





*Story by Nathan Fent  
Photos by Sandy Ankenman*

# Picture Perfect

*Sunshine, open pastures and  
grass as tall as the hood of a truck ...*

Chris Ankenman recalls the advertisement for the Demier Ranch as his wife, Sandy, searches through a pile of papers. She uncovers the old and faded paper that once had a place in an issue of the *Limousin Journal*. “For Sale” was the headline, followed by numerous pictures of green pastures, tall grass and clear, endless blue skies.

As Chris settles into his blue recliner and Sandy pulls up a chair beside him, the couple reflects on the transition from a cold mountain ranch in Colorado to the almost picture-perfect portrait of Northeast Oklahoma.

Chris and Sandy Ankenman own and operate Ankenman Tarentaise Ranch, 975 acres situated in the Northeast corner of Oklahoma near the town of Miami.

Chris and Sandy both grew up on cattle ranches near Gunnison, Colo. They became friends in junior high but never dated until they were finished with college.

Both attended Colorado State University where Chris received his bachelor's degree in animal science and Sandy earned hers in fashion design. Sandy also earned a master's degree in family and consumer sciences from Oklahoma State University.

The couple married in the fall of 1981, and shortly after, began to search for a place to increase the size of their ranch and herd.

"The ranch we had in Colorado we wanted to expand and that was very hard to do there at the time," Chris said. "We looked around at different areas of the country and chose this one. The reason we chose Oklahoma was because we had seen some really nice advertising for this area."

The advertisement was an insert

in the Limousin Journal, which announced the Fred Demier ranch was for sale.

"It was a good color advertisement and what was very impressive about it at the time were the pictures, which were taken sometime in late May," Chris said. "There was grass as tall as the hood of the pickup. That particular year in Gunnison we had to feed hay until the third of June. It just seemed to us that to have that much grass that time of year was almost impossible."

## Scenery change

Chris and Sandy packed their things, loaded their cattle and moved to Oklahoma. The transition that lay ahead for the cattle, as well as Chris and Sandy themselves, soon would be confronted.

"We brought cattle from Colorado that were Angus and Angus-cross cattle," Chris said. "They didn't make the transition well with the heat and humidity change."

Because of the difference in natural flora between the two states, the Ankenman cattle also faced problems with fescue toxicity. Fescue, which does not grow in Colorado, was a grass their cattle had not eaten.

"It was an adjustment to high fescue amounts in the pastures," said Wylie Hough, longtime veterinarian of the Miami area. "They also faced differences

in palatability and natural nutrition."

Chris and Sandy said they struggled to see the hardships their cattle faced.

"It was very tough to see the set of cattle that we brought not do as well as they had in Colorado," Chris said.

The cattle were not the only ones having a hard time with the climate change. Chris and Sandy said they also had a challenging time getting used to the weather.

"As humans it was difficult for us," said Sandy. "I tell people that I was grouchy that whole first summer. We had just never been in an area where you sweat everywhere you go. We came in cars with no air conditioning, we lived in homes with no air conditioning and we didn't have near enough shorts or light clothes."

## A new breed

Rather than taking a long period of time to allow their original cattle to adapt, the Ankenmans turned to cattle born in the area.

"Some of the first people that we met in the area had Tarentaise cattle," Chris said.

Chris and his father, Bill, began observing a herd of Tarentaise cattle. They frequently looked at the cattle and studied the cattle from the time they were born and as they matured.

"We watched the cattle six to eight months before deciding to buy them," Chris said. "We got familiar with the herd. Up to that point we had not heard of the breed nor did we know any particular background on the cattle."

The first herd of Tarentaise they purchased consisted of 120 cows. Since then, the Ankenmans have not altered from the Tarentaise breed. They maintain nearly 400 cows today and manage spring and fall calving herds. The busiest times on the ranch are during the

*A group of the Ankenman's Tarentaise heifers. The Tarentaise breed originated in the Tarentaise Valley of the French Alpine mountains. Tarentaise cattle are known for their superb milking ability and maternal instincts.*





*Chris (right) and Sandy (left) enjoy working and living on the ranch. They have never hired workers and they take pride in the work that they do. From animal care to advertising their cattle, the Ankenmans strive for excellence through the Tarentaise breed.*



calving season.

## Handling the workload

Despite the large number of cattle and the amount of work done to maintain them, Chris and Sandy have never hired a farm hand.

“We are the ones that do the work,” Sandy said. “We have never hired any outside people. We are real people, and we’re out here working.”

Chris chuckles as he recalls a day when Lawson Essex, retired farm manager of the Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College Farm, helped him pregnancy check a group of heifers.

“We asked Lawson if he would come by and help us preg check some cattle,” Chris said. “I caught one of the heifers a little late in the chute, and Lawson went to pull on her tail. She

flung manure all over him.”

Essex recalls the incident and laughs, giving his side of the story.

“It was like a water hose,” Essex said. “It went over my head, down my back and behind my ears. Chris was laughing so hard he couldn’t do anything else. I guess it would have been hilarious if it hadn’t happened to me.”

Although they have not hired any farm hands throughout the years, they have had some extra sets of hands on the ranch. Chris and Sandy have raised three daughters on the ranch. Autumn, 23, is an agricultural communications graduate from Oklahoma State University and now works as the director of communications for the Arkansas Cattlemen’s Association. Lacey, 20, is a junior at Oklahoma State University majoring in graphic design, and Abbey, 17, is a junior at Miami High School.

“We spent many times playing freeze tag on the bales of hay or going through the homemade obstacle course that required you to ride the pony,” Sandy said. “The girls always used to have their friends come over to play.”

Growing up on a ranch was fun for the whole family. The family has many

fond memories.

“I used to go and check cows with my dad,” Lacey said. “I would sit on the armrest of the truck so I could see. I got quite a different perspective of work and life in general and was exposed to so many different things.”

Chris and Sandy said that maintaining great relationships with customers and delivering a quality product are things they have always kept in mind. They have never had a production sale because they feel that buyers do not end up getting what they really want.

“If people will tell us their goals and objectives, then we try to help them with those goals and objectives in tailor-making a sale so that they get what they want,” Chris said. “The atmosphere of an auction is to create confusion and excitement, which often times results in a person not getting what they came for.”

## A unique market

Chris and Sandy do multiple things to market their cattle. Sandy maintains a Web site that she began in 1996. Within a month of getting the Internet at home, Sandy had a working page up and running. Today, the Ankenman Ranch Web site offers pictures and in-



*The Ankenman family has enjoyed growing up on the ranch. Pictured with Chris and Sandy are their daughters Lacey (front), Abbey (left) and Autumn (back). The Ankenman daughters have many fond memories of the ranch.*



*The McNaughton Barn, located on the Ankenman Ranch, was built in 1893 and is on the National Registry of Historic Places.*

formation for prospective buyers.

“We try to stay very current with our advertising,” Chris said. “We don’t do a lot of things but where we do, we try to do quality.”

Advertisements for the ranch run in the Joplin, Mo., Cattlemen’s News, and Sandy sends a free newsletter to anyone who signs up through the Web site.

An interesting advertisement is the ranch’s sign that sits near the entrance of the ranch. The sign offers clever phrases and quotes to people passing by and to those stopping to visit the ranch.

“It is a good way to communicate who we are,” Sandy said. “It serves as an extension of my personality.”

The Ankenmans said they get many comments about their sign. People call to say they like what it says or to give an idea for the next phrase.

“The sign is part of the advertising package,” Chris said. “We get a lot of calls about our sign.”

Phrases such as “Wearing Traditional Jeans, Raising Progressive Genes,” “We’ll Deliver your Male” and “Raising Bos Taurus Outstandis” are seen every day by the people who drive along Highway 137 that passes by the ranch.

Many of the ranch’s sales are done via the phone. Since the Tarentaise is not a common breed in the United States, the Ankenmans get buyers from all over the country.

“They’ve kind of got a niche,” said Rod Hough, the Ankenman’s local veterinarian. “When they promote their cattle, they’re not promoting against other breeders in the area and when they make a sale and please the customer, they have a captive audience.”

The rareness of the breed is something Chris and Sandy said they see as a big advantage.

“We do have something that is reasonably unique to the industry,” Chris said. “If you don’t, you tend to fall back into the market.”

The Ankenmans personally have delivered many cattle during the years. Their dedication to their customers and their willingness to help has resulted in great relationships with buyers.

“We’ve gotten to see a lot of countryside and meet a lot of people,” Chris said. We’ve been able to deliver cattle to people in our own truck and trailer.”

This dedication and passion for their ranch has helped Chris and Sandy continue to have success.

The view of the lush green pastures and the clear Oklahoma sky is much better in person than in that original magazine advertisement. Here Chris and Sandy have raised their cattle, raised a family and made a home, and it is here that they plan to stay.

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