Del River Farm—The Evolution of a Louisiana Grazing Enterprise

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Working with livestock producers that are progressive by nature, and want to do whatever is necessary to properly manage the natural resources that they have been blessed with, is the best part of working for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Another benefit of this job is being able to witness the evolution of a producer's grazing enterprise as the producer's goals and objectives are realized. Several of us here in Louisiana have been fortunate enough to work with such an individual in Mr. Dick Delhomme of New Iberia, Louisiana.

Mr. Delhomme is the owner and operator of Del River Farm, which is located in south Louisiana. The climate in this part of the world is pretty warm most of the year, with mild winters and plenty of rainfall. Needless to say, the results of pasture and range improvements can be realized faster than in many other areas of the country.

Del River Farm has grown from 60 acres in the mid 1980's, to it's present size of 600 acres of haying and grazing land. Each successive parcel that was added to the operation was in poor condition when purchased, with a large portion of the grazing area overgrown with briars, cherokee rose, and chinese tallow trees. The relatively flat topography and high rainfall in south Louisiana often cause drainage problems for livestock producers. This was the case at Del River, as several areas on the property had poor surface drainage which was hampering forage production,and causing trafficability problems in the winter months. These problems were addressed by the development and application of a resource management system which utilized grade stabilization structures and land crowning as the main components. These measures allowed for better forage production and increased the carrying capacity of the property.

Harvesting grass as haylage provides top quality stored forage for cattle.

Iberia Parish rancher, Dick Delhomme looks over a well managed stand of dallisgrass.

Over 250 acres of the property was originally used for commercial crawfish production. These areas are now part of a grazing rotation and support dallisgrass, common bermudagrass, native grasses and sedges, as well as several test plots of eastern gamagrass and switchgrass.

Several years ago Mr. Delhomme began subdividing his pastures with the purpose of adding flexibility to his breeding and herd management programs. He utilized a grazing management plan that was developed using the Grazing Land Applications software to assist him in the decision process. The carrying capacity of the ranch at that time was approximately 190 animal units with a stocking rate of 2.3 acres/animal unit. The grazing plan projected an increase in carrying capacity of 61 animal units after three years of implementation. The actual increase in carrying capacity after three years is 80 animal units with a stocking rate of 1.6 acres/animal unit. This was accomplished through optimum fertility management, an increase in production through surface drainage, and a higher degree of harvest efficiency facilitated by the rotational grazing system.

Delhomme says that the grazing system added the flexibility that he wanted, "The grazing system gives me the selectivity to put cattle where I want them to be. The old system was sufficient for what I had, but the way my operation has grown, I couldn't manage it any other way." The grazing management on Del River Farm has evolved from a four pasture decision deferred grazing system to a twenty pasture rotational grazing system over the last decade.

The grazing system has also complimented his herd management. Other than raising registered Angus cat-

Conservation and HOGS

H. Harold Bryant

A few miles west of the geographic center of Texas is the Forked Lightning Ranch owned by Charles D. "Buddy" Clark of Menard. Forked (pronounced Fork-ed) Lightning Ranch, located on the Edwards Plateau, is a 13,116-acre cattle, goat and sheep operation.

Mr. Clark's ranch operation is exceptional. This is a result of his excellent brush management program, grassland restoration, close attention to animal performance, and wildlife habitat improvement.

In a recent interview with Buddy (as he likes to be called), it is more than evident that his vision for total resource management is practiced on the ranch. He and his family have combined heritage, land resources, tradition, hard work, and stewardship into a ranching enterprise worthy of recognition.

Buddy Clark of Menard, Texas, holds one of the old style branding irons from the Forked Lightning Ranch. The ranch was founded by his grandfather, A.H. Murchison, nearly 100 years ago. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.

The lands, which became the Forked Lightning Ranch, were first acquired by Buddy's grandfather, A. H. Murchison, in the late 1800's. Forked Lightning was named for the lightning storms, which seemed to pass over the ranch as seen from the ranching town of Menard 10 miles to the west.

According to Buddy, his grandfather was a trail boss and worked throughout much of the central and southwestern United States. On his trips from east to west, Mr. Murchison would observe the various ranch country and decided that Menard County had exactly what he wanted in a ranching operation.

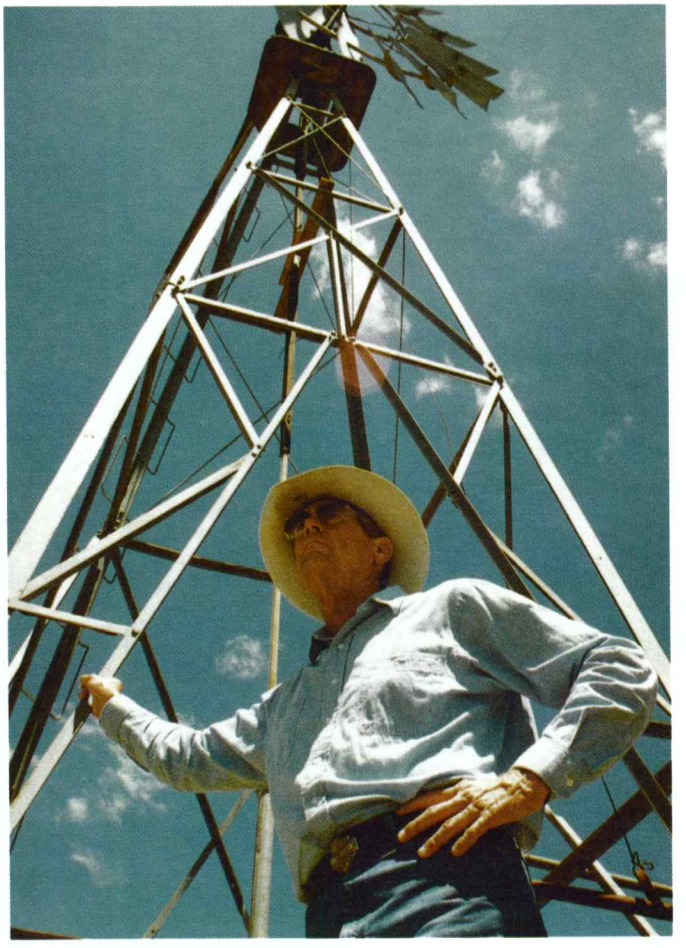
When Mr. Murchison passed away in 1953 at 102 years of age, the ranch was operated for a time by his wife. In 1958, Mrs. Murchison became a cooperator with the Menard County Soil and Water Conservation District thus beginning a long association with the ranch and a commitment to resource conservation.

Buddy began operating the property in 1962, and in 1964 formed a partnership with his grandmother and sister. Since 1994, the ranch has operated as a family partnership between Buddy and his wife, Jo, and his son, Lee, and daughter, Dandy.

Early in 1964, Buddy began to develop his vision for resource management as he worked with Soil Conservation Service technicians. As Buddy remembers, "I would go to the field with Audrey Baker, district conservationist, to measure vegetative conditions using line transacts. While Audrey stepped off the line, I would drive the pickup truck to meet him at the next stop. Audrey always had a ready supply of brochures and other information on grass, brush management, wildlife, and related material. I guess I was a quick study, because I was determined to apply resource conservation and management principles and develop a profitable ranching enterprise."

In order to appreciate the ranch today, Buddy pauses to remember the conditions that existed in 1964. "We had come out of the extended drought of the 1950's. The place was overgrazed and unwanted brush occupied most of the ranch. It was best described as a ranch of brush, dirt, and rocks."

Buddy recognized the most limiting factor on the ranch was the adequate distribution of water. This not only affected livestock performance, but also caused portions of the ranch to be overused. For example, in one, four-section pasture, there was water in only one corner. In 1964, the stocking rate was estimated to be about 32 acres per animal unit and animal performance was on the decline. Obviously, this was an unacceptable situation. Over the years, the ranch has incorporated water development within the other management criteria of



Water supplies and distribution are two of the key factors affecting cattle performance and forage utilization. The ranch has six windmills, six farm ponds, and 13 water storage facilities. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.