

Family generations

Robin Giles is proudest of his high-performing, moderate-sized cattle.



Angus fit the rough central Texas hill country that Robin Giles and his family have called home for generations. His current cow lines trace back to three Angus cows imported from Scotland by his grandfather, standing testimony to the longevity of the cow lines and the people who have managed them.



Texas Proud

Generations of Angus and of the Giles family have flourished in the hill country of central Texas.

STORY & PHOTOS
BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

On a high, brushy slope dotted with limestone rocks and tiny yellow flowers, Robin Giles cups one hand around his mouth and utters a long, loud “ooooo-weeeeeee.” He pauses, cocks his head to one side,

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Angus cattle, native grasses, flowing creeks and scenic overlooks, such as Palmer's Point (above), bind Giles to his family's 115 years of living on the land.

and listens. It isn't long before a deep, resounding "moooooo" replies from behind a clump of live oak trees, then an Angus cow and her calf appear.

From different directions, more cows and calves break through the brush and hurry over to the brown Ford pickup parked in the clearing.

"I do everything I can to keep them spread out," Robin says as he surveys the group of 20 or so Angus that have congregated around him.

"We rarely see our cattle. The proper care of livestock is sometimes no care. Sometimes we overpamper our livestock. If you do that, they get used to it. To make a living, you can't give them that individual care."

Robin couldn't if he wanted.

As a one-family ranching operation in central Texas, the Giles have a lot with which to keep up — 200 mother cows in addition to 1,000 sheep and 1,500 Angora goats spread across nearly 10,000 acres of rough and rolling hill-country terrain.

Family roots

This is harsh and demanding country, laden with limestone and often plagued with drought. Still, it's land that Robin, like his father and grandfather before him, cherishes and fights to keep. The scenic overlooks, the gnarled live oaks, the tenacious native grasses, the flowing creeks, even the Angus cattle that graze the hills — they all bind him to his family's 115 years of living on the land.

"These hills are my home, the land we own, lease, and in between," Robin says. "When the livestock get out, you have to know it. There's not anyone left who knows it as well as we do."

Robin traces his love of ranching back to his grandfather, noted architect Alfred Giles, who, as a young man in 1873, immigrated to the United States from Hillingdon, England. Two years later, he settled in Texas. He soon achieved success as a much-sought-after architect and designed residences, county courthouses and commercial structures all over the state.

In 1885 he partnered with his brother-in-law and began buying land near Comfort, a small German community on the banks of the Guadalupe River. Soon, Hillingdon Ranch, named for Giles's native homeland, consisted of more than 13,000 acres.

In 1887 the architect purchased three Aberdeen Angus cows from Scotland.

"The land reminded him of where he and his family had vacationed in Scotland, and he remembered the black cows on the green hills," Robin says. "So he wanted his own. By the turn of the century, he had his numbers built up pretty well, and he sold a lot of surplus cattle. A lot of them went to Missouri and Mexico."

In addition to Angus cattle, Alfred Giles raised horses, mules and Angora goats on his hill-country ranch. According to the *New Handbook of Texas*, he was a founding member of the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers' Association and a member of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers' Association (TSCRA).

Alfred and his wife also raised five children, one of whom was Robin's father — Palmer Giles, born in 1894. Like his father, Palmer became an architect. He

also worked in the Texas oil fields and served in the Army.

After his father died in 1920, Palmer decided he preferred ranching, so he disbanded his San Antonio-based architectural firm and moved to Hillingdon Ranch. During his era, Palmer added sheep to the ranch and sold wool.

A place to call home

In 1943 Robin was born. "When I was a little kid, all I wanted to do was play ranch," he remembers fondly. "I had toy cows and fences, and I used tree pastures.

Ranching is all I've ever wanted to do." As a young man, he attended Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. In 1967 he graduated from Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos with a degree in range management.

Meanwhile, he and his wife, Vicky Tavener, had two children: Gwen and Kip. Sadly, Vicky died of cancer at the age of 33.

In 1980 Robin married Carol Royce. The couple have one son, 14-year-old Grant. The three live in the ranch's old rock-and-frame farmhouse, where both Alfred and Palmer lived. Parts of the home date to 1850.

"Carol and I sleep in the same four-poster bed where my grandfather and father died," says Robin, who was raised in the house.

Many Giles relatives return to the homestead as often as they can. Weddings sometimes are held under a special live oak tree, and now and then babies get christened in a nearby creek. Occasional barbecues and reunions call cousins back home. Robin uses the family get-togethers to his full advantage.

"I host family functions with the aim of telling [my relatives] how important it is to hang onto the land and how it will keep the family together," Robin says. "I tell them I don't care how much

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-Robin Giles



Robin and Carol Giles and their son, Grant, live in the ranch's old rock-and-frame farmhouse, where both Robin's father and grandfather lived. Parts of the home date to 1850.

they get for the land, there's no single thing they can buy that will mean as much as the land and our family."

So far, his "sales pitches" have worked. Of Alfred's nearly 200 heirs, only one has sold 235 acres of the Giles's long-held acreage to someone outside the family.

"My only regret is that we haven't been able to make enough money to hold all the land together," Robin says. "We're always putting it back into our own ranch instead of a savings account."

During hard times, he and Carol simply survive off what the ranch generates. "When we have a bad year, it's a challenge to see how lean we can get by,"

Robin says. "One year we only made \$9,000. Our calves didn't bring much, beef and lamb were both cheap, and wool wasn't selling. During those lean years, we don't buy new trucks or put in new fences. We pay the bills and eat."

Ranching for the long term

Refusing to sell out during hard times and toughening up his mother cows — that's how Robin Giles has perpetuated the Angus herd his grandfather started in 1887.

"All our cows go back to them," Robin says, referring to the original three animals Alfred Giles brought from Scotland.

Robin's key to longevity as a rancher in the rough country of central Texas is two-fold.

"I raise Angus because they fit us better," he says. "Grandpa picked out a good breed for us. They don't take as much care, and they have no calving and udder problems. We don't doctor them for anything other than [to] vaccinate, and their moderate size makes them more efficient."

Secondly, "I put the most emphasis on cows and their productivity," he says. "And I stick with it. Cows are the important part of a herd. Bulls are just an intermediate to get there."

As part of his range-management plan, Robin also



Approximately 1,500 Angora goats, 1,000 head of sheep and 200 cows spread across nearly 10,000 acres of rough and rolling hill-country terrain provide diversity for Robin Giles's central Texas ranching operation. The diversification reduces stress on the vegetation.

grazes sheep and goats.

"Out here, you need 25 to 30 acres to run one cow," he explains. "In some places, it takes 1,000 acres because of all the juniper. So we raise one-third sheep, one-third goats and one-third cattle. Sheep and goats increase our animal units. Ten Angora goats are equal to one cow.

"They also eat the variety of forage that the cattle don't. By doing that, we can get the stocking rate down to 12 acres per animal unit. So it makes the land more efficient and diversified, too. There's not as much stress on the vegetation. To make a living ranching, you have to run a lot of livestock on a lot of acreage, so you have to be in a lot of places and spread yourself thin."

When it comes to calving, though, Robin doesn't worry whether his pregnant cows and heifers will need him. His attention to their health and body condition has eliminated most of the problems that cause difficult births.

"When I was younger, I put my emphasis on sales," he says. "In the '80s I realized we had to do something other than breed for big. So every October we weigh and divide the cow weight into the calf weight and cull based on that procedure. We get the percentage of cow's body

weight raised in calf every year. And that really evened up our cattle and made them more efficient. It gets rid of big, inefficient cows."

"Our first-calf heifers rarely have trouble," Robin continues. "In the last 20 years, we've lost only six first-calf heifers out of more than 1,000 head. We never pull calves. If they did have problems, they died off. I feed them protein only, then they're hungry and run all over these hills looking for grass. They're very conditioned, and their muscle tone is just super. So they have very little trouble calving."

To help boost the higher calf crop, Robin breeds for a moderate-sized animal.

"Your calf-crop percentage has a lot more to do with a profitable herd than the size of a calf at weaning," he says. "So I like a loose, low-birth bull. They won't hurt first-calf heifers. Loose bulls are ugly, but they're very useful when they're light and small.

"Our average cows are 950 pounds [and] raise 550-pound calves," Robin says. "If you try for more weaning weight than that, you'll end up with more open cows. Our calf crop is always more than 95%. That fits our production management, our kind of country and breeders who want the same kind of animals."

Overall Robin is the proudest of his high-performing, moderate-sized cattle.

"We don't have any cows that weigh 1,100 pounds," he says. "We keep the mature size down and have steers finish out at an ideal weight in the feedlot. Last year at the feedlot, our steers gained an average of more than 4 pounds a day. At slaughter they averaged 1,200 pounds, graded 87% Choice, and made Yield Grade 2s and 3s.

"When your cattle fit the market that well, then you know you're not in the Dark Ages."

Adaptability

"I enjoy our way of life so much because I have more fun with my family working than I do [doing] something else that costs a lot of money," Robin says. "I love all the facets of ranching. A problem to me is just a challenge, the government included. And I don't blame much on the weather. Drought is a part of this country. If you don't plan for droughts, you're not much of a manager."

With his elbow resting on the open window of his worn pickup, Robin pauses, grins a bit, then adds, "But I'd sure like a rain."

