The 33 Ranch: Stewardship in Action
Darlene Kutzler, Earth Team Volunteer

Caring! One word defines the 33 Ranch; caring for the family, the land, and the animals. Obviously, whenever a ranch has remained in the same family almost four generations, a lot of care has been given.

The ranch history began in 1914 when Cleve Berry's homestead near Cedar Butte, South Dakota, became the 33 Ranch, so named because Cleve and his new bride, Jessie, trailed 33 head of livestock from Nebraska to western Mellette County to start the ranch operation.

In 1952, Cleve's daughter Jan and her husband Odeen (Skee) Rasmussen moved onto the ranch. Working together, they built the ranch resources. "None of it would have happened without Jan," Skee said, recognizing the fact that working together was the key to their success. The Rasmussens worked with Dave Steffen, Rangeland Management Specialist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, to increase hay production and range carrying capacity.

For many years, Skee had implemented a seasonal rotation grazing system which utilized several pastures. With Steffen's advice, Skee seeded marginal hayland to native western wheatgrass and green needlegrass as part of his hayland renovation. Stock dams were built to provide water for livestock during summer months. Artesian well water was piped to winter pastures. Some of the water developments on the ranch were cost-shared through USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service programs. These efforts and their concern for the land earned Skee and Jan the honor of South Dakota Range Manager of the Year in 1972 from the South Dakota Section of the Society for Range Management.

The ranch consists of 16,200 acres of deeded land. In addition, the 33 Ranch leases 5,200 acres of tribal land. Located on the edge of South Dakota's Badlands, the ranch topsoil is shallow, consisting of clayey and silty soils. The parent soil material is silt stone. A joke that Skee enjoys telling people who ask him how far they are from the Badlands describes the soil situation; "I've spent most of my life about two inches from the Badlands," he tells them. The land is not suitable for cultivation and the Rasmussens are using the land for the best purpose possible—grazing and haying.

Dan and Amy, two of Skee and Jan's three children, have returned to the ranch with their families. The next caretakers of the 33 Ranch include the families of Dan and Dawn Rasmussen and their children Jess, Briana, Laura and Katherine; and Amy and Blake Lehman, who have two children, Jason and Patrick.

Over the last six years, Dan and Blake have purchased Skee and Jan's cattle. In January 1996 when Skee and Jan retired, their children and families formed a limited liability company partnership and leased the land from their parents.

Jan and Skee now serve as valuable advisors. Jan says, "Skee's years of experience and knowledge about the ranch are a valuable asset to Dan and Blake." Blake likes the fact that Skee is available when they need advice for decisions. "We can get his advice every time we need it. It's a real benefit for us to have him here as ranching has been a real learning experience for me."

Dan, Blake, and their families calve out 560 Angus and Angus-cross cows and heifers and retain their 500 plus yearlings for sale until they are 18 months old. The best heifers are retained as replacements and the rest are spayed. Dan and Blake are working toward a better quality calf crop through artificial insemination.

"We have inherited pastures that have a good reserve of grass and desirable plant varieties of both cool and warm season grasses," said Dan. "We like to harvest as much of the grass as we can while maintaining the plant communities and still have a crop next year." Dan says that he and Blake are being conservative that way.

Dan and Blake are expanding Skee's rotational grazing system. Skee's rotation utilized summer pasture, winter pasture and a calving pasture. "He had a good program going, but there are always niches where you can improve," said Dan.

Some of the pastures have been cross-fenced to allow for more flexible grazing rotation during the growing season.

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Skee Rasmussen (left), Blake Lehman (middle), and Dan Rasmussen (right), discussing grass species and range conditions. Photo courtesy of USDA-NRCS, South Dakota, 1997. Photo by Darlene Kutzler.

Blake Lehman and his son rounding up cattle. Photo courtesy of USDA-NRCS, South Dakota, 1997. Photo by Darlene Kutzler.

Moving cattle through the grazing rotation. Photo courtesy of USDA-NRCS, South Dakota, 1997. Photo by Darlene Kutzler.
The Rasmussen Ranch is located in the mixed prairie of south central South Dakota with a very shallow topsoil. Photo courtesy of USDA-NRCS, South Dakota, 1997. Photo by Darlene Kutzler.

Pastures used in the rotation range in size from 500 to 1,200 acres. One summer pasture contains 8,000 acres, but does not lend itself to cross-fencing because of the Badlands. Using high tensile wire and solar panels, electric fencing is being substituted for traditional fences. "We've seen the benefits, we know rotation works, so now it is just building and maintaining the fences," says Dan.

Dan and Blake now use the calving pastures and winter pastures, which were not previously used during the summer, to run yearling heifers. The heifers are put into each pasture for two weeks at a time. "We target the warm season grasses starting in late May including big bluestem and sideoats grama," says Dan. "The heifers hardly touch the cool season grasses used during calving season including western wheatgrass and needlegrass." Last year, five pastures were used; and this year, there will be six. The same pasture is never grazed the same two weeks of the year, and the rotation is never started in the same pasture. If they begin the rotation in pasture number two this year, then it will begin in number three next year. Dan says, "Watching the big bluestem, there is hardly any impact. Good rains the last two years have helped the big bluestem go to seed after the rotation. If use on big bluestem gets too high, we will sell some yearling heifers early. It is a luxury that we have started out with a wide variety of plant species and a high concentration of warm season grasses."

The rotational grazing system has allowed Dan and Blake to increase the livestock carrying capacity of the ranch. On one rotation, they are now able to harvest 960 animal unit months (AUM's), where previously, they could only harvest 600 AUM's. Other rotations have shown similar improvement. Dan and Blake have determined that the added value would amount to $13 per AUM. Dan said, "That would pencil out to $4,680, but I doubt that the average would be that high in the long run because we have had above normal rains over the last two years."

Assistance in planning the rotational system now being used came through the "Bootstraps: Ranching for the 90's" grass roots program. The self-help program for ranchers was developed by a group of local ranchers with help from local Natural Resources Conservation Service, Cooperative Extension Service, and conservation district staff. As part of the Bootstraps Program, a range inventory was conducted on the 33 Ranch to help Dan and Blake expand their rotational grazing system. NRCS staff guided Dan and Blake through the process of implementing the recommendations and are providing follow-up.

Steffen says the 33 Ranch caretakers monitor the plant communities, looking at the grass to make sure the plant communities stay healthy. Because of the availability of the warm season grasses, the Rasmussens have been able to keep the heifer calf crop for increased weight gain.

Dan and Blake believe the investment of time (moving the cattle often) is worth the effort. "I used to wonder, are we going to have time to move cattle that often? Now, I look forward to and enjoy doing it," said Dan.

To balance the cattle's nutritional needs, they use a Grazing Lands Application computer program available from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. "Plug in the ration components and the program tells if the cattle are reaching the amount of gain you expect," said Dan. The computer program includes climate conditions, temperature, wind speed and hair length of the cattle in the balancing process. It can even be customized to the breed, age and size of grazing livestock. Hay and pasture forage are sampled to get a reading on the digestible organic matter and protein. Dan and Blake use fecal sampling during the summer to determine protein content of grass eaten by their yearling cattle. They believe that good nutrition adds to the conception rate.

Showing improvement in range management and livestock quality and health every year has been a family tradition on the 33 Ranch for 83 years. Dan, Dawn, Blake, and Amy are determined to continue the family tradition and provide a healthy lifestyle for their families. Hopefully, some of their children will decide they "want to be a rancher." Skee says he wouldn't change anything. "It's been a great life. I've been to Washington, D.C., three times in five months serving on various boards; and I wouldn't trade our ranch for the whole works if I had to live there."

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