

Northwest of Burns

Caleb and Chelcie Cargill raise cows and kids in Oregon's high desert.

By Rebecca Colnar Mott



The hills that surround Izee, Ore., rise to 7,000 feet of timber from the high plains desert country. It's a land of live water creeks, dirt roads, and tough cattle. It's horse and dog country, with steep timberland. Cows trail more than 40 miles round-trip into the hills for summer grazing and return in the fall.

Follow the highway northwest of Burns, Ore., and you'll find the IZ ranch, managed by Caleb and Chelcie Cargill. They're a young couple, ages 36 and 35, who have ridden out the challenges of building a ranch life together. Caleb lived in Crane, Ore., a small town boasting 100 people, with a family which owned cows and ran a custom haying business. Chelcie's childhood found her riding and gathering cattle at the foot of the stunning Crazy Mountains outside Melville, Mont., on the Cremer Ranch. Her family's lineage—Chelcie is fifth generation—is that of ranchers and rodeo producers.

After high school, Caleb attended Northwest Lineman College and spent 10 years building power lines across the West. His work took him to Lewistown, Mont., a town of 3,000 in the state's center. When his sister dragged him to a young ag leadership conference, he met pretty cowgirl Chelcie.

After graduating from Montana State University, Chelcie became regional manager for the Montana Farm Bureau with a keen interest in policy and agricultural issues. She



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became governmental affairs director and developed an advocacy program called ACE: Advocate. Communicate. Educate.

“When we first started dating, I was burned out from building power lines and wanted to return to my agricultural roots,” Caleb says. “I built power lines to save money and buy cows. When I moved to Montana, I wanted to make a change and Chelcie and I both wanted to build and maintain a family ranch.”

That desire led Caleb to start Cargill Fence

Company in 2013. The couple married in 2015 and by 2016 they bought their first bunch of cows. As they worked they put their money into their ranching dream, but growing a herd had limits. Finding leased ground in Montana that was big enough, but not too big, was challenging.

“At the time we wanted to run 200 to 300 cows and a lease came up in Oregon. It was a ranch I had custom-hayed on as a kid and Dad was still haying it,” Caleb explains. “We talked to the manager, made a deal, and in 2017 got financing to buy more cows and truck them back home to Oregon.”

Chelcie, Caleb, and their cows became Oregonians in a high mountain valley near the town of Seneca. But it wasn't entirely smooth sailing from there.

“As in every situation, there are things to learn, and that situation taught us to be thorough and verify when drafting lease agreements,” Chelcie says. “There's a reason to put everything in writing and to have a full understanding of the owner's priorities and goals when leasing ground. We made the move to Oregon thinking we had five years and a secure lease. We didn't have everything we needed in writing, and when the owner decided to sell the ranch and we couldn't purchase it, our lease wasn't honored [in the sale], so we were there less than two years.”

By the grace of God, they say, Caleb's community was willing to help, finding grass

with neighbors, a house to stay in, and places to stash cows, including shipping some back to Chelcie's family ranch in Montana.

When they were initially growing the herd, Chelcie's family was in a transition. "At that time," she says, "it just didn't make sense for us to buy a bunch of cows and try to stay on my family's Montana ranch."

Time passed and succession work on the Cremer ranch moved forward. By 2019, the couple was able to lease ground from Chelcie's parents and send half their cowherd there. Now they split their herd between Montana and Oregon.

They have since secured more leases in Oregon and continue to grow their cowherd in both states. "It was a bumpy road for a couple of years," Caleb says, "but we now have secure leases and good landowners who made this possible. Now that we have some security, we can do some long-range planning." In addition, they bought a small place in Burns where they lived while their leasing opportunities were uncertain. That land provides a home base to feed cows and raise a hay crop. "It gives us a foundation so we won't be high and dry if something happens."

They still own and operate Cargill Fence Company and as they've accepted larger projects and expanded into retail sales, they've added a crew foreman and several employees. "Having that extra income helped," Caleb notes. "As the company grew and our cowherd grew, we had the diversification and capital to ride out the bumps in the road."

Caleb enjoys being a small business owner in a rural area, offering jobs to locals and helping support multiple families. In 2021, Caleb and crew built corrals for the IZ ranch. "We knew the managers from living in the area, but a few months after that job the manager called me, kind of out of the blue, and asked if we'd be interested in the management position because his family was moving on."

They interviewed for the job with the caveat they wanted to continue to grow their cowherd and lease ground. The longtime owners were pleased with what they saw in the capable pair, and the Cargills soon had a salaried job on a sizable cow-calf outfit and a place to grow their herd.

But it wasn't just a business and cowherd the couple was growing. In the midst of their work and moves, they became a family of six. Adding four young children has caused them to get creative about getting work done. The kids—Teagan, five, Hadley, four, Isaiah, two, and Deacon, six months—are regularly packed into the pickup truck when it's time



COURTESY CARGILL FAMILY



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FROM TOP: Caleb and Chelcie are raising their four children—Hadley, 4, Isaiah, 2, Teagan, 5, and Deacon, 3 months—in the ranching tradition. BOTTOM: Learning to mechanic during summer 2022 on one of the Cargills' main Oregon leases in Wheeler County. The ground is generally used for grazing, but it was such a good grass year they put up hay. OPPOSITE: The Cargills manage the IZ Ranch, where they run some of their own cows in southwestern Grant County between Burns and John Day. Caleb is riding Simon.

for ranch work or the hour-long run to town.

"With Teagan and Hadley," Chelcie says, "Caleb and I were pretty much the only ones around to work with our cows, so they came along for building fence, doctoring, calving. We'd just put them in the pickup, a carrier or

a stroller and away we would go. Now it's more challenging to throw four kids in a pickup, but we get creative...and adjust our expectations!"

When they see horses, Teagan and Hadley clamor to ride, and both have started helping



ABOVE: Helping with weaning on a muddy day. RIGHT: Extreme winter conditions in and around Burns and Harney County through the end of March 2023 made calving stressful and demoralizing with all-hands-on-deck. A few months later, the Cargills couldn't believe the grass on their family ranch in Montana.



move cows on shorter rides. “They believe they are top hands and tell Dad they’re ready for those big days,” Chelcie chuckles. Horses are a must on the ranch. Chelcie estimates that about 14 saddles horses—some ranch-owned, some Cargill-owned—help them get their jobs done.

Chelcie’s confidence and background in Farm Bureau policy and advocacy becomes apparent in conversation, although when you meet her she might be wrangling three kids with a baby on her hip, while bustling them into their car seats and booster seats for the long drive into town for a Harney County Farm Bureau meeting, where she serves as secretary.

“Being successful in ranching also means being a part of a vibrant and thriving rural community,” Chelcie says. “I’m involved in Oregon Farm Bureau, but there are so many ways to support relationships and local businesses which will ultimately make us successful as ranchers as much as the land or cattle. Thriving rural areas will make ranching a real possibility for our kids in the future.”

Caleb and Chelcie were encouraged by their parents to experience life before return-

ing to the ranch and they hope to adopt the same approach with their children. “Although we would never pressure them,” Chelcie says, “deep down in our hearts, we feel like our blood, sweat, and tears poured into this pursuit over the last seven years is because we want to see our kids have the same opportunity. That’s what keeps us going.”

The couple agrees that they couldn’t have been where they are today without the successful fencing business and plenty of family support and there’s no doubt that Caleb’s business prowess, ingenuity and exemplary work ethic played a key role as well.

“It certainly doesn’t look like it did when our parents and grandparents were our age,” Caleb says. “We’ve had to diver-

sify and get creative about how we build our cowherd.”

Caleb looks over the beautiful cow, horse and dog country outside their ranch home and adds: “There were scary times and uncertainty that things were not going to come together, but we’ve had so many people who were pulling for us. From Chelcie’s family who helped us move four times and continues to support us running cattle in Montana, to a local producer in Harney County who gave us pasture when we were in a bind, to my brother-in-law and dad who spend so much time helping us work cows. If we had to pay full price for all the support we’ve been shown, we never could have done this.” ■

Rebecca Colnar Mott spends plenty of time border crossing between southeastern Montana and north-central Wyoming. She serves as an agricultural freelance writer as well as director of media relations and publications for Montana Farm Bureau and helps her husband Casey ranch in Custer, Mont.