

To be an American: 'Home on the Range'

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Germany when their current work permit expires. Friends and neighbors have mounted letter-writing campaigns on their behalf, and both U.S. Rep. Ben Lujan and U.S. Sen. Tom Udall have taken up their cause.

When Germans Christian and Sonja Spahn bought this land and began building their own log home in 1998, they brought longtime friend Tom Bobek to help. By the time construction was finished, they'd offered Tom the job of ranch manager. Tom called Inge on her birthday, at home in Germany, to ask whether she'd be willing. The Spahns paid her way to come check it out.

"All the way from the Denver airport to Trinchera, I said, 'No, no, no!'" Inge recalls. "But then we came over the pass into this valley and I said, 'Yes, yes, yes!'" It took a year for the Bobeks to get the required visas and work permit. They moved in and set to work on June 10, 1999.

The ranch sells bison



The Bobeks prepare to load a bison bull into a Springer stockman's trailer.

meat throughout the region and by mail order. It supplies livestock to ranches as close as Springer and as far as San Antonio, Texas. It sells heifers to cutting-horse trainers; last weekend six were in a pen awaiting their ride to trainers in Artesia and Las Cruces.

"Right now I have 60 bison," Inge beams. "I should have my first calf in two weeks. This year - I hope! - I'll have 22 calves."

Officially, Inge doesn't work. She doesn't get paid; the Bobeks' American work permit allows only Tom to work; Inge is just the wife. In fact, Inge regularly works two 8-hour days each week, feeding bison in the

office, selling and delivering meat, making trips to town for hay and supplies. Of course, in reality, the work spills over into most days.

Inge is also active in both the Branson and Des Moines communities. A regular in the Branson Hiking Club, she's also the president of the Trinchera Arts & Crafts Club at the Senior Citizens' Center in Branson, 18 miles from home. She annually brings the club for a day of arts and crafts at The Legacy, a Trinidad assisted-living center, 44-miles from home.

She was contracted as an artist by the Des Moines Schools to help students paint a mural. Across the

street at Studio C, owner Christina Boyce says, "Inge is one of my best-selling artists. She makes both large-ticket and small-ticket items. I'm currently sold out of all her big pieces." Inge makes small and large stained-glass pieces, from mobiles to windows. She makes portable, two-piece chairs. She also enjoys drawing, painting, and beadwork. She and Tom sell their diverse work through their own Web site at TrincheraValleyArts.com.

"Every dollar we make is reported on our taxes," Inge says. "We pay enough taxes to prove to the government that we pay our way. Our truck is paid off, our house and land are paid off. And we keep all our money here, in Colorado and New Mexico." In fact, she and Tom sold everything they had in Germany to buy 50 acres from the Spahns and build their own log home. Inge kept only some of their furniture, which she had shipped to their Trinchera home.

They met 23 years ago in Bad Goegging, a village of hot springs in southern Germany, 80 miles north of Munich, where they both worked in an Audi factory making electric cables for the upscale cars. They married in 1992.

Tom took to Trinchera right away. A handyman who can seemingly make or fix anything, his hobbies



Photos by Tim Keller

Tom built a display case to showcase the knives he creates.

include making knives and shooting old, collectible rifles - Springfields, Ballards, an 1840 muzzle-loader. He and Inge are both NRA members and enjoy competitions at the NRA's Whittington Center, though their best shooting is right at the ranch. Inge organizes NRA shooting classes at the ranch "for the rancher ladies, to get them used to the firearms they have at home." She brings NRA instructor Keith Gibson from Trinidad. The first class was on home safety, the second on handguns. Inge is currently planning a rifle-shooting class.

In 1999, Tom Bobek received his first E-2 visa, a work permit allowing him to live and work in America for five years. The 2004 renewal was easy, he says: they had to pay a lawyer, but they didn't have to leave home. "But in 2009, everything had changed. We had to return to Germany to apply for the renewal at the U.S. Embassy in Frankfurt. It took lawyers, meetings at the consulate, lots of appointments. We ran out of time and had to apply for a temporary extension. Altogether, that renewal cost us \$10,000 and kept us away from the ranch for weeks."

The E-2 visa is attached to the ranch and owner/investors Christian and Sonja Spahn, who divide their time between the ranch and their home in Germany. The U.S. government looks for a profit in the investors' business, but the bison ranch is currently just breaking even, throwing the Bobeks' 2014 visa renewal into doubt: they may be forced to move back to Germany - where they no longer have a home or any possessions.

"If we worked for an American, after five years we could apply for citizenship," Tom says. "But for an American to hire us, he has to certify that no American can or will do the work."

The U.S. government holds an annual lottery to

fill quotas for immigration from each region or country. Winners receive green cards, allowing them to remain in America and apply for citizenship - the Bobeks' dream. "We try every year," Inge says. "Nowadays it's done on the Internet. But our name has never come up."

"They're looking for all the help they can get. Last year, Congressman Lujan sent a letter to Frankfurt to help us," Inge says. "When Sen. Udall's representative came to Des Moines last month, she said, 'We want people like you here!'"

"We do everything like an American citizen except vote," Inge says. "We own our home. We pay taxes. We have health insurance. We have Social Security cards. We've never had an accident, nothing to do with the law." With nothing left behind them in Germany, they're Americans in every way except the official papers.

Saturday afternoon, they walked down the hill from their house to separate a bison bull from a corralled group. French Tract bison rancher Mike Decker arrived and backed his long trailer to a chute. The Bobeks opened a gate and the half-ton bull exploded through the long chute and into Decker's trailer, slick as a whistle. The three ranchers talked about the animals and the business, then Decker headed back toward Springer, south along the old Goodnight-Loving Trail.

The Bobeks walked up the hill as the sun approached the mountain-top to their west. A dozen bison wandered across the draw at the base of the mountain. Tom and Inge turned toward their home, looking forward to at least four more years of this American life, and hoping for even more - hoping for a document to make official what already seems true in all other respects, that they have become Americans.

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Clarification

In a story about Holy Trinity Academy in Monday's *The Chronicle-News*, a board member's name was inadvertently left out of information provided to *The Chronicle-News*. Phyllis Moniot is the secretary of the HTA board.

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Weston, N.V.
\$40,000

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\$45,000

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7th grade teacher
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\$10,600

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Food bank coordinator
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