

Settled in

BY SIERRA BLACHFORD

A tale of endless chores, a blizzard, some baking gone wrong, and a new life on the Northern Plains

South Dakota



The calf pens in warmer weather.



M

y husband, John Blachford, grew up farming in South Dakota. I was raised in central Missouri caring for Charolais cows, stocker calves and working in the back of our livestock auc-

tions. We met in 2010 when I was working as a marketing intern for Land O' Lakes in South Dakota. That summer I lived with Arnold and Carol Wienk, of Wienk Charolais, and their family introduced me to John. We started going to street dances and checking his cows in the summer pastures.

In the fall, this led to a long-distance relationship when it was time for me to go back to college at the University of Missouri. For several years, we wore out I-29 traveling to visit one another while I finished school.

Eventually, we got engaged and I finally finished my degree. I graduated on December 15th, 2012, and moved to a house in town in South Dakota on January 1st, 2013. We were tired of long-distance phone calls!

I kept the 12-day journal in February shortly after I moved. It was a busy time on the farm and an exciting period of wedding planning activities, too. I also experienced one of my first South Dakota blizzards. We enjoyed an Americana-themed wedding this past year over the 4th of July weekend near my hometown in Missouri.

Now, we are back in South Dakota enjoying "married life". John's family has farmed near the town of De Smet for three generations. During that time, the family has transitioned their operation from dairy to beef. They also raise corn, beans, wheat and alfalfa. John worked to improve their commercial Angus herd through the introduction of AI. John is the current president of the Kingsbury County Cattlemen's Association.

We live on John's grandfather's farm in an old farmhouse. John's grandpa purchased this land in 1944 while he was living in Baltimore serving in the military. This quarter was originally homesteaded by Amos and Alzina Whiting. Amos was one of the first white residents to settle in the area. In Little Town on the Prairie (one of the 'Little House' series), Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote, "[Pa] must go to the meeting of the county commissioners. The country was settling so rapidly that already a county was being organized, and Pa must help... the meeting was to be held at Whiting's homestead claim". On February 18th, 1880, the first recorded meeting of the County Commissioners was held in Amos Whiting's home on this land. I am working with the historical society to determine if we are living in the same house today.

I am adjusting quickly to life in South Dakota. I write part-time for SDSU Extension, newspapers, and on my blog at www.sierrashea.com. Every week I write a "Farmin' Friday" post to share our workweek caring for cattle and raising crops.



Rancher's Journal



12 DAY JOURNAL OF SIERRA BLACHFORD

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2013

Today we hauled the calves to the livestock market in Madison. Before we hauled them, John and Ron picked out 17 to keep as replacements. It's Super Bowl Sunday and the game started at 5:30 p.m., but we were still hauling cattle at that time. John and his dad, Ron, both used their DVR's so they can still watch the game after they finish with the calves.

The calves did not want to come off the pot at the sale barn, so John went in to get them. He got all the calves off the trailer, but got covered in cow poop in the process. Since he was very dirty, I went into McDonald's and ordered our super bowl supper 'to go'.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 4

John, Ron, Monica (John's step mom) and I went to the sale to watch the calves sell at noon. Monica brought a tape recorder and videoed each draft as they sold. Grandpa Bob (John's grandfather) is in the nursing home but he keeps up with the farm and cattle. He will enjoy watching Monica's recording. A man bought some of the heifers for replacements, which made Ron and John proud. They talked with the buyer after the sale and learned that he had also purchased their heifers two years ago.

When we got back from the sale, John did the evening chores and then



Sierra is working with the local historical society to find out if their farm house might be the original home of Amos Whiting, as mentioned in Laura Ingalls Wilder's book *Little Town on the Prairie*.

we ordered a pizza from the café to celebrate the big day. This is the second time I've gotten to watch the calves sell. A few years ago, I missed a day of class to stay for the sale. It was worth it!

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 5

I substitute taught at the school in De Smet for math today. During one of my breaks, I figured up some of the bookkeeping on the calves. Ron calculated the rate of gain on both the heifers and the steers. I will substitute each day until next Tuesday. I hope the kids don't have too many ques-

tions; it has been a long time since I did the quadratic formula.

Ron used the dozer to move some snow that drifted into a pen. John is taking care of some Charolais cattle for a neighbor who is on vacation this week, so he did those chores for the first time in the afternoon. He also took the check to the bank in town for the calves. He called the vet about getting the replacement heifers pelvic measured and bangs vaccinated. The vet happened to have an opening that afternoon, so the vet came out within a few hours.



John choring on the home place.

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After a long distance romance that burned up a lot of fuel on I-29, Sierra and John were married this past July 5th in an Americana-themed wedding near her Missouri hometown.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 6

Today, Monica drove Ron to Huron to pick up a tractor that was being repaired. It is about a forty-mile drive so it took him a few hours to get home. It was less expensive than paying to haul it and I think Ron enjoyed the scenery. John did chores. They take quite a bit less time now that the calves are all gone. He moved the replacement heifers to a different pen and started cleaning out the bedding and manure to get ready for calving.

When Ron got back to the farm in the tractor, he started hauling out the manure that John had piled. He spread

it in a field that will be planted to corn this spring. John also did the neighbor's chores again. After I finished subbing, I went to the tuxedo store to see about renting tuxes for our wedding this summer. It's very hard to pick between all of the choices because they all look nice. Then, I started a load of laundry and rode with John to feed the cows their nightly bale of hay.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7

Today, John and Ron finished scraping and hauling the manure out of the heifer pen. John moved the replacement heifers to the larger pen now

that the feeder calves are gone. John did chores for the neighbor, which took about three hours.

I substituted again and during my break I worked on tracking down some addresses for our guest list. That's probably my least favorite "wedding planning" task. John and his Mom are having a meeting this evening with an insurance man. I made a new 3-bean chili recipe that I found on a blog, went to the gym, and talked to a friend from college for the first time in a few weeks. It was a nice, quiet day. Yet, John always misses the calves the first few days after they are sold. After looking at them and caring for them every day for nearly a year, it is strange with the calves being gone from the yard.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8

John did his regular chores and then hustled around to do the neighbor's again, too. I subbed and felt sorry for him, because it was awfully windy and chilly outside. I am not used to the South Dakota wind and snow... yet. After school, I went to check a set of heifers for another set of our neighbors who live south of town. They were at a bull sale longer than they planned, so they asked John if I could stop by on my way to my house in town. All the heifers were fine, I did not find any new babies.

There is a blizzard warning in effect for most of South Dakota for the coming weekend, so everyone is hustling

Cows out on cornstalks.



Sierra behind the wheel.



around to get ready for it. I need to go to the store and get milk. John has requested more Sun Chips and M&M's for his house at the farm. So much for healthy snacks! John breeds cows at a dairy every evening, but today he went early so we could go over to Minnesota to a big gun shop with our friend Lance. We have been talking about going since June, but haven't taken the time. Lance said this trip was the first time he had been out of state in three years. It's the first time I've been out of state in about a week, since I just got back from Missouri a few days before we sold the calves. Our trip to the gun shop was fun and I was surprised at the huge selection.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 9

Everyone is in full blizzard preparation mode now. I am not used to these activities, we don't get this much snow in Missouri! John put all the equipment he could under the pole shed so it would not get covered in snow. I am going to the grocery store for more essentials and then helping him feed

the neighbor's cows. I am glad we went on our little outing to the gun shop last night. I hope it will keep me from getting stir crazy when the snow and wind hit. This will be my first official blizzard since I moved here. I'm nervous! John's Mom stopped by to look at my new couch; she said they have already postponed the Ludefest supper (a traditional Norwegian meal) until next Sunday on account of the blizzard. They may cancel church, too.

I spent all morning tracking down addresses for the wedding online. I helped John with the neighbor's chores; I opened gates for him and took a cornstalk bale down to the cows. Mostly I just waited around on him to fill up the feed wagon, but he said it was helpful and saved him time. While I waited I wrote a funny, little poem about how I dislike this brown, muddy time of year.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10

They canceled church and I think they will probably call off school tomorrow; we have gotten several

inches of snow so far. I can never remember canceling church in Missouri. We even went to a country church, too. John is coming to get me from my house in town in a few minutes. I think it will be best if he shows me how to drive in the snow before I venture out on my own. Then, we are going together to feed the neighbor's cows. I will get the job of shoveling snow out of the feed bunks. We don't have to do that very often in Missouri! At least I will get a little exercise.

They keep talking on the Weather Channel about the wind coming up out of the east this afternoon. John explained to me that this is bad because farms around here generally don't have any protection from blowing snow from that direction. All the shelterbelts are planted to protect from the wind blowing in other directions. An east wind puts snowdrifts in funny and inconvenient places on all the farms. John talks more about the wind than any person I've ever met. He's always talking about how "the wind switched" and this or that happened

because of it. I guess all South Dakotans pay attention to the wind; there sure is a lot of it here. I don't mind the wind, makes me feel small and humble against nature's power. It's a good reminder of my real ranking on the food chain. We may be high up on there, but Mother Nature still wins.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11

Today was the big blizzard, which turned out to be not so bad after all. The wind blew during the night, so we did not have to work outside in it. The school did have a snow day, so I helped John feed instead. Snow does make for a lot of extra work, pushing it from the yards and shoveling it from the bunks are two time consuming tasks. John pushed snow for an hour and a half in the morning and then Ron did all afternoon. I helped John do the chores for the neighbors, we bedded their bulls and moved snow there, too. It was a good thing I went along again, I kept very busy this time.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12

Today is my last planned day of subbing for a week or so. I really enjoyed



Sierra and John Blachford enjoying the snowy weather.

getting to know all the kids. I am subbing while I look for a job here in South Dakota. John was busy again all day; today was the last time he did chores for the neighbor. They are back from their trip now and he is glad to get back to his regular schedule.

John came to my house for supper and I fixed meatballs, sweet corn and potatoes. We both thought it was my best effort yet as a fairly new cook. I was feeling brave so I tried to make meringue cookies and I majorly failed. They wouldn't stiffen after twenty minutes of blending so I had to throw them out.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13

I had an interview for a position with SDSU Extension today in Brookings. I really hope I get the job, the project is writing about farmer's markets. After the interview, I went to a flea market and got a dresser and two end tables for my house. It takes a lot of furniture to fill up a home.

When I got back, John had sorted off all the first calf heifers that are going to start calving soon. We gave them their second round of scour guard shots and then he gave them a bale of hay and went to feed the cows. He breeds the

dairy cows tonight at 5:30 instead of 7:00, so we are going to go to the gym in De Smet afterwards. We always have to plan our dates, meals and events around his schedule at the dairy.

After I helped John, I came back to town and called the graphic designer to discuss our wedding invitations. She does good work! I am looking forward to getting the proofs in a few days.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14

John and I had an exciting day. At 10:30 a.m. I met him at the farm and we left to go to a bull sale north of De Smet. We were at the sale until about 4:30 p.m. Since I was cold all day, I went home and took a hot shower. Then, I fell asleep on the couch. My mother always said the cold just sucks the energy right out of you!

The bar in Lake Preston has started serving meals occasionally. We met a few other couples for a prime rib supper! It is John's favorite meal. It was very nice to sit and visit for a couple hours.

Thanks for reading about some of my first days in South Dakota with John! I am proud to say I survived the winter. We are happy to be married now and are enjoying working and writing together on the farm. **WR**

An advertisement for Wrangler jeans and shirts. It features a photo of a person wearing blue jeans. The text reads: "SEND US YOUR 12-DAY JOURNAL AND THE FAMILY CAN BE OUTFITTED IN WRANGLER JEANS AND SHIRTS! FREE! We're looking for down-home folks like yourselves to share your daily ranch life with the rest of us. It's fun to do. Plus, each member of the family gets a pair of jeans & a shirt from the good folks at Wrangler. LONG LIVE COWBOYS." The Wrangler logo is at the bottom.