

The Sandhills’ Dr. Dolittle: Rancher raises creatures rarely seen in Nebraska

By Cindy Lange-Kubick
Flatwater Free Press

SENECA – The Reindeer Rancher sits at the head of the long table in the big barn he built for overnight guests.

Phillip Licking is swatting flies and washing down barbeque potato chips with Dr. Pepper, staples of the slim 60-year-old’s bachelor diet.

You can call him Flip – everyone does – thanks to an older cousin who couldn’t quite spit out Phillip.

Flip loves these hundreds of windswept acres in Thomas County, hemmed in by railroad tracks and grassy hills and cut by the lazy Middle Loup – this spot where he raises animals you’d expect to find roaming the savannas of Africa or the mythical North Pole, not grazing in the middle of nowhere near Highway 2.

It’s a wide-open ranch in cattle country without an Angus or Hereford in sight, where Flip Licking has built this barn and a cozy cabin, turned a corn crib into a bison-viewing perch, hauled in his childhood home, rescued a one-room schoolhouse, built a sand volleyball court and a swinging bridge and put up a porch swing with his mama’s name – Jackie – welded across the top.

Jackie Johnson was a city girl who spent her school bus fare on trips to Chicago zoos, then hitchhiked west and met Paul Licking at the Cowpoke Cafe in Thedford.

Maybe that’s where the Safari in the Sandhills started, deep in her youngest son’s DNA, because as far back as he can remember, Flip’s had a soft spot for animals.

“When I was 5, I begged for a bum lamb for my birthday. Look where it took me.”

A llama came next. When his Mullen High School classmates were eyeing fancy pickups, Flip was spending his summer haying money on bison babies and longhorn calves.

Over a half-century, he added more bison. And reindeer. Zebras and zebus. Water buffalo and emu and elk. Miniature horses and donkeys and bossy goats, potbelly pigs and alpacas and porcupine and peacocks.

And that trio of camels you spot just outside the barn window as Flip unwinds his stories, making you look once and once again, thinking: I have a

feeling we’re not in Nebraska anymore...

The camels are in hot pursuit of a faded green pickup.

Flip is behind the wheel of that ’98 Chevy, bumping down the pasture road as a trio of long-lashed and long-legged cartoon character dromedaries close in.

Flip owns plenty of pickups, but the green Chevy is what he fires up for ranch tours. The animals recognize it. They know there’s a 5-gallon bucket of cow cake in the bed, ready to be doled out, sure as penny candy from clowns at a parade.

And they come running.

This is what fills Flip’s calendar when he’s not setting up petting zoos in small towns or corralling reindeer and hauling them to hospitals and shopping malls and fundraisers, from the Panhandle to the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge, so kids can touch Santa’s hooved helpers during the holidays.

The rest of the year, he’s here hosting Boy Scout troops, wedding receptions and family reunions. Last year alone, nearly 2,000 visitors cooled off in the Loup, cooked burgers on a grill shaped like a rusty longhorn, played ping pong, belted out karaoke in the barn and bumped along with Flip to see the sights on a ranch tour.

Once, a doctor from Omaha came to stay and spent three hours in the pickup bed, marveling over the bison, left behind a \$300 tip and drove home happy.

“She didn’t want to see anything else.”

As for Flip, what you see is what you get.

A guy who makes jokes at his own expense, patting his barely-there stomach and saying: “Jenny Craig keeps calling.”

A guy with a soft spot for the old and weak, but who doesn’t take any crap.

“I just don’t like bull****.”

Flip’s world is black or white. No gray.

Telling a man what he can do with his property? Wrong.

Bureaucrats who lord over the little guy? Wrong.

He hasn’t been back to Lincoln with his reindeer since the city told him he needed a permit and then sent someone to stand watch while children snaked through the line in front of the hospital on 70th Street.

“What a shame,” he says. “It was awesome seeing the kids at the hospital.”



Photo by Cindy Lange-Kubick/Flatwater Free Press

A grabbag of bison and other animals graze on Flip Licking’s ranch, sandwiched between the scenic Middle Loup River and a passing train.

He won’t go back.

In 2014, when Seneca was in an uproar over a vote to unincorporate, a resident took to Facebook claiming Flip never paid for a house he owned in town.

He paid, Flip says, and the former homeowner knew he did, but Flip didn’t have Facebook. So he grabbed a piece of particleboard and a can of spray paint and nailed his rebuttal to the front of that house. It calls the resident, in foot-high letters, “a big, fat liar.”

That sign? Still there. When will it come



Photo by Cindy Lange-Kubick/Flatwater Free Press

Flip Licking tends to several of his eight reindeer, which are a big hit with children and adults alike during events in the weeks preceding Christmas.

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O’Neill Wins Best Of Show

Photos & Story By:
Terri Licking

The Thedford Art Gallery is showcasing 79 pieces of art in their annual Open Show competition during the month of July and culminating after the Thomas County Fair. Adult and youth artwork is featured.

“We separate the art into categories as 3D pieces and photographs are hard to compete with the talents of painters for awards,” said Terri Licking, TAG president. “This year, due to the increase in the number of abstract paintings, and after conferring with our judge, Amy Simonson, Dunning, retired art instructor from Sandhills School, we made another category for abstract art. This adds additional winners and hopefully more artists entering for next year.”

Tim O’Neill, North Platte was selected adult “Best of Show” with “Lakota Princess.”

“This piece was not just a painting, but a process of different aspects to get to the result,” Licking said. “His bio of how he created this masterpiece is located by the piece.”

Other awards included:

Art
1st Place: Cecelia Wonch, Dunning, with her painting inspired by a Tim Cox painting entitled “Horse Whisperer Getting Loud.” This piece also was an award winner at the recent NebraskaLand Days Art Show in North Platte.

“That is how we have a wide array of artists in our show. I enter the NLD

show in June, offering to bring any art from that show up to ours. It has been a very successful collaboration between the Prairie Art Center and our own show. Holly Carlini is the executive director of the Prairie Art Center. We will coordinate getting them back to North Platte after our fair at the end of the month,” Licking said. “Other pieces that may not have won in our show, but did in the NLD show, have their award by them.”

2nd Place: “Sun-downer,” by Tim O’Neill, North Platte.

3rd Place: “Blue Mountains,” Maggie Evans, McCook.

“TAG would like to thank Ms. Evans also for her help the day we hung our show. She came with a friend from McCook, bringing more of her art and the artwork of another artist and helped us label all entries,” Licking added.

Honorable Mention: “The Sentinel” by Tim O’Neill; “Sunflower Glo” by Linda Lacy, Ashby; “Kenny” by Maggie Evans, McCook; and “Afternoon Delight” by Tim O’Neill, North Platte.

Abstract Art
(Eight pieces entered in this category)

1st Place: “Dance of the Firefly,” by Patricia Coslor, Sargent.

2nd Place: “Abstract Horse” by Tim O’Neill, North Platte.

3rd Place “True To Yourself,” by Nicole Hoffmann, Mullen. Nicole is the director of the Mullen Art Center.

Honorable Mention: “Lightness of Being” by



“Lakota Princess” by Tim O’Neill, North Platte, was chosen Best of Show at the Thedford Art Guild’s Open Show.

Patricia Coslor, and “Inspired by What Came Before” by Mary Smith, Callaway.

Photography
1st Place: “Here’s Looking At You,” by Megan Licking, Stapleton.

2nd Place: “Waiting Patiently,” by Bridget Licking, Thedford. They own their own photography business, Flash Photography and With Love Co. Photography, respectively. Some of their work may be seen on their Facebook pages.

3rd Place: “Prairie Sentinel,” by Kelsey Phillips, Mullen.

Honorable Mention:

“Rainbow Reflection,” by JoAnn Urbanovsky, Elyria; “A Still Day,” by Linda Teahon, Dunning; “Betty” and “Snot Today,” by Megan Licking; and “Long Live Cowboys” by Bridget Licking.

3D Art
1st Place: “Eagle Shield” by Jay Lewis.

“This piece was a carving on a moose antler and also was an award winner at the NLD show.”

2nd Place: “The Red Owl,” by Jay Lewis.

3rd Place: “Supreme Sunflower,” a clay bowl

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Photo by Cindy Lange-Kubick/Flatwater Free Press

Flip Licking coaxes a zebra over for a treat while feeding the zebra herd on the land he owns outside Seneca in the Sandhills; the creatures are a popular backdrop for weddings held on his exotic animal ranch. A nearby alpaca is also expressing interest.