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The Forum

OF FARGO



LATE EDITION

MONDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2019

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Patrick Springer / The Forum

Ron Brownotter, shown here at one of his pastures on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, is believed to run the nation's largest American Indian-owned buffalo herds. He "started with nothing" 25 years ago.

'Talk about faith'

Standing Rock rancher started with 'nothing,' now runs nation's largest native-owned buffalo herd

By Patrick Springer
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BULLHEAD, S.D.
A punishing winter piled up snow on Ron Brownotter's pastures so high that half of his cattle starved because they couldn't graze the frigid, windswept prairie surrounding the Grand River.

A four-day blizzard stacked drifts as tall as a house, blocking roads to his pastures during the

winter of 1996-97. "That changed everything for me," he said. "I knew I had to diversify from beef cattle."

The hard lessons from that disaster helped persuade Brownotter to switch to raising buffalo, the rugged "Monarch of the Plains" that adapted to thrive in the unforgiving environment of the Dakota prairies.

BUFFALO: Page A5



This is the third of a three-part series examining the economic and cultural significance of the buffalo to certain tribes, with a focus on the Standing Rock Sioux.



Chris Flynn / The Forum

Ron and Carol Brownotter decided to raise buffalo on their ranch after they lost half their cattle in a harsh winter.

Text messages foreshadowed death of woman found in Sheyenne River

Killer to be sentenced Friday

By April Baumgarten
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FARGO — Just days before her death in October 2015, Amanda Stach Engst sent out a series of text messages, saying "they" were driving to "the rez" and she was afraid "he" would hurt her.

"If you don't hear from me tomorrow, then something went wrong."

... But you know what I drive and 'they' are Billy and Crystal Herman," one text from the 36-year-old woman said.

Four months later, Engst's body was found Feb. 4, 2016, in the Sheyenne River on the Spirit Lake Indian Reservation south of Warwick, N.D. Prosecutors allege Billy Joe Herman, 40, strangled Engst from behind with a cord while his then-wife, 40-year-old Crystal Marie Herman who's now known as Crystal Johnson, drove Engst's vehicle in mid-October 2015.

He beat Engst with a shovel before putting her body in the river, according to court documents and transcripts from hearings leading up to Johnson's 2018 sentencing in Eddy County District Court. Johnson was ordered to serve 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to a Class AA felony of accomplice to murder.

Herman has pleaded

guilty to second-degree murder in U.S. District Court, and prosecutors will ask that he serve life in prison without parole when he is sentenced Friday, Oct. 18, in Fargo.

Federal prosecutors and investigators have shared few details in the case, but transcripts from Johnson's hearings, divorce filings and other court documents shed light on what brought Herman, Johnson and Engst together, including claims that Herman would harm his and Johnson's child if Johnson didn't go with him in the weeks leading up to Engst's death.

The documents and transcripts also describe Engst's messages of concern for her safety, what unfolded the night she died and evidence linking the couple to the killing in the midst of an investigation into their robbery spree in the Red River Valley.

'Can't talk now'

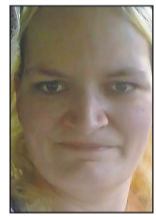
Herman and Johnson had a child together in 2010 before they were married in 2011 in Warwick, according to divorce filings in Clay County District Court.

Johnson filed for divorce in early September 2017, and it was finalized in April 2018, along with Johnson's name change.

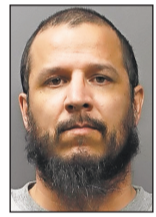
Former Eddy County State's Attorney Travis Peterson read aloud facts of the case during Johnson's change of plea and sentencing hearings. He said Herman and Johnson were separated but still married in September 2015, when Herman arrived at Johnson's mother's house and told Johnson to come outside.

"According to Crystal, Billy Herman demanded that Crystal come with him, and that if she didn't, he would harm

TEXTS: Page A8



Engst



Herman



Johnson

INSIDE TODAY'S FORUM



LIFE: Celebrate spookiest time of year with "Spooky Ballets." PAGE B1

North Dakota Ethics Commission withholding details of first complaint

By Jack Dura
Bismarck Tribune

BISMARCK — North Dakota's new Ethics Commission has received its first complaint, but its details aren't immediately available.

The panel's Oct. 23-24 meeting agenda includes an item called "Com-

plaint" that "must be discussed in executive session," citing constitutional and statutory authority for doing so. Executive sessions are closed to the public.

Ethics Commission Chairman Ron Goodman said he couldn't confirm or deny the existence of a complaint.

"I'm going to tell you at this point that we have a meeting in October, and I'm sure you'll be there, and I'm going to just have you show up at the meeting," Goodman said. "I just don't feel I can share any type of information like that without

ETHICS: Page A8



Today's weather



Mostly cloudy



Details, D4

Business.....	A4
Classifieds.....	C3-8
Comics.....	B3
Crosswords.....	C7
Life.....	B1
Obituaries.....	A6
Opinion.....	A7
Sports.....	D1-4

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650.49 Acres Crop/Pasture	Stark County, ND	November 6th
224 Acres Crop/Pasture	Billings & Stark Counties, ND	November 6th
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Farm Equipment	Churchs Ferry, ND	November 14th

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BUFFALO

From Page A1

“They take care of themselves,” he said. “They’re hardy; they’re strong.”

Today, the Brownotter Buffalo Ranch on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation sprawls over 20,000 acres, home to a herd of 600. His herd is part of a buffalo resurgence at Standing Rock that also includes native herds owned by the tribe and others.

For Brownotter, raising buffalo isn’t merely about practicalities. It’s about his ancestry and identity, an extension of the days when the Standing Rock Sioux were sustained by buffalo herds that once roamed the Northern Plains by the millions.

“I’m raising buffalo because I’m a Lakota-Yanktonai person on Standing Rock,” he said. “We’re surviving here. It’s who we were and who we are.”

Thanks to years of hard work, Brownotter is doing much better than surviving.

His operation is believed to be the largest buffalo ranch solely owned by an American Indian in the United States and Canada, according to the National Bison Association.

It took years of struggle and help from financial partners to survive a gauntlet of challenges.

When he started ranching more than 20 years ago, he was commuting from California, where he was attending college, and had to scrounge for posts to build a fence to hold his herd.

“I started with nothing,” he said.

The roots of the Brownotter Buffalo Ranch span three generations. When many families at Standing Rock were forced to sell their land allotments, his grandmother bought 320 acres in 1917.

“She never sold out,” he said, referring to his grandmother, Annie Leaf. His ranch southwest of Bullhead in Corson County occupies an area called Leaf Crossing.

The parcel his grandmother bought, later inherited by his father, became the basis for Brownotter’s ranch when he got his start in 1994. He eventually bought the land from his family and gradually added more rangeland through leases and purchases from neighbors.

Brownotter’s father raised a small number of cattle, planted a large garden and leased pastureland to neighbors.

They also hunted to keep food on the table. “A lot of times we went hunting deer on horses,” he said.

Growing up around cattle — and living in the midst of a sea of grass — imbued Brownotter with a strong urge to raise livestock at an early age.

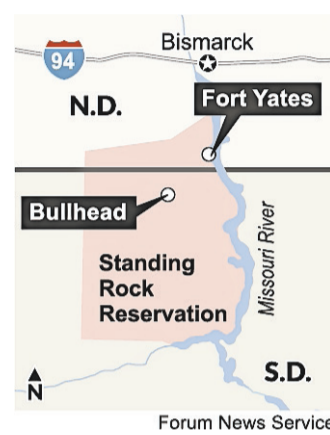
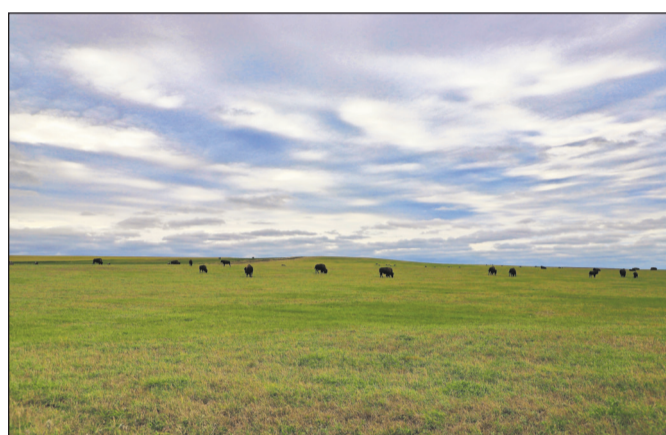
“I knew I was going to be a rancher since I was 12 years old,” he said. “As a young person I would come out here and fix fence, on my own, without being told.”

He spent money that fell into his hands on items including a shovel and ax, which he regarded as investments in his future. “I knew I needed tools to become a rancher,” he said.

In 1994, while studying agriculture at Cal Poly in Pomona, Calif., Brownotter plunged into the cattle business with the purchase of 100 beef cattle using a loan from a federal loan program.

Whenever he could break away, he made the 1,500-mile commute, one way, back home to Standing Rock to tend his cattle. Family and friends helped when he was away, but being so far from his livestock nagged at him.

“It was a constant worry,” Brownotter said. Also, he added, “My equipment wasn’t up to par.”



Above, top: Ron Brownotter uses these corrals to sort buffalo calves and yearlings that he sells at auction every November at his ranch. He sells more than 300 buffalo every fall and maintains a herd of about 600 on his 20,000-acre ranch. **Above, left:** Ron Brownotter holds a 7-foot post used to fence the pastures on his buffalo ranch. He has strung more than 80 miles of barbed-wire fence to hold his herd. **Above, right:** Buffalo graze at the Brownotter Buffalo Ranch near Bullhead, S.D., on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The herd started with buffalo from Custer State Park in the Black Hills and also from Catalina Island off the California coast.

Photos by Patrick Springer / The Forum

While at Cal Poly, as a class assignment on agricultural entrepreneurship, Brownotter persuaded his study group to draft a business plan for a buffalo ranch on Standing Rock. The idea was viable, but it would be years before he would pursue it.

A setback in his early ranching days came when he was denied a loan to build pasture fencing. Years later, Brownotter would join a class action lawsuit by American Indian farmers and ranchers alleging loan bias by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

He had already started building the fence, but had to rip it out. Then came the killer winter.

The impetus to turn to buffalo ranching came in 2000 or 2001. Brownotter and his wife, Carol, were out for a quiet drive to Bullhead.

Carol, who was taking classes at Sitting Bull College, knew that it would be a good time to switch to buffalo. “I noticed buffalo prices were at a slump,” she said. The cattle losses in 1997 remained a painful memory, and she knew Ron had yearned to raise buffalo for years.

“I just felt that this was the time to make the change,” she said. “I just said it — ‘We should go into buffalo.’”

It didn’t take Ron long to answer. “OK,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

That November, the Brownotters went to Custer State Park in the Black Hills for the annual buffalo auction, where they bought six buffalo yearlings. Brownotter fenced off 10 acres near their home.

They were buffalo ranchers. “That was an amazing feeling,” Carol said.

Not long afterward, Brownotter had what turned out to be a fateful meeting with a future partner. He made a presentation to the Sitting Bull College board, suggesting they could raise money through a buffalo herd.

The board didn’t seem impressed, but one of the board members approached Brownotter after the meeting. Tom Aman, a businessman from Aberdeen, S.D., with extensive cattle experience, agreed to help Brownotter

get the financial backing he needed.

At the time, Brownotter had 30 to 40 head of buffalo on 2,000 acres. A couple of months later, Aman and another man visited the ranch. They came with a message that stunned Brownotter. The upshot, he said: “We invest in Native American businesses and money is not an issue. Overnight, we grew from 2,000 to 20,000 acres.”

With financing in hand, Brownotter set about expanding his herd.

“We went to every buffalo sale in the area that year,” he said. He returned to the Custer State Park auction, one of the country’s leading buffalo markets, and bought every female in the ring.

“I sat in the back, the only brown face in the crowd,” he said. “I was outbidding everybody. I enjoyed it.”

At another auction, in Mobridge, S.D., he bought 200 head of buffalo.

There was just one problem. Brownotter didn’t have enough fenced pasture to hold a herd that had abruptly mushroomed in size. His only option was to unload the buffalo in the middle of his sprawling pasture.

“Talk about faith,” he said.

After making such a bold move, however, Brownotter was looking for reassurance. A religious man, Brownotter asked God for a sign. He was sitting on a plateau overlooking the Grand River, a mile from where Sitting Bull had lived.

He looked down and next to him was an eagle feather — “It was right there” — which he believes was an auspicious sign.

Brownotter took a roundabout path to ranching. He joined the Marines after graduating from high school, an enlistment that took him to California, where he was stationed at Camp Pendleton.

“I joined the Marines to get away from here because I was drinking too much, getting into trouble,” he said.

The Marines, in fact, got Brownotter into treatment. He spent the last three years of his 10-year hitch working as a drug and

alcohol counselor. Sobriety has become a cause.

Brownotter has his eye on a neighbor’s 160-acre parcel. He’d like to turn it into a retreat center where residents of Standing Rock can receive inpatient addiction counseling, a service that is not available on the reservation, despite high rates of addiction.

“We’re losing too many young people to suicide, overdoses, tragic accidents, car wrecks,” he said.

The site he has chosen is directly east of his ranch headquarters and is surrounded by buffalo range, which he believes would provide a pastoral setting. Brownotter, who has lined up support from a backer, is confident his dream will become a reality someday.

“I guarantee this will be built,” he said, quoting a pledge from the backer that he recorded on video.

Some of Brownotter’s buffalo have an exotic pedigree. He received 201 buffalo that came from Catalina Island off the California coast, where a small herd had been transplanted in the 1920s to make a movie.

The Catalina buffalo, which he received around 2005, were a gift and an important part of establishing his growing herd. “That’s another miracle,” he said.

Brownotter has room to expand his herd to 750, and expects to reach that number in time. But he regularly thins his herd, selling more than 300 calves and yearlings every November in an auction from the corrals on his ranch.

He also hosts buffalo hunts on his ranch, another way of culling his herd, especially unruly bulls who have a habit of

breaking through fences to eat his neighbor’s crops. “They want that buffet,” he said.

Twenty-five years after starting with nothing, Brownotter is now on sound financial footing. Earlier this year, he bought out his partners’ interest in the ranch, giving him sole ownership.

He attributes his success to a string of miracles and the rich grazing lands on Standing Rock, especially pastures of native grasses. “Those are dollar bills waving in the wind,” he said.

His growing ranch is part of a broader resurgence of buffalo at Standing Rock. The tribe has a herd of 250 and a cooperative in the reservation’s Rock Creek District, where Brownotter’s ranch is located, has a herd of 800 to 900, to name two other

large herds.

Now in his late 50s, Brownotter is thinking about who will take over the ranch when he retires. He has four children — three daughters and a son — all of whom own buffalo. He hopes one of them, or another family member, will succeed him.

Years ago, Brownotter had a dream that long puzzled him. He was standing near the St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Bullhead, which he attends, and a herd of buffalo came thundering past him, running from east to west and stirring up a cloud of dust.

Today he regards that dream as a harbinger of the fate of his buffalo venture.

“It was a forecast of what was going to happen over time,” he said.

Readers can call reporter Patrick Springer at 701-241-5522.

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