

True GRIT

Oma Bell Perry has managed her family's Texas ranch with determination, sound principles and an extra dose of respect.

BY MERRIDEE WELLS

The Frio River is Oma Bell Perry's companion. It is entwined around her life as are the Angus cattle and wildlife which graze along its banks.

Even though the historic Perry Ranch address Leakey, Texas, was not Oma Bell's birthplace, it has been her home since 1935, upon graduation from college. She wakes to the sounds the Frio River makes as it winds past her limestone home. Angus cattle, native and exotic wildlife depend on the river as a water source. Down river the water provides recreation for thousands who visit the scenic locales.

The river's moods change as rapidly as the weather, providing hours of entertainment and

unimaginable beauty.

The ranch has been a part of the Perry holdings since 1927, when Oma Bell's mother bought the Big Spring; 7,000 acres of southwest Texas cedar would fairly describe most of the country back then.

Of, course, there was the river, forking at the very spot where the original homestead was built. Canyon walls dotted with unexplored caverns and hidden springs bubbling from deep within the earth drew the Perry Family to the spot.

Seemingly quite isolated, State Highway 83 runs the length of the ranch on the west at an elevation of 2,000 feet. The ranch headquarters is nearly 500 feet below, on the canyon floor.

"When Momma bought the ranch you couldn't see a deer, unless it jumped over the road," says Oma Bell, "the cedar were so thick."

Sheep and goats were the mainstay of the ranch in the beginning. The flocks, along with ranch crews who spent nearly six months each year clearing and burning the cedar, were responsible for creating what is today a productive ranch, which can accommodate large numbers of wildlife as well as 300 head of mother cows.

"We had to get rid of the sheep and goats when the predator problems became so great," explains Oma Bell. "When the government quit allowing us to control eagles and made it more difficult to trap or poison wild hogs and



coyotes we were forced to sell off the sheep and goats."

This move led the Perry women, including Oma Bell's two sisters, who also lived and worked on the ranch at that time, to stock the ranch with a suitable breed of cattle.

"We decided on Angus, and it's been a good decision," says Oma Bell. "We bought our first set of commercial heifers from Essar Ranch in San Antonio. That was in 1950. This is also when I first met Waymon Ashley, who was the herd manager at the time. He



Oma Bell Perry has spent her entire adult life on the historic Perry Ranch in southwest Texas.

their permanent herd number, a "P" for Perry, followed by the last digit of the year they were born (5 for '95). This allows us to cull females based on age and pregnancy status. We can't afford to have any boarders here. If a cow fails to breed she is sold," Oma Bell says.

The bulls which run with the Perry cows have a common thread. They were chosen for soundness above all else.

"I began buying yearling bulls when it became apparent I wouldn't be able to find older bulls which hadn't been fed too hard and were soft footed. This is rough country and a bull must be able to travel. We have purchased young bulls and brought them here to acclimate," she says.

In recent years selections have been made from the Grote Ranch at Mason, Texas and from RBR Ranch and Lastovica Angus, both of Fredericksburg, Texas.

Perry Ranch calves are annually sold through the sale in Fredericksburg. Calves are gathered by pasture and shipped to the Gillespie County Sale. Last year's calves, excluding the replacements, weaned at an average of 500 pounds, which would be well above 50 percent of the average cow weight in the Perry herd.

Grazing alongside the Angus cattle, visitors can see white tail deer and wild hogs as well as several species of exotics including Fallow, Axis and Sika deer, Blackbuck antelope, Audoud, Corsican rams and Four-Horned sheep. Wildlife management and natural resource conservation are important aspects of Perry Ranch survival. Oma Bell, a property rights activist, is quick to point out the many

was very helpful to us when we selected our heifers."

An additional purchase of 50 heifers came from Tommy Brooks of Brady, Texas. This marked the beginning of the Perry Angus herd. The cattle have been a part of this historic ranch ever since.

"We've never felt the need to change our breed or get other crosses," she says. "My mother, sisters and I always worked around the cattle and we needed animals who were gentle and easy to handle.

"Except for my foreman,

I'm here by myself now and it's necessary to maintain gentle cattle. We don't use horses or dogs, we just get a bale of alfalfa and honk the pickup horn. Our mommas are so gentle we could lead them through downtown Chicago if we had to."

Though the Angus cattle have become a tradition on the Perry Ranch, management practices have kept pace with industry changes.

The climate in Texas' southwestern section is hot

and dry, with little more than an 8- to 10-inch annual rainfall. The best grass is in the spring, when rainfall is more plentiful. Subsequently, calving begins in January and continues through the spring.

Pastures are periodically gathered and calves are ear notched, males on the left, heifers on the right. Bulls are castrated and given necessary vaccinations.

"At weaning we will select our replacement heifers, vaccinate them for brucellosis and freeze brand them with

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management practices which go on to benefit both domestic animals and wildlife.

"We're very careful about our stocking rates. If the rain is scarce we cut back on cattle numbers. We have our hunting rights leased and are careful about the numbers which are hunted based on population. In winter, we supplement the cows with alfalfa. It is high in protein and vitamin A, which is good for the cattle. What they don't eat, the wildlife picks up. If we fed cubes, or other supplements the wildlife could not utilize those," she explains.

Oma Bell has found it increasingly more difficult to ranch without interference from the government. "They do not understand we wish to preserve our land and way of life, not destroy it," she says.

This cattlemaster possesses a wealth of interesting facts and amusing stories about the historic ranch which is her home. The locale has drawn many interesting people over the years for various reasons.

"The Pearl Beer Brewery in San Antonio once filmed commercials here," she recalls. "They claimed the water they use to brew their beer originates right here at our spring!"

Cave explorers and archeologists have made significant discoveries on the Perry Ranch. A dinosaur print, relocated to the hill above the river where visitors can view it, tells of the early inhabitants of the Perry Ranch.

Indian artifacts have also been found along the river's edge where Native Americans camped while searching for food. They too found the springs a refreshing place to visit.

Oma Bell is the last of her



Since their introduction in 1950, Angus cattle have been the mainstay of the 7,000-acre ranch. "They are gentle, easy to handle, problem-free cattle which wean heavy calves," says Perry. "We've never felt the need to get any other breed."



family to live and work the ranch. After she's gone, it will be used as a place of peace and development for others less fortunate than herself.

"I have deeded the ranch to the St. Judes branch of the Episcopal Church as a home and school for needy children. I want them to enjoy the ranch and the river as much as I have," she says.

Oma Bell has asked the Angus cattle remain, as they have for more than 50 years, as an integral part of the Perry Ranch.

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Angus cattle share the Perry Ranch and the Frio River that runs through it with many varieties of exotic wildlife.