuts. However, after the war ended, a big four-lane freeway (Highway 101) was put through the middle of the ranch. Houses started coming in all around it, and our family didn't have any choice but to move," recalls Todd.

The valley was becoming too urbanized for ranching. "What used to be the family ranch is all city now. My dad could see that it wasn't going

to work there much longer, and he had a passion for the cattle business, so he started looking for another ranch to buy. He found a ranch in northeastern California, near Susanville, in Lassen County." Margret was pregnant with Todd at the time, and ordered by her doctors to stay on bed rest. The first time she actually saw the ranch was when Todd was two months old.

Their Five Dot Land and Cattle Company was started there in 1959 with 200 registered Hereford cattle. This is where the ranch headquarters are located today. The name of their branded meat product comes from

this ranch his father purchased. "That was the brand that came with the ranch. Five brothers had owned it at one time. The brand is 5 dots, positioned like the pattern of dots on dice. My dad took that brand and expanded the operation. Some of the neighboring ranchers were selling out and he was able to take advantage of that so the ranch kept growing as we went along," says Todd.

"We are located where the Cascades, Sierra Nevada Mountains and the

Great Basin all come together, on the east side of the mountains. This is good cattle country," he says.

Building a Natural Beef Herd

In 1994 Todd took over the daily operations of the ranch from his father Jack. Since then, Todd and his wife Loretta have maintained a predominately Angus cattle herd, and they developed a natural beef program in 2006.

"We still have mostly Angus cross cattle and produce our own bulls. We were unable to find anyone producing the kind of bulls we needed that would sire the kind of cattle we want for our beef program. So we started an artificial insemination (AI) program and have been producing and growing our own bulls. Most purebred breeders sell bulls that are too big. We are in high desert country and need cattle that can get around and rustle their own feed," he says.

Their cattle are primarily Angus but have been crossed a little bit with Herefords, Senepol and a composite. "We got some composite bulls from Steve Radakovich in Iowa who breeds a composite created from Red Angus, Hereford, Senepol and a small amount of Barzona. This all adds some hybrid vigor and helps downsize the cattle in our herd. These



The Swickard family is all involved in the family business with the 7th generation hard at work in the business.

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cattle can use the country and do well in our conditions; they are hardy and efficient. We certainly get a benefit from the crossbreeding and try to match the cattle to the environment where they are. We have some pretty tough country,” Todd says.

The cattle run on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service allotments as well as private land. “We run on three different Forests and have quite a bit of BLM, and some private leased land as well, with cattle on about 700,000 acres. With our efficient cattle we are able to minimize hay use in the winter. The cattle can manage to keep grazing. We used to feed about 2 tons of hay per cow during winter, and we have some cattle now that don’t get any hay at all. On average, we are now feeding about half a ton per cow per winter.”

Whenever they do feed hay, they try to feed it on ground that needs more litter and fertilization. “We feed in areas that needs some help for the soil. Depending on the area, sometimes we harvest our hay a little late so that the hay incorporates the seeds. Wherever we feed the hay, it becomes a seeding process, and this works very well.” The cattle operation works with Nature instead of against her, and it is amazing what you can do with cattle to improve the land and forage.

“You really see the difference, in the increased productivity, if you can manage it right and do some things like that to take care of the soil. This helps ensure more plants and plenty of cover for the land. Productivity of the land is so much higher this way, than it is under traditional season-long use or using it the same season every year,” Todd says. This is where Holistic Management helps people, to understand how this all works.

Building a Beef Brand

When the Swickards first began to market natural beef, they started selling their product at farmers markets. This opened the door to acquire a permanent location at the Oxbow Public Market in Napa, California in January 2008. “We started our branded beef program at that time, since we needed a way to more effectively market our cattle,” he says. A branded niche product seemed the best way to go.

“California is an expensive place to do business, so we were forced to go a different direction in 2006–2007 when cattle prices were really low. Then came the recession. California is probably the most expensive place in the world to do business, with high electric costs, minimum wage, taxes, fuel, etc. Ranching is traditionally a low margin business and it got to the point where it wasn’t working. We decided to market the cattle in the Bay area at Napa. My wife headed that up, so now we are selling beef back into the Silicon Valley that we had to move out of, so at least those folks are now our customers!”

Some of their beef is sold to people at the headquarters of Google, Air BNB, and several places in San Francisco and Santa Clara. Five Dot Ranch sells only beef from cattle owned and raised on their ranch. It is

sold wholesale to local restaurants and markets as well as through their own store in Napa which houses a butcher shop and restaurant called the Cookhouse. Fresh meat is sold through that store. “My wife has about 60 different accounts—restaurants and small grocery stores, so this keeps her busy doing all the marketing.”

To keep a constant supply of beef for their customers, the ranch has 3 different herds of cattle, with different calving seasons. Varying calving seasons also help match the cattle to their environment. “One herd stays year round on leased pasture in the Bay area, so this gives us a consistent supply, ready to harvest at different times. One of the main things our customers want is consistency in a year-round product,” says Todd.

The cattle are raised predominantly on grass, and finished for a short

time in the ranch feed area in Susanville. “We try to minimize the number of days on supplemental feed, but we do feed for about 90 days to get the consistency. Most of the feedstuffs are grown on our own ranch but we do buy some barley. We also use some rice bran, which is a by-product of the rice industry here in California; it works nicely in our feeding program.”

The meat is sold in many high end restaurants and grocery stores. “They really like our product and the consistency of it. We debated frequently whether to go with a 100% grass fed product, but for customer satisfaction (which we feel is highest priority) we’ve opted to continue using a short finishing period on a mixture of forage and

grain. Due to taste tests, and catering to our chefs, we’ve stuck with this route. We just try to minimize days on feed. We hold all the yearlings over; they are usually harvested at about 24 months of age. We take them slowly; we don’t push them at all,” he says. This is also healthier for the cattle.

“With the three herds, we are constantly weaning calves, processing them and moving yearlings around, as well as the cow herd,” Todd says.

Learning to Manage Complexity

Todd’s parents, Jack and Margret, were introduced to Holistic Management when they went on a Western Livestock Journal tour to Africa in the early 1970s and met Allan Savory. “My dad began using some of those practices and was one of the first ranchers in this area to start planned grazing,” says Todd.

“I continued to incorporate these practices, and this is the main reason we are still in business today. We were able to weather some of the challenges by taking care of the soil, all the vegetation, etc. In our line of business we are producing food and can keep the landscape in relatively natural state. We try to work with Nature, even though we have to deal with many different state and federal agency people and private owners that we lease ground from. Each of them has different priorities and objectives and it’s a constant juggling act,” he says.

“We have to be very flexible and change all the time. We must accommodate each person/agency’s management philosophy. We also have to juggle many different species of wildlife, taking care of sage grouse, tiger salamanders, Carson wandering skipper butterflies and so on.



The Swickards are constantly adapting their management in order to accommodate each person/agency’s management philosophy. They have to juggle many different species of wildlife including sage grouse, tiger salamanders, Carson wandering skipper butterflies, and Canada geese.



"It keeps changing, according to the attitude and philosophy of the individuals within the agencies we have to deal with," he says. With a change in personnel there can be a big change in requirements or how they are interpreted.

"It takes a lot of communication and work to try to accommodate all this, and we also have to continually do an education process because many of those folks are not familiar with Holistic Management. We have to re-educate, as new people come on board, so they can understand where we're coming from," Todd says.

This all takes effort and coordination to keep everything running smoothly, and the ranch functioning optimally. The ranch has about 70 employees right now, counting the people who work on the beef marketing side and the restaurant. There are many jobs, and it all goes back to one holistically-managed ranch—supporting all these people and generating livelihoods for many families.

"We have to extract every bit of value that we can, from what we produce. We sell beef jerky, hot dogs, bones and all the offal from the harvested animals. My daughters are working on things like CSA boxes, and every marketing tool that we can utilize," says Todd.

Holistic Management provides a foundation, and he feels it has kept the ranch in business. The holistic view helps in all aspects of life, and not just the grazing and cattle management. "It helps us put the whole picture together. This what we constantly try to do. We took several of our cattle managers to the Holistic Management conference in San Francisco last year, and now they are doing some things on their own with the cattle that are helping the ranch, the soil, and the environment.

"We also do ranch tours for some of our employees who work in our restaurant in Napa. They come up here and tour the ranch to see what is going on and visualize how it all starts. Some of our customers in that area (Napa and San Francisco) also come tour the ranch, so they know how it all fits together. It's a great education for people from urban areas, just to see where their food comes from and how it all works. In the city, people are insulated from actual food production; they get their information from television and off their iPhones! They need a better look," Todd explains.

There is always someone at the ranch to host these tours. "Our daughters Kaitlin and Kirby help with the tours, and handle the social media end of things. We do a monthly newsletter that goes out to social media," he says.

Interaction with the public and the consumers is good for everyone. "It's good for our business and it's good for our customers to understand how food production works, and how the cattle business and grazing fits into the picture as well." It's also helpful to get some feedback from consumers to understand their perspective and what they want.

Working with people, the land, cattle, nature, weather, the varying seasons, etc. makes ranching a balancing act. "We have to do a lot of adaptation in our operation; no two years are the same—working with the agencies, weather conditions, and so on. We've had a really bad drought for seven or eight years, and the past two years have been particularly bad, so we have to constantly change things," Todd says.

"Every winter we sit down and come up with a new grazing plan and try to fix any problems we had the previous year. We always try to move forward. Sometimes we can actually take advantage of drought. If we get into a situation where we have to haul water, we haul it to a place where traditionally the cattle wouldn't go." Water can be used as the attractant to get them there, to use that area.

"Even if something is a hardship, a person can often turn it into a



The Five Dot Ranch focuses on value-added products to maximize profit in the expensive production area near urban California.

positive, and make some good come from it," says Todd. "We've had to reduce numbers somewhat, however, because of the drought, and it's been a challenge. We've had fires, and lost a couple of BLM allotments to fire. Traditionally we have a lot of different permits, and take a non-use on some of them each year. This gives us a flexibility to accommodate drought or fire, and to take care of the plants and soil. We don't want to overgraze and sometimes we'll go 18 months or even two years between uses—before we graze it again—if a certain piece needs a longer recovery period. Everything needs lots of TLC in the drought and it's not the time to push it. We lighten up the grazing and keep enough flexibility so that we always err on the safe side." The goal is a constantly moving target, and takes a lot of effort to move toward it.

"This operation is so land-extensive, with multiple allotments and so many competing land uses that we have to work with (various agencies, recreation, wildlife needs, and so on). We have to try to balance it all. It's not like a factory where you can be isolated and insulated in a little box and just do your own thing without being affected by so many outside forces. We are constantly juggling, working with people, the weather and the environment, and all the issues that go with it," he says.

Family Business

Todd and his wife Loretta (Lori) have four children. Daughters Kirby and Kaitlin are working full-time for the business. They have both graduated from college and one is working on beef sales full-time and the other is helping on the business side of the ranch. Daughter Lindsay is currently a high school agriculture teacher in Santa Rosa and son Logan is still in college. He plans to come back and work in the family business.

"We've encouraged all our kids to go out and work in various locations before they come back to the ranch. This gives them good experience and they are more ready to decide what they really want to do. If they come back, it's because they want to, and not something they feel they got forced into. It would be a voluntary decision. Lori and I have always felt philosophically that this is very important. All of our kids have done that, so far."

The family business has always been a team effort. "We are starting into our generation succession planning, and going to a seminar on this with the kids. We try to stay current on planning. It's always good to learn new things and we encourage our children to continually keep changing and adapting to our world. It is changing fast!" 🌱

