



## FINDING BALANCE

### *McKibbens honored by PCLA for supporting slow food, buy-local movements, raising healthy, grass-fed herds*

**Photos and Story  
by Jolene Guzman**  
The Itemizer-Observer

DALLAS — When it comes to “slow food” David and Bette McKibbens, owners of McK Ranch, are all in.

The McKibbens take their time raising the all-natural, grass-fed beef on their ranch near Dallas. They’ve also spent time finding the right balance of production to remain one of the few ranching operations in Polk County to make a living solely off what they raise.

“That was our goal, to be self-sustaining and not have to supplement our income,” Bette said.

It took them a number of years before they could just focus on their herd.

“We did that for quite a few years,” David said of working other jobs in addition to farming. “Then we saw the grass-fed, grass-fattened operation as a chance (to make a living).”

He noticed the trend of people wanting to invest in healthier food about 15 years ago and decided that was one way a small operation could distinguish itself and find a following of customers.

Years later, that risk has rewarded the couple.

“That trend still is growing fast,” David said.

“People want to know where their food comes from and they want to eat healthy,” Bette said.

The learning curve was steep, however.

“I did a lot of reading,” David said. “I took classes. Then it was



**Bette, left, and David McKibbens were named Polk County Livestock Association’s “Livestock Family of the Year” in honor of their innovation in developing an all-natural, grass-fed cattle operation.**

trial and error. Just when you think you have it figured out, something else will pop up.”

Unexpected curve balls aside, the McKibbens believe their system is best for customers, cattle and the land.

“It’s the healthiest form of meat that you can buy,” David said. “It enhances the land so we can make a profit.”

That successful thinking-out-of-the-box strategy has earned the couple Polk County Livestock As-

sociation’s “Livestock Family of the Year” honor.

“They are innovative people in coming back and looking at grass-fed beef,” said Jim Clawson, PCLA past president, about why the McKibbens were chosen for the award. “They are just folks. If you ask them to do something, they always respond.”

Clawson added they are always willing to show people their operation and talk about how they developed it.

“They have been particularly active and supportive of the farmers markets, too,” Clawson said. “They always step up to the plate and help make things happen.”

David and Bette said the award — a secret until the night of the association’s annual dinner —

was a surprise.

“I didn’t have any idea,” Bette said. “There were a lot other families who were deserving of it.”

But none perhaps who had the gift of good timing as much as the McKibbens. Not long after moving to grass-fed beef, other trends such as “buy local” and the “slow food” movement began to take hold.

McK Ranch has been in the center of each of those waves over the years, selling at farmers markets and developing direct marketing through custom sales and a retail store at the ranch. The McKibbens even branched into wholesale.

In 2012, Bette was one of 200 delegates from the United States who participated in “Tierra Madre,” a slow food conference in Italy.

### **Grass-fed, natural beef:**

**What:** McK Ranch.  
**Where:** 3415 Ballard Road, Dallas.  
**For more information:** 503-623-6214 or [www.mck-ranch.com](http://www.mck-ranch.com).

“It was pretty cool to be able to do that. We met people from all over the world, and one thing I found is that small farmers and ranchers all have the same set of problems,” Bette said.

Those issues include how to stay profitable without working themselves into the ground.

About a year ago, David and Bette faced that challenge as well.

Looking to find a different kind of balance — one that allows them to relax more — they have reduced the size of their herd and eliminated some wholesale contracts. After crunching the numbers, the couple have found they’ve remained on solid financial ground.

“It was a good decision for us,” Bette said. “Before it was the two of us on the road every day of the week. Now I can manage it every other week, three days of the week. It’s not so exhausting.”

The McKibbens now see another trend — one that gives them hope for the future of farming and ranching in Polk County.

“The livestock association is growing. It’s really nice to see after all these years, it’s finally taking off,” Bette said. “Young members are coming in, which is great.”

Not ready to hang up the cowboy hat and boots, the McKibbens will still serve as an example to those young up-and-comers.

“We try to go with the flow and try to be ahead of the game,” Bette said.



**Signs point the way to McK Ranch on Ballard Road near Dallas.**



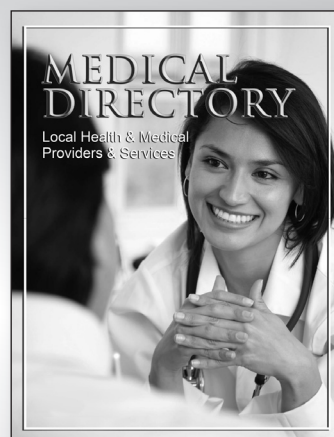
**A portion the herd enjoys the sunshine and a pasture of green grass Monday morning at McK Ranch.**

**Look what’s  
coming up....**

**Reserve your  
space today!**

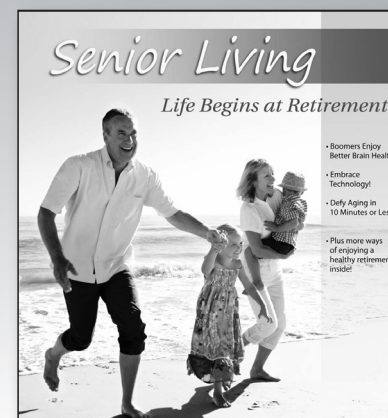
**Call 503.623.2373  
Talk to Heidi, Rachel  
or Karen.**

**Itemizer-Observer**  
147 SE Court St, Dallas  
[www.polkio.com](http://www.polkio.com)



Polk County Medical Directory is your **FULL COLOR** guide to all health and medical providers and facilities throughout Polk County.

**Deadline to Reserve: March 26  
Publish Date: April 8**



A large senior and baby boomer population call Polk County home. Are they aware of your business and/or services? They’re aware of us. Let us help you reach them.

**Deadline to Reserve: April 7  
Publish Date: April 22**