

Standing into the Storm



*a journey from industry
into grassfed bison ranching
and a call to reclaim our
agrarian heritage*

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with
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INTRODUCTION

One hundred and twenty years ago, 90 percent of Americans were engaged in farming. Today, two percent of Americans are farmers. This means that up to 98 percent of us have no farming education or background.

Today in California alone, aging farmers 65 years or older outnumber beginning farmers 25 years and older by a ratio of 60:1. Consequently, in another 10 years, the vast majority of those who currently grow our food will likely be either retired or dead.

Already efforts are underway by agri-business to fill this void. Tractor-like robotic machines guided by the Global Positioning System (GPS) are being developed to replace farm workers. With no pesky humans to breathe in or absorb industrial farm chemicals, the need to provide medical coverage and wages for farmers may soon be a thing of the past.

In the meantime, practicing sustainable agriculture and the ethical farming of multi-species of animals and plants, as opposed to monocrops of corn, soy, rice or grain, requires *more* committed people. The model pioneered by farmer-activist Joel Salatin shows us that it's possible, practical and profitable. As more Americans join the ethical food movement, however, a backlash has already begun in the form of raids on organic small farmers and audit of small farmers that result in the enforcement of laws created by and for big corporations against small farms that do not have the financial resources or people power to comply. There are also more farmers' markets exposés.

Unless we wake up, our only legal food sources may be from commercially run, chemically-laden, GMO-based farms or offshore food producers. The remaining local ranches and agricultural lands may be controlled by industrial farming corporations, land and housing developers, and farmland and rangeland trusts. (Interestingly, some of these non-profit trusts acknowledge multiple financial sponsorships and support from such agribusinesses and pharmaceutical giants as Monsanto,

Wyeth Laboratories, DuPont Chemical and others.)

For today's generation and those who follow, reasonable and even encouraging to consider that what we choose do for a living may no longer be limited or relegated to one career throughout our lives. A factory worker becomes a chef. An engineer becomes a doll maker. Yesterday's oilrig mechanic becomes today's organic farmer. A musician/composer partners with a secretary to become 100 percent grassfed bison ranchers.

The true nature of all living things is to expand and grow. Most humans fit this model. Like the land, which thrives from a variety of animals, insects, plants and trees performing different tasks in a complementary ballet, we humans seem to similarly respond to diverse challenges. Even if uncomfortable, we seem to seek change and inner growth.

Key elements of our humanness, flexibility and diversity are what this book trumpets and calls forth. This is a book for individuals from all walks of life, who want to personally contribute to the basic tenets of any sustainable life cycle: ethical and humane production and consumption of chemically-free, non-cloned, non-GMO food produced by caring farmers and ranchers.

Standing into the Storm begs three questions: "If not now, when? If not here, where? If not me, who?"

FORWARD

Becoming a breast cancer survivor did one pivotal thing for my life. It forced me to get in touch with my mortality. Having a longer childhood than many, by the time I reached my mid-40's, I was unemployed, unmarried and had a lump in my breast. Then I had two lumps. By the time I found a job with medical insurance and waited 90 days for coverage to kick in, I had three lumps.

According to statistics, I am lucky. A Southern California surgeon removed my breast, replacing it with an implant I aptly dubbed "Grace." Six months of chemotherapy later, I had begun early menopause. Somewhere in there, I met, fell in love and became married to an incredible man. So while it was a mixed bag, it seems that in many ways the best part of my life has been saved for last.

This book is an extension of the love and caring I found late in life. It is anchored, in part, on a special promise that my husband and I included in our wedding vows. We promised simply that we would be willing to be teachable. As best friends, it reminded and encouraged us to remain open, flexible and to listen to our hearts. And this led us to finding our way out of corporate America into grassfed bison ranching and selling our meat in farmers' markets. Along the way, we learned many things that we share here. But most of all, we learned that it's about more than deciding to do something different. It's about *doing* something different.

We hope the book encourages and inspires you to join us in reclaiming our agrarian heritage and the gifts it bestows: a direct connection with the land, increased independence and self-sufficiency, a sense of identity and a feeling of belonging.

You are invited and you are welcome here.

I

THE BISURKEY® YEARS

(bah ZUR key)

(1993 – 2002)

*The true nature of all living things is to
expand and grow.*

—UNKNOWN—



There comes a moment when deep inside, you know it's time to move on. It may mean leaving the nest, abandoning the familiar, doing something different. You know that in order to grow, you must go. Recognizing that moment is the beginning of every great journey.

Within most lifetimes are multiple opportunities to expand, explore and grow. Sometimes I do this kicking and screaming all the way. Other times, exhausted or powerless, I allow myself to be carried by the current. Still other times are embraced and welcomed, sensing that wonders await that could not even be imagined.

This was all of those times.

“You the folks from California?” she yelled.

“That’s us,” Ken yelled back.

“Mike’s working the animals. There’s a storm comin’ in tonight, but he’s expecting you.”

As if on cue, Mike drove up and got out of his truck.

After brief introductions, he said, “There’s a storm coming and we’ve got to work them animals. They’re sold and need their shots. So you’re helpin’. Hope you don’t mind.”

Dumbfounded, we looked at each other.

“Well, okay,” we said, “but we need to change our clothes.”

“Sure, I’ll tell Robin,” he said, and left us to pull from our suitcase in the trunk. In the house, we changed quickly from travel clothes into jeans, t-shirts and tennis shoes. Then we joined Mike in his truck. The house disappeared behind us as we drove up a nearby grassy hill. Cresting the hill, I caught my breath. We had entered another world.

Stretched out before us were several large corrals, made from a mix of wood and steel pipes. The grass had disappeared and the dirt had turned to mud covered with hoof-sized holes, most with pools of water inside.

What a mess, I thought. We had gotten out of the truck and I was trying to navigate through the mud toward the corral fence without falling down. In the distance, at the furthest point of the largest corral, were about 40 restless bison.

It was our first experience seeing them. For me, it was certainly the first time since visiting Yellowstone National Park as a child, and never in the context of a corral or handling system. For Ken, it was the first time ever.

“Wow,” was all we could say.

While Ken and I waited, Mike went over to briefly talk with his son, a young man sitting on an ATV who looked to be in his late twenties. Mike came back after a few minutes.

“He’s about to go get ’em,” he said. “We’ll wait down there,” he said, pointing to another building. Mike turned and started walking toward the truck. “They were worked yesterday, so they’re skittish now, but we’ve got to run ’em through again to vaccinate ’em.”

We got back into the truck, and quickly arrived at a building that abutted a corral made of steel pipes. Inside the building, Mike grabbed a bucket that held needles, syringes, and small vials filled with light yellow liquid. He handed them to Ken, walking through the building and out the other side into a smaller corral system. We hurried to keep up.

“Ken, you give them their shots. Kathy, you keep track with this pad,” he said handing me a tiny spiral notebook and pencil. “When he’s ready, my son’ll bring em down.”

Walking as he was talking, he gave us a brief tour of his handling set up.

“Robin and me’ll move ’em into the tub, and bring ’em through one at a time. After they hit the crash gate, I’ll close the squeeze chute and you give ’em a shot through here.”

He grabbed an unseen part of the steel fence, which opened like a small door.

“Just give ’em a shot in the rump and get yer arm back out quick. Don’t stay in there any longer than you need to, to give ’em their shot. They can break your arm in an instant.”

I looked to see if he was kidding. He wasn’t.

Ken’s reaction to all this astonished me. He’s always been an extremely quick study, and was taking in the change of venue and priorities with a calm demeanor. I couldn’t detect any outward sign of fear, insecurity or surprise. He seemed sure of himself, commenting that the syringes looked similar to some of the medical equipment he’d quality inspected in the past.

How do guys do that? I wondered, noting my own growing sense of panic. Neither one of us expected this. I wasn’t sure Ken had ever been on a ranch, other than the dairy farm he used to live next door to in upstate New York. Even I had never worked cattle, which are large animals. But these were bison.

Hey, I’m the one from Montana, I told myself in an effort to bolster my nerve and recapture my confidence. Yet in spite of all the Montana ranches I had visited growing up, I had never been invited to help with large, moving animals.

What I did know about, though, was the *rancher’s rule* about visitors. It didn’t matter why you were there. Anyone visiting a ranch is fair game for free, badly needed help. There’s always plenty to do and this is especially true when there are sudden changes in weather, equipment or fencing. These events will always crowd out social niceties, which are a luxury enjoyed by those who live in the city. If a visitor doesn’t want to help, they are welcome to come back another time. The joke is, there is never a time when ranchers and farmers aren’t busy.

“Here, make yourself useful,” was one of Mom’s favorite post-ranch phrases for drafting help.

Watching Ken fill a syringe from the vial, I was grateful to be

assigned the job of scribe, though it wasn't clear what I was supposed to be writing down. Ear-tag number is all I could remember. Before I could ask for clarification, we heard a whoop from Robin in the distance.

"Here they come!" she yelled.

Briefly we looked her direction and then ran to our assigned spots.

My panic was replaced by excitement, followed by a surge of adrenaline. Above us, cresting the hill, running bison appeared. They were all heading in our direction.

Moments later we heard an engine and saw Mike's son on his ATV. He was driving quickly back and forth behind the herd in a ribbon-candy like design, to keep them moving toward the corrals.

"They're splittin!" hollered Mike, "Don't let 'em split!" Immediately, the ATV engine got quieter as his son backed off, allowing more distance between himself and the bison.

In response, a smaller, separate wave of bison rejoined the main herd, forming one river of bison streaming down the hill. They rounded the corner of the building where we had just been. Miraculously, within moments, they had funneled into the large corral where we waited.

Mike quickly closed the gate. The animals milled around, no doubt looking for the exit. While he moved toward the tub, Robin was on foot in the corral, separating three and four off at a time, moving them into the crowding tub. The crowding tub is a large round, solid steel enclosure, with walls about seven feet high. It's considered especially valuable in handling bison, since the nature of bison is that when they discover there's no exit, they want to go back the way they came in. The theory is, that in following the curve of the tub, they believe that is what is happening. In reality, they are being steered into another alleyway where they must uncharacteristically enter single file. When they see the crash gate at the end of the alleyway, because they can see through the steel pipes, they think they can go through it. This natural instinct draws them forward.

Once each animal reaches the crash gate, they are in a narrow area called the squeeze chute. A steel collar is closed behind their heads to hold them in place and the squeeze chute is narrowed to hold their bodies in place. Now an injection may be given, or ear-tag affixed. Only after that, is the chute widened and the gate opened to release them back into the outer pasture or a corral, depending on the setup.

For us, it was baptism by fire.

At Robin's coaxing, one by one, individual bison entered the alleyway. From outside, Mike would guide them and when each one reached the

crash gate, he closed the steel collar around their neck. Ken had each syringe filled and ready. He quickly opened the small door, injected the exposed rump, and got his arm back out as fast as he could. Over the loud clanging of the bison against the steel pipes, Ken would yell out the ear-tag numbers, which I wrote down. When Mike heard Ken yell out the numbers, he released the bison back into the larger corral.

What Ken remembers most vividly about the whole experience was seeing the steel squeeze chute, which weighed over a ton, bounce as the bison entered and were secured with the collar. This was particularly the case when a larger bull entered. Though bison strength is legendary, he was unprepared to see the entire chute lurch inches off the ground, depending on the shifting weight and speed of each animal. He remembered Mike's warning not to let them break his arm. Right.

The whole process which took about an hour seemed to pass in seconds. As quickly as it began, we were done.

"Looks like that's it. How 'ya doing Ken?" Mike asked, walking over. It was the first sign of a smile we'd seen.

"Well, I've never done anything like that before, that's for sure," Ken said.

"Yah, well, sorry about that. But we had to get them animals ready to be delivered in the morning. And do it before it rains again and this place turns into a muddy mess."

We looked around following his gaze. It clearly had rained earlier and the wet ground was still holding puddles of water where the bison's hooves had been. It also explained the slipping we had seen from a few of the animals coming down the hill as they rounded the corner of the building. If it had been raining, the exercise would've been impossible.

The four of us walked back to the house together. Mike and Robin were visibly more relaxed. Mike was a likable character. Probably mid-forties, full, wooly head of blond, curly hair, totally uncombed and unkempt. His manner was casual and business-like at the same time. He was unassuming, but elements of the marketer that I had met over the phone were there.

Entering the house, he ushered us into his living room and insisted we watch a video clip of the movie "Dances with Wolves." This featured Cody, his famous buffalo bull, which he had hand-raised as an orphan calf. We hadn't heard of Cody, but we complimented him on the animal's cooperation for the movie. When Mike told us how much they were paid, we realized this wasn't a simple case of wanting to be in the movies. He

was well compensated for Cody's participation and we were impressed.

Then he proudly showed us a huge, tanned bison robe, which was draped across a well used, brown leather couch. Dutifully we examined it, noting how especially heavy it was.

"It's a winter robe," he said. "Depending on size and quality, you can usually get between \$1,500 to \$3,000. You don't often see one this size."

I found myself doing a reality check about every five or ten minutes. What a shift in worlds. One moment being in Santa Barbara, then stepping off a plane a few hours later, interacting with bison and steel handling equipment. What a sheltered, convenient life we had been living. Mike's ranch provided a stark contrast to California, while somehow being more tangible and real. Unlike corporate environments, where things are often done by committee, here there was an immediate response to events. There was no guessing, wondering, waiting, or asking for permission.

I found myself hoping the contrast of our worlds wasn't too obvious, yet feeling every bit the greenhorn, tenderfoot – completely out of our element. Yet Mike and Robin made us feel welcome. We joined them for dinner, and afterward, wandered back outside so they could show us around before we left. For fun, Robin took me on a short ATV ride, up the side of a steep hill and down. Then Mike introduced us to Cody, who hammed it up nicely for our camera. We learned that Cody loved Oreo cookies, so Mike gave us some to feed him. We had a friend for life.

Afterward, we all climbed in the truck for a general tour of the ranch. Ken and I got in the back with their big, friendly ranch dog. As we entered one of the pastures where the main herd was, a big bull about 100 feet from the truck turned and stood facing us, tail raised. We heard a kind of growling coming from the bull and as we got closer, it got louder. Even as greenhorns, it was clear to us that this was not bison talk for, "I'm glad to see you."

While Mike nonchalantly explained that the bull was just displaying dominance, Robin became alarmed that he was getting ready to charge the truck. She looked back at us to see what had the bull riled up. Spotting the dog, she immediately ordered, "Cover the dog! Cover the dog!"

Good grief, cover him with what? I wondered anxiously, looking at this large affable dog sitting next to me, tongue happily hanging out. But the sense of urgency in her voice was real. With nothing to cover him, I lifted my t-shirt and quickly pulled him underneath next to my chest. My new best friend.

It worked. The dog disappeared from view, the bull stopped growling



First-time author Kathy Lindner describes the path she and fiancé Ken began in 1993, seeking a life beyond layoffs, mergers and down-sizing—a life outside of corporate America. All they originally wanted was an active retirement raising bison for meat they could sell to support a home for themselves and their animals. Instead, they found themselves in the middle of a food movement that was gaining momentum. It would change their lives forever.

You'll travel with them over an 18-year journey of determination to survive outside the "system." Middle-aged beginners with no agricultural background, they stubbornly held fast to their goal despite limited capital, denied loan applications, commercial regulations and obstacles few can imagine, let alone overcome.

Standing into the Storm began as a memoir about what Kathy and Ken learned along their journey to a more fulfilling lifestyle, but it became more. The book includes a Call to Action for individuals, foodservice, and the bison industry, as well as a call for all of us to advocate on behalf of bison, that may once again be in danger.

The Lindners believe that regardless of our abilities and resources, we each can make a positive difference for ourselves, for the animals and for the earth. Their story shows that courage, vulnerability, self-discovery and strength are available to us at any age—as is the will to prevail. "Ken and I have come a long way and there's still much more to do," Kathy says. "But if we can do it, so can people who want something more. The smallest beginning is all that's required."

Kathy lives with her husband Ken in their Valencia, California condo north of Los Angeles. Now in their early 60s, their bi-weekly 1200-mile commute to Heritage Ranch in northeastern California, a trip they have undertaken every 11 days for over eight years, is almost done. In 2011, they began building a house and in 2012 they will finally join their bison at Heritage Ranch, eventually adding heritage species of chickens, turkeys and pigs. Lindner Bison's presence will continue at the

farmers' markets in southern California while they make needed improvements at the ranch and find a way to make these additional meats available to customers. Kathy Margaret Lindner is proud to share both the name and pioneering spirit of her great-grandmother, Margaret Carlston, who became known as the Cattle Queen of Montana.®



Margaret Carlston
1861-1931
Cattle Queen of
Montana

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