

Cow Country

In defense of the American West's beloved bovines.

Words & photos by Todd Klassy.



A herd of cattle heads toward the barn on a sunny spring day near Cleveland, Montana.

Cows have been getting a bad rap. The large domesticated ungulate that has been providing mankind with meat, dairy products, and other beneficial goods for centuries, suddenly has fallen out of favor, not because they are mean or vicious, but because vegans claim they can't keep their gas to themselves.

Politicians are telling us we must stop relying on cattle because the methane they produce is somehow damaging our climate. Never mind the \$60 billion that beef cattle provide to the American economy. Never mind the additional \$40 billion that dairy cattle provide to our economy. And never mind the health and nutritional benefits of beef, which researchers claim was one of the most important contributors to the positive health of most Americans and our country's increasing influence on the world stage.

Most vegans and vegetarians would be appalled by how much red meat Americans consumed a century or more ago. Back then, even chicken was considered a luxury. In 1861, English novelist Anthony Trollope wrote after a trip to the United States that Americans ate twice as much beef as did Englishmen. Charles Dickens also wrote, "no breakfast was breakfast" without a T-bone steak.

The reason for the popularity of beef was simple. Early Americans did not have reliable refrigeration. As such, they did not trust fruits and vegetables because they were hard to keep. Beef on the other hand



A lone Hereford beef cow moos on the crest of a hill in the middle of a western pasture near Cleveland, Montana.

could be preserved without refrigeration if smoked, salt cured, brined, canned, dehydrated, or stored in lard, and milk produced by dairy cows could be preserved if turned into cheese. And for the first 250 years of American history, even the poor in the United States could afford beef for every meal.

Today we eat far less red meat than our forefathers did. But we are healthier as a result, right? No. During those early days, heart disease in America was rare. Sources of information about death back then show there was no widespread heart disease before the early 1920s. In fact,

the heart disease “epidemic” began after Upton Sinclair wrote the fictional book about the meatpacking industry called “The Jungle.” The popularity of that book caused meat sales in the United States to fall by half in 1906. Sales did not recover for another 20 years...after which heart disease in America was much more common.

Some researchers trace the rise in obesity in America to the moment when people began frying food in vegetable oil. In the good old days, McDonald’s fries were cooked in beef tallow. But customer demand for less saturated fat prompted a switch to vegetable oil in the

Beef cattle pose for a photo on a ranch near Havre, Montana, on a sunny spring day.



A herd of cattle climbs a steep slope during a November cattle drive on a ranch near Malta, Montana.

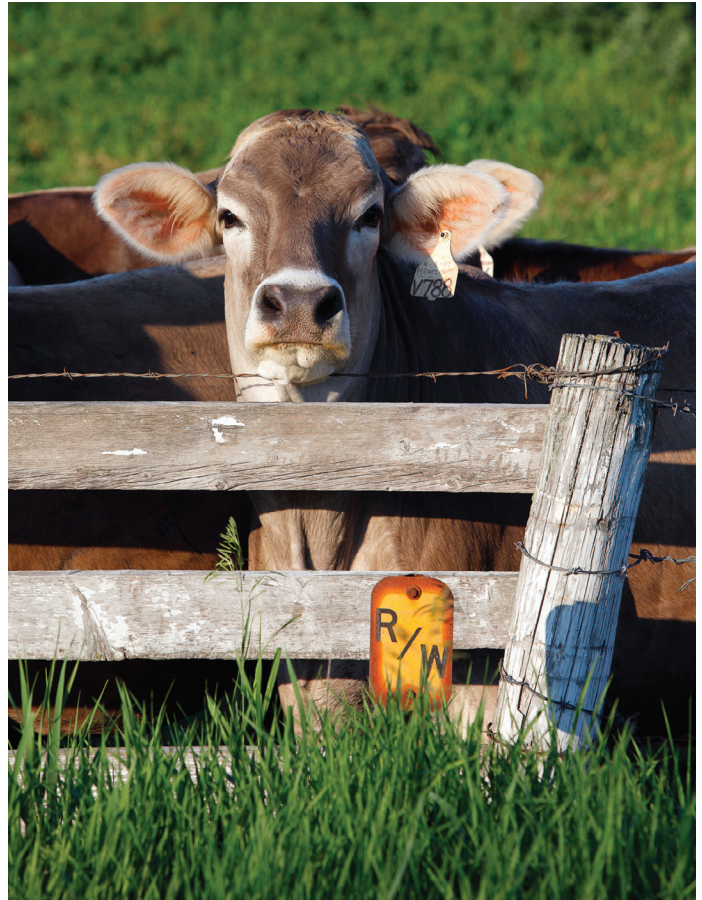


early '90s. Not only did the food taste worse, but it also contributed negatively to the health of McDonald's customers.

Today there are more than 800,000 ranchers and cattle producers and 40,000 dairy farmers in the United States, 97 percent of which are still family-owned businesses. If the politicians in Washington and elsewhere have their way, an entire American industry will be gutted when they are done and they will destroy many of those ranchers and farmers who are already reeling from lower global market prices from countries like China, Brazil, India, Mexico, Pakistan, and Russia... which care much, much less about the environment than the United States does.

But what about the greenhouse gases cows belch and fart into the atmosphere on a regular basis? This too is largely a fantasy concocted by those in other countries who would benefit from a failed U.S. beef industry. According to researchers at several prominent American universities, methane from ruminant animals, such as cattle, is part of a natural carbon cycle and the type of methane produced by cattle is dif-

A Brown Swiss cow pokes its head over the top of the fence on a farm near Monticello, Wisconsin.



Black Angus cattle graze on western grass with a beautiful butte in the distance south of Havre, Montana.





A small herd of Charolais calves huddle together on the Birdtail Ranch near Chinook, Montana.



A Black Angus cow casts a reflection in a reservoir on a ranch near Cleveland, Montana.



Storm clouds gather in the distance over the Hofeldt Ranch near Lloyd, Montana, as ranchers gather a herd of Black Angus cattle.

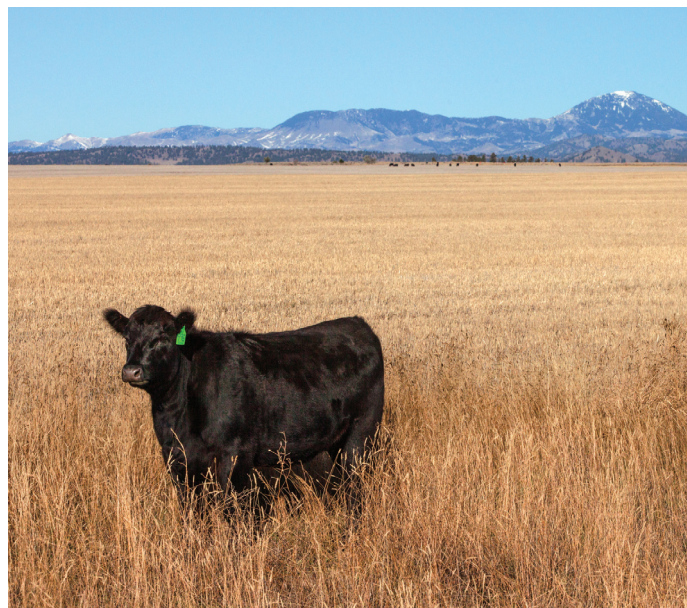
A small herd of steers huddle in the middle of the grassy Great Plains on a ranch near Great Falls, Montana.



ferent from the methane created by burning fossil fuels. The fact is, methane from cattle doesn't stay in the atmosphere very long. Over the course of a decade, the methane emitted from a cow will be degraded through photochemical reactions to carbon dioxide. That carbon dioxide can then again be taken up by plants, and the cycle of life on earth repeats. Methane produced by burning fossil fuels, however, was created 150,000 to 250,000 years ago and generates far more greenhouse gases in our atmosphere than that produced by the beloved cow.

Instead of turning the cow in America into an evil contributor to the destruction of our planet, most Americans should be giving thanks to the cow for all it did to build a country, feed Americans, and make our country as strong as it is today. Even though herds are much smaller than they were 100 years ago, and even though they produce much less methane and greenhouse gases as a result, there are those who want to make them extinct altogether. Little do they realize they will be doing far more harm to our country and our planet as a result. ■

Todd Klassy is a Montana photographer who specializes in telling the stories of farming and ranching with his camera. He enjoys spending many days on the dusty backroads throughout the upper Midwest, capturing the beauty of farms, fields, ranches, and rural life.



A Black Angus stands alone in the middle of a field with mountains looming in the distance near Chouteau, Montana.



Cowboy Travis Liddle ropes Black Angus calves on branding day on a ranch near Rattlesnake, Montana.