



Ranching by the numbers: beef, benchmarking and balance

FCC Knowledge Podcast: Talking Farm and Food

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Marty Seymour (MS)

Guest: Ben Campbell (BC)

MS: From FCC, it's the FCC Knowledge Podcast, a show that features real Canadian producers, real stories, and real good conversation about the business of farming. I'm your host, Marty Seymour. In this episode I talk to an engineer turned cattle rancher. Grazed Right Ranch is owned and operated by Ben Campbell and his wife Stephanie. Ben shares how he got started in the cattle business, and how he learned as much as he could, as fast as he could. We're also going to learn about how he approaches benchmarking and how he applies that to his business. Pretty sure you're going to like this guy. This guy will try anything. I think what makes Ben unique is he's always willing to admit when something isn't working. I even managed to get him to share a few details about his biggest fail. In my professional world we call that a 'learning opportunity'. This episode is a doozy. Stay tuned.

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MS: Welcome to the FCC Knowledge Podcast. Today in our podcast we've got Ben Campbell. Welcome to the show, Ben.

BC: Thanks for having me.

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MS: All right. I kick off all these podcasts with the same question. I want to know where you are, and what's the price of land in your area?

BC: I'm near Black Diamond, Alberta, which is half an hour south of Calgary. In the foothills, beautiful views, so that indicates that the land is pretty expensive. I don't know, it's so variable. It literally depends on what you can see from the land, if you've got a mountain view or not. And a short, 15-minute drive in any direction changes the price dramatically. But where I am, and what I've paid is about \$1 million a quarter for my land.

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MS: Okay, for all the listeners out there that their heads are popping off right now, you're telling me your land is worth \$1 million a quarter?

BC: Yeah. So, then try renting it from someone and telling them you'll give them \$10,000 or \$5,000 a year. It doesn't matter. People own land. And I have a direct neighbour who owns land and it just sits unused because the opportunity of rent doesn't even touch the value of the land.

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MS: It doesn't get them out of bed in the morning at all.

BC: Yeah.

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MS: We'll come back to that maybe as we go through the podcast about the economics of operating an environment like that. But for our listeners that wouldn't know your operation, you're in the cattle business, so why don't you tell us a little bit about what you guys do at your place?

BC: We do a little bit of a few different things. Our main business is commodity cattle, and I call it commodity cattle instead of saying yearlings. So far, it's mostly been yearlings, but we do whatever makes sense and we evaluate that on a yearly basis. We buy and sell cattle and whatever is the most profitable as our forecast for the next year, that's what we'll do. So, I did cull cows a couple years ago, and the last three years I've done yearlings as the main income of the farm. And then we also have a direct market business. And that's how we got started. That was the only income we had to get off the ground. And we direct market into the Calgary area, beef, pork, chicken, and eggs. And we raise all of those on the farm except for the meat chickens. I did those for one year and then quit.

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MS: All right, well we're talking about that in a minute because I've always got to ask about chicken ranching. Your story is a bit unusual, a bit different. I consider yourself reasonably new to the industry. Now, it's not as black and white as that, but I might make a leap and say, coming as an engineer, you didn't come from agriculture with that same view. So, tell us about your background.

BC: I can tell two stories. One is that I'm a third-generation rancher, born and raised on the family ranch, and I could say that it's in my blood. The truth is not that at all. The truth is that I was raised on an acreage on the family ranch. My dad was a drywaller and he wasn't on speaking terms really with my uncle who ran the ranch, so I had no daily participation

in the ranch. I didn't know anything about agriculture. I was embarrassed to be from a farm. I went to high school exclusively with city kids, and they made fun of me for being from the country, and so I really downplayed it. And I thought I would never be so mean as to live in the country and raise my kids in the country where they can't hang out with their friends all the time. So, I got a degree in engineering and I worked as a professional engineer.

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MS: So, obviously you fell and bumped your head one day. Something changed for you. You go from engineering, guaranteed income, to now you want to be a rancher? How did this happen?

BC: Yeah, it's a good question. A couple of stars aligned, I guess. But I really wasn't sure of what I wanted to do. I was an engineer because I had an engineering degree, not the other way around. I didn't get an engineering degree to be an engineer, so I wasn't really set on that path. I only got an engineering degree because I liked being in school, and I liked physics. And engineering seems like a good degree to get, it's respectable, so that's what I took. So, I finished university and I wasn't interested in being an engineer, so I went and worked for Engineers Without Borders in Zambia, in Southern Africa. My wife and I moved there. She's a registered nurse and she worked at an Anglican mission hospital, and we lived there for just over a year. And I worked with a cotton farming company that did an out-grower scheme.

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MS: Ben elaborated on his out-grower scheme for me a little bit. It's a company that gives rural farmers inputs to plan and spray their crops. Then they buy the crops back at the end of the year on a contract, then work with a finance company that paid the farmers.

BC: So, it's kind of a neat thing, and it was in agriculture a little bit. And it definitely wasn't engineering. I really enjoyed that. And then I came back to Canada and I still didn't want to be an engineer. So, I did falconry, which is not a job at all, it's just a hobby. I did that basically full time for a year.

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MS: Okay, full stop. Falconry? This is witchcraft to me. What is falconry?

BC: Oh, okay. Falconry is hunting wild game with a trained bird of prey. You can have falcons or hawks, in Saskatchewan you can have eagles, and then you hunt things like medieval times. They still do it today. There's probably only about 20 active falconers in the whole province of Alberta. And my grandfather was a founding member of the Alberta Falconry Association, so I picked it up as a family thing.

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MS: Oh my god, the plot thickens. So, now you're driving home from work one day as an engineer, and the switch goes on, I want a ranch?

BC: Yeah. I don't know. There was a lot of factors. A friend of mine visited, a mutual friend of ours in Ontario, and he was doing grass-fed beef direct marketing it into the Ottawa region and was just starting out. His family were dairy farmers here, and he moved there. My friend visited him and said, yeah, there's this thing called grass-fed beef, and it's supposed to be good for the environment. And I wanted something that I enjoyed, something that was mentally challenging and helped me physically stay healthy. I wanted something that was good for my community and people beyond me. I wanted my career and my job to benefit more than just me individually. And I wanted to do something that was good for the environment. I've always been kind of an environmentalist. So, I was looking for something that fit all those things, and he mentioned that and said, yeah, maybe that's something.

So, my family has a ranch, and so I started by just leasing space for four yearlings. And I produced four of the worst grass-fed beef you could produce. I had no idea what I was doing. It's totally different than producing commodity beef. And I made these animals, and sold them to my friends and family, and they absorb, of course, all your errors and shocks in life, and that's what they did. And that's how I got my start, and then I loved it and I grew from there. And I went from 4 my first year, to 27 my second year, to 35 my third year, to 77, and then up to 400 my fourth year.

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MS: So, you've been at this four years, you've got 400 head, just south of Calgary, \$1 million a quarter for land. And I'd say we've got listeners on the line from Southern Ontario paying \$25,000 an acre that are still eye rolling about, this is impossible, he can't be doing this. So, how are you making your payments?

BC: Yeah, good question. Diversity and high value. You have to get the value out of the land. And so, I took a course called Ranching for Profit, and what they said was you have to utilise the value of the product. So, if you buy a tractor and you just use it as a commuter vehicle to drive back and forth to work, you're not utilising the value of that machine which is doing tractor work. So, you have to do tractor work to pay for it. And so, the land that I have has more value than exclusively agricultural value. One of the values it has is that it's close to a huge market like Calgary. So, with direct marketing, we're able to make higher returns on a dollars per acre than we would if we lived in, I don't know, three or four hours away from a major city.

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MS: That sounded like a great theory, so I asked Ben to lay it out for me. What does that look like for them on their land?

BC: I have a farmyard. We used to have a feedlot on the place, and so we've got a lot of buildings. So, I turned our calving barn into self-storage units, and I rented out the mechanic shop to a guy, and RV storage space. There's a lot of horses in this area, so we board five horses for \$200.00 per horse per month, so there's \$1,000 a month. I rent the shop out for \$1,000 a month. If my rental units and the RV storage is going as I want, that's \$1,000 a month. And we have a loft apartment in the barn for \$1,500 a month. And so, those things add up to the mortgage payment. My goal is to make everything else pay for my mortgage, and then my agricultural income can support my agricultural business and growth.

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MS: Oh, I love that. I love the separation of your payments and your cash flow relative to how you're running your enterprise. So then, do you see a collision of values around the cash flow side of your life? We'll just say all the rentals, the horse board, etcetera, against the space or the time that your cows need? And then how do you balance that?

BC: I'm pretty firm on my conviction that I'm going to do what I want in life, and I won't let the dollar control me. So, for sure the dollar return is, in terms of time spent or money spent, on rental properties. We had an old shop built in 1963. I redid the siding, the interior, the electrical. I put in a brand-new overhead door. It cost, I think it was \$7,000. And then it's got a gross revenue of \$12,000 a year. And I take almost no time on that because I have a good renter. So, that's the highest return in terms of dollars back versus dollars spent, and also in terms of dollars returned versus time spent, compared to the cows. But I quit my job as an engineer, not because I saw all the money in ranching. I quit my job as an engineer because you only live once, and if you're not doing what you enjoy, then what's the point of doing anything? So, I've been pretty firm on that and it's been hard, and I'll admit that. It's been really hard not to chase the dollar too much.

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MS: I was curious. How firm had Ben been? Because that's a really hard thing to do. Was there a time when he got caught up in the dollar? He had one example that came to mind.

BC: Well, we only have a small pig herd, and we had an offer to buy way more pigs and to increase our pig herd to ... we do normally about 20 in a year, and to increase it to 80. And I started thinking, well, if we sell the pigs for a bit less, yeah, we can do these pigs. And I thought, wait a second. Am I doing this because I want to raise pigs, or because I'm trying to make money? And if my motivation for increasing the herd size is only to make money, it doesn't make sense with my life goals ... it's hard balancing finances and what you actually care about in life.

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MS: I've got some young kids in my house that are 12 and 13, and they compare themselves to our neighbours, etcetera. I can't imagine it's any different for you. And so, when you make those lifestyle decisions, what do you tell your kids?

BC: My kids are seven, five, and three. My son William is three years old. This is his only summer in his whole that he'll be three. And my son Sam that's five, this is the only summer in his whole life that he'll five. He'll have 10 years of being under 10, but he's only got one year of being 5, and I only have one year of him being 5. So, I try to take time, even when I'm busy, to go down to the river and play, or go for a walk, or collect bugs. These kids come with me doing chores a lot. But they also do complain that I work too much and we're always working. It's hard. It's not easy, and I wouldn't say that everything I'm doing is perfect. It's a really tough balance balancing work and life. And especially at this stage. I'm 36 and we've just bought this place from my family, and making payments, and renovating everything under the sun. It's life from a fire hose right now.

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MS: In some ways what you described about your kids, that's like the plight of the farm kid, and that Mom and Dad are working, and we've got all these other responsibilities. But what I hear you saying is in your core values, is those things are important to you. And that you've made a deliberate decision to raise your kids that way, and I don't think you have to apologise to anyone for that.

BC: Yeah. Yeah.

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MS: I want to hear about the chickens. So, you're in chickens and then you're out of chickens?

BC: Oh, chickens. Basically, the short story is that our farm is modelled on nature. And you so often reach a fork in the road where you can follow a natural path, or you can follow a man-made path. For example, when you put pigs in tight quarters they can fight, and they can bite each others tails off. So, then you're at a fork in the road. You can either give them more space or decrease their numbers, and then you don't have to worry about them biting each other. Or you can dock the tails and then there is no tail to bite. And so, we try to choose on our ranch to do the natural setting. The short story with chickens is there is no good natural setting to raise meat chickens in Alberta and make money. Not that I've seen.

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MS: So, the short story made sense. But Ben tries so many different things, and is willing to share his wins and losses, I couldn't help but ask more about the chickens. I thought, there's got to be a valuable lesson in the long version of this story somewhere. And frankly, I was just curious.

BC: They have to be, in nature, a baby chicken has its mom to keep it warm overnight. All the babies will huddle under the hen, and she'll protect them when night time temperatures drop down to five degrees, that they don't all freeze to death. And then they do that until they're fully feathered, and they don't need their mom to do that. Of course, when you do commercial chickens, you can't have hens sitting on top of them all. So, they have to spend about four weeks in some sort of shelter. And so that was, for us, we did two batches of 300 our first year. And they were in a barn, and then we brought them outside. So, they're 28 days old when you bring them outside, and then they're ready to kill at 35 to 40 days. So, why even bring them outside if they're going to be dead in two weeks? The whole situation didn't fit my natural approach. Now, the thing is, we tried to do a really good job of it. We built these, I think they're called chicken tractors. My friend built these eight-by-eight squares, these cages, and you drag them along through the field, and you fertilize the field, and they're always getting fresh grass, and it sounds so wonderful. In reality, we put a bunch of chickens in the field, now they're in the middle of a field. How do you get food and water to them? And they burn through food and water. So, we're carrying five-gallon pails, and I set the pail down, and I set it in chicken poop. And I pick it up, and I slip and dump all the water on myself that I've lugged all the way through this field. And we live in the foothills. There's no level ground and it's all bumpy. And the chickens, every day one's dying. I don't know anything about chickens. We're way too big to not care if chickens are dying, and we're way too small for a chicken veterinarian to care about us. If you phoned him and said, I have 600 chickens, well that's nothing. All they want you to do is, please don't bring any sick chickens or dead birds to our vet clinic, or to any chicken farms, is all the help they gave me. So, it was a mountain of work and a royal pain in the ass, and just it was no fun. It was so little return for so much work.

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MS: So, that sets up the question about what I think is interesting about your operation and the moving parts. And I'll describe you as an experimenter, not in terms of the mad scientist, but the person that's willing to take a go at chickens, to try pigs. I think a lot of people are stuck on, how do you make the decision to go into one of those? And then more importantly is, how do you make the decision to go out?

BC: I'm always looking at both, at going in and going out of things, always. This will maybe make me sound like the mad scientist, but I'm interested in goats. Oh, maybe there's money in goats, or maybe there's money in sheep. So, I'm evaluating those. But I'm also, every winter when I have time, I go through every single thing that generates income for me. Not on an individual basis, but I'll say, all my rental properties, all the horse boarding, all the whatever, then I'll ... and it's not an exact science, but I have a rough idea of the hours I put in. So, then I know my return on investment, and I know my dollars per hour. I take my net profit, and then how many hours I work on average over the course of a year on that, and then I say, okay, so I'm getting paid \$35.00 an hour for doing cows. I'm getting paid, I don't know, something insane for rental properties. And for horse boarding, I'm getting paid \$100.00 an hour when I go check the horses. And these different things. And then I look at them all, and I keep in mind enjoyment and what I want to do. And I

think, okay, if I were to get rid of one of these, which one? Can I increase one, and what about if I decreased one to get rid of it? This year, my wife Steph and I were talking about just getting rid of something because we kind of ... everything seemed to be working, which was fine, but there's only so many hours in a day. So, we're trying to see, well, let's just get rid of something just so we have more time for personal time, or vacation time.

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MS: So then, it's kind of the soft side then about what you're ... I guess, as you mature into your business and figure out what's working what's not, as you're starting to put value in more of the softer things to make space for that.

BC: Yeah, that's right. And I'm really not afraid to fail. The meat chicken thing, that didn't work, and I'm fine with that. I don't feel like a failure. No one's going to succeed at everything. And the pigs too, they worked, but if I don't want to do them, I'm not embarrassed if I don't do them next year. And laying hens, last year we had 300 laying hens which is the limit in Alberta without quota. And we were rolling through eggs. And I don't know, it was just not my favourite thing to do. Even though the money seemed good, and I talked to my wife about it and said, we're making pretty good money doing these chores. I think it was \$60.00 an hour to do the chores, but it's only mostly 45 minutes a day, so you don't even make \$60.00 in a day as a net profit. And I thought, I don't know, couldn't I pay you \$60.00 an hour to do that? And she said yeah, but if I want to go out of town, then I can't because I have to do that 45 minutes of work that day. Because that's the only thing that we had that was daily, daily stuff we couldn't get away from.

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MS: I think there's a parallel in that to a story you shared with me before about when you upgraded your truck. Tell me that story. Just help our listeners understand that experience. Start from the beginning.

BC: What happened was my wife, she picked up a load of pigs in the spring from a farm north of Calgary, and she calls me in tears. She's broken down on Highway 2 which is super, duper busy, the busiest highway in Alberta. And she's fully loaded with pigs. The truck is broken. We only have one truck. I have a trailer that could haul it, but the only thing that could pull my trailer is the truck that's broken. And I don't know who's going to give me a truck at the drop of a hat. Even if it all works, she's going to be sitting on the side of the road with these pigs in the heat. And it was terrible. The stress of it was just brutal, and she didn't feel good about it. And it turned out to be a minor thing, it was a fuel pump. And she ended up being able to limp it home, and everything got unloaded fine. But even when we got the pigs home, she was still stressed. There was lingering stress. And I thought, why do I have my wife driving an \$1,800 truck? Because it makes financial sense. And I fixed the fuel pump, and the truck works fine. But we bought a second truck, even though it didn't necessarily make financial sense. Because of the quality of life that if, not only if my other one breaks, we'll still use the crappy one and then the good one we

can sit, and we won't put lots of miles on it. But the quality of life of being able to fix something when it breaks, but also the quality of life every day of knowing that if there is a problem, I'm going to be okay. And I don't need to worry about driving far away from home, and being stressed the whole drive, even if it all goes well. So, there's not really a financial return, but there's a huge return on quality of life. And we've started to put value on that.

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MS: Oh, that's great advice for our listeners, absolutely.

BC: I think because we're starting out, it's really hard to put yourself above your own economics. Because if you end up going bankrupt in five years, you're afraid you're going to look back and say, oh, we shouldn't have spent money on that. Instead of buying an auger, we could have just shovelled that grain. Or whatever thing you're doing that you could have just muscled through or put your head down and powered through. Lots of times in farming, we evaluate return on investment, and how much money we're going to make per year, per month, or per hour doing a certain job. People are really for that. But the thing that I realised this year was, we don't really compare, and evaluate, and take pride in the return on investment to our personal satisfaction and quality of life. You only get to live once, and there's a lot of value in quality of life, and in your marriage, and the quality of marriage.

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MS: So, speaking of marriage, I asked Ben to share some advice with other producers his age. And he shared some of his actions a couple should consider, based on him and Steph's experience. He makes a very obvious and practical case that stuck with me. I never thought of it the way he has.

BC: One of the things that my wife and I did over the last couple of years that's been really valuable is see a marriage counsellor. Now, that sounds like a funny thing to bring up in an agricultural discussion. But the person that we talked to, he actually does business team building and business work. And he told us that the stage of life that we're at, in our mid-30s, starting a new business with young kids, is the most challenging time of your life. Which just hearing that, in and of itself, was such a relief. Because every year has been getting progressively more difficult as we take on more and more, and we have kids, and our plates get more full, but there's never more time in a day. And it's not like our lives were going badly, but we both recognized that the skill required to be successful at this stage of life ... and when I successful, I don't just mean successful at raising kids, or successful at having a good ranch, or successful in our marriage, but successful at all three of those things simultaneously. And not saying, well, we'll let our marriage suffer for 10 years while we get our kids out of their early years. Or we're not going to let our kids suffer while we get our business off the ground. To do all those things at the same time is really, really difficult. So, I said to her, we've got a bunch of yearlings, several hundred, and one dies, I don't go lie on the floor and mope around. I say, in my financial

projections, I project up to 1% of them dying every year, and if that happens, that's just part of the projections. And if they don't, then that's all bonus money. So, let's say a yearling is worth \$1,800. Why can't we spend \$1,800 this year on marriage counselling, and really learn a bunch of skills that'll help us with all these new challenges that we're meeting? And so, that's what we did. We went and spent some money and set time aside, no matter how busy we are, to work on our relationship. And I can't tell you how valuable that's been. That's probably been the best advice that I could give anyone else that's young, at this stage of life, and I don't know, maybe people that are older too is, when you're going to go climb a mountain, you prepare for that by exercising. You might go get certain equipment, or learn certain skills for ice climbing, or repelling, or whatever. And so, we're entering a new stage of life that's very different and difficult compared to before, so let's spend some time acquiring some skills and tools so that we can be successful at that.

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MS: Yeah, I think that's brilliant. I see lots of parallels about the continuous education, and why wouldn't we look at our marriage with that same lens of objectivity as well as humility, that we would be willing to get some coaching?

BC: Yeah.

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MS: After the break, Ben and I get into benchmarking. And how does he decide if something is economically viable and whether he even wants to continue with it? How does he decide something's not worth it? We'll find out after this. Up next ...

BC: Probably the most comical part was, I flipped off the snow with a middle finger. Me, standing in the middle of the field, and I told the snow to F off. I was sick of it. It just was a disaster.

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MS: Do you love listening along to these conversations? Maybe you know somebody who would be a great story for our FCC Knowledge Podcast. Feel free to nominate these folks and send us a direct message through one of our FCC social media channels. We'd be happy to hear from you. And if you're looking for more learning and think you have some extra time this winter, check out our FCC virtual events. We have events from money management, to will and estate planning, data integration, and more. All from the comfort of your home. We'll sell you the whole seat, but you only need the edge. Actually, they're free. We actually don't charge for them, but they're pretty cool, so check us out.

I want to shift gears a little bit. And as an engineer, I don't know if you were a number guy to start with, or you go to school and you learn to measure. But it does strike me, in all the moving parts in your business, you're measuring lots of stuff. I'm curious if you're

benchmarking against things. Am I making enough money? How do you square the circle on the economic viability of any one of these enterprises you've touched?

BC: That's a really good question. My initial benchmark for any of these is, if I'm getting paid less than anyone else would be willing to be paid to do the same job, then that job is a failure. So, for example, if I make \$35.00 an hour for my cattle, then would I be able to say, look, I want to step away from that? If I can't even pay someone \$35.00 an hour to do what I'm doing, as a minimum, I can't find someone that would even be willing to do that, then that means that that job isn't good. Now, a good thing is if I could pay someone \$20.00 an hour, and then I get to keep the \$15.00, that gives me my hours back in life to go spend on something else, on another project, or with my wife and kids, or whatever I want to do. So, the initial benchmark is, what would I pay someone to do that? And then I compare about other things, and jobs that I've had in the past, and what I need, how much money I need. It's all well and good if I'm doing a job that you could pay someone \$15.00 an hour to do, and I make \$17.00. Well, that meets my minimum criteria sort of, but that doesn't pay the bills. And that's the other thing, is that I need to make enough income to pay the bills and to have money for growth and extras.

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MS: Let me make sure I understand you right. So, you actually ... your common denominator is the dollars per hour that I extracted for that effort?

BC: Yes. That's the way that I understand it. And I'm open to being wrong. I'm open to hearing other ways of doing it, but the way that I do it is dollars per hour. And then I look at everything I do, and I say, well, if I want to, I could step away from this whole business and pay someone dollars an hour to do all these jobs. Maybe I have to stay and manage it, but I'm sure you could hire a manager. If your business can't run without you personally there all the time, it's likely not a viable business. My common denominator is, I bought this ranch, I started this business. If I can't say, I want to take a year off, I'm going to pay someone to do all the jobs, and I'm still going to pay the mortgage, I'm still going to make money, the businesses will all still be profitable, at least that to me allows me an exit strategy, or an understanding that what I'm doing is right.

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MS: Well, what I like about it is the simplicity of the metric. So, you take the cloud and the complexity out of it by saying, I'm just going to use that as my metric. To your point, right or wrong, it's your metric. And so, other people, I remember I was in the hog industry in early 2000s in Manitoba when the pig barns were closing. And one of the group in this industry meeting said, you've got to be really big because if you're going to go down, the bank's in really deep with you and they're the last person ... you get to stay the longest because the bank can't afford to have you close. So, their measure was really against, produce pigs as cheap as you can, and get as big as you can, and then too big to fail. Clearly, we know how that storybook ends. We read about that all the time. But I think the wisdom at what you've done here is this simple metric that you can come back to

and say, \$17.00 is my number, and if I can't achieve that, then I'm going to get out of chickens. Where it's conflicting for me, if I was listening to this, I would say, but wait a minute. You're an engineer, and you can make \$150,000 a year and have someone run your entire farm. So, what do you say to that guy?

BC: Well, I do make quite a bit more than the \$17.00. Like I said, there is another metric of, I need to be able to pay the bills. So, that's one of the factors for me is that, if I won the lottery, I would do almost all the exact same things that I'm doing now because I really enjoy them and I like the challenge of them. Engineering, you literally couldn't pay me \$1 million a year to be an engineer and live in Calgary, and be in the office 60 hours a week, and live. You couldn't give me a nice enough house that that would make any sense to me, because I don't even spend my days indoors because I don't want to. What makes me happiest in life, and what connects me most to my true self, is playing with my kids on the pond in our canoe. Going for a horse ride at 8:00 at night with the cows when they are all satisfied, and they're curious, and fun, and the air is still, and the sun is low, and the colours are beautiful. Checking fields and seeing the way the grass looks, and being proud of how it used to look and how I've improved it. Spending time with my wife, going for a horse ride, and just looking at our life and what we've done. And working cows successfully with my wife, and sorting cattle, and it actually going well, and us getting along for that where it's really emotionally challenging to do. So, if I can do that and I'm making money while I'm doing that, that's good enough for me.

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MS: I see that same response in the greenhouse grower in Ontario that walks in and smells the tomatoes. I see it from the hog farmer in Manitoba that looks out over his group of sows with a sense of pride. And so, if you've got your version of it with your cattle, I see it in every sector of our industry. And I think that's a pretty cool thing about Canadian agriculture.

BC: I knew that being a construction engineer wasn't right for me because I could see that pride in their job for a lot of my co-workers who loved their job. And they didn't care about staying late after work, and they didn't care about their exact pay. They had photos in their house of construction equipment, and they were proud of what they were doing, and they loved what they were doing. I physically cannot fake it enough to do my best at something that I'm not enjoying. And I think, and I'm probably not the only one that is incapable of doing a really, really top-notch job if you don't like what you're doing.

0:32:01.2

MS: Yeah, great point. Another thing we've talked about in the past, it's about mentorship. So, you would say, you've been in the cattle business a little while, I think you've done a great job forming relationships. How did you break into those circles and be heard? We've got lots of people that want to get into agriculture, not sure how. Some might even be listening to this podcast. How did you use mentors? How did you break into this circle?

BC: It was with great difficulty. I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know anybody at all. I literally didn't have one friend that was in the cattle business that was a close friend of mine that I could call or send a text to. I didn't know the terminology, what a heiferette was, or anything about aging. I literally knew nothing. And so, I started by Google. I bought Raising Cattle for Dummies, the Dummies series of books.

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MS: There's actually a book like that?

BC: Yeah, yeah, it's on my shelf here, in the library in my house. I failed Calculus in university, and I bought Calculus for Dummies, and I am an engineer. And shamelessly, I bought it. I don't care. I'd rather pass the course than not. But I bought, Producing or Raising Beef Cattle for Dummies, and I bought every book you could that was like that. And I googled everything that you could google. All the free stuff. The Alberta Government, the Department of Agriculture from Alberta and from Manitoba were really helpful for me. There was stuff about rotational grazing, and bale grazing, and swath grazing, and different options for winter water for cows, in pastures. And I just went down a rabbit hole.

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MS: It really becomes clear to me as I chatted with Ben, he's a lifelong learner, and he believes in continuous education. You can see it in how he manages his life, his business, and his marriage. It's pretty obvious during our chat that he sees value in all learning, including his engineering degree. Which at first glance, folks might think, that's not even applicable to ranching.

BC: When people say, you got an engineering degree and it was a total waste of time because now you're a farmer, that just shows how little they know about engineering and education. And this would be true for any kind of education that someone has is, it's not about a linear thing of learning one thing so that you can do that direct task. Because anyone that's trained in, that is a plumber and they went to school in the 70s, is obviously learning and doing new and different things now. So, my engineering degree was a degree in learning, and a degree in critical thinking and problem solving. You couldn't say more of what it takes to be a successful person in agriculture than to be critical thinking, quick to learn, and a problem solver.

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MS: So yeah, that foundation, I'm totally with you about that. The critical thinking, like you said, and a lifelong learner. How did you break into the cowboys' club?

BC: I started, when I wanted to buy cattle, I googled the Alberta Angus Producers' Directory, and then I started cold calling people in my area and said, do you have cattle I can buy? And I phoned a guy named Stephen Hughes and he said, no, I don't have any, but you can

try this other guy, Alex Robertson. And he is part of a forage association in my area that does research and extension. They don't graze cattle or anything, they're just an education group run by producers for producers. And they said, yeah, come out to one of our meetings. So, I went out to their meeting and I didn't know anybody there. And I just sort of slunk in like the nerdy kid in high school to a circle of friends. And these guys are like lifelong friends, they've known each other for decades. And someone makes a joke, and they're all laughing, and then I start laughing, even though I didn't hear the joke or understand the punch line. And they look, like, who's this kid standing here pretending he's part of our circle of friends? But they're all so welcoming. I can't emphasize enough how welcoming the agriculture community has been to me. And everything started snowballing. If you show that you are interested and willing to learn, and also that you're willing to work, I think a lot of people will be happy to help you. And I told someone I was really happy to have them as a mentor, and they told me that for every student wanting a mentor, there's a mentor wanting a student. I didn't realize that. I thought everyone was doing me a favour, and they were. But people got something out of it themselves too.

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MS: Ben didn't just attend meetings or find a mentor, he went all in on getting into the industry. He shared some examples of steps he took to learn more and get to know more people. It's quite an impressive list.

BC: And so, I joined my local forage extension group. There are forage extensions groups across the entire province of Alberta, and I'm sure there are in other provinces. I went to every event they held for a month. And then I joined the Cattlemen's Young Leaders Program which is put on through the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. And then I joined the Young Cattlemen's Council. I really just said yes to every opportunity and did everything that I could possibly do. And I was gone out of town, at conferences and seminars and meetings, at least once a month for well over a year. And I probably spent \$10,000 over the course of two years taking courses. I drove to Idaho, and took a four-day grazing school, I flew to South Dakota and took a ranching for profit course.

0:37:16.1

MS: So, he joined groups, attended events, and took classes. He also reached out to folks directly to learn more from their experiences.

BC: Dylan and Colleen Biggs who run TK Ranch in Alberta, it's probably the largest direct marketing ranch in Alberta. Very kind people. I cold called them. I'd looked up their website and phoned them and said, I want to learn. And they said yeah, sure, come on by. And I went and stayed at their house for several days in a row, many, many times. And they just took me around and showed me everything they knew. Even though they were essentially cultivating competition for one of their markets, they actually believe in what they say, that they're trying to have a vibrant, agricultural food community in Alberta. And it's not just about them, it's actually about creating that community. So, I've had so many people help me so, so deeply.

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MS: So, what advice do you have for that up and comer in the industry, the person that says, well, I'm from Watrous, Saskatchewan, or Vita, Manitoba, or somewhere in rural Quebec, I need a mentor. What advice do you give them?

BC: Try things and if it doesn't work, keep trying new things. I would look for some sort of research and extension agency in your own province that holds events, and just start attending those events. And when you attend those kinds of events, I've found that those kinds of people were really good for mentoring me, the other people that have attended those events, because they're also willing to try new things and learn and grow. That's one thing I would do. The Cattlemen's Young Leaders Program is an across the country program for people, I think it's under the age of 40, or under 35, and they pair you up with a mentor for an entire year. So, that's a really fantastic opportunity.

0:39:03.2

MS: And there's other farm groups too that have mentorship opportunities and programs, the formal side, so great advice, great advice. Okay, we're kind of nearing the end. I've got a couple other anchor questions I love to ask. So, it's self-evident that you like to try things. Not everything works. What's your biggest fail? Our listeners love to hear when somebody steps on a rake on an idea they had. What's the one thing that you're embarrassed about, but publicly proud that you took a risk?

BC: The scary answer to that is I am trying so many different things right now that the jury is still out on that you may be better off to ask me that in five years when I know. We bought a ranch for \$1 million a quarter. We've only bought two quarters of it, but it's a pretty substantial investment for that small of acres. We're in direct marketing which I think has been successful, but we've also stepped into commodity cattle. And I'm yet to have been seriously burned, but everyone tells me that I'm going to be burned one day. So, I put myself out there to have a lot of failures. So far, the biggest failure I would say ...

0:40:13.2

MS: I love that Ben was willing to share this next story with me. I think all producers, entrepreneurs of any kind, we all have those days where you feel a knot in your stomach when you look back at them. Even when you know you learned a lot, the feeling is so easy to recall. Sometimes you don't talk about those times. Maybe we're too proud or embarrassed, or just too far past them, or too busy. But the fact that we have rough winters or rough seasons, it really does connect us all.

BC: Yeah, the biggest failure I've had so far was, I set up bales for bale grazing. And I hesitate to tell this story because I am a big advocate of bale grazing for people because I think it's a really easy first step from conventional agriculture of rolling out bales of hay for cow/calf producers every winter to bale grazing. It's a really easy step to take, and I think

a financially good step. But my dad and his brother sold their entire cow herd, and I bought all the bales that they had left over that year, which was, I don't know, a couple hundred bales, 300 bales or 400 bales, or something. And we had them all set out, and it was a really, really cold, really snowy winter. And we live in Chinook central, in the foothills of Alberta. We never get standing snow here all winter. It always melts off, and we always have a nice warm winter, at least for portions. And this winter it didn't happen. It was two-and-a-half feet of snow. No one even owns a snowmobile here because there's no point because there's never enough snow to ride one. And we couldn't get anywhere in the fields, and the local elk were starving. And every single night the elk were coming into the bales and eating two or three bales. And I had just paid \$100.00 a bale. And I'm in my 20s, I don't make that much money at the time, and to lose \$300.00 a day is a pretty substantial loss, with no end in sight. I tried everything, Mr. animal lover, natural guy. I went and got pig livers from the butcher and I was putting pig liver everywhere. But it was minus 27 every day, so the pig livers froze rock solid. And someone said, well, you need to make it smell like a farmyard. So, I got a bit of gas and I dumped it all around the perimeter. But there's two feet of snow, just sunk straight in. And I'm just literally yelling and screaming at elk. And my wife said I was like Moby Dick and the white whale. I was just obsessed with these elks, trying to chase them away. It was a nightmare. I got my truck and I parked it right in the centre. I had the Hobbit audiobook on a speaker blaring loud, so it sounded like someone was talking. And I put blinky lights from bicycles in the truck. And I bought two cans of Axe Body Spray, which I don't use, that stinky deodorant. But I sprayed my entire truck with it, and then I sprayed a bunch of hay bales, so the place smelled like people, it sounded like people, there was a truck, there was blinky lights. And I go out there at 7:00 at night and it's pitch black and I see nothing, and I think, there. Every time I did something, I said to myself, there, that'll do it. And every time it was a failure. Right at 11:00 at night I said, I'm going to go check one more time before I go to bed. And Steph says, don't Ben, don't. Because it doesn't matter if they're there or not, just go to bed. I went at 11:00 and I just see hundreds of eyes in these bales, and I lose my mind, and I'm running out there. It was a story, like from a book. The bottom of the quad stuffed with snow, the carburetor froze open, all the fuel leaked out of it, and I walked home uphill a mile, in a snowstorm, in minus 27, in two feet of snow. It was an absolute disaster.

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MS: You would think that all that standing snow, and the subsequent, I'll call it the elk issue, would be a tough enough winter, especially combined with the freezing temps. But Ben was a really busy guy that season. He had a lot of irons in the fire.

BC: Finally, the elk left. I think it was just because it warmed up a little bit. This was the year I bought 400 yearlings. I was also managing another herd of 150 head of cows for someone. So, I was calving in brutal, deep snow conditions, and getting a load of yearlings every seven days which don't know what electric fence is. And you need electric fence for bale grazing. So, every seven days, a new load of cattle, they'd break through the electric fence. I started with one wire, then I had two, then I had three, and I doubled the posts. And they'd break through the wire, and you're trying to take the wire down, and

chase them out, and put the wire back up. But it's not on, and they get through it. And the dog can't run through the snow, and I can't run through the snow. I felt like I was dying in quicksand. I fainted one day because I was running all day and hadn't taken a break. Like, literally, since I woke up, I hadn't taken a drink of water or eaten a drop of food, and I was running in snow and yelling. Probably the most comical part was I flipped off the snow with a middle finger. Me, standing in the middle of the field, and I told the snow to F off. I was sick of it. It just was a disaster, the whole thing. And after a month of owning all these yearlings and feeding them all this expensive hay that the elk had eaten, the price of them had gone down. And so, had I just waited a month and bought them one month later, I would have bought the whole herd for \$30,000 less. So, essentially, I paid \$30,000 to nearly kill myself with all this stuff.

0:45:14.1

MS: I wish there was a Governor General's award for best story about an agriculture wreck, because you're winning right now. That's a beauty. That's a page-turner.

BC: Yeah, that was really an epic saga. The elk-chasing disaster started in early February, and by mid-late April, I was walking through the field. I sat on the ground and I just wept. I was just overwhelmed. I thought, I can't take it anymore. I was losing weight, and so stressed, and I was so mentally and physically worn out, I just broke down and sat. I just cried for about five minutes in the field and then pulled myself back up and put myself together and kept going. And it all turned out well, and it was a fantastic year financially. And after all the snow melted, it was a really great year. But man, that was really a challenge of testing if I wanted to be a farmer or not.

0:46:05.2

MS: I wish you could have seen the look on my face as you were telling your story about giving the finger to the snow, and the elk. That's a beauty. So, my last question, this is my favourite one that I love to ask people. And I always think about, as we get older, we learn from our mistakes and build on it, and I always love the question about, what would you tell your 20-year-old self? Knowing what you know today, what would you tell your 20-year-old self?

BC: Nothing. It was such an adventure, I wouldn't want to spoil any of the fun. I'm very pleased with everything I did because I didn't chase money. I don't know. The only real advice I would say is be kinder to your family because that's ... yeah, that's the advice I would tell myself. But I would say be nicer to your family because when you get stressed in farming. Man, I'm not really that easy to stress out, but farming really gets me sometimes. It's really hard to stay calm. And so, being kind to your family who's always there to support you and help you when you're in the middle of a field broken down in mud or snow, or when everything turns to crap, the people that bail you out are your family or your closest friends. And those are the easiest people to take for granted. So, I would say that's the advice I would give myself.

0:47:28.1

MS: Yeah, that's very wise. I was thinking about the old adage, if you can sort cattle with your family, or if you can run the gates separating those heiferettes by colour in a Black Angus herd, you know you love your family. So, that's great advice. Any other closing thoughts?

BC: No. We could talk all day on all sorts of different stuff, but yeah, that's probably enough tangent.

0:47:50.4

MS: Well, thanks for your openness and your transparency. You're just an outstanding chat. I'm really glad that it's worked out today, Ben. Yeah, shout out to you for your resiliency too. I was thinking about the image of you sitting there on the ground crying, and there's an old runners' quote that I like, and it's really kind of a reflection of our life. And it's, most people never run long enough to see how far they can go. And I use that a lot on these kinds of scenarios, because it's easy to quit. You could have quit that day and went back to town and got a job, right? And so yeah, I think you should be proud. You should be really proud.

BC: Thanks. Thank, Marty, yeah. I think I am. It seems to be going well. I don't know, maybe I'm just lucky.

0:48:26.5

MS: An old rodeo phrase I use is, winners are lucky, just ask any loser.

BC: That's great. You've got a lot of good ones.

0:48:39.1

MS: Oh yeah, I'm the one-liner king. All right, and I'm going to let you go. Thanks for making space for me today, though. Always a pleasure. And hopefully we can get some industry stuff going again, and maybe I can shake your hand in person.

BC: Yeah, that would be wonderful. I'd love that. Thanks for inviting me. This was really fun for me.

0:48:52.7

MS: All right, awesome. Enjoy the day, Ben.

BC: Yeah, you too Marty.

0:48:55.4

MS: As you heard, Ben was wise beyond his years. Despite the somewhat recent entry into the cattle business, he forged his way up and made a ton of great connections in the industry. A few things from our conversation really stood out for me today. First thing, keep learning. Informal, formal, mentorships, even marriage counselling, whatever it is, find something that works for you and invest in it. Take time. Technically speaking, listening to this podcast could be considered a form of growing your knowledge and learning, so you're already on the right track. Next, benchmark. Use it to gauge your success. Take Ben's experience in determining the dollars per hour that he needed to extract for his effort. You could always pay someone else to do that task if you needed, but you've got to know what that number is before you start. Ben and Stephanie decide what things they'll continue to do, and what things they'll stop doing, based on their benchmarking dollars per hour. Thirdly, don't be afraid to try new things and fail, but also don't hold onto something that isn't working. Benchmarking and knowing what your values are will help you drive success, and it creates guideposts. That's how you know when to start and stop. I think number four, and the big takeaway from me about Ben, is that rough times suck. They just do. And for all of us in agricultural, they're going to be familiar, and we need to learn from them. We need to grow, and we need to become resilient. And just know that you're not in this alone. Whether it's your spouse or your family, there's always someone you can turn to for guidance. Because in the end, what's most important to all of us is that we dream, grow, and thrive.

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