

Conservation Enthusiast

Texas rancher Chip Merrill has lived a lifetime as an advocate for land stewardship.

Story & photo by Kindra Gordon

Conservation enthusiast, spokesperson and advocate would all be accurate descriptions of John "Chip" Merrill's involvement with conservation efforts during the last 50 years. A lifelong Texas rancher, Merrill has made numerous contributions to the range management profession.

He is a past president (1981) of the Society for Range Management (SRM), has been actively involved with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), is affiliated with several natural resource foundations, and is likely best known for his 33 years as director of the Texas Christian University (TCU) Ranch Management Program, from which he retired in 1996.

Most recently, Merrill was honored for his contributions with the prestigious National Golden Spur Award, which was presented to him Oct. 29, 2005, by the Ranching Heritage Association.

Practicing what he's preached

Despite the accolades, the title Merrill seems to relish most is that of rancher — where he gets to practice what he has often preached.

Merrill and his wife of more than 50 years, Virginia, have raised three children on their family ranch near Crowley, Texas, and all of the family has been involved in the ranch over the years. "It's a real team effort," Merrill says.

Merrill and his father switched from a registered and commercial Hereford

operation to registered Angus in 1947. Today, he and son John Jr. operate XXX Ranch Inc., which variously has been a registered and commercial cow-calf, stocker and farming operation. They represent the fourth and fifth generations of their family to ranch in Texas, and range management is a big part of their history.

Merrill's introduction to conservation and land management came via his father, Louis, who was one of the "founding fathers" of the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (SCS) — today known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Louis served as the regional conservationist for Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana for 20 years.

"I literally grew up with the Soil Conservation Service and those early people who approached conservation with a missionary zeal," Merrill says. His father was also charter member No. 4 of the Soil Conservation Society of America (SCSA) [today known as the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS)], so to say he's followed in his father's conservation-minded footsteps is a bit of an understatement.

Merrill earned his degree from Texas A&M University in range and forestry and worked for the SCS briefly before and after a stint as a pilot with the U.S. Air Force. But, he has spent most of his life ranching and teaching.



► "Natural resources are constantly changing and require on-site management by competent land managers and adequate technical assistance to make needed and timely adjustments," John "Chip" Merrill says.

Range management success

From 1961 to 1996, while also living on and operating his own ranch, Merrill directed the TCU Ranch Management Program in Fort Worth. He says he'd "never taught anything but Sunday school" prior to that. Evidently, that didn't matter. Under his guidance, the TCU Ranch Management

Merrill's contributions

If you do not know John "Chip" Merrill personally, chances are you do know or have benefited from one of the many organizations with which he has been involved.

He has served as a director and member of the executive committee of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA). Merrill is a past director of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), and he chaired both the TSCRA and NCBA Research and Education committees, where he led efforts to fund the first national beef consumer survey and to establish the national Integrated Resource Management (IRM) program.

As a founding member of the national Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), he is credited with getting more funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for grazing programs and technical assistance nationwide.

His other affiliations include the Society for Range Management (SRM), Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), Natural Resources Foundation of Texas (NRFT), Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT), and Texas Wildlife Association (TWA). He was inducted into the State Fair of Texas Heritage Hall of Honor in 1998 and continues as a director and member of the executive committee of the Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show.

Program became known and respected internationally.

On his own ranch during the last four decades, Merrill has utilized rotational grazing, first with deferred-rotation and for 20 years with one-herd intensive rotation units.

More than a decade ago, the Merrills switched from a cow-calf operation to a seasonal stocker operation, grazing the range from March through June.

One memorable range management success came in 2001, when they produced

97 pounds (lb.) per acre in 100 days with stockers on native range stocked at one steer per 2 acres, with no inputs except salt and mineral. Those gains came in their fourth year of drought and grasshopper invasion. Merrill says the key to their success is always to stock according to available forage.

Asked what changes he's noted in natural resource management issues during the last 25-30 years, Merrill says, "Most devastating is the shift from science-based professional management of private and public rangelands to misinformation,

overregulation and lack of qualified technical assistance for both. Environmental activists have damaged rangelands severely with lawsuits and mismanagement from the court bench."

He adds, "Natural resources are constantly changing and require on-site management by competent land managers and adequate technical assistance to make needed and timely adjustments."

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