



Six Generations in the Saddle

The Eatinger family in the Nebraska Sandhills just keeps rolling and ranching.

By Carolyn Dufurrena

When Byron Eatinger's great-grandfather, Charles Henry, came west in 1878, the Nebraska Sandhills didn't look like the rolling green ocean of grass they are today. The famous wet meadows were there, but there was "a lot of dry ground in between." The sand dunes were just that—dry, blowing sand.

Charles Henry was looking for a new opportunity. Family lore has it that the family

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BYRON EATINGER

dairy's bookkeeper back in Dundee, Ill., had absconded with a significant portion of the dairy's bankroll. Needing to generate some capital, Charles Henry headed west to Abilene, Kan., to buy beef cows, "1,000 head of yearlings for \$5 apiece," says Byron, now 88. Charles Henry hired the crew of Texas cowboys which had brought them north and headed toward what is now the Hyannis area of the Sandhills in Cherry County.



PHOTOS COURTESY EATINGER FAMILY

ABOVE: On the ranch today, from left to right: Byron and his wife, Mary; Wayne and his wife, Roxanne, and son, Miles; longtime employees Dennis Drews and his wife, barrel-racer Mika (who also run their own cow/calf outfit on the ranch), and farmer and mechanic Joe Naillon. **AT TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Charles Senior, aka CH, born 1846; son Charlie, born 1879; grandson Ralph, born 1907; Ralph's son, Byron, born 1933; Wayne, born 1954; and Miles, born 1982.

Somewhere outside Ogallala they were met by a crew of 14 cowboys that told Charles Henry he would not be going north but rather east for some distance, at which point he was welcome to head the cattle north again. He took their advice, being seriously outnumbered, and ended up in Calf Creek Valley where there were plenty of wet meadows and “grass not burned off by Indians.”

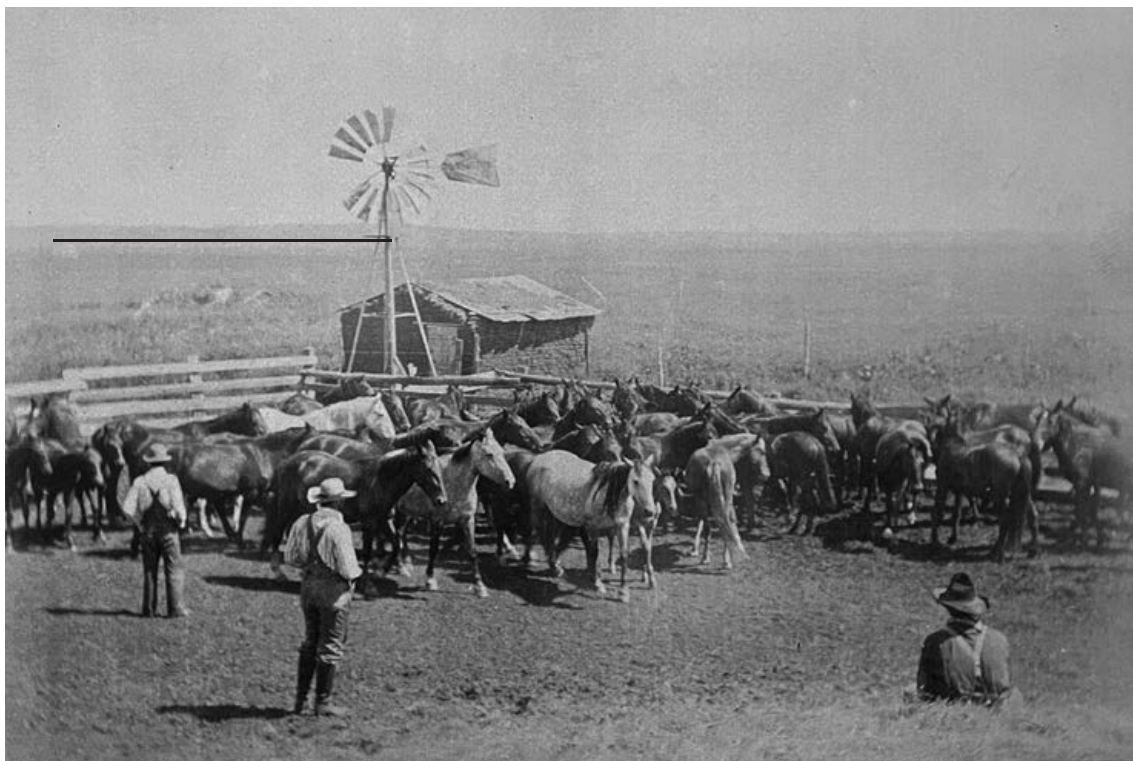
They took the wheels off the covered wagon that carried their supplies and sodded over it. Charles Henry headed back to Illinois for Christmas. He left the herd and the sodded-over chuckwagon with one of the Texas hands, who agreed to watch over the herd for the winter. The Texan must have had plenty of shells and time to practice with his six-gun. When Charles Henry returned in the spring he was still there and could “shoot the head off a flying grouse with movements quicker than the eye could follow.”

At the end of the grazing year Charles Henry took the herd to Chicago, having lost half to wolves, Indians and the Sandhills winter. Bands of Pawnee had drifted back into the Sandhills from reservations in Oklahoma. They took some beef, but “only what they needed and they used all they killed—hoof, hide and horns.” They coexisted peacefully with ranchers.

Charles Henry garnered \$25 a head for his cattle, \$12,000 in all. He called it the most money he ever made on one transaction. It was enough to buy a second herd of yearlings in Ogallala that year, and heifers in Omaha the third. Charles Henry’s oldest son, John, had come to Nebraska and built the operation with his wife, Mame, and their six children. They lived in the second sod house, a two-story structure which stood until recently. Gradually through the 1890s, the rest of his four children moved west; the youngest, also named Charles Henry (“Charlie”) arrived at the turn of the new century. “They hadn’t bothered to homestead at first,” says Byron, “but after the Kinkaid Act in 1904, Charlie filed, allowing the family to expand and make



LEFT: This photo showing the West House and the East House was taken between 1912 when the silo was built and before the sheep shed was torn down in 1921.



BELOW, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: The horse buyer, Uncle John and Charlie Eater.



The Eater family pose in front of their home and 1916 Dodge automobile. From left: Ralph, Eunice, Harold (cousin), Laura, Charles Junior, Mabel and Pearl.



FROM TOP LEFT: Ten teams of horses and the men who work with them take a break during haying north of ranch headquarters around 1915. The workhorse on the far right has a foal by her side. ➤ The East House, ca. 1920. Photos are dated by the age of the vehicle out front. This is a 1919 Dodge. ➤ Byron and Mary Eatinger married in 1953.



PHOTOS COURTESY EATINGER FAMILY

a ranch out of the place.”

He and John had taken cattle to market in Chicago in the fall of 1918 when the Spanish flu hit the stockyards; the men were quarantined there with their animals. Charlie became very ill. “Great-grandfather was a big man with a big personality,” says Wayne, “but he was so sick he could barely negotiate the sale of the cattle.” The men made it home and Charlie would recover, but John became ill soon after the trip. “He walked out for the mail, felt worse, and died in the house that afternoon.” Mame and their six children moved back to Illinois, though the family continued to support her for many years.

CH and his wife, Anna, continued on the ranch, raising their own brood of six children in the big sod house: Mabel, Ralph J. (Byron’s father), Laura, Eunice, yet another Charles Henry and Pearl.

Byron was born on the ranch in 1933, and has spent most of his life there since.



A new start in a new country. From left: Charlie Eatinger, his cousin Ed, and Frank Eatinger pause for a photo, ca. 1915.

He walked to a one-room school a mile and a quarter away, though he says: “They kept moving the school around. Well, later I rode a horse.”

He started working in the hay fields at a young age, but says, “I could sleep till breakfast until I was eight.” Then he had to work all day. “I drove a rake with an old gentle team, scatter-raked some. And then when I was nine, I started wrangling the horses. We had 35 or 40 head of workhorses and I’d get after ‘em!”

Charlie died in 1937. “The family was dead broke,” but somehow they made it through the Depression, managed to pay the bank and through the war years things gradually got better. “I didn’t go to town much,” Byron says, but he graduated from Valentine High School in 1951. “I was a little too young for World War II, and I didn’t quite get drafted for Korea, but I spent some time in the Army

around 1955.” Mostly he’s just stayed put, keeping things together with his wife, Mary.

Son Wayne was born in 1954 and grew up in the house that his uncle John had died in, in 1918. After graduating from high school in Valentine, Wayne went on to college in Hays, Kansas, where he qualified for the College National Finals in steer wrestling.

He would go on to spend several years on the Pro Rodeo circuit. “I was at the Houston Livestock Show in 1981,” he says, “bulldogging steers” when he met the cute, dark-haired farm girl from Taft, a little town in south Texas. Roxanne Schmidt, an elementary school teacher, was visiting the Cowboy Bar, along with everyone else under 30 in Houston that week, and the Eatings needed some more cowgirl talent in Nebraska. “She finished the school year in Houston, and we married in December.” Son Miles came along the next year. Roxanne would cowboy with her husband for more than a decade, until Miles went to high school.

Wayne and Roxanne built a new house on the place after they married. It burned in the winter of 1989, the result of a chimney fire. “It was 25 below zero, and I saw smoke pouring out of the roof,” Wayne says. “I climbed up there with a hose to start pouring water down

the chimney, and the roof started to give way under me. Lucky I didn’t fall through.” He also confesses to have taken “a really deep breath and run back into the house to get the cow records, which were on my brother’s Apple III computer.” He snagged the records, but ran past his wallet and wedding ring. Still,

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the couple rebuilt their home on the same spot, and just kept on keeping on.

These days Byron, Wayne, and Miles continue the family legacy, haying those big meadows and running Angus cross cattle. “We lease our bulls,” says Byron, “calve in late spring, and wean in September.”

The Nebraska landscape has changed some since Byron was a boy. The brutal Sandhills winters have gotten milder in recent years, and the dunes and their interspersed wet meadows, called fens, have stabilized, thanks to years of careful stewardship. Byron was an integral part of the Sandhills Task

Force for years, a cooperative group of ranchers, environmental advocates and state agency folks who worked to improve conditions on the range. [*RANGE* profiled this group in Summer 2015. “Harvesting Sunlight Since 1904” can be found via rangedex.com.]

The work is the same, but the way the job is done has changed, from haying with teams of horses to tractors, and now, Byron says with satisfaction in his voice, “to tractors with heated cabs.”

He’s grateful for the place he has. In spite of the challenges every generation has endured, the place is thriving. His mother cows graze a landscape that has changed considerably from the blowing dunes of his youth to the sea of grass that it is today. His grandson is here to carry on the legacy. And, not least, Byron is thankful for those cowboys who turned Charles Henry’s herd to the east back in the day. His great grandfather was “fortunate those boys ran him off in 1878, and told him about this valley where our family ended up.” ■

The Nebraska Sandhills are Carolyn Dufurrena’s fantasy home. She writes about this landscape and the people who nurture it from her real-life home, Quinn River Ranch, in the Nevada desert.