
LESSONS IN MINDFULNESS ON A LAFAYETTE RANCH

BY VALERIE D'IPPOLITO

Ever since childhood, Anne Holding and her husband, Hunter, knew just what they wanted to do in life. Anne wanted to help children; Hunter wanted to raise cattle. In 1995 they bought a 21-acre ranch in the Lafayette hills. Hunter moved his Black Angus cattle-breeding operation there. A year later, he and Anne added Deer Hill Ranch, a nonprofit experiential education center, to the site. Working in their two businesses, the Holdings discovered their separate interests had more in common than they thought.

HOLDING RANCH

When I learned that Holding Ranch's 100 percent grass-fed beef came from the affluent suburb of Lafayette, I thought, "what a strange place to raise cattle." But I changed my mind after visiting the ranch.

"This was cattle country through the first half of the century," Hunter Holding informed me as we rode in his Chevy Suburban through the golden rolling hills just north of downtown Lafayette.

Soon we arrived at "Mistletoe," a 150-acre tract of grassland adjoining Bear Creek Road where Holding Ranch cattle have their summer quarters. Jolting along a dirt road that runs inside the property, we spotted the herd, a black mass under a spreading oak. The cattle stood close to the road, as if waiting for us. I realized that's exactly what they were doing when Hunter pulled over, flipped open the truck's tailgate and started tossing out hunks of alfalfa hay. The cattle swarmed the wagon like kids around an ice-cream truck. Two large mother cows shoved their way to the front, followed by 30 or so weaned calves, leaving the "babies," a

couple of 250-pound calves born that spring, pushed to the back. "Cattle are hierarchical," Hunter reminded me.

Mistletoe is divided into five plots of pastureland separated from each other by electric fencing. Every few weeks in the summer, Hunter loads the back of the Suburban with hay (alfalfa is the cows' favorite) and leads his herd, carrot-and-stick fashion, from their current plot to the one next to it. Although he recently bought a 6-month-old pup that he is teaching to herd, ("a good dog is better than three cowboys on horseback for herding cattle"), for now Hunter's cattle drive is a one-man operation. "Trust," Hunter says, "not moving and riding and hollering, is the basis for herding." And, of course, the alfalfa helps.

Hunter leases Mistletoe from the East Bay Municipal Utility District for a surprisingly reasonable fee because his landlord knows that these carefully managed cattle will help maintain the property as grassland. Pointing to a tangled jungle of scrub that had overrun some neighboring land, Hunter said, "If you don't graze, the land's going to look like that: greasewood and 'junk.' It's not really usable for anything." To keep the "junk" from overrunning Mistletoe, Hunter's cows provide the ideal lawn service. Wandering the land, they churn the soil with their hooves, helping prevent invasion by aggressive plants. They also trim the grass while dining, fertilize the land by depositing valuable gifts, and rototill the fertilizer into the soil with their hooves.

Grassland also helps the environment. Grasses and legumes remove greenhouse gases by taking excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it as carbon in their underground root

mass, a process known as carbon sequestration. Although bovine emissions—cow belching and flatulence—release harmful methane gas, some argue that pastured cows' pollution is negligible compared to the cattle's usefulness in preserving grassland.

Hunter pays as much attention to the grass his cattle eat as he does to his cattle. Pulling up some dried stalks by the side of the road, he handed them to me for inspection. The grass was woody, far along in its life cycle. "That's what you don't want," he said, "It's stemmy, just not palatable." Although cattle will still eat it—they'll even consume thistles in a pinch—this aged grass makes poor forage.

Photo by Paul Supkeoff





SIX REASONS TO EAT GRASS-FED BEEF

In a 2006 report, the Union of Concerned Scientists (www.ucsusa.org) supports grass-based cattle raising over industrial cattle production and lists the following benefits to eating grass-fed beef:

- Protection of air and water quality
- Increased soil fertility
- Improved health and welfare of animals, farmers, and farmworkers
- Improved human health due to reduced antibiotic use
- Higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids and CLA (thought to strengthen the immune system and lower risk of cancer and heart disease)
- Leaner meat, lower in saturated fat (reduces the risk of heart disease)

To learn more about grass-fed beef:

www.holdingranch.com
www.eatwild.com
www.themeatrix.com
www.americangrassfedbeef.com
www.stockmangrassfarmer.net

Grass that's too young, called "washy," is also bad for cows. "Runs right through them," Hunter says. Frequent rotation helps the cattle eat grass at just the right stage of growth and also prevents the cows from overgrazing or undergrazing the land.

To allow the grass to grow back during the rainy season, the cattle leave Mistletoe in October and don't return until the spring. They spend the fall and winter on the hills above the ranch and can often be seen looking down on hikers in nearby Briones Park. After two years of this grazing, the cattle are sent to a small family-run slaughterhouse and turned into beef. The sides of beef are hung and dry-aged for 30 days to make them more flavorful and tender, then cut, packaged, and frozen—ready for sale.

Holding Ranch cattle spend their entire lives on pastureland eating grass, the food their digestive systems were designed to process. Most beef cows in this country are not so

fortunate. For the last three to six months of their lives, they are sent to industrial feedlots for fattening and mostly fed corn, an unnatural diet for a ruminant. Feedlot menus can also include such unusual items as stale bakery goods, pasta, candy, meal made from feathers, and pig and poultry by-products, as well as hormones. Confined to small spaces, mired in their own waste, and eating an unhealthy diet, the cows are especially vulnerable to illness, so low doses of antibiotics—many of them used with humans—are often added to their feed. Some scientists fear that routinely giv-

ing cattle these drugs will result in strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria that could endanger human health.

Hunter, by contrast, gives no antibiotics or hormones to his cattle. On the rare occasion an animal becomes ill and he must medicate it, he does not use it for meat.

Hunter and his cattle have formed a successful partnership with their natural environment. This connection to the natural world is something that Hunter believes most people are missing in their lives. Anne agrees and through her work at Deer Hill Ranch, tries to help children and adults reestablish that connection.

DEER HILL RANCH

When I arrived at Deer Hill Ranch, the campers, eight kids age four to six, were learning how to milk Evie the goat. Alex, the ranch administrator, was helping Ryan, one of the littlest campers, manipulate Evie's teat. Ryan closed his eyes and squeezed. A thin stream of milk shot into a galvanized pail. Ten seconds later, Ryan announced that he was finished. "I did a lot" he said.

Bynow, the fourth day of the weeklong summer camp, the kids had all done a lot. They'd fed goats and sheep, walked ponies and cleaned their hooves, held chickens, collected eggs, brushed potbellied pigs, made paper, woven baskets, carded, spun and dyed wool from ranch sheep, hiked, listened to stories, and played games. It was clear that everyone was having fun. But entertaining kids is only part of the program at Deer Hill Ranch, as I soon learned from Anne Holding.

From her warmth and good humor, it's easy to see that Anne is a "people person." In fact, she's been helping people ever since she was a child working with her mother among the poor in a New York City settlement house.

At Deer Hill Ranch, Anne continues to help people by designing programs that teach children and adults valuable lessons in life. "Animals have so much to teach us about respect, about thoughtfully responding instead of reacting," she said. In the Farm Study Program, for example, children learn how to take care of farm animals and, in the process, develop useful life skills like empathy, self-confidence, and emotional control.

The Farm Study Program also helps at-risk children, and kids who are severely emotionally disturbed, autistic, or developmentally delayed, as well as adults with Alzheimer's disease. "If I had one tool to help kids, it would be a chicken," Anne said, placing a plump brown hen in my arms as a demo. The hen made a pleasant bundle to hold, her feathers surprisingly soft to the touch. She emitted little squawks every few seconds, which Anne told me was the chicken version of purring. "When children hold chickens, it teaches them how to be mindful, to treat the chicken in a respectful way. And there's a carry-over," she added—treating animals with respect shows kids how to behave respectfully with people.

Not all lessons involve animals. Multi-day craft projects (like carding, spinning, and dyeing wool) teach kids to slow down, work persistently, and be patient. The Team Building Program for older children and adults, which include a ropes course, teaches partici-

pants to be more inclusive, cooperative and respectful of one another.

Some life skills are taught more directly. Children learn how to “live lightly on the land” by not generating unnecessary waste and reusing whenever possible. To show how effectively waste can be recycled, Anne likes to tell the story of an old farm woman asked what she did with her garbage in the old days. “What garbage?” the woman replied, “nothing came in packaging.”

Other lessons occur serendipitously. Corky, the oldest pot-bellied pig, came to the ranch from an animal-rescue society. He had been repeatedly beaten by his previous owner. Although Anne doesn't tell Corky's history to most of her young visitors, she shared it once with a severely emotionally disturbed child, who had himself been physically abused and was now living in foster care. “Was it the daddy who did it?” the child asked Anne. When she told him it was, he replied, “Me, too.” Anne pointed out how happy Corky was now on the farm, sending the little boy a clear message of hope.

“We really believe in our work, because we see how effective it is,” Anne said. Although she is convinced that even a single visit to the farm can make an impression, she would like to make longer programs available to reinforce the experience. Many of her campers naturally extend their own programs by coming back year after year, but Anne also wants to offer long-term therapeutic programs for at-risk and emotionally disturbed children.

Deer Hill Ranch needs financial help to continue the current programs, develop new ones, and rebuild the crafts barn, which was burned in a recent fire. Finding the needed funding each year



DEER HILL RANCH'S ANNUAL PUMPKIN PATCH FUNDRAISER

October 14 (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.)

Deer Hill Ranch

3232 Deer Hill Road

Lafayette

For more information, call (925) 283-1197;

or visit www.deerhillranch.org



Anne Holding

remains a constant challenge. The annual “Pumpkin Patch Fundraiser” is scheduled for October 14th. A second fundraiser will be held in April.

A large multi-colored flock of chickens wanders the grounds at the ranch. Their fresh eggs are sold, along with Holding Ranch beef, both at the ranch and at various farmers' markets in Contra Costa County.

Deer Hill's mission—teaching children how to act respectfully toward the natural world and everything in it—suggests the Zen practice of “mindfulness.” “It's a word we use all the time at the ranch,” Anne said. Mindfulness also describes Hunter's attitude to his cattle and the land they graze. Based on mindfulness, the Holdings' separate interests—raising cattle and helping kids—are not as different as they seem. 🐷

Holding Ranch beef and Deer Hill Ranch eggs are available at the ranch (M–F, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.), the Walnut Creek Farmers' Market (Sun 9 a.m.–1 p.m.), and the Concord Farmers' Market (10 a.m.–2 p.m.)

Valerie D'Ippolito likes to write about food and the people who produce it. A Bay Area resident for the last 20 years, she lives in Oakland with her family.