

**T**raveling the back roads of Montana, one comes across some real deal ranching gems. These are not celebrity ranches of the rich and they are not the hobby ranches of the deep-pocketed latecomers. And the Hook Horn Ranch isn't a multi-generational outfit based on inheritance, which most ranch foundations rely upon.

Some think that the only good way to get into ranching is to inherit an existing outfit or to have a pile of money to invest in one. Nevertheless, the Hook Horn shows that there is still hope for those who want to ranch without all the benefits of inheritance and golden pockets.

The Hook Horn Ranch lies outside Niarada, Mont., far west in Sanders County, bordering Idaho. Sanders is a county that gets Seattle-like rainfall on its west side and desert-like rainfall on its east side. Through grit and determination, Alisha Burland-Taylor and Abraham (Abe) Taylor, wife and husband, started ranching in 2014 in their 30s, with the lease of a home-site on Tribal Lands. The Hook Horn is on the Flathead Indian Reservation's dry belt. (The Flathead people are also known as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. The lease lands cannot be owned. They are held in a federal trust.)

Alisha, whose Native American heritage comes via her father, is currently 47 and Abe 43. "I've always had a love for horses, cattle and raising my own food," she says. "I've always wanted to ranch and to live in the Big Open with ample space and forever views. It seemed impossible, but if you really believe and work diligently, dreams can come true." She says this from their backyard and old homestead house that frames views devoid of any neighbors' homes. But she looks out into a world she loves; treeless grasslands, foothills, mountains, their own livestock, a large greenhouse (they live and work as self-sufficiently as possible), a barn/tack room, a boneyard of ranch equipment, and a menagerie of ranch animals including chickens, turkeys, dogs and cats.

Native Montanans, they both grew up in Ronan (just south of Flathead Lake's southernmost city of Polson) in the morning shadow of the impressive Mission Range, graduating from the same high school, but not knowing each other, since Abe is younger than Alisha. When they met, Alisha was a single mom with two young girls, living paycheck to paycheck.

"My pickup transmission went out and I took it to one of our local transmission shops for repair," reminisces Abe. "Alisha worked the



## High Hopes & Horses

*Ranching on the Flathead Indian Reservation's Hook Horn Ranch.*

*Words & photos by Larry Turner.*

front desk. We met. The rest is history." They married, and Abe took in Alisha's girls as his own.

"They resisted in the beginning," says Alisha, "but now he is the best thing next to fresh baked bread." Their eldest, Tautiana, is 28 and has three children. Gaebrial is 22.

"I have always lived my life wanting to be purposeful. At a young age I was lucky enough to live outside of the small town of Ronan. I had plenty of space, family fields, a creek bed, and neighbor property to roam. The best way to do that is on horseback, so as a young kid I was always interested in horses. I had to con my younger brothers into 'helping me' change sprinkler pipe to earn the money to purchase my first horse...which taught me a lot."

When she was 12 years old, she started halter breaking and gentling Appaloosa horses for Hugh and Lila Krantz from nearby St. Ignatius. Around that time she was drug by a horse from a stirrup at a local branding, which resulted in a broken

shoulder and a terrible concussion. It did not deter her though from getting back on a horse after she healed.

Today, Abe and Alisha have 20 horses. Seven are working horses, a few in train-

ing, and the rest are old enough to live freely on their range for their remaining days. They especially love Arabians, Appaloosas and the American Saddlebred.

"The first time that I rode an Arabian, I was hooked forever," Abe says. "They have spunk, endurance, speed. They love galloping, just as I do. I find them to be perfect ranch horses for our type of range which is far and wide. I can get to the cattle quickly to check on them. The Arabians don't tire like other breeds."

When Abe and Alisha moved in together, their ranch dreams began in earnest. "I had a barnyard full of critters. We both have a love for horses, cattle and critters," Alisha says. "Our mutual love for riding horses led us to many endurance rides and pleasure rides along the Flathead River. It was during the recession, but it was a cheap and cheerful activity." Soon they purchased their first longhorn cows and a bull. They rented 40 acres outside Ronan. To pay the bills, Abe continued his contractor work.

As their herd and pony count grew, they knew they needed more land, and tribal-owned land became their steppingstone. "An opportunity of a lifetime came when we needed it most," reminisces Alisha. "Our homesite was passed on to me by a dear friend and local cowboy celebrity Hugh Houle. He said that I was the only person he knew who could handle living out in Niarada. The stars aligned and we were able



ABOVE: Alisha and Abe work Hook Horn cattle at the Conrad Place which they lease a few miles from the main ranch. RIGHT: The Taylor homestead house was built in the 1930s...an ongoing remodeling project with Abe's construction skills. OPPOSITE: Alisha and Abe pose with freshly harvested eggs in front of their barn. She bakes a lot.

to pick up surrounding tribal land and a state lease to put together our own cattle ranch operation. We had to buy cattle cheap and cheerful and keep upgrading the herd with different breeds." Today they have 150 mother cows and nearly 10,000 acres of lease land. "It didn't take us long to figure out how challenging and tough ranching can be. Equally, it didn't take us long to figure out that we live in paradise and that all of it is well worth it."

They live off the grid on a hardscrabble road where cell phone coverage is sketchy. They have no television and no desire to have one. They have a large greenhouse where they grow veggies, herbs and flowers. They harvest their own livestock for food and harvest wild game. Alisha can take game on the Reservation, including elk, deer, bear and a bison once a year. She has to do the hunting and dressing of the game herself as per regulation. Her Salish and Kootenai ancestors hunted bison, elk, deer, pronghorn and other wild game, along with harvesting wild camas, sarvis berries, huckleberries, bitterroot, wild onions, moss and Wapato (wild potatoes). "We are pretty much self-sufficient and we require little food from elsewhere," adds Abe. Alisha recently built her own saddle and Abe fabricates equipment for the ranch.

With Abe's construction skills, he built the greenhouse with special rattlesnake foundation prevention measures, placing a thick wire mesh surrounding the structure. He has remodeled many parts of the old ranch house, including adding insulation that did not exist.

"We learned about grasshopper infestations, drought, stock water challenges, predators, broken fences from elk, and callous human tres-

passers who leave gates open, cut fences for ATVs and recreate," says Alisha. "People climb the hills to paraglide, freak out our horses and cattle with drones, and least to forget, it seems that all balloons die here! Try riding a fresh colt by a bright shiny thing!"

Ranching in this part of Montana is not a bowl of huckleberries for the rancher or stock (although the Huckleberry Capital of Montana is in Sanders County). Alisha says: "The cattle here have to be able to range out, cover steep terrain, travel a distance for water, and calve with no help. The reality of hybrid vitality, diversity in the cattle herd, natural health and immunity, are necessary for this operation to move forward. You cannot bring pampered cattle out here. Even the foals born here are the best ranch horses because they learn about barbed wire and predators. Mountain lions and wolves, and occasional bears, are always here. We have had livestock depredation!"

One year they lost 16 calves to mountain



lion and bear. "There was no compensation for this as that is only available for proven wolf and grizzly bear kills," says Abe. "Problem black bears from the Polson area are dumped out here as we are outside civilization, so to speak." Fox and coyotes visit the ranch, too, and the Taylors have dogs which help ward off predators. However, as Abe says: "We do not use our dogs with the cattle, though. We want our cattle to take care of themselves and not be herded unnecessarily."

The Hook Horn is not a one-breed operation. "We know and understand the Black Angus craze for marketing," explains Alisha, "but in this Big Open abundant predatory area where we live, some other breeds actually fare better. Basically, they are tougher and more resilient in the environment. That said, though, we have Angus and also Longhorn, Corriente, Salers, Hereford, Scottish Highlander, Belted Galloway, Wagyu heifers, Gelbvieh and Charolais. Bulls are red and black Angus and one Gelbvieh. We love to see the different coat patterns, horns, breed, body type. It keeps it interesting and beautiful."

Half of their herd is Angus and Angus-cross. The Angus are the only ones that they will take to a livestock auction. “We only sell commercial Angus at the sale barn. We have learned that we cannot get a fair price for our crossbreeds, so we sell them privately to folks who want to raise their market beef, or we finish them on our pasture and sell them as two-year-olds for butchering. Our product can be purchased at some of our local retail businesses, too,” adds Alisha. “My job is to sell beef either on hoof or packaged. My goal has always been to provide a healthy beef product to consumers who want an alternative to beef processed by big corporations.”

One of the Taylors’ biggest hurdles is USDA’s inspection bureaucracy. “I was just notified by our beef processor, Clark Fork Meats in Plains, that they are going out of business at the end of the year because of the constant changes USDA places on them to run their already well-managed butcher shop in western Montana. They said the USDA-placed stress is too much, pushing small agriculture business folks to the point that they can no longer take joy in doing a job that they have been doing well for years! These folks put out an outstanding finished product! We need mom-and-pop butcher shops in our community. These people help us beef producers and put our local-raised product out there for consumers in our own rural areas. It’s a good thing, a win for small businesses, producers and consumers.” Alisha asks, “Why all the red tape, USDA?”

“Our best days spent on the ranch are on horseback,” says Alisha. “We do not use a 4-wheeler. Brandings are a special time as both sides of our family help out. Our daughter Gaebrial can ride with the best of them. Part of it is in our Native American DNA. Our ancestors were horse people. On this ranch of range animals, they know how to slip away and brush up. They move fast and can outrun most folks on horseback. It is dangerous work. I do not know of many people who actually ride like us anymore.”

Abe chimes in, “We need more cattle to support Alisha’s horse habit!”

The Hook Horn Ranch is all drylands of crested wheatgrass, native bunch grass, prairie Junegrass, rough fescue and Idaho fescue. They put up some of their own hay for the winter months along with purchasing hay if need be. “Winter is different every year,” says Alisha. “We supplement our range grazing with hay, salts and minerals and some

lick tubs for extra groceries. Last winter, we got three feet of snow in our lower elevation pastures, so we had to feed twice as much hay as the winter before.”

The Flathead Indian Reservation comprises 26 percent of Sanders County and ranching is the main source of income for many tribal members. It also plays a significant role in keeping and maintaining time honored cultural land stewardship practices passed down from Native American practices. “I’m happy that we have and live on tribal lands with ranching a big part of it. If this area was not a reservation, it would be a little Aspen with all of the land gobbled up by the wealthy and turned into ranchettes and yuppieville, disrupting and destroying the Big Open forever.”

They are already seeing that in many parts of Montana with large parcels of land being taken out of food production, turned into millionaire playthings, and then resold again for more profit and development.

“I honor my forefathers with my lifestyle of self-sufficiency and spirituality,” Alisha says. “I have always had a spiritual connection with land and animals, hunting, harvesting, berry picking, growing, collecting firewood. It has been a natural cadence in our lives. We learned to be responsible with weapons at an early age. Abe was taught that what you kill you eat. My father taught me to hunt

with purpose. Be prayerful. To take life means you are sustaining life. I belong here on this land. The longer that you are a rancher, the better land and animal steward you become. You realize the bugs, the birds, the wildlife all work into this story.”

Reservation ranching is not traditional; tribal members generally cannot outright own Reservation land. It is leased and held in a trust by the federal government. Alisha looks at it this way: “Although I can’t own the land, it’s a moot point. The land owns you.” ■

*Larry Turner, a longtime contributor to RANGE, lives in his hometown of Malin, Ore., but spends ample time with his son who lives in Columbia Falls, Mont. Turner is co-owner of the online travel magazine [www.highonadventure.com](http://www.highonadventure.com). An avid skier and fly fisherman, you can reach him at [skiturn789@yahoo.com](mailto:skiturn789@yahoo.com). For information about the Taylors’ range and grass-fed, no-vaccination beef, please contact [alishaburland@gmail.com](mailto:alishaburland@gmail.com).*



*The naming of the Hook Horn Ranch comes from cattle like this that Alisha checks out during a herd ride. BELOW: Abe and Alisha check out their greenhouse greens, part of their ranching self sufficiency.*

