

LOCAL NEWS

Trust in the land

Sixth-generation rancher turns to conservancy to preserve family heritage

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By Sarah Junek / For the Denton Record-Chronicle

On the south side of U.S. Highway 380 near Denton Creek is a sign that reads: “Cattle Trail Crossing.”

It marks a dusty thoroughfare of another era when cattle were driven north by hoof from the Rio Grande through the grasslands of Texas to what the sign calls “the meat-hungry markets of the North.” The trail drives disappeared in 1895 when fences and railroads moved them into the history books. But despite American Indian raids, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, the Great Depression, constant droughts and fires that scorched the grasslands, family-run cattle ranches survived and spread across the rolling prairies of North Texas, staking their claims to a heritage that, many say, makes Texas, Texas.

Today, the old Chisholm Trail still winds its way through a number of North Texas cattle ranches.

In 1900, 85 percent of Texas’ 3 million residents lived on rural land, primarily ranches and farms.

Today, 82 percent of Texas’s 18 million residents live on urban land.

Tied to the land

From atop the high hill behind his house, Joe Barnett sees rooflines where a vast open horizon once was. And instead of herds of cattle moving past the trail crossing sign alongside his homestead, the 60-year-old fourth-generation North Texas rancher watches huge trucks hauling heavy equipment and lumber for new development springing up all around him.

But Barnett can’t imagine living anywhere else.

To him, his 1,250-acre spread isn’t just another ranch, it’s a family heirloom.

“It had been in the family long enough that, you know, I kind of just wasn’t interested in seeing it cut up and developed,” he said.

Barnett looked around for a way to keep his ranch from falling under the plow of development.

Last summer, he found it: the Connemarra Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust that seeks to protect undeveloped land in North Texas from urban sprawl.

Started in the early 1980s, it’s now one of 40 land trusts operating in Texas. In placing part of the Barnett ranch in the Connemarra Conservancy, the Barnett family retains the title to the ranch and can continue to raise cattle and hay, but they relinquish development rights on the property forever.

In doing so, Barnett devalued his own land by outlawing development on it.

But he talked it over with his wife, Janice, and his two children, Dan and Analie. They all agreed that it was the right thing to do. The family’s ranching heritage, they concluded, meant more to them than the windfall they’d get from selling it.

“We knew how much the land meant to him and the family all those years,” said Dan Barnett, Joe’s 31-year-old son. Dan lives and works in Grapevine, but dreams of one day moving back to the ranch to work it with his own children.

For Joe Barnett, every step he takes across the ranch serves up another memory, a deeper meaning, of his ranching heritage. The windmill his father, Billy Joe, installed in 1954 reminds him of the punishing drought that left much of the Barnett herd dehydrated.

The windmill provided water for the cattle and a cool swimming tank for Joe as a boy. Joe cut cattle, planted corn and hauled hay, and had run-ins with horses, cows and chemicals just like his father.

It was dirty, dangerous work. Joe’s father got caught up in a corn picker and lost his right arm. His grandfather, while working cows in his mid-1970s, was gored by a Hereford. And on most days, there were plenty of headaches and frustration. Yet Billy Joe loved the ranch as if it was another member of the family.

About a year and a half ago, at 81, Billy Joe was still working cattle during a spring roundup. He was in much pain, yet refused to see a doctor for whatever ailed him.

Around that time, Joe decided it was time to retrieve the old Barnett branding irons stored away in the barn. Billy Joe hollered at his son, “Hold on. I want to tell you about them brands.”

“All right,” Joe said.

“The straight one was W.Y.’s,” Billy Joe said.

W.Y. Barnett was Billy Joe’s great-grandfather.

“The crooked one was made for my grandfather in the ’30s by a fellow named Watt Jones.”



DRC/Sarah Junek
Cattle rancher Joe Barnett walks the highest point on his property west of Krum. Part of his 1,250-acre ranch is in a land trust, which means the family relinquishes development rights on the property owner.

Billy Joe told his son that family lore held that the “S” came from the first name of Samuel Barnett, six generations ago. His youngest, Kentucky-born son George migrated to Texas after word spread of free land being offered to settlers.

W.Y. Barnett settled about eight miles west of Krum, borrowing money to purchase 222.5 acres he bought for \$8 an acre in 1893, a time when free grass and range rights for cattle were being fenced in by the day.

When the old house burned to the ground, all that was left was that crooked brand, and a Denton County Livestock Protection Association Book of Brands with the Barnett “S” listed in the registry.

Joe listened to his father’s story, but he didn’t ask many questions. He now wishes he had.

“It was one of those things where you had a hundred questions and only asked two,” Joe said, speaking of his last days with his father.

Now the rusty wrought-iron branding irons are prominently displayed on the homestead’s fireplace mantle.

For Joe, they symbolize what mattered most to his father — his land, his cattle, his ranching heritage. Now, that’s all that matters to him.

“I quit branding a few years ago, but I’m going to start branding again,” he said.

A staircase inside his homestead leads up to a loft overlooking the Barnett’s grasslands and cattle. Leaning against the wall is an old barbed wire gap Joe cut from a fence line not too long ago. The last cattle drive for his family ended in 1933 on the northwest corner of the ranch when his father drove the Herefords from Decatur through that gap as a young boy.

“That’s the original gap they came through,” he said.

Joe hadn’t noticed it was the original gap until he saw the wire pieced together.

“See, there’s four,” he said pointing to the teeth on the barb. In all his years of working fence, he’d never noticed the old-style barbs. Now the cut-out gap in the fence leaning against the wall in the loft is Joe’s way of paying homage to his father and the Barnett family’s ranching heritage.

Keeping tradition

Last summer, Joe went a step further memorializing his heritage by registering his father’s ranch as a heritage farm with the Texas Department of Agriculture.

Since 1974, the Family Land Heritage Program honors farms and ranches maintained in continuous agricultural production by the same family for 100 years or more.

To be eligible, the same family must have maintained the land in continuous production and fit the old census definition of a farm, 10 acres or more with agricultural sales of \$50 or more a year. The owner must be actively managing the everyday operation, and if all of the land has ever been leased or rented to someone outside of the family, it will not qualify, said Family Land Heritage Coordinator Melissa Blair.

The program has honored 80 farming and ranching families operating for 150 years or more and five families recognized for 200 years of operation or more. The ranch’s agricultural history is documented and published each year.

Families receive a certificate of honor at a ceremony at the Capitol in Austin and are eligible to purchase a historic bronze marker to display on their property.

Joe drove his son, Dan, to Austin as part of a gathering of 122 other “heritage families” from across the state. Joe proudly strolled across the Senate floor in his boots and jeans, the only rancher honored in Denton County. His father, who had just passed away, was not far from his thoughts.

“We did it for him,” Joe said.

Joe is now spending most of his time trying to restore the native, drought-resistant grasses that blanketed the Barnett Ranch in its early years. He wants to do everything he can to see to it that the ranch endures for generations to come.

“It’s nice to have ... something for the children,” Joe said, adding that he hopes the land will hold as much meaning for them as it is has for him.

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