



Above: John Warner inspects his herd. For more than 100 years his family has raised Angus cattle. Since those early years, everything on the Warner ranch has turned black – cows, layer hens, registered Morgan horses, even the family dog is black.

JOHN WARNER WALKS

In His Father's Pioneer Footsteps

Like red paint on the weathered barns near Sawlog Creek, the tracks in the buffalo grass fade a little more each fall. What started more than 130 years ago as ruts left by supply wagons between Fort Hays and Fort Dodge, are today little more than slight depressions running through the western Kansas countryside. Indian grass now fills the two ruts that lay hidden to all but those familiar with their history.

One man who knows the history of this supply route and the rest of the countryside is long-time Angus cattleman John Warner. The wagon trail cuts through the heart of his six

sections of grassland, running from the north in Hodgeman County to the southwest through Ford County.

A walking history book, Warner will spin you a yarn about the trail, Angus cattle or life along Sawlog. He's lived his entire 88 years on the land his father, Willis Warner, homesteaded in 1884. The elder Warner moved from Green County, N.Y., to establish a cattle ranch.

"All the honor of starting this outfit goes to my parents," Warner says reverently.

But Warner played a major role, although you'll never hear him say so. Most of his stories give credit to his father, a pioneer who literally

Postcards

F R O M

ANGUS AMERICA



PHOTOS & STORY BY JOHN SCHLAGECK



Eighty-eight years young, Warner takes an active role in the day-to-day operations. He begins each morning by feeding four stud horses – three too many, Warner says, jokingly.

carved a living out of the western Kansas prairie.

To learn a smidgen of the Warner Ranch history will take at least a day spent with the veteran cattleman. A visitor will log many miles, and open and close countless gates leading from one pasture to the next.

Dressed in a worn pair of black jeans, blue denim work shirt and a tattered straw hat he pulls tight on his head, Warner looks rugged, like the windworn countryside he's been a part of for nearly 90 years. Deep lines mark a weathered face that wears a contrasting peaceful, easy smile.

For a small man, standing at most five-and-a-half feet tall, his large hands are strong and calloused. You'll have to look long and hard to catch them in his pocket.

"A loafer keeps his hands in his pockets," Warner says.

All his life, he has worked hard. Warner

wants to be remembered as a working man.

He remembers feeding his black cow herd with three feed wagons, three teams of horses and pitchforks – all before a breakfast of eggs, toast and bacon. He'll also tell you he used to be pretty good with his hands, but today he can't fix fences or drive staples in a post because of arthritis.

While he hasn't written it down on paper, Warner can tell you all about his father's first years on Sawlog Creek.

"When my dad first settled in southwestern Kansas, he bought all the land he had money for," Warner recalls. "And when barbed wire was introduced, he started fencing his holdings and putting together a cow herd with cattle purchased from adjoining homesteads. Dad worked for neighboring cattle and sheep men and dug wells by hand."

By 1882, Willis Warner had purchased about 50 cows of nearly every description, which he selected because of their good milking ability and gentle dispositions. He later learned about the first Angus bulls brought to America by George Grant of Victoria. He bought his first Angus bull in 1893 for \$25. This was the first step in developing an all-black cow herd.

"Dad started showing some of the stock, and in 1905 his two-year-old steers won second place Angus feeders at the American Royal Show in Kansas City," Warner says. "In 1931 the steer calves won champion Angus feeders at the Royal.

"Then in the 1940s Davis Brothers of Big Rock, Ill., fed a pen of Warner bred Angus steers to win first place in the heavyweight class of the Chicago International Exposition."

Warner became a partner with his father after he graduated from Spearville High School in 1924. Throughout his 70-plus years on the ranch, Warner has insisted on using only the best bulls he could buy, although he didn't always end up on the right side of a bargain.

Since those early years, everything on the Warner Ranch has turned black. The cow herd is black. Layer hens are black, the family dog is black and 40 head of registered Morgan horses are black. Dressed in black hats, shirts, trousers and boots, the Warner Family rides its black Morgans in the Dodge City Days Parade each year.

Yes, there's plenty of history tucked away under Warner's battered straw hat. While his wife has bought him an attic full of new western straw hats, Warner prefers one with a frayed bill that barely shades his eyes from the elements.



POST CARD

After he's gone, Warner wants future generations to remember the Fort Hays/Fort Dodge Trail. He constructed this monument out of rock posts and baling wire to serve that purpose.

"I've been married to that woman (Ruby) for 52 years. I told her I don't believe in waste when she starts telling me I ought to switch hats," Warner says, a smile creeping across his face. "I believe in wearing things out. Nobody wears clothes as long as I do, so nobody wants 'em when I'm finished wearing 'em."

Driving east in his pasture toward a hill Warner calls "Coyote Mountain," he begins another tale about the drought of the 1930s.

"Nothing would grow out here back then," the Ford County rancher says. "The cattle died because all they had to feed on was dried up pigweeds. We lost 24 cattle one night."

During the Dirty '30s, the government bought some of the cattle for \$12 a head. The cattle not able to be driven to market were shot — 32 in one night — and the Warners skinned them and sold the hides.

Today the Warner Ranch is operated by John and his sons, Willis and Jack. The two sons operate a commercial cow herd of nearly 500 head.

Warner says ranching has provided good, steady employment for his family.

"I've always said ranching is hard work. But if you take care of your cattle, they'll do pretty good for you," Warner says. "This ranch is all I know. It will always be home."

Like the days when he started helping his father so many years ago, Warner keeps busy helping his sons with the farming, haying and

ranching. He begins each morning by feeding four stud horses — three too many, Warner says, jokingly.

The veteran rancher enjoys life and nurturing his creatures. The solitude and ever-present western Kansas winds are constant companions. One day he plans to be laid to rest in the cemetery fenced with rock posts in the southeastern corner of the Warner pasture. Two of Warner's sisters and a brother-in-law are buried there.

While he's witnessed plenty in his 88 years, Warner says things like the ruts in the Fort Dodge/Fort Hays trail have changed very little.

Like the trail, Warner has changed little over the years. He moves a little slower now, and a crooked wooden cane helps steady his gait. But tucked away under his battered straw hat memories of pioneering the vast prairie still burn as fiercely as a July summer day in Ford County, Kan.

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