

# The Lazy KK

*There is nothing lazy about the people behind this brand.*

*Words & photos by Larry Turner.*

**F**irst and foremost, family is what ranch life is all about. Just ask Lazy KK Ranch owners Joe and Patti Bignell. You might also add football, rodeo, great country to live in and good neighbors as bonuses. Their oldest son, 33-year-old Parker, echoes those sentiments.

“The greatest gifts that I’ve ever been given are my three daughters [Anika, five; Laken, three; and Breka, one], my wife, Donica, and the immediate family that I come from,” he says as he surveys the broad expanse of Big Sky Country outside of Hall, Mont., where the Lazy KK Ranch lies on a fold in the gentle foothills of Flint Creek Valley. Framing the picturesque ranch are the John Long Mountains to the west and the Beaverhead-Deer Lodge National Forest to the east.

Two families (Parker’s and his parents, Joe and Patti) live on the home ranch. Younger brother, Nate, lives with his wife, Mary, in Helena where he works for the federal government as a water/ditch commissioner. Brother “Mac” Maclane lives in Gold Creek and works on the ranch. Sister, Frankie, lives in Butte where she is the assistant women’s basketball coach for Montana Tech. When not coaching she heads back to the ranch to help.

A fourth-generation Montana rancher, Joe (and Patti) always dreamed of ranching with their children and grandchildren. The dream was realized with the purchase of the Swiss Ranch outside of Hall in 2006, which they renamed the Lazy KK Ranch after their brand. Prior to that, they lived on the Gimlet Creek Ranch that Joe grew up on with his two brothers and five sisters outside Avon. Joe’s father, Sammy, passed in 1969 when Joe was young and his mother, Lue, with help from her children, ran the ranch. She would later remarry. His brother John runs the home Avon Ranch. Brother Jim has the Bignell Angus Ranch not far away.

Their mom fed with a team of horses. “She could harness anything and work with the best of men,” recalls Parker from stories passed down. “Dad used to put up hay with a beaverslide until they went to round bales in 1992.” Joe and Patti married in 1990. “Mom

didn’t know a thing about ranching, but soon after marriage she became Dad’s right-hand man,” Parker explains. “Now she can do it all, from horseback chores to running equip-

friends on a sunny, crisp day as they saddle up to round up several hundred head of cattle for sorting and shipping. “Follow me,” says the ruggedly handsome Joe, once an All-American tight end and captain of the 1984 Montana State Bobcat national championship football team. He leads me to the top of a butte overlooking the rich grazing country where the cattle are gathered and pushed to corrals a few miles away. The panoramic view is extraordinary, mindful of some of Charlie Russell’s paintings in the late 1800s



*ABOVE: Joe Bignell (far right) with his brothers Jim (left) and John (middle) at the home ranch in 2010.*

*BELOW: Parker Bignell and Flint Creek Valley ranch neighbor Jace Burrier head out at first light to gather cattle. Parker says, “By working together and working with the feds, we can maintain healthy landscapes and produce a healthy product for consumers.”*



ment, and she is a tour de force in the kitchen, too. These rural Montana ranch ladies are something else!”

Joe loves his life and his family and says, “I couldn’t be happier.” Today he is with his entire family and several neighbors and

and early 1900s. A dozen horsemen help with the roundup, including his granddaughters Anika and Laken, who traded their cowgirl hats in for riding helmets, just to be on the safe side.

“In spring, summer and fall, we pitch in



to help each other with brandings and roundups,” Parker says. “With a labor shortage here in our area—as is true with many rural areas—that is the only way we can do certain things. Good neighbors and friends are priceless.”

### Seasons at the Ranch

“Ranching is a four-season livelihood, with little time off,” Parker says. “We’re not a celebrity ranch or a corporate ranch. We are the salt-of-the-earth type of rancher, and we use horses for everything, not four-wheelers. Spring is our busiest season. The first of March we are calving heifers, followed by calving cows March 24th. Our lambing season for 900 ewes begins on April 25th. On May 15th, we get the cattle out to grass. We start irrigating then, using sprinklers, pivots and flood irrigation. And we fix fence, if needed.” The late spring and summer range is in nearby Gold Creek and Lower Willow Creek Valley. When summer arrives, haying season begins in earnest after July Fourth. Cattle and sheep are checked on continually and are rotated pasture to pasture and range to range if needed...along with doctoring.

The Bignells have 13,000 acres of deeded



*Lazy KK Ranch owner Joe Bignell rides flank while driving cattle several miles to backcountry corrals—for sorting, doctoring and shipping—in the beautiful Big Sky hill and valley country west of Hall, Mont. LEFT: Tiffany Wagner is saddled up and ready to ride with her little sleepy-eyed cousins, Laken and Anika Bignell, on an early Montana morning at the Lazy KK Ranch.*

and leased land. Predation is a potential problem due to plenty of bears, coyotes, mountain lions and wolves, and that requires extra vigilance. Dogs are used for monitoring the sheep (and sometimes cattle too) against predation. “In August, we get our calves contracted out

to buyers,” says Parker. “Generally, they are repeat buyers from the Midwest. With the sheep, we pasture them through the summer, then send the market lambs to Canada where they are processed.”

Late summer and early autumn is rodeo and fair time for the family. Parker is a volunteer at the local fair department. Anika and Laken participate in rodeo and Anika has already won her first buckle. They are following their dad in rodeoing.

Parker steer wrestled, calf roped and team roped for Montana Western College in Dillon, winning the Northern Rodeo Amateur Steer Wrestling finals in 2014.

Autumn is a busy time on the ranch as the cattle have to be off federal grazing land



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Parker Bignell, with his three daughters, Breka, Anika and Laken, says: “Some of the smartest people I know are ranchers. And we are the first environmentalists.” ► Members of the Bignell family (horseback are Laken on the left and Anika) take a break before sorting and doctoring cattle at their back country corrals. ► The Bignell family at Nate and Mary’s wedding in 2023. Left to right: Parker with daughter Anika, Donica with daughter Breka, Maclane, Frankie, Nate, Mary, Laken (Parker and Donica’s daughter), mother Patti and father Joe. ► Joe Bignell (number 86) helps hold the National NCAA Division I-AA Championship trophy after the MSU Bobcats defeated Louisiana Tech 19-6 in 1984. Bignell was captain of the team and was named First Team Football All-American in the NCAA Division I-AA. ► The Lazy KK Ranch home and headquarters in Montana’s Flint Creek Valley.



by October 1. It is the season of roundup—sorting (by sex), weighing, preg checking and shipping—all leading to what Parker says is the best day of the year: “Payday! It only happens once a year!”

Donica, though, supplements their family income by working in Missoula several days a week as a registered dental hygienist. When working, her mother-in-law, Patti, cares for the girls. “Patti makes lunch every day for those working on the ranch,” Donica says. “One of the joys of living on the ranch is always having a community of support, especially when raising kids.”

Parker says in winter they just try to survive. “Because of the severity, there is no winter range or pastures so it is our most stressful time. We hand feed daily from our summer hay crops, so there are no long vacations to Maui!” Winter also means shop-equipment projects.



### Football, Athletics and College Are a Family Tradition

In the rural ranch and farm areas of Big Sky Country, football is like a religion. The Bignells have produced many memories on the gridiron for Montana State University in Bozeman. First team All-American Joe led the way followed by his three sons. Nate and Mac started on the defensive line for the Bobcats. Mac had a tryout with the Philadelphia Eagles and his dad with the San Francisco 49ers. Neither was selected but it was an honor just to be invited. Parker spent a year playing at MSU

but transferred to Montana Western where he got a bachelor’s degree in business administration. Frankie would follow up with the same degree at Western. At Montana State, Mac received a bachelor’s degree in marketing.

Along with working on the ranch, Mac is the head football coach at Deer Lodge Wardens High School, a local fire department volunteer and a member of the Northern Rodeo Association. Nate’s degree is in elementary education. All the brothers were standout football

players at Drummond High School, leading their teams to several state championship trophies. Frankie played basketball for the Montana Western Bulldogs. Donica played basketball at the University of Providence in Great Falls.

“Mom and Dad stressed the value of education to their children, just as we will stress that to our daughters,” says Parker. “All of us have received degrees and with that we bring greater knowledge back to the ranch. At Western in one of my ag classes, 22 of the 34 students enrolled were heading back to the ranch



*Lue and Sammy Bignell (Joe's parents) pictured on an airplane flight in the 1950s. RIGHT: Lazy KK Ranch owner Joe Bignell opens the gate to allow a herd of cattle to come into the nearby corrals for sorting and shipping.*

or farm. The Western professors scheduled classes specifically to help with future ranchers and farmers.”

### **The Present and the Future**

Parker is optimistic about the future of ranching. “The recent election results will help us. Cattle prices have been good but our freight costs have been our biggest expense. I see those going down in this administration. I would like to see more cooperation in this industry. Some of the smartest people I know are ranchers. And we are the first environmentalists! We need to do stuff years in advance and if we don’t do it right, we don’t survive. So it behooves us to treat the land, the critters and wildlife well. And by working together and working with the feds, we can maintain healthy landscapes and produce a healthy product for consumers. I see a future for our kids. As ranchers, we can’t stay in a rut. No idea is dumb. It might not work, but we always give it a try. And we’ll find out that some do work.”

One idea working for the Bignells is the use of Black Hereford—a breed just 30 years old—bulls bred to Angus cows. “The gentle disposition of the Hereford bulls is a plus compared to the potential angry disposition of Angus bulls,” Parker says. “Cattle markets are shying away from the red breeds. They prefer the Black Angus/Black Hereford breed because of superior meat quality, feedlot efficiency, and superior genetics.”

One trend that Parker sees is ranches being sold to out of staters who want to make them into game and hunting preserves, therefore taking cattle off the land. “What they’re finding out is that the elk and deer are leaving their preserve land because of the tall grasses. Elk and deer like shorter grasses for foraging,

Cattle and sheep will eat the taller grasses, leaving the shorter, fresher grasses for the elk and deer.” The Bignells did an experiment to prove their point, placing 300 yearlings on a paddock for four days and leaving a nearby same-size paddock ungrazed. “After we took



them off the paddock, the elk and deer came in and grazed the shorter grasses. They did not touch the nearby ungrazed tall grass!”

The family ranch has a robust wildlife population, including elk, deer, pronghorn, bobcat, mountain lion, coyote, fox, badger, skunk, raccoon, bear, wolf and squirrel.

“We let them roam freely, but if they want to taste our beef and lamb, we are set up with

predator control.”

Their first and main line of defense are guardian dogs. “We treat our dogs [15 are on the property] with the same care and respect we treat our horses. They are an integral part of the ranch.” Anatolian, Akbash and Great Pyrenees are the guardian dog breeds they use. “The Anatolian and Akbash breeds are aggressive toward bear, mountain lion and wolves,” says Parker. “We’ve lost one sheep to a wolf and some members of the family have been stalked by predators, so we have to be extra vigilant as the predator population is growing. When Dad was a kid, you could go into the woods without fear. That’s not so now. The predator population is getting out of hand in my book.” Border collies are the herding breed they use.

Parker and Donica would love to see their daughters return to the ranch after college. They are already helping with chores. Parker deadpanned to Anika recently, “We could use a vet.” To which Anika replied, “Dad, all I want is just to be a cowgirl.” ■

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