

Hitchin' A Ride

by
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One of the benefits of working at the TLMA is the opportunity to visit many of the Longhorn breeders across the country. Over the years, I've been able to visit breeders on both sides of the country and everywhere in between, big programs, small programs, and even a few very unusual programs.

Recently, I had the privilege of traveling through Oklahoma and Kansas, a trek that resulted in one of the most interesting weeks that I've had in a very long time. Some of the stops were at places well known to me, but I also had a chance to see some spreads that I had never seen before. Regardless, every ranch was special in its own way, even down to the unique and remarkable people who own and operate them.

This month, we're going to visit the vast grasslands of the Flint Hills area of Kansas, and explore a historic ranch that has not only been in one family for over 120 years, but has sustained itself strictly from the proceeds of beef ranching.

The Gilliland Ranch

When Mark Gilliland invited me to visit his spread in Kansas, my first reaction was "Hmm...6,000 acres of flat-as-a-table-top land. How interesting can that be? It won't take long to look at!" Well, I had never been to this part of the Flint Hills area, and how wrong I was. This ranch consists of miles and miles of beautiful rolling hills, with spectacular views, big trees, and an almost unlimited amount of chest-high native grasses. The spread has been in the Gilliland family since the 1800s, and as the sole owner, Mark Gilliland is responsible for an enormous legacy.

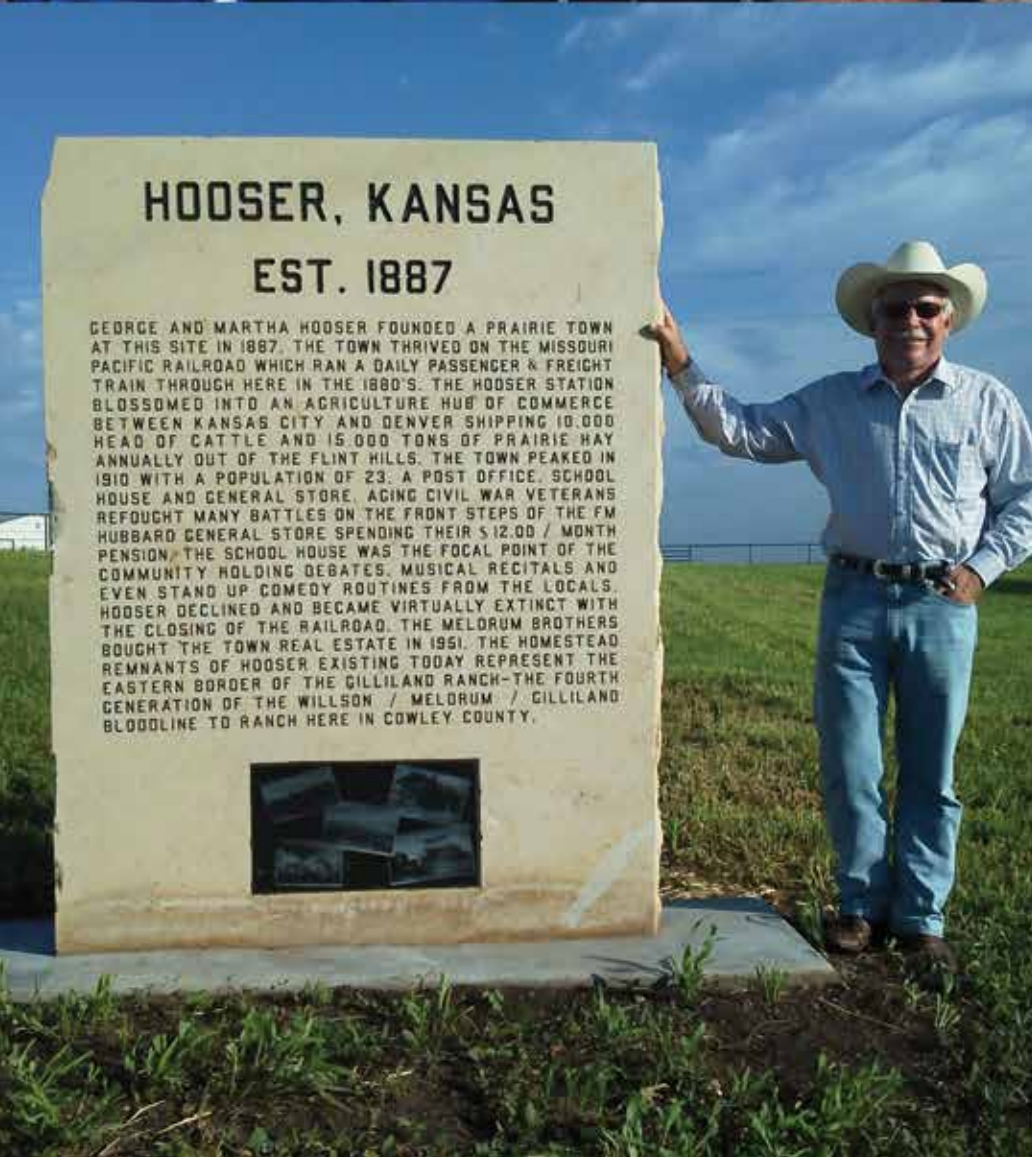
How did Mark Gilliland, a retired plastic surgeon who practiced for years in Houston, become the sole heir and caretaker of almost 10 square miles of beautiful land? Let's take a look at the history of this area and his family, and a ranch that has survived and flourished for over a century strictly from the income of cattle production.

In the 1880s, the Missouri-Pacetic Railroad was transporting thousands of head of cattle





and tons of prairie hay across the Kansas Flint Hills. Around 1887, a prairie town named Hooser sprang up along the railroad. A few years later in 1890, Mark's great grand uncle, JJ Willson, bought the first family ranch land adjacent to Hooser and started in the cattle business. JJ's sister, Althea (Mark's great-grandmother), raised two sons (Mike and Brady Meldrum) who learned the cattle business from their Uncle JJ. They bought cattle from New Mexico and then shipped them to Hooser by rail. They found these cattle would gain three pounds per day on the Flint Hills tall grass and could be sold for a tidy profit after a few months. Although they both had active social lives, they never married nor had children. These lifelong bachelors liked to buy land. They expanded the ranch from 500 to 5000 acres over the next 40 years strictly from ranching profits. Since he took over, Mark has added nearly 1000 acres to bring the ranch to its present size.



Management of the ranch was passed along to Mark's father, Jim Gilliland, in 1962. Jim had an interest in protecting the land from the ravages of overgrazing, yet he also recognized a need to protect and improve the revenue from cattle production. He introduced rotational grazing as part of his land management practices, and made such dramatic improvements in the native grasses that he was inducted into the Kansas Cowboy Hall of Fame in Dodge City for his ranch management efforts.

Jim Gilliland passed away in 2010, making Mark Gilliland the sole heir. Mark says he was very lucky. "If my grand uncles Mike and Brady had not been bachelors and had sired any children at all," he chuckled, "I wouldn't have gotten one acre of this!"

Mark actually grew up on the ranch, and left to attend high school at New Mexico Military Institute, where he was valedictorian of his graduating class. From there, he went on to get his undergraduate and medical degrees at the University of Kansas, completed his general surgery residency at the University of Texas, and his plastic surgery residency at UCLA. He practiced plastic surgery for 28 years in Houston, and now has retired

to undertake his second career – managing the vast Gilliland ranch. He and his wife, Charlene, now live in Winfield, Kansas, just a short drive away.

I was fortunate to spend two days with Mark as we travelled around the property. There is something overwhelming about being surrounded by miles of five foot tall grass. According to Mark, most of the grass is big bluestem, little bluestem, and Indian grass, and has a 16-18 percent protein content. Something is good, because the cattle on the ranch are all fat, slick and very, very content. As we topped hill after hill, each time we were greeted by a new vista of miles of waving grass, trees, and lakes. Occasionally, we would find the remains of an old homestead to explore; other times we would find ourselves sitting on a rock on a ridge, hypnotized by the view.

Mark understands that not only has a great opportunity been left to him, but also a great obligation – to continue the stewardship of the land and protect the legacy of his family. He certainly seems to be up to the task. He has undertaken a serious construction campaign, rebuilding the ranch house, improving miles of ranch roads, and constructing two picturesque stone cabins for guests. “I plan for visitors to have a first-class experience, whether they are here for

the hunting, the bass fishing, trail rides, or for the Longhorns. I want everyone to be comfortable and have a good time.”

Mark leases some of his land to the Drummond family in Oklahoma (they can be seen on *The Pioneer Woman* on the Food Network channel) and they help him manage the herd. A significant portion of the ranch is preserved for raising a quality Texas Longhorn herd. He currently has more than 50 head of Longhorns, and plans to steadily but selectively increase his herd to about 100 quality animals. In the coming years, he plans to visit as many other Longhorn producers as possible, and gather as much experience and knowledge as he can. He knows that quality is the key to a successful Longhorn program, but his attraction to the breed goes beyond the cattle. “I really like the collegiality and social side of Longhorn breeders,” he said. “There are a lot of great people involved in this breed, and I enjoy their company very much.”

I agree there are a lot of great people in the Longhorn industry, and the numbers just increased by two when Mark and Charlene got hooked. The only negative moment of my visit came as we left. It was a long drive out of the ranch, but not simply because it’s so big. As Mark’s journey through life proves, it’s a hard place to leave behind.

