

More With Less

Texas grass farmers win CAB Sustainability Award.

Story and photos by Abbie Burnett, Certified Angus Beef

It's July in the rolling Texas Panhandle Plains, but not a bead of sweat forms. A cool breeze moves the knee-high grasses carpeting the red clay soil like God himself is smoothing out the wrinkles in a blanket. Indigo clouds fill the northwest sky with a promise of rain.

In a region of guaranteed droughts and an average annual 18 inches (in.) of rainfall, Mary Lou Bradley-Henderson and husband, James Henderson, of Bradley 3 Ranch (B3R) near Childress, Texas, look in wonder across the landscape.

With regular dust storms, 50+ mph winds, and temperatures ranging from 115 to -35, just living here is harsh, Mary Lou says. Although, not this year.

"This is living the dream," she says. "You can't go wrong when it rains every other day. Not in this country."

If going through bad years makes one appreciate the good ones, Mary Lou and James have plenty under their belt to take a respite this year.

"Anybody can run cattle this year," Mary Lou says. "It's when it's 111 and ain't raining that it's a different can of worms."

They should know.

More than 65 years ago, the ranch was considered a wasteland when B3R's matriarch and Mary Lou's mother, Minnie Lou, arrived.

It was the 1950s, during the drought of a generation. Her soon-to-be father-in-law, Rusty, procured



the ranch property as a wedding gift.

As they walked the desolate landscape, Rusty pulled out his pocketknife and began sifting under the fine soil.

Minnie Lou's not sure what surprised her more: that there were roots or that they were alive. Nothing above ground promised, either.

"I didn't know until later," she recalls, "but no one had ever owned this piece of country for over 10 years without going broke."

She might have taken the same path had a friend not told her outright, "You're one of the worst grass people I've ever known."



They were understocking, but overgrazing.

The cattle were cherry-picking the good stuff, eating all the grass and leaving space for 30-gallon-a-day, water-sucking mesquite trees and redberry juniper to steal the land.

Distraught at what they'd done, Minnie Lou implemented a

rotational grazing plan and strapped GPS collars to her cows to find the grazing paths. She learned every pasture is different and finding grazeable acreage over total acreage per cow is challenging.

Minnie Lou admits, “For 42 years, I didn’t think we made any progress.”

In the early 2000s, Mary Lou and James sold their meatpacking company, B3R Meats, and returned to the ranch. They mapped out a 20-year plan to ensure water was no more than a half-mile from any point, picking up work Minnie Lou started. The fruits of their labor are evident this year.

B3R is the 2021 Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Sustainability Award recipient, and it’s been a long time coming.

Soaking it in

Water is the elixir to life in these parts.

In the 1940s, a saltwater spring was plugged and flooded the aquifers under the ranch’s south part, making groundwater unusable and unaffordable to clean up. In the north, the groundwater is so full of sulfates it must be kept moving to evade evaporation, and thus turning fatal for the cattle.



Water-guzzling plants ruled their pastures, and any rain was trapped or evaporated before it could hit the ground.

The plan: build more opportunities for water, gouge out the scourge of brush one by one and bring back the grass while managing a quality-forward seedstock business.

Droughts are not an “if,” but a “when,” and James and Mary Lou do their best to prepare. Still, the record drought of 2010 to 2014 changed everything.

There were 100 days over 100 degrees, and 45 over 110, recalls Mary Lou.

“Droughts like that are mind games because you’re defeated financially and defeated on what to do,” she says.

They thought they had a drought contingency plan.

“But we didn’t have enough of anything — grass, hay, or money,” James says.

Even when sparse rains came, the withered land drank it so fast, mud wouldn’t form. One evening in 2015, Mary Lou, James, and Minnie Lou gathered around their dispersal plans.

“I just thought it was our time,” Mary Lou says.

However, they were rained out overnight and couldn’t drive to the lease country.

“Okay, I hear You,” she says. “We’re not done. So, we weren’t done.”

They formed a new plan. First, they began investing in stock tanks (West Texan for ponds). It takes one dry year to remove brush and dig the pond and another nine for the rain to soak the ground, find equilibrium and begin filling.

It’s what they did for the 20 foot-deep tank just down the hill from their barns and homes. As a result, water that would normally flow into Red River was now stored for cattle.

A 10-year process became one as a single night’s rain in June filled the 2020 pond to the brim. There are nine operational ponds now, with more on the way.

In 2019, an interesting new design started floating in B3R’s

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water troughs. Aqua balls — black, polyethylene spheres filled with a touch of water — have saved 5,000 gallons, or \$3,000 to \$4,000 per trough.

Covering about 95% of the surface area, the balls prevent water evaporation, loss to wind, and surface algae growth. The water is crystal clear and mildly cool on a 90-degree day. Heifers gently nudge their noses against the balls to find a drink. In the winter, the surface area is so small, ice rarely forms. When it does, it easily breaks.

“We’ve got 45 tubs on the ranch, all about 2,000 gallons,” James says. “They’d typically be dry come springtime, and we’d lose another 4,000 gallons in the summer to evaporation. We’re saving several thousand dollars a year.”

Other touches are solar-powered wells that keep the water moving in the sulfate-rich areas, with overflow ponds for wildlife. Wildlife has also found water in the new springs that have emerged from brush removal.

Since Mary Lou and James came home, they’ve doubled the size of the herd and expanded acreage several times over. A two-section pasture that wouldn’t run 20 cows can now hold 45 at 30 acres per cow.

They’re proud of the successes, but it doesn’t stop there.

High expectations

Sustainability to Mary Lou and James is as much about the efficiency and quality of the animal as it is about land and water.

“We’ve really concentrated our cow herd on being efficient,” James says. “Sustainability is doing more with less, and well, the cows have to do that, too.”

They’ve built indexes around the performances of their herd and focus

on cows that can raise a calf, breed back, do it on minimal resources and maintain their flesh. With their background in meatpacking, Mary Lou and James are always keeping the carcass top of mind.

“We’re trying to get a very highly productive cow,” she says. “One that will have calves that’ll work downstream for some of the CAB steaks later on.”

While the genetics and performance indexes are finely tuned in a detailed spreadsheet, management in nutrition is just as intentional.

Growing heifers, James says they try to get them to their mature weight as soon as possible. Why risk it when they can get her growing stages behind her before the calf ever hits the ground?

That nutrition is all in the grass and how they manage it.

Hundreds of species are out here, James says.

“Predominately sideoats, blue and hairy gramas. Silver and Iron Master bluestem. A lot of buffalo grass. A lot of dropseed, some white tridens,” he says, “and we’ve come back in and planted a lot of what would have been the original prairie grasses like big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass.”

Like a carefully maintained lawn, regular and rotational grazing improves the grass. Growth above reflects growth below.

“To maintain grasses in a fragile environment, you’ve got to be able to let them grow plenty of roots,” James says. “If we are grazing those grasses, then they regrow and refresh and redo. If you don’t ever graze the grasses, they become stale and basically worthless from a nutritional standpoint.”

Biodiverse grasses are essential. They mature at different times of the

year, so the nutrient value varies. If a monolithic culture is all there is, James says it’s all really good or all not good.

This year their cows weaned 61.4% of their body weight and averaged a body condition of 6 to 6.5. A big deal in the Panhandle, says Mary Lou.

With more grass and better grazing comes more cattle. They can run a cow to 30 acres like they set out to do. B3R was purchased at 3,500 acres and began with a few hundred yearlings. Now it’s at 16,000 and about 850 head.


“For us, if you don’t have the bottom line, we’re not here,” Mary Lou says. “We’ve got to make it work. Truly, we are sustainable, or we’re not.”

Progress for progress

Before there were fences and farms in the Panhandle, stirrup-high grasses owned this land. With time, they have dwindled to near extinction. Now with time again, they’re resurrecting.

Nothing is a one-year thought process, Mary Lou says. Just like building a fence, she asks herself whether their decisions will last the next 50 years.

What will this place look like for the next chapter of ranchers? Will the land work for them as it has for Minnie Lou, Mary Lou and James?

“It’s taken 60 years to figure this all out, but we are about to get those grasses back that stirrup-height,” Minnie Lou says with a smile. “It quite grabs my heart when I walk into those pastures and remember what they were and what they are today.” 

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