

Boot Life: A singular Sandhills store keeps on dressing cowboys in the age of Amazon

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AINSWORTH – Mort McBride was walking down Main Street when a man stopped him with a question.

“Is there a place to buy a decent pair of boots in this town?”

McBride was standing in front of a building he’d recently bought. It was 1959, and he knew he wanted to start his own business. He just didn’t know what kind of business, until he answered the question.

“Well, there will be shortly,” he said to the man on the street.

And Ranch-Land Western Store was born.

“They started the store on a wish and a prayer, was all it was,” Mort’s son – and now Ranch-Land’s owner – Joe McBride said.

Three generations of the McBride family have helped outfit customers from near and far in boots and hats through Ranch-Land’s 64 years of business.

Tucked away in the Sandhills, the store is filled to the brim with history and memories. It has survived a fire that threatened its existence; booms and busts in the cattle market; the economic strain of a global pandemic.

Now, Ranch-Land is finding its footing in the 21st-century world of on-line shopping and big box stores – and betting that its personal touch and rich history will keep hold of loyal longtime customers while reeling in new ones, too.

Shortly after Mort McBride and his wife Louise started selling western wear to the people of Ainsworth, they

moved Ranch-Land across the street to a bigger, four-floor building with its own decades-long history. Before it was Ranch-Land, the building was a JCPenney. Before that, a combination hardware store and mortuary.

The basement that once stored the embalmed bodies of Ainsworth’s recently deceased is now a workshop where the McBrides craft leather goods and turquoise jewelry. Ranch-Land fills the top three floors with western wear that people travel hundreds of miles to get to, Joe McBride said.

A clanking cowbell announces entering customers. Above the door, a portrait of Mort and Louise watches over perusing shoppers.

“The best damn western store in these parts,” a hand-painted sign next to the photo declares.

To the left, there’s a wall of boots in a rainbow of colors and a menagerie of leathers – boots made from conventional animals like bison, wild boar and alligators, and more exotic creatures. Ostrich, shark, elephant and hippo, even capybara.

Straw and felt hats are stacked on the opposite wall, with perfectly domed crowns and flat brims that get hand-shaped by Joe McBride.

Joe McBride has been a fixture at the store almost literally since the day he was born – Mort and Louise took baby Joe to the store on their way home from his hospital delivery in 1965.

“I guess it was determined that I was probably going to be a part of this place,” he said.

He and his sisters grew up here, napping on saddle blankets underneath leather saddles, and help-



From left, Joe McBride, Lori McBride and their daughter Rhe’Ann McBride. Rhe’Ann is the third generation of the family to work at Ranch-Land Western Store. “(My parents) wanted us to find our own passions ... that we loved as much as my dad and my granddad loved the store,” she said. “It just so happened that I found that love, too.” Photo by Haley Miles for the Flatwater Free Press

ing their dad run the ancient hand-crank cash register.

By 12, Joe McBride was on the payroll, learning how to fit boots and shape hats with steam and his two hands. He shaped his first hat on that first official day of work. By lunch, he’d sold it off his head. It wouldn’t be the last time Joe McBride would sell the hat off his head or the boots off his feet.

When he was in college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Mort called with a proposition: “I have a man here that wants to buy the store. But I’d rather offer it to you first.”

“I thought about it for about 30 seconds. ‘You know, that’s probably

what I need to do in my life,’” Joe McBride said.

He took over in 1988 and modernized the store. He introduced new styles of shirts. He retired the hand-crank adding machine and bought an actual calculator he taught his father to use. He kept the old cash register until it broke beyond repair.

The store chugged through as the ranchers and farmers of the Sandhills clawed their way out of the farm crisis of the ’80s. Joe and his wife Lori’s kids grew up helping count cash behind the counter and fitting customers with boots. As other western stores throughout the Great Plains closed, Ranch-Land’s clientele started to

travel from farther and farther away.

“Used to be every little town had a western store,” Joe McBride said. “We’ve persevered longer than most of them.”

Then a fire nearly closed Ranch-Land for good – but helped convince a third-generation McBride, Joe’s daughter Rhe’Ann McBride, to join the family business that neither father nor daughter ever thought she’d join.

The 2017 fire started on Christmas night in the alley behind the store. It spared the building itself, but the smoke and soot destroyed all four floors of inventory – thousands of boots, hundreds of hats and racks of clothes the McBrides had to get rid

of. “Our whole world just kind of got turned upside down,” Rhe’Ann McBride said. “I just said, I have to be there. I quit my job and moved home.”

Once she had returned to Ainsworth and helped clean up the fire, she and her parents faced their decision. Should we keep Ranch-Land open? Or should we take the insurance money and wave goodbye?

“We debated hard,” Joe McBride said. “It was the customers that made us stay. Everybody kept saying, ‘we need you back, we want you back.’”

Rhe’Ann McBride has stayed on ever since,

See *Boot Life*
Page 11

High Five Fridays...A Big Hit!

If you are driving by the Thedford Elementary school on an early Friday morning, you will see Thedford High School students and athletes out in front of the school greeting the elementary students as they arrive at school.

Every Friday for the last few weeks, the high school students have arrived early at the elementary school to greet and give ‘high-fives’ to the students. “We are trying to have our older kids in all our high school activities set good examples for our elementary students,” said Bec Ray, Thedford Athletic Director. “We are hoping they can set good examples and be good role models by opening doors, showing kindness and saying good morning to the younger students.” It is the hope of the school that this will get the youngsters excited for sports days and all the other programs the high school has to offer.

The Cross Country and football teams got the ball rolling with treats and high-fives and so far the volleyball ladies and FBLA members have added to the excitement.

Here’s to the students getting the 2023-24 school year off to a great start!

So as you pass-by, watch for the school spirit being shared around Thedford elementary school.



THEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Members of the Sandhills-Thedford Football team greet a youngster headed to school on a recent Friday. Noah Werner with his mom, gets a treat from, l-r: Coby Higgins, Zeb Wilde, Tyson Hickman, Quinton Marshall and Brady Dahlberg.