

# 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.

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

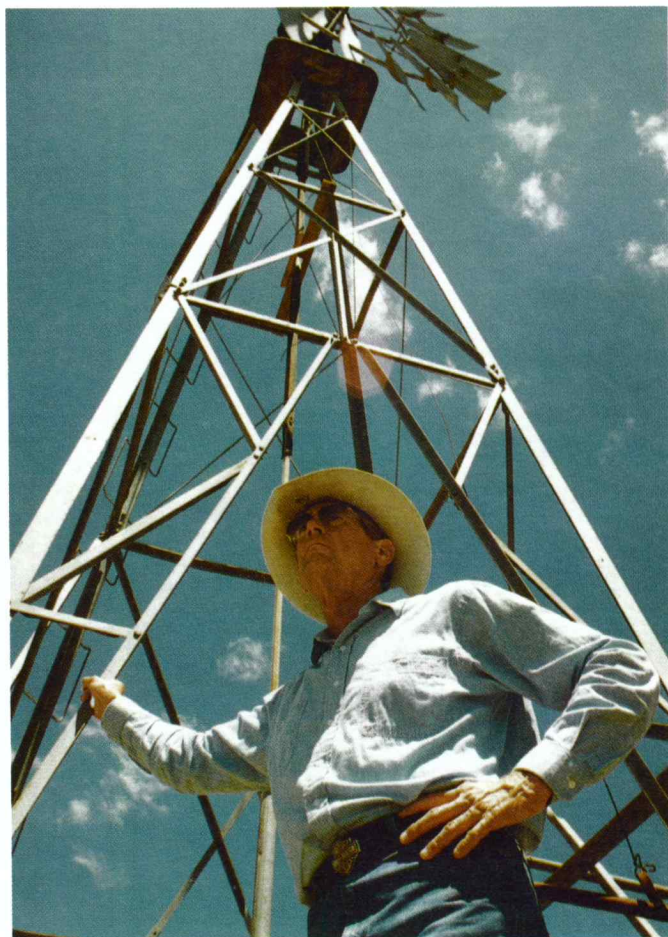
Service technicians. As Buddy remembers, "I would go to the field with Audrey Baker, district conservationist, to measure vegetative conditions using line transects. While Audrey stepped off the line, I would drive the pickup truck to meet him at the next stop. Audrey always had a ready supply of brochures 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

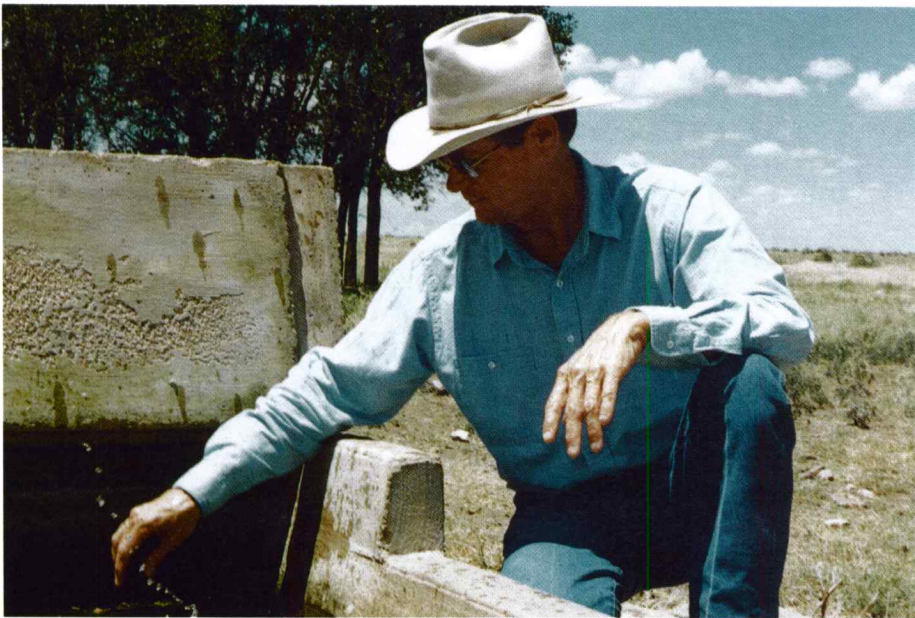


*Buddy Clark of Menard, Texas, holds one of the old style branding irons from the Forked Lightning Ranch. The ranch was founded by his grandfather, A.H. Murchison, nearly 100 years ago. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.*



*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.*





*Buddy inspects the operation of one of the more than 130 water troughs on his ranch. Providing adequate water to thirsty animals is critical in West Texas. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.*

cross fencing, brush management, and forage improvement. The key is to provide sufficient water for optimum distribution of grazing.

Working with Charles Anderson, district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly the Soil Conservation Service), they jointly developed the ranch's grazing plan, revised forage inventories, established grazing systems, and installed necessary water systems. Over the years, the carrying capacity has greatly improved so that the ranch now averages about 16 acres per animal unit.

Vegetation inventories provided a road map of where to begin and where to establish priorities for work. Using assistance from the Great Plains Conservation Program, Buddy began his plan to restore vegetative cover and productivity on the ranch.

Buddy observed that many of the better grasses such as side oats grama, little bluestem, and Indiangrass were present but were on the decline because of the invasion of woody species. Shin oak, mesquite, and prickly pear had to be managed if the grass and other desirable plants were to be restored on the ranch.

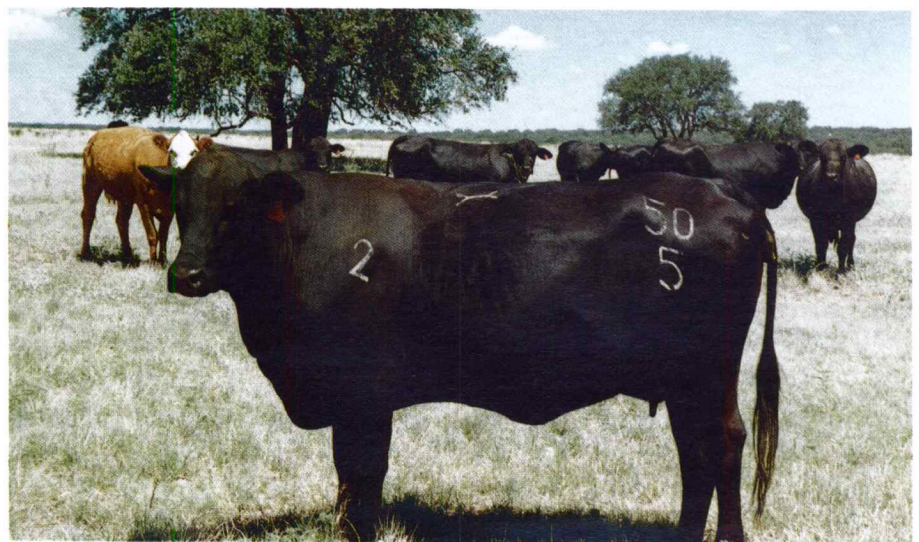
Four methods of brush management used on the ranch have been mechanical, chemical, fire, and biological. Two combinations used are mechanical-biological and chemical-fire. To date, the most effective method in terms of cost and results, as well as return on invest-

ment, is mechanical-biological when coupled with a "Priority Pasture System."

Mechanical brush management techniques such as tree dozing and root plowing have been very effective on the mesquite and algerita areas of the ranch. Chemicals have been aerially applied for prickly pear control with mostly good results during the early to mid-1970's. However, the price spiral brought on by the high cost of aerially applied chemicals led to the combination of chemical-fire for a much less expensive control of prickly pear without the erratic results of chemicals alone.

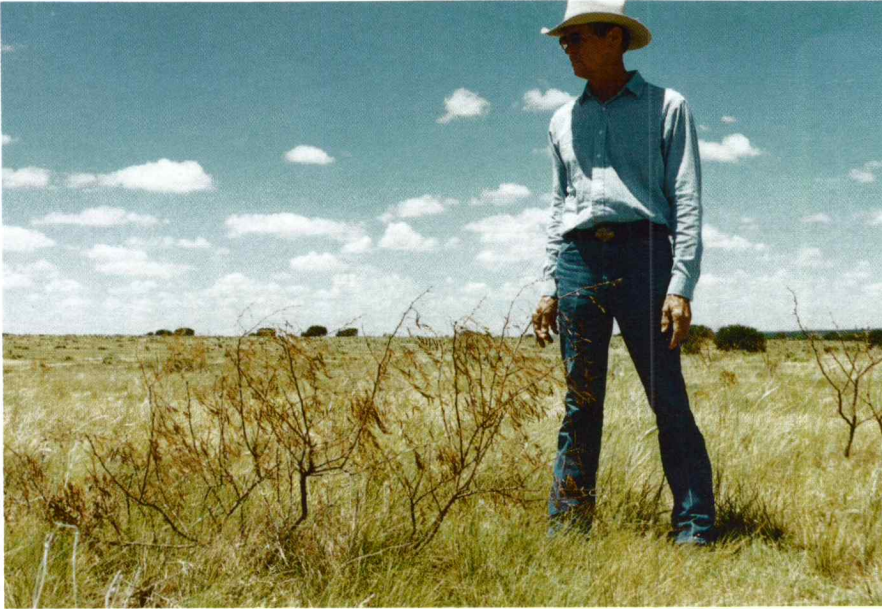
Buddy began by chaining selected pastures to knock down the shin oak and put as much canopy on the ground as possible. Angora goats were then used to graze the sprouts to the point of near total defoliation of the plants. This type of "Priority Pasture System" required a stocking rate of nine goats per acre. He uses this system during the five-month growing season for shin oak and determined that this type of grazing management must be carried out for three continuous years in order to achieve his planned objectives. Buddy has been quoted as saying, "I'm a grass farmer. The animals are simply the harvesters." This statement is probably the best insight into Buddy's ranching philosophy.

Cattle, goats and sheep pay the bills on the Forked Lightning. In addition, income from wildlife makes a substantial contribution to the overall ranching operation. Through the years several cattle breeds and crosses have been either used or tried on the ranch. From observations, weaning weights, cattle performance, and markets it was determined that Brangus cattle were the preferred breed. Buddy's herd is predominantly a commercial cow-calf operation with limited registered cattle. He keeps his herd to about three-eighths Brahman. He feels this is just about the right mix for maximum weaning weights and overall performance. He has used stockers in the past as surplus forage is produced or markets dictate. The cattle are rotated through the



*Animal performance is critical to management decisions. These Brangus cattle have greatly benefited from the conservation practices applied on the ranch. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.*





*Conservation practices have focused on brush management and restoration of grassland. Initial treatment has been followed in subsequent years by spot treatment with chemicals shown here. Photo by H. Harold Bryant.*

pastures as a single herd depending on the season of the year, forage availability, and working calves.

Angora goats are normally kept in small groups in a number of pastures. Small groups are usually easier to handle. This also results in lower intensity grazing pressure. The key to the management is to allow for proper stocking in each pasture thereby reducing the risk of over use of the better wildlife plants. As Buddy says, "The key to our operation is flexibility."

Sheep have been a relatively recent addition to the ranching enterprise. With mohair prices at static levels, sheep have been a way to diversify the operation and still market a natural fiber from the ranch.

Buddy recognizes that domestic livestock make up only a part of his total ranching operation. Since the early 1970's he has devoted a portion of his time to building a quality deer herd management program also. He has modified his brush management in many of the pastures so as to maximize habitat requirement and also meet the needs of the livestock. For example, several pastures have been treated by managing about 60 percent of the shin oak canopy on the land's contour. This leaves a natural appearance to the landscape and provides the necessary cover to be left for optimum habitat.

Buddy is well-read in the literature of deer herd management and has closely followed the work of many wildlife authorities. He has worked with neighboring ranches to bring about a better understanding of management techniques.

This has led him to be a spokesperson for quality deer management. In 1976 he was recognized by the "Fort Worth Press" with its Texas Conservation Award as Wildlife Conservationist for the year. And in 1977, he received the non-professional Wildlife Conservation Award from the Texas Chapter of the Wildlife Society. He has received other recognition for his outstanding contribution and leadership for applied wildlife conservation and habitat improvement.

Buddy leads by example and served as a director from 1985 to 1987 to the Texas Section Society for Range Management. In addition, he served on the Menard County Soil and Water Conservation Board for 18 years and for a time as vice-chairman. In 1981, he served as President of the Hill Country Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts and President of the Texas State Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts from 1991 to 1992. In 1992, he was elected to the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and served as chairman from 1995 to 1996. He is currently a member of the State Board.

Oh yes, the HOGS—A hundred years ago, a rancher traveling from Menard to the State Capitol in Austin would probably have gone by horseback. In 1998, one rancher uses his classic, metallic-blue Harley-Davidson motorcycle to make the same trip. You get the idea from visiting with Buddy that Texas and the rest of the country is best seen from the wide seat of his HOG. There is an appreciation of the outdoors, nature, and rangelands that can only be experienced in this fashion.

It is evident that Buddy has made conservation pay on the Forked Lightning Ranch. In 1996, Menard County and much of Texas experienced one of the worst droughts in recent history. Even with below average rainfall, ample native forage was still available. This is a remarkable testimony to sound resource management through conservation the partnership of land owner conservation and NRCS technical assistance.

In 1997, the ranch experienced a wet, cool spring and this delayed the growth of warm season perennial grasses. Buddy said, "From my perspective, the effects of the drought were a long way from being over." The current stocking rate for the ranch was about that of 1996 and Buddy adopted a wait and see attitude for adjustments later in the season.

Typically, the weather turned dry during the summer and early fall, but the ranch ended 1997 with above average rainfall. Buddy was able to maintain a level-stocking rate with high-quality native forage.

Buddy has made his mark on the management of Texas rangelands. He has used sound management, common sense, technical assistance, stewardship of resources, and a commitment to conservation to build his ranching operation. He has conserved this part of Texas for future generations and the Forked Lightning Ranch will continue to be a part of Menard County's heritage.

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