Grass and the Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors

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UNTIL recently, most Texas stockmen thought as their forefathers for centuries past. Even after ten years of Soil Conservation Districts, most of them still talk about how many acres per cow it takes. Now we are beginning to find here and there, stockmen who recognize that they are essentially grass farmers. Just a few years ago we looked on pasture land as being that part of the State not fit to plow. Our few grass farmers are spreading the word that this has been a false gospel.

Today, more and more of us are buying seed and fertilizer and planting old cultivated land to grasses and legumes for grazing. From one end of Texas to the other, those few are proving that the way to produce animal products profitably is to feed the beasts GRASS!

In May, 1948 our Association began publishing a monthly bulletin called TEXAS TOPSOIL. It hasn't missed or been late an issue since its beginning. TOPSOIL *preaches* grass. An early issue was devoted entirely to tributes to grass.

TEXAS TOPSOIL told about one of the early pioneers in grass farming in the sheep country. His name is Clayton Puckett, past President of the Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association and recently elected to the Vice-presidency of the Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors. In 1940 Clayton had 4700 ewes on his Fort Stockton ranch. His lamb crop that average year weighed 251,000 pounds. Then he reduced his flock to 3600 ewes. During the four year period from 1944 to 1947 his annual production was 277,000 pounds of lambs. 1100 fewer ewes brought him 26,000 more pounds of lambs. His grazing was properly geared to the growth of the grass plants on his ranges.

Another case history from TOPSOIL is that of a Negro dairy farmer, Hulen Rigsby, my neighbor in Galveston County, where the rainfall averages 46 inches a year. During January, February and March, 1948 Hulen was producing all his milk from store-bought feed. His water-soaked pastures were about nil in nutritive value. During those three months of that year the average difference between his milk check and his feed bill was $159.

That summer he persuaded the County to open an outlet for his drainage water and he became a Cooperator with our Brazoria-Galveston Soil Conservation District. With the technical advice of the Soil Conservation Service and some financial assistance from his farsighted banker, Walter Hall of Dickinson, Rigsby planted some White Dutch clover and Dallis grass pastures. The first three months of 1949 the average difference between his feed bill and his milk check was $555.

Of course, I can't very well preach grass farming without practicing it myself. My own experiences explain my enthusiasm on this subject.

At my home place, League City—a very few miles from Hulen Rigsby's dairy—I have done with beef cattle what he did with Jerseys. Before our Soil Conservation District was formed in 1944, my calf crop ran about 50 percent. The calves

sold weighing around 325 pounds and never came even close to topping the market. Since then I have been the best Cooperator I knew how to be, following my ranch conservation plan to the letter. My six hundred acres of drained, fertilized and seeded tame grass pastures are paying off. And I have learned that rotating the grazing also pays.

When I get enough of these pastures so that all my cows can be on them the year 'round, I feel certain that I can at least equal Tom Lasater's 600-pound, 6-month-old Beefmaster calves.

But so far I haven't done badly. My 1949 calf crop was 88 percent. It sold averaging 425 pounds. We could have made the calves weigh more, but the Houston Stockyard buyers think any animal bigger than that must be a two year old, and they cut the price two to three cents per pound on them. Our best brag is that since last May we made seven shipments. Seven times we topped the market. The last one was on December 14 when the 18 head of 420-pound calves brought 25 cents a pound straight across. Not one calf or its mammy had a bite of feed except grass.

A hundred years ago my ancestors bought the Thomas de la Vega survey just East of the City of Waco. I still own part of the original purchase. For years, tenant farmers cottoned the land to death. Twenty-five years ago, we cleared the brush and post oaks out of the bottoms and bought cattle. At first they did fine. Ninety percent calf crops were the rule. Then both calf crop percentages and weights went down and down. In 1944 we branded a 71 percent calf crop and sold it in November averaging 425 pounds.

Since then we have been cooperating with the McLennan County Soil Conservation District and the range men of the Soil Conservation Service. With their advice and the whole-hearted co-operation of our ranch manager, Dr. Jerry T. Millar, we reduced the numbers in our breeding herd to fit the condition of our grass.

There, too, we are seeding pasture grasses. So far we have planted and have up to good stands, three hundred acres of K.R. bluestem and one hundred acres of that Oklahoma meadow mixture. If we can get the seed, this spring every acre of old cotton land will be in grass. The only exception is a two hundred acre bottom field where we have alfalfa two years and oats one year.

We like Johnsongrass. We graze it in summer, resting our native pastures. When we cannot completely rest a pasture, we rotate the grazing between native and tame pasture.

This program is ringing the cash register. Our 1948 calf crop on November 1 sold weighing 535 pounds. The percentage figure was 91.4. Fearful of the market, we sold our 1949 calves earlier so there are no comparable November weights. However, the percentage figure was 94.7. If it gets much higher, maybe the neighbors will start complaining.

I am proud to be a practicing grass farmer. My ranch stationery has the words "grass farming" on it.

That is enough of my own experiences. Let's get back to the work of the Association of Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors.

For a long time many of us have felt that our 4-H and FFA programs stress too much the feeding of grain to cattle. Our big livestock shows pay king's ransoms for grand champion steers, in the State where corn crops average 16 bushels per acre.

Generally, Texans graze their commercial cattle. But our club boy program, until recently, has been mostly devoted to feeding out steers, barrows and wethers.

At the 1947 Houston Fat Stock Show

the grand champion steer was a 750-pound Aberdeen Angus that sold for $12,500. Newspaper accounts said the boy had put $700 in feed into the calf. In effect, he was paid a fortune for putting gains on an animal at a cost of three times their commercial value.

That steer and the feed bill that produced it are the sire and dam of our grass judging contests.

Our Association, in the fall of 1948, brought together representatives of the Extension Service, Soil Conservation Service, and Vocational Agriculture Teachers. The November 1948 issue of TEXAS TOPSOIL had two lists of grasses, 35 for use at the 1949 Fort Worth Stock Show contest, and 33 for the one scheduled for Houston. The grasses named were those of importance in the trade areas of each city. In addition to identifying the grasses, the boys were asked to learn these characteristics: native or introduced, cool or warm season, annual or perennial, and whether good, fair or poor grazing value.

At the shows the boys were given ruled cards on which to name the grass specimens and check the correct characteristics. They had a minute to study each specimen.

Range men should by all means see one of these contests.

The boys are keenly interested and the competition is intense. The contests are sights for sore eyes—eyes made sore from the glare of barren ranges.

Many of our Soil Conservation Districts now hold annual grass judging contests locally. By having them—activities of Districts and of this association on the state level—we are not only getting the young folks to know about grass, but our soil conservation districts and their supervisors are gaining recognition.

No boy has ever made a perfect score at any of these contests. We always have well grazed specimens and include some duplicates.

Another item on the list of preachments in TEXAS TOPSOIL is the value of complete farm and ranch conservation plans. These, of course, are worked out by the operator, with technical help of the Soil Conservation Service men, to SUIT the operator's individual needs. The location of water, salt and mineral boxes are all part of good grass farming. All of these, put on paper as a plan of operation, are getting done the important job of improving our ranges. Our association believes in them and preaches them.

State soil conservation districts are creations of the local people, to a greater or lesser degree, run by local people.

This Soil Conservation District movement is gaining momentum, but it needs a lot more steam. Especially must it have the real recognition and support from all who have to do with the land. I am convinced that it is the only way America can stay permanently prosperous.

Through loyalty to tradition, there are those who think that a few demonstration farms here and there will educate all the rest of the farmers and ranchers. Well, if land were all the same, that might work. But land pieces differ just as human beings differ. Sick land (and our land is sick) needs special, technical help. I know from bitter, costly personal experience that what my neighbor does won't fit my soil or my conditions.

This technical help won't ever work unless it is locally directed as to "when" and "where" as it is now through the supervisors of soil conservation districts. About 150 years ago a man said, "Were we directed from Washington when to sow and when to reap, we should want bread." Thomas Jefferson was the author of those forgotten words. The millions of us who have had contact with Washington-dominated agency programs know that Jefferson was right.

On-the-farm, technical assistance isn't the whole answer by a long shot. There

is a tremendous educational job that must be done. This New Agriculture, as it is sometimes called, is an abrupt about face for all the farming methods since the beginning of time. Our people need to learn its value.

To some of us, research, too, is directing its major efforts toward comparatively unimportant matters. Last spring, Louis Bromfield said that our experiment stations were devoting 90 percent of their work to the products of the soil, and only 10 percent to the soil itself. From my own observations, Bromfield's 10 percent is high.

Insecticides, higher yielding crop varieties, hi-bred corn, chemical fertilizers and so forth aren't worth a hoot in Hades if there is no fertility to the soil. The emphasis now being placed on such research projects is just postponing the evil day of reckoning.

There is nothing mysterious about this job of ours. Simply put, it is to bring nature's way of doing things back to our land. When it was left to itself, before man's interference, nature had a perfect system to keep the world in balance. Through soil conservation districts, this balance is coming back again.

Let me brag a little about our state soil conservation law. It is the only one of its kind. Most of the others are based on the premise that all agricultural brains are either in Washington or on the campuses of the Land Grant Colleges. True to form, we Texans are different. Eleven years ago, 94 Texas farmers "fit, bled and died" to get the Legislature to pass a law so worded that we landowning farmers and ranchers would run our own show ourselves.

The members of our State Soil Conservation Board are five landowning farmers and ranchers. And they are elected, not appointed. They are elected at conventions of representatives from each district in the State.

The Supervisors of our Soil Conservation Districts are elected, too. All five of them. They as well, must be landowning farmers or ranchers. And they must be bona fide residents of their Districts. There are no ex-officio agency members of our Boards of Supervisors, even as Secretaries. It is our program from top to bottom. We are mighty proud of it!

As a whole, Texans have confidence in these locally administered Districts. This confidence was again proven at the 1949 session of the Legislature. Those Senators and Representatives were almost unanimous in voting $5,000,000 to Districts during the biennum for use as operating capital.

I hope you will share with us our enthusiasm for the Democracy of Soil Conservation Districts. I hope, too, that you will all join together with us to build up the local leadership of Supervisors.

Texas soil conservation districts have made real progress in the past few years. 65,000 farmers and ranchers have become cooperators with us. In the field of grass alone, not to mention our many other coordinated practices, 700,000 acres have actually been seeded with good results. If the seed hadn't been so scarce, this figure would be much higher. All told, range and pasture improvement plans have been worked out with ranchers on over 20,000,000 acres. Our ranchers have put these plans in effect on well over 10,000,000 acres.

Although I have been talking as a Texan about Texas, the problem of all America's 2200 Soil Conservation Districts are much the same. Our task is to preserve the American way of life as we have known it. The time remaining to save this is very short. To do it, we must have the whole-hearted help of all agencies and all the people, rural and urban. We must all work harder and work together.

We promise that the Texas Soil Conservation District Supervisors will do their part.