

THE LAZY MD RANCH

Text & Photography by Lynn Donaldson

Dale and Margaret Vermillion wanted to raise their boys on the land.
Now that that's done, their grandkids have the run of the ranch.

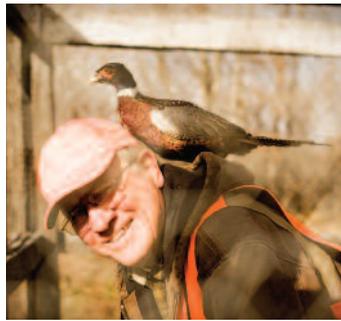
This Montana ranch takes its name from its patriarch's profession.

To date, three generations of

Vermillions have been anything but lazy on it.

I grew up on a wheat farm that my great-grandparents homesteaded in central Montana. I always took for granted the idea of being surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins, and, for that matter, I've also taken for granted being surrounded by land. I've seen *Gone with the Wind* and know that land is "the only thing that lasts." I've chuckled at Mark Twain's observation that they're not making it anymore. But until I met Dan, my future husband, and his family, the Vermillions, I had never thought of land as something that can shape the type of sons I want to raise, or that it can be the impetus to bring a family together.

My in-laws, Dale and Margaret Vermillion, moved to Montana in 1971 with four-year-old Dan and two-year-old Jeff. (Youngest son Patrick was on the way.) Dale had just finished his residency at Massachusetts General. Right off the couple bought a piece of property on the Yellowstone River almost before they purchased a family home. Margaret liked the view of the Crazy Mountains; Dale saw targets on the deer grazing in the tall grass beneath cottonwoods.



"All the other doctors in Billings were buying cabins in the mountains near ski hills," Margaret says. "They all thought we were crazy!"

But the Vermillions wanted more than a slopeside cabin. "We figured if our kids were doing the sorts of things we

wanted them to be doing outdoors, they wouldn't be doing the things we didn't want them to be doing in Billings," says Margaret.

As a boy, Dale had grown up hunting and fishing in and around Goodland, Kansas. After graduating from KU, he was a Rotary Scholar in Switzerland and then entered Harvard Medical School in the fall of 1959. He married Margaret in 1964, and a week after their wedding the couple headed for Cuenca, Ecuador — a city some 9,000 feet above sea level — where they would spend the next two years. Dale was a doctor in the Peace Corps, and Margaret taught fourth grade.

"We did a lot of hiking and fishing there," says Margaret.

"That's where she started the tradition of always catching the biggest fish," adds Dale.



*Dale Vermillion
saw some of the
best hunting and
fishing in Kansas,
Colorado, and
the Northeast
get snapped up.
That's when he
decided to stake
his claim to a
piece of property
on the Lower
Yellowstone.*



“The Lower Yellowstone is a locals’ secret ... they picked a great spot.”

— Alex Maher



After they closed on the ranch, their broker took them out for a beer at the New Atlas Bar in Columbus. In a quiet moment, Margaret asked, “Why’d we do that?”

But as the past four decades have shown, the Lazy MD has proven to be their best investment by far — in more ways than one. To begin with, who could have foreseen how Montana’s real estate market would explode? Apparently, my in-laws did.

“I’d grown up on the East Coast,” Margaret says, who was raised in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. Summers were spent at a family compound on a lake. “We had all our aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents together. I wanted a place like that, where my grandchildren could come visit me. Where I could be a part of their lives, and they’d be a part of mine,” she says.

Early on, she learned an important life lesson. “Development had happened everywhere I’d lived. And the land that is most attractive always goes first,” she says.

Dale had seen access to quality hunting and fishing become severely limited in parts of Kansas, Colorado, and the Northeast. “I really thought that when our boys were in their thirties, they might not have a place to do this,” he says.

Then there are the memories they made, which are captured in family photo albums that hold countless snapshots of Dan, Jeff, Pat, and their friends holding their guns and any number of feathered and hooved and finned creatures unlucky enough to cross the boys’ paths.

There’s one of eight-year-old Dan with his chest puffed up, holding a five-pound brown trout he landed in the Sweetgrass. Fourteen-year-old Jeff holds a five-point buck he shot and then had to swim across the Yellowstone to retrieve. Scout troops camping out. Inner-tubing parties. Hungover groups of college kids gathered around the enormous oak dining room table that belonged to Margaret’s grandmother from the family compound in Maine.



*Stacks of photo
albums chronicle
the boys’ lives.*



“Kids just develop differently when they’re running around in the open countryside learning to be independent.”

— Margaret Vermillion



More recent albums show Pat’s wedding on a hillside overlooking the ranch, Jeff’s riverside rehearsal dinner, Margaret rowing a drift boat piled with seven grandchildren peering over the edge on the prowl for turtles.

“We had no TV down at the ranch,” says Margaret. “The boys only had what was outdoors to keep them entertained, and they were always outside learning about nature. Kids just develop differently when they’re running around in the open countryside learning to be independent.”

The Lazy MD Ranch sits about seven miles east of Big Timber on just under 800 acres. Sweetgrass Creek cuts right through the middle of the property. Dotted with cottonwoods, sagebrush, and willows, its pastures and hayfields are a haven for just about every varmint that Tom Sawyer ever dreamed of chasing.

“The Lower Yellowstone is a locals’ secret,” says Alex Maher, a family friend who also happens to be the broker/owner of Live Water Properties in Jackson Hole. “The fishery is very good, and it receives a fraction of the float traffic and fishing pressure that the upper river and Paradise Valley do. So it’s terrific water.

“Years ago, people thought that this section of the river wasn’t as good as it is. You’ve got the river bottom, some with cottonwoods, some with cliffs, a lot of Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse, a fair amount of water fowl, whitetail deer, turkeys, elk, antelope, mule deer. It’s wildlife- and fish-rich country. So they picked a great spot,” Maher says.

Three homes can be found on the Lazy MD. (Check them out at www.VermillionRanch.com.) The Lewis and Clark Cabin — where Dale and Margaret camped out with kerosene lanterns, a wood stove, and outhouse the first six years they owned the place — was built in 1867 and is one of the oldest rough-cut log cabins in the Big Timber area.

The Harrison Homestead, now a rambling, two-story Victorian farmhouse surrounded by a white picket fence and lilac bushes, sits on a new section of the ranch the family purchased in 1997. Back then, this beautiful homestead was a junk shed with no windows or foundation. Margaret brought Livingston architect Kirk Michaels on board to restore it; it is now listed on the National Historic Register.



Craving electricity and running water, my in-laws built a third structure, a simple cabin, in 1982. Two bedrooms, one bathroom, an open kitchen-dining-living area, and a large sleeping loft upstairs. “We put six beds up there so the boys could each invite at least one friend,” Dale says. “It was one of the smartest things we ever did. They all had friends who loved to come down for a weekend of fishing, throwing rocks in the river, and exploring the Sweetgrass. We rarely had any requests from them to stay in Billings.”

In 1993, Margaret and Dale decided to retire at the ranch and started a major construction project, transforming their simple cabin into a home. They doubled its square footage and added an upper deck that looks out onto the Yellowstone River with jaw-dropping views of the Crazyes and Granite Peak in the Absaroka-Beartooths.

Now Margaret walks every day and has become a passionate oil painter. “It’s so nice to be able to step right outside my door or look out a window and paint,” she says. Dale keeps busy with various projects around the ranch. A grandchild or two is almost always underfoot. “My primary joy is having another generation here to have picnics with on the river, to build bonfires on the shore. I try to give them memories like the ones I had growing up,” Margaret says.

It’s wonderful watching her dream come true. Last fall, Dan took our two boys deer hunting with toy rifles. When Charlie’s fifth birthday rolled around in May, where was the party? Where else. I wouldn’t trade that day for the world, and neither would he. Don’t believe me?

That’s Charlie, leading the charge to the trout derby, on the cover of this magazine. 🐟

*And, on some
occasions,
the family fun
takes place
inside, not out.*