

The Cowboy Kings of Kodiak Island

On an Alaskan island known more for its fishing industry and namesake bruins, a handful of stalwart ranchers ply their trade in a tenuous balance of man and nature.



Bill Burton rides herd over a group of bison on his Kodiak Island ranch.

By Mike Coppock

Kathy Burton is frying some eggs and beef bacon for my breakfast as her husband, Bill, places a filter over my cup and pours hot water through the coffee grounds so I can have a cup of joe to down the meal with.

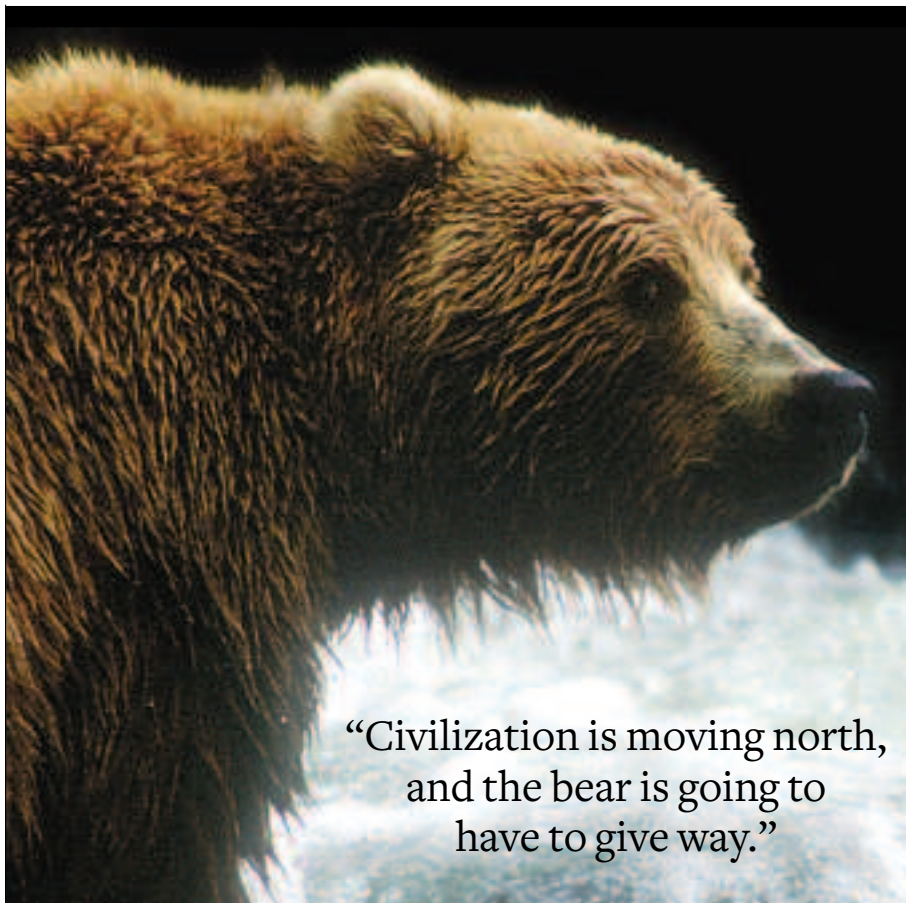
Suddenly, something grabs Bill's attention and there's a rat-a-tat-tat of boot heels scurrying over floor planks as he heads for the front door of the ranch house. For a moment it looks as if he's going to grab one of the three rifles he keeps by the doorway, but his arm reaches briefly in their direction then pulls back as he steps outside onto the porch.



He squints at a few head of bison grazing around an old, weathered barn. His eyes follow the fence line upward into the nearby hills. "What I like about these bison is if there is a bear anywhere around, they bunch up—usually by the barn—and try taking turns goring him," Burton explains.

He's not talking about just any bear. Here on Alaska's Kodiak Island there is only one type of bear. Standing ten feet tall and weighing as much as 1,500 pounds, the Kodiak brown bear is the world's largest, and has acquired a well-deserved reputation for its size, cunning, and voracious appetite. The bears can (and will) quickly eat the entrails of a steer upon making a kill, and return for the rest of the putrid meat after it has baked in the sun.

PHOTO BY HANK PENNINGTON / MAP BY JILL WITROSKI



“Civilization is moving north,
and the bear is going to
have to give way.”

The struggle between the bears and cattlemen on Kodiak has been ongoing since the Russians introduced cattle here in 1795. The United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, and Kodiak became an important supply point and fishing hub. The government pushed to establish American cattle ranches on Kodiak following World War II in an effort to create a source of locally produced beef. Drawn by the promise of abundant land and adventure, ranchers from the Lower 48 came north to see if they had what it took to homestead a cattle spread on the nation's second largest island.

At 3,588 square miles, Kodiak is a 100-mile-long island that rises from the Gulf of Alaska about 30 miles south of mainland Alaska. A snow-capped and glaciated mountain range separates the forested northern side from the rest of the island, which is made up of broad valleys of well-watered grasslands. Some fourteen ranches averaging roughly

22,000 acres each once covered the grasslands to the south of the town of Kodiak.

Today, just a few ranches remain. Most of the early homesteaders found both the bears' assaults and the severe extremes in weather to be too much and packed it in. A handful, including Burton, persevered. Like the cattle ranchers of the Old West, they've thrived by adapting to the unique realities of their surroundings, and by employing a few unconventional techniques that are sometimes required to survive against unforgiving odds.

As Burton hoists himself into the saddle to make his rounds, it's obvious that the steely 70-year-old doesn't plan on leaving the plains of Pasagashak Bay anytime soon. Wearing a weathered cowboy hat and work boots, with a square jaw, piercing eyes, and matter-of-fact clipped speech, Burton cuts the image of a classic Westerner of more than a century ago.

Burton was majoring in animal husbandry at the University of Florida in 1960 when he was first bitten by the bug

to see Alaska. He came up during the summer, and soon signed on as a ranch hand with an outfit that had started up on Kodiak in 1950. Burton and his brother Jim later took over the ranch with some 22,000 acres of state leased lands and another 160 acres deeded in 1967.

The Burtons' goal, like their ranching neighbors, was to supply high-quality beef to the town of Kodiak, villages on the island, and to mainland towns such as Homer. Distance and isolation, however, took their toll on supplies and getting their beef to market.

The region didn't get electricity until 1986. Prior to that, Kodiak ranchers had to use either Coleman lanterns (as the majority did) or fire up John Deere generators.

Nature can be brutal on Kodiak with heavy snows and strong winds. Burton once lost twenty head of cattle when they bunched up and fell through lake ice in spite of his desperate efforts to save them. He was also losing ten to twelve percent of his stock each year to bears. It was an old story with no ready solution.

Despite the problems the Russians encountered involving cattle on Kodiak, the Bureau of Land Management encouraged the establishment of cattle ranches on federal lands both on Kodiak and on the Aleutian Islands. Grazing rights for 200,000 acres were set aside for cattlemen on Kodiak. Many ranchers sunk their last dime into what would become the adventure of a lifetime, and they were not going to just sit by and watch the bruins wipe them out.

The ranchers heard the stories of how the bears had wiped out the dairy at Bell's Flats just south of town. They could hear their own cattle bellowing in terror at night in a far off valley and found signs of slaughter the next day.

Rancher Ron Hurst reportedly lost 400 head to the bears over the life span of his ranch.

“He liked to claim that for every head he lost, he went out and shot a Kodiak,”

Kodiak: Space Portal



On the Narrow Cape of Kodiak Island, between herds of grazing buffalo and scattered fishing villages, is the Alaskan Aerospace Development Corporation's Kodiak Island Complex. Situated away from populated areas, the complex poses fewer risks to the public, and because there is less atmospheric drag from this location, the rockets can carry heavier payloads for less cost. The corporation is owned by the state of Alaska, and was created by the state legislature in the early 1990s to stimulate economic growth through the aerospace industry. This year marks the 10th anniversary of Alaskan Aerospace Corporation's first commercial launch from the complex, but there's no time to stop for a celebration.

"The next launch is hours away as I write this," Sal Cuccarese, the chief of staff and director of lands and environment at the complex, says via e-mail.

In 1998 the complex sent up its first commercial launch with the U.S. Air Force's Ait-1. The 12 launches since then have seen such entities as Lockheed Martin, the Missile Defense Agency, and the U.S. Air Force putting satellites into orbit and conducting tests. Business is good, and the profitable complex is planning an expansion.

"KLC's future is bright and we are in the design phase of our third pad complex to meet anticipated demands," Cuccarese says.

The location marks a unique confluence of modern science and wild Alaska, although so far the two have coexisted peacefully. Onlookers report seeing herds of indifferent buffalo chomping on cud while nearby a fiery rocket lifts off into outer space.

—Joanna Nasar

Burton says.

Something had to be done.

Legendary Kodiak rancher Joe Zentner made a clandestine trip to Kansas in 1952, where he bought a Piper Cub airplane in order to spot Kodiak bears from the air and then kill them. The line between making it or surrendering to the bears had been drawn.

Zentner paid \$3,800 for the plane. Upon its arrival on Kodiak Island, a high wind severely damaged the wing, tail section, and some of the plane's fabric. Zentner took it to the workshop at the Kodiak Baptist Mission for \$2,500 in repairs.

Incredibly, Zentner still did not know how to actually fly a plane. He had paid \$1,200 to have it flown from Kansas to Kodiak—substantial money in the 1950s. His first official flying lesson came from fellow rancher Dave Henley. Henley took Zentner up numerous times and showed him how to handle the controls. But, when Henley was late for Zentner's solo flight, Zentner read the manual and then took off by himself.

From that day in 1952 on, Zentner flew without a pilot's license nor did he finish his flying lessons. A Kodiak sheet metalist volunteered his time in constructing a prefabricated hanger. Another friend did the finishing work to the outside after Zentner selected a flat meadow for the hanger.

Guiding hunters to a bear from the air was a legal gray area, especially in territorial days, but both Zentner and Henley did it. The tactic did not slow the bears

down. In 1958, Zentner lost ten head to bears, Ron Hurst lost six, Joe Beatty four, Ned Roberts two, and Henley one.

The federal government was not unsympathetic. In 1960, it sent six-foot-six-inch tall Ivan Marks and a dozen bloodhounds to Kodiak to hunt bears. Marks had already won fame having hunted Big Foot in California. If he could chase Big Foot away from logging camps, the Feds reasoned, maybe he could do the same with the Kodiaks.

Marks' hunts proved failures. The bears got most of his dogs.

The Kodiak Cattle Barons decided to take matters into their own hands. With quiet consent from newly-elected Gov. Bill Egan, Zentner and Henley armed their planes. Zentner mounted a M-1 semiautomatic rifle above his cockpit with a Nydar sight taped to the windshield for aiming. The gun fired four inches above the propeller.

A stock growers' meeting was held in Tom Feldon's cabin to discuss the most effective way for Zentner to use his plane and gun against the bears. In an atmosphere resembling a tent revival, the ranchers began handing Zentner checks for fuel and whatever else he needed to shoot the bruins down from the air.

Besides Zentner and Henley flying voluntary bear patrols, the ranchers hired Ovid McKinley as a protection agent who also piloted one of the armed aircraft. They brought down thirteen Kodiaks in short order. Meanwhile, Governor Egan sent agents from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to do a "bear-cattle study."

In 1963, ADF&G killed 35 Kodiaks from both the air and the ground. From 1964 to 1968, ADF&G agents killed as many bruins as they could along the Kodiak road system.

If the Kodiaks hid in the brush, firecrackers were dropped to flush them out for a kill shot from the planes. Henley once accidentally set a valley ablaze near Anton Larsen Bay while trying to drop firecrackers on Kodiaks from the air.

The general public was not aware of

Bill Burton, one of a few remaining ranchers on Kodiak Island.





Burton checks on one of his stock.

the air assaults, or Gov. Egan's involvement with them, until one Sunday morning in the fall of 1963. Henley had made strafing runs on four Kodiaks. Running low on fuel and still wanting to rack up a few more kills, Henley landed the plane at Kodiak's municipal airport, where the public saw the armed aircraft for the first time.

By Monday, cries of bear slaughter taking place on Kodiak reached Egan's office. He immediately ordered the ranchers to dismantle the gun. The stock growers association ignored the first message, but the language in Egan's second message left no doubt they had crossed a line.

Zentner though continued "spotting" from the sky for some time. This was even more remarkable due to his being featured in the August 1964 edition of *Outdoor Life* in an article titled "The Kodiak Bear War." Today on display in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge's visitor center in Kodiak, the magazine's cover features a drawing of Zentner and his plane screaming down from the skies blazing away at a Kodiak as it rears up in defiance. The Piper Cub was destroyed in a violent windstorm in 1972.

It may have been rancher Ron Hurst who first proposed bisecting the island with a bear-proof fence similar to the State Barrier Fence of Western Australia. Hurst, at his ranch at Salty Cove, had set in place a woven wire fence running for eleven miles in an

effort to protect his herd. He found that the bears followed the fence, and thus the fence could be used to direct the bears away from his cattle. He had already lost 61 steers valued at \$250 a head, a total loss of \$15,250.

"Nobody enjoys watching an old brownie fish a salmon stream more than I do," Hurst told local author Wanda Fields. "But, I lose a darn sight more beef to bears than I market. Civilization is moving north, and the bear is going to have to give way."

The president of the Alaska Stock Growers Association, John Grounds, and the director of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, James Brooks, also were in favor of a bear fence along the Kodiak Wildlife Refuge boundary.

It did not seem so absurd when one realizes the value placed on both the Kodiak bears and the nearby cattle was \$100,000 in 1963, while the cost of running a 16-mile fence ranged from \$200,000 to \$750,000. Something was needed now that the makeshift air force had been shot down by the governor.

But, Zentner warned, if such a fence did become reality, it did not mean public outcry would die down. After all, for the fence to work, all the Kodiaks living on the ranching side of the fence would have to be exterminated.

Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, about to announce his presidential bid, was willing to introduce an appropriations bill for \$750,000. Steel posts ranging from six- to eight-foot tall were secured through federal monies and warehoused at nearby Bells Flats. What killed the plan was a number of ranchers took Hurst's original logic and reversed it. Instead of the fence leading bears away from cattle, Tom Feldon pointed out, suppose it lead bears to cattle? The reverse logic took hold in the minds of the ranchers and the project was scuttled.

Forty years later I am driving by the corrals and pole barns that make up the Kodiak State Fairgrounds near Bells Flats. The Kodiak Rodeo, held every

August, is an echo from the days of Zentner, Henley, and the others. At the height of the ranch operations on Kodiak, cattle were an incremental part of the local economy. Today they are more of an oddity. But, the surviving ranchers have not given up. They have put plans into place not only to ensure their survival, but hopefully a return of ranching as an important Kodiak industry.

Rounding a bend, I pull over to watch two trout fishermen try their luck on the American River. A lonely brush road leaves the highway here, following the river until it disappears to the south. It leads to the 45,000 acre Hurst ranch.

Charlie Dorman has the spread now. Hurst finally gave up, moving out of Alaska before his death. Zentner, Henley, Fields, and the others fell victim to heart attacks, strokes, and time. The Feds erected a bronze plaque where Zentner's ranch house stood in honor of the ranching pioneer.

When Dorman took over the Hurst ranch 30 years ago, it had 400 head of cattle. Now the 73-year-old runs all buffalo, some 250 to 300 head. He began making the shift in 1999. Dorman is holding buffalo hunts for income, and soon plans to retail their meat.

"They don't need winter feed and the bears tend to leave them alone," Dorman says.

Bison is an important part of the plan for today's survival and growth of the Kodiak ranches. In the shaggy beasts, the new Cattle Kings of Kodiak believe they have found a meat producer that can hold their own against the bears.

For Dorman, it wasn't just the passing of the old-time ranchers that resulted in the dwindling number of ranches on Kodiak. Even after the state assumed control of the lease lands from BLM, there was growth. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Alaska under bush-pilot-turned-governor Jay Hammond backed agriculture to the hilt in an attempt to lessen Alaska's dependence on the federal government.

"It all changed after Hammond," Dorman says with a disgusted tone. "They (the State of Alaska) don't want agriculture here. To them, there is more money to grow bear on the land. They bring in the big bucks from hunters and tourists, but how does that help the people here in the state?"

Dorman may sound negative, but like Burton, he and fellow rancher Nathan Mudd have not quit. The two have received a USDA grant for the construction of a portable slaughterhouse that's designed to be both hauled as a trailer to the outlying ranches, as well as placed on a landing craft for the ranches on islands off of Kodiak's coast.

Only 23 years old, Nathan, from Eastern Oregon, is the new face in Kodiak ranching.

"Things so far have been very difficult," Mudd says. "We've been working hard to turn it into a business to sell cattle."

He had been bringing his cattle to the Kodiak market by landing them on the beach after crossing the straits from his island by boat. He started listening to Dorman's idea of a mobile slaughterhouse after one crossing made him seasick.

"It has not been easy to find equipment," Mudd admits. The total cost for the slaughterhouse has been \$380,000; half again as much as the costs covered by a USDA grant. Still, Mudd has confidence it will help the marketing of his winter slaughter cattle (not to mention reduce his sea sickness).

Burton holds buffalo hunts as well, charging up to \$4,000 a hunt. Burton brought the first bison to the ranchlands in 1980, which he purchased in Montana.

He also derives income from subleasing portions of his ranch. Five acres are leased to the Narrow Cape Lodge where his son Buck is in charge of maintenance, as well as being his father's ranch hand.

Burton also has new neighbors.

State funded Alaska Aerospace Corporation constructed its Kodiak Launch Complex on lease lands within the Burton ranch. Having no connection

with the federal government, the facility launches satellites into polar orbit for private firms, the U.S. military, and Third World countries.

"Anybody who puts down the money," says CEO Dale Nash.

The Burton ranch was the finalist out of 28 Alaskan sites considered, as well as one of two other sites on the island. The Burton sight met the screening criteria of having available support services (the city of Kodiak is only 50 miles away), year-round logistic services, good weather, and food and lodging for customers wishing to watch their satellites

"Nobody enjoys watching an old brownie fish a salmon stream more than I do, but I lose a darn sight more beef to bears than I market."

go into orbit. And, more importantly, unrestricted down range launch corridors away from human habitation and sea shipping lanes.

Since the first launch in November 1998, the complex has grown to include a launch pad, booster rocket storage facilities, mission control, and maintenance shops. With a Space Age backdrop, Burton rides one of his 30 horses around the structures as he moves cattle. Bison often graze near the launch pad.

"They work with us. Kathy worked for them for seven years as a general secretary," Burton says.

Alaska Aerospace spokesperson Sal Cuccarese says they want to be a good neighbor. Cuccarese says they have pulled Burton's vehicles out of the mud at times, reported to him sick and injured livestock, and graded the Burton ranch road in winter.

"Once a herd of 70 buffalo moved close to the bluff so we sent a helicopter to herd the animals away," Cuccarese says.

Burton sells those bison whole and dressed down to Kodiak residents.

Kodiak hairstylist Terri Miller and her family purchases two whole bison from

the Burtons each year.

"The meat is simply excellent," Miller says.

Local civic groups such as the Lions have used Burton bison as prizes in various community fundraisers.

Today, besides battling Kodiaks and losing anywhere from ten to fifteen head to them each year, Burton also deals with erosion caused by unrestricted four-wheeler use, and with poachers. His ranch has 350 bison, 50 cattle, 20 yaks, and 60 elk. He plans to leave his spread to his son Buck and his newborn grandson, James.

Currently he is dealing with a ruling that says that any bison that strays from lease lands will be considered feral by state officials.

"We fought that and have been able to get a two year moratorium on the decision so that I can have time to get more fencing up," Burton says. "It means I am going to have to put up fencing in some very rugged areas. You'd be surprised how bison can negotiate their way over and through about anything."

Talk to anyone in Kodiak, Bells Flats, Port Lions, and the other Kodiak communities, and they all seem to know Burton, and they've all eaten his beef.

Burton seems to know this. It might be why you can find him on horseback battling 40-mile-per-hour winds in horizontal rain tracking down a bunch of strays. Or unslinging his rifle as he comes upon the deep imprints of Kodiak tracks in the sand.

Maybe he does it because first and foremost he is a cowboy.

Mike Coppock is a former Alaskan newspaper editor. He is currently writing a book on the history of Alaskan seaports.