

This couple's retirement plan? Buy some bison, start a ranch

LINWOOD - It wasn't *exactly* on whim that John and Cindy Gedritis decided, "Hey, let's buy some land and raise a bunch of the largest animals we can find."

But it's not far from the truth about how they came to own a 127-acre farm west of Stevens Point and raise a herd of bison on it.

Welcome to the Back In Time Bison Ranch and the intriguingly unorthodox retirement for a couple who spent most of their lives in northern Illinois.

The seed for the bison ranch might have sprouted quickly, but the soil it was planted in has been fertile for years and years.



John, 62, and Cindy, 63, have been married nearly 30 years, raised two grown sons, and lived for most of their lives in West Chicago, about 50 miles west of Chicago. During that time, Cindy worked as a substance abuse counselor and supervisor, and John was a project manager in the construction field, until he decided to become a semi-truck driver at 57.

For as long as they have known each other, they've felt drawn to woods, fields and lakes. John is a lifelong angler and hunter, and, Cindy said, "our vacations were always in Wisconsin. Always up north."

Like a lot of people, those vacations helped spur dreams of retirement and conversations about what they were going to do when the boys were adults and Cindy and John didn't have careers keeping them in Illinois.

About a decade ago, the conversations began to transform into action. "We've been looking for property in Wisconsin for about 10 years," Cindy said. "My dream always has been by Lake Michigan, near the beach. Maybe some waterfront, maybe not. But close enough that I could maybe walk to the beach."

But most every parcel of land for sale they found which met that criteria was out of their price range. And besides that, "there still had to be work available," John said. Although this was a retirement plan, he still planned to work.

One of the reasons he decided to become a trucker was so that he could find a job almost anywhere. But lakefront property in their price range was way off the beaten path and wasn't anywhere near a job. And John couldn't see driving an hour so that he could drive some more. So they just kept on looking.

From hobby farm to bison ranch

While Cindy was having Lake Michigan beach dreams, John envisioned a small farmette or hobby farm, and raise a few beef cattle, maybe some hogs, to put some meat on the table for family.

All that was slowly stewing for several years. Then John saw a video on You-Tube from a bison farmer. "Some young woman up in Canada talking about how little hands-on work it takes them to raise bison," he said.

Cindy, now that she knows, disagrees. "In comparison. I wouldn't say 'little,'" she said, laughing.

"Well, yeah, in comparison to cattle," John said. "So that kind of raised my antenna there, and I started to look into it a little bit more, and I found a pretty viable industry ... There's actually a demand for the meat."

He and Cindy started looking for larger parcels of land, big enough to raise bison, which are, according to one Wisconsin Public Radio piece, "the biggest, baddest animal in Wisconsin." They started to do more research on what it took to raise bison.

This was in the spring of 2021. Not long after John glommed onto the raising bison idea, he found a piece of property west of Stevens Point

advertised on a real estate website that specializes in land, not homes or city properties. As he scanned through the information and scrutinized the property on Google Earth, he thought that it looked as if it were set up to raise bison, with large fenced-in corrals and other aspects that could be used to sort and handle large animals.

It turned out that it was a former bison farm, and the sellers had retired from the business. Both John and Cindy felt it seemed like a great place to live and put their retirement dreams into action — well, except for the beach and Lake Michigan.

Cindy and John weren't quite ready to sell their West Chicago home at the time, but the land seemed to be pulling at them. They visited and inspected the property again, and they were hooked. They bought the property, which includes an old barn, a house and outbuildings, and moved in September 2021.

'They're still wild animals'

John and Cindy have 17 bison right now, and they've learned a lot about the animals over the course of the past couple of years. They watched more videos, of course, but that was just the beginning. They have visited other bison farms across the state and in Minnesota. They have joined the Wisconsin Bison Producers Association (Cindy is on the board), the Minnesota Bison Producers Association and National Bison Association.

They have attended conferences, which are fun, Cindy said, because there are often bison meat samples there to try. Bison meat is a pricy commodity and it will be a year or so before individual bison in their herd are the right size and age for butchering and processing into meat.

They've developed a network of other bison ranchers who are happy to help, they said. "We've learned what works and what doesn't," Cindy said.

And their bison are teaching them too, more and more each day.

"The bison have just been amazing," John said. "Because we're going to have to process them at some time, I try not to get that attached to them. But you kind of do, because you're with them every day, and you realize they have personalities."

The main reason that John and Cindy chose to raise bison is that the animals are largely self-sufficient. They take care of their young and can fight off predators if attacked.

"They winter extremely well. They don't need shelter and pretty much fend for themselves," John said. "I don't have to worry about them. ... It's just less headache."

That said, there are particular cautions that John and Cindy take when they are around their bison. Get too close to a young one, or spook them, and they will protect themselves.

"They're still wild animals," John said. "You have to keep an eye on them all the time. There's a little trust there. I would say they trust us to be out near them more than I trust them when I'm near them."

Although Back In Time Bison Ranch is a retirement plan, Cindy and John expect it to be a business as well. They envision the bison to provide meat for them and family members, but they expect to sell it, too.

How that will work is still a work in progress. Cindy has been working on the ranch's website, which offers photos and text about what it's like to raise bison.

Eventually, people might be able to buy meat through the website. People will likely be able to buy meat off the ranch too, and maybe at central Wisconsin farmers markets.

They like the idea of providing fresh, locally raised meat, raised in a way that's good for open land and the animals themselves. The long-term goal is to butcher and sell the meat from two bison per month.

"We want to offer good, healthy food to our community. That's ... our mission," John said.

It sounds like a lot of effort for a retirement. But that's what John and Cindy expect, and it's what they want.

"Because I don't want to get sucked into the couch watching the boob tube, and have my health deteriorate every day," John said.

"We want to stay active," Cindy said. "And not just physically active," John said. "This requires mental activity, too. It's a lot of learning. I think the learning part is the most important part of all this."

Contact Keith Uhlig at 715-845-0651 or kuhlig@gannett.com. Follow him at [@UhligK](#) on Twitter and Instagram or on Facebook.

