



## **2008 OUTSTANDING RANGELAND MANAGEMENT AWARD**

### **GRAVES T-BAR RANCH HENRIETTA, TEXAS**

What do you gain from putting your heart and soul into managing a north Texas ranch for seven generations? Take a close look at the Graves T-Bar ranch in Clay County near the town of Henrietta and you'll get a good idea of the results. Alan and Jacquetta Graves are the current managing generation of this working cattle operation and are as dedicated to the land as their parents were in the beginning.

The ranch had its primary origin in 1937 when Oscar and Furn Graves, Alan's parents, began acquiring property south of Henrietta. Over the years land was also added from Jacquetta's family, part of which has been designated as a Texas Century Ranch. Alan began working on the ranch as soon as he could hitch a ride in the pickup, and in 1976, Alan and Jacquetta took over all ranching operations from both families. They still see to the day to day ranching chores.

Alan states that, "From the beginning we realized that the land had to be managed properly in order to support a profitable cow-calf operation." He has made a concerted effort all these years to teach his children and grandchildren the importance of investing their time and resources back into the land that has supported them for so long. This has

fostered a genuine “appreciation” of the land by all involved and has been the key to their success in the ranching business.

This ranch is located in the North Central Prairie land resource area in a gently rolling terrain. Primary ecological sites include Claypan Prairie, Sandy Loam and Tight Sandy Loam. Much of the land acquired over the early years of ownership was in cropland fields. These areas were established to perennial grass. Species seeded included Sideoats grama, King Ranch bluestem, Kleingrass, and on deeper soils a tall grass mix. In fact, Alan got so good at seeding grass that in the 1970s and 80s, he began harvesting and selling Kleingrass and KR Bluestem to help make ends meet. He designed a grass seed stripper and purchased a clipper seed cleaner. After drying the seed, he used his garage to clean and sack the seed and prepare it for sale.

Brush control, primarily on mesquite, has always been a priority at Graves T-Bar ranch in an effort to reduce brush competition with native and improved grasses and to conserve water resources. The method of choice has been individual plant treatment (IPT). Alan began as a young boy carrying a three gallon spray can from early in the morning until mid afternoon applying kerosene as a basal treatment. Later, he added 2,4,5-T to help in the kill and he was near 100% effective. These long hard days gave everyone involved an understanding of what it takes to stay on top of brush encroachment. Alan and his father believed that this selective method was the most environmentally friendly way to address the problem and resulted in the least amount of chemical applied on the land. For over 30 years, since Alan has been managing the ranch, he has hired one or two high school students to help spray mesquite. The local high school football coach loved Alan and the shape these boys were in when they reported for two-a-days in August. Alan’s stern safety talks always included a caution to drink plenty of water and to watch for rattlesnakes.

Clayton Bernard, a 2004 Civil Engineering graduate of Texas A & M and past summer employee, said, “Alan would start out looking for a good hard working summer helper by having Jacquetta scout for him at school by looking for a dependable hard working student. Then, he would apprentice you by having you do spring time yard work until school was out and he was sure you were a hard worker.” Alan would pick up his students at 6:00 a.m. and take them to the café for a breakfast of eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy. Alan believed his summer help would work harder with a good breakfast under their belt.

The T-Bar Ranch has received very little cost share or incentive for brush management. They have treated the mesquite encroachment before it was dense enough to qualify for government payments. Alan budgets for the treatment of brush annually as a part of his overall business plan. This long term commitment has resulted in a good example of what it takes to overcome a serious threat to north Texas rangelands.

Mechanical treatment with a bull dozer has been used on some areas, primarily on acquired land with heavy dense stands of mesquite. This method has been kept to a minimum, and due to the expense involved has usually been done with cost share

assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Tree dozed areas are raked and reseeded to adapted range grasses.

Weed control has also been addressed when needed. Alan's boyhood introduction to weed control was celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July each year pulling cockle burs. Some aerial application (very little) has been done to reduce curly cup gumweed density on certain sites. With a jump into current technology, a new method of selective weed control just started in spring 2008. The ranch purchased a 500 gallon tank with motorized sprayer using a cluster nozzle for use in ground application to reduce weeds on range and pasture land. A GPS unit is used to guide the application. As testimony to all the prior years of mesquite management, this method of weed control can not be used on most other north Texas ranches due to brush densities.

Proper grazing management of forage resources has been an important goal of the ranch and is continually being carried out. Litter is accumulating on pastures. Primary grazing plants are multiplying. The condition of the different range sites varies from high fair to excellent, and range condition is systematically improving. Weaning weights and calving percentages are gradually increasing due to progressive management of the ranch.

Over the years, rotation grazing of two, three and four pasture systems have been used. Originally, Alan rotated on a set calendar system, but with time and experience he has advanced to rotating on an as needed basis. Movement of cattle is based on summer rainfall, condition of pastures, and how the cattle and grass look to Alan. Alan now has a goal of resting 500 acres out of his total of 2500 acres of rangeland per year during the summer months. Alan does not feed hay except as needed in calving heifers or other confined situations. He believes standing hay in the pasture is much cheaper than hay in the bale.

The stocking rate being used allows the ranch to deal with drought in a reasonable manner. Very little cattle reduction is needed during low rainfall periods due to the level of forage availability and conservative forage use. Alan monitors the use and regrowth of his pastures daily. If needed, he reduces numbers by not replacing older cows that are sold annually. Alan and Jacquetta realize the effort it has taken to bring their ranch to its current condition, and they do not intend to damage these resources by overgrazing.

Graves T-Bar ranch has always been a cow-calf operation. In the 1950's, Herefords were used. The cow herd is now basically commercial Angus consisting of about 250 cows with a 950 lb. average weight. To get the best advantage from available grazing, a cross breeding program with bulls from breeds such as Main-Anjou or Simmental is used. Alan keeps about 13 bulls available which are put on the cows during April through September. Artificial insemination is also a part of the breeding program. Most replacement heifers are raised on the ranch.

Going to the extra effort required to take care of natural resources requires a mindset and a commitment to do just that. These efforts can sometimes seem expensive at the moment, costing time, money, and a lot of energy. But, the truth lies in the understanding

that it is a long range investment that will pay off in the future. Alan and Jacquetta Graves like to refer to the term “sustainability” when thinking of their efforts to take care of their ranch. Seventy years of sustainability in this family has resulted in a productive and profitable ranching business. And, probably most important, future generations will see that sustainability continues to be the goal.

It is an honor to recognize the Graves T-Bar Ranch with the 2008 Outstanding Rangeland Management Award.