Ranching is More Than “Cowboying”

Bob Bunker

In reality, Kent Radcliff is a rancher, but in his heart, he’s a range rider. As he talks about certain kinds of ranch work, the “cowboy” surfaces as a reverence in his voice and a gleam in his eye. “I like to hear equipment when it’s running good, but I’ll let someone else run it. I’d rather get on one of those,” he says, pointing to a handful of horses grazing near his ranch home. “You ride out in the pasture and see your calves are slicked off and fat and the grass is stirrup high. You feel great!”

His true love surfaced that day in 1973. Bryon McKinley Radcliff, Kent’s father, was still living and running things. “We were carrying 1,200 cows on 15,000 acres,” Radcliff says, turning back the years. “We didn’t have any stocking rate program, no scientific application. We just carried 1,200 cows on 15,000 acres.”

That day in ’73 Kent got a call from his father who wanted to powwow at the ranch office in town. That’s Dexter, Kans., in Cowley County down near the Oklahoma border.

“Dad said, ‘I sold 400 cows over at the East ranch. I want you to get a crew together and go over here and round them up. We’re shipping them in 15 days.’”

“Well, I created a fuss and jumped up and down. I cussed. I said, ‘What are we going to do for cows? What are we going to cowboy?’ Dad said, ‘I sold them for $500 a head.’ I said, ‘I don’t care if you sold them for a thousand dollars a head. What are we going to do for cows?’ I said that because I was wanting to cowboy. That’s when he said, ‘Who writes the checks down here?’ I said, ‘You do.’ He said, ‘Then get your crew together’.”

“I did, and we shipped them. That was in September. In October, you couldn’t give a cow away for $200. The market broke just like a stick—just crack—and it was gone.”

FOLLOWING THE BREAK, it was a quieter cowpoke who shuffled into his father’s office, hat in hand, asking, “How did you know the market was going to do that? We’d have been stuck with a thousand cows that wasn’t worth the powder to blow them to hell. This other guy’s now stuck with 400 of them and he’s paid an outrageous price. Are you sure he’s not going to come down here and shotgun somebody off their horse?”

Finally, there was room for an answer. “I’m 75 years old. I’ve been through five of these. After the third or fourth one, you find yourself sitting there in the office or in the saddle, smoking a cigarette or having a glass of ice tea, and all of a sudden it grabs you at about the belt buckle. You think, ‘Damn—I better get out!’”

Kent says, “I told Dad I still didn’t understand how he knew. ‘He said I’d have to go through one to understand. Well, the next year, in 1974, I had cows of my own, and the market broke again. I don’t know all there is to know about it yet, but I’m sure studying it pretty heavy now. You don’t get that out of a book down at the college. You pay very dearly for that kind of experience.”

AS RADCLIFF TALKS, the drouth continues to torture his pastures. At best, they’re knee-high to a pony this day. Still they are in better shape than grass on many other area ranches, according to Jeff Hart, with the Soil Conservation Service at Winfield, the County seat.

“There’s an awful lot of pastures that look like the top of a desk,” Hart says. “Those fellows have been overgrazing or using it right up to maximum and haven’t been taking as good care of their grass as Kent has.”

Six years ago Kent started a burning program. His grandfather who homesteaded the ranch in 1873 ran steers and did some pasture burning. But Kent’s father switched to cows and calves and operated without fire for 35 years.

The author is associate editor of Kansas Farmer magazine, a Harvest Publication published every 2 weeks, in Topeka, Kans. This article, edited for Rangelands, is based on an interview by the author with Kent Radcliff, ranch owner and operator in southern Kansas.

Editor’s Note: This is condensed from an article that appeared in the September 5, 1981, issue of Kansas Farmer magazine. Even though the discussion is about one ranch in Kansas it is felt the lessons learned and the management practices used can be applicable and appropriate on a much broader area of the world. The interview will be concluded in the next issue of Rangelands.

Kent Radcliff ranches in the southern Kansas Flint Hills about 50 miles southeast of Wichita. He has grown up on the ranch he now manages and has learned the ranching business through education and experience. The grass he is standing in is the result of a dry summer under his management. (Photo by Jeff Hart)
"The rule back then was that if you had cows and calves, you didn't burn," Kent says, "because you were going to kill your calves or lose your grass." He claims the rule survives on some ranches.

Hart, in backing Radcliff, estimates that about 50% of the ranchers in Cowley County practice some pasture burning. It's primarily done for brush control, sometimes for livestock distribution.

"Kent was one of the first to burn and a lot of ranchers followed after that," says Hart. "Kent's not afraid to try something new. If you can show him a better way or he discovers one, he's willing to make the adjustments necessary to give it a try."

THE RANCHER'S FIRST TRY at burning resulted from prompting by Carroll Lange, District Wildlife Biologist with the Kansas Fish and Game Commission at Winfield. Their first conversation was aimed at getting rid of wiregrass (prairie threeawn) in a prairie hay meadow. Spraying was out because it would kill the bluestem. Lange handed Kent a cigarette lighter and said, "Let's burn it."

"I thought he was crazy," Kent says. "Burn a pasture? What if the fire got away? What if it did get away and burn out a neighbor? If that happened, you've made an enemy for life—damn near.

Knowing and understanding the range grasses is as important as "cowboyin." Radcliff keeps track of all of his pastures and strives to maintain them at a high productive level. (Photo by Jeff Hart)

"Anyway, we wound up making a fall burn on that 80-acre meadow which was about 60% wiregrass. We took out 85% in one burn—just about eliminated it. After that I figured that Lange might know what he was talking about.

"Back a hundred years ago, nature and the Indians took care of these problems. Lightning, I'm sure, caused some horrendous prairie fires that covered thousands of miles. When the Indians burnt the grass to bring the buffalo in, they also eliminated all the trees. It was a sea of grass.

"Then people came and fenced off pastures and built roads going this way and that. And they quit burning because fire became a dangerous thing. Then they wondered where all the trees and brush came from. Now you've actually got to get out and work and sweat and think and worry whether your pasture's going to be good or not. A hundred years ago, nobody cared. It was good—all of it—everywhere—no one worried about it—there was more than we could use."

On Radcliff's ranch, fire is a tool in both his steer and cow-calf programs. The rules of thumb he has adopted for burning go like this: For cows and calves and a slight-to-moderate brush infestation, burn 2 years out of 5. Increase that to 3 years in 5 for heavy brush infestation, but never 4 or 5 consecutive years for the cowherd. "I do burn whatever pasture I put my steers in," says Kent, "because you're going for gain. With cows, you're going to maintenance. They're out there the year around for the end product—the calf."

THE RANCH OPERATES BOTH spring and fall calving herds. Kent burns pastures the first week in April, sometimes with cows and fall calves in them. But he says he won't burn one occupied by spring calves. "Fall calves will get up and go with the cows," he points out. "But spring calves are still young enough that they do what their mothers taught them—lay still until they get back. If anything threatens them, they just hunker down and become part of the landscape."

The drought has taken its toll. Radcliff and Lange have discussed a counterattack on the weeds, brush and trees, which gained ground on the grass this past year. They may try a November burn over entire pastures instead of just spot burning selected areas.

"From the 12th to 25th of November, we've had our best luck killing wiregrass and cheat. A fall burn also gets 60% of other undesirable grasses like Kentucky bluegrass and Bermuda. We consider them as invaders. They don't have the gain potential that big and little bluestem, sideoats grama, switchgrass, and Indiangrass have."

STEER PASTURE IS ALWAYS burned in spring, but a different pasture is used from one time to the next. Mere mention of his steer program brings a grin to Kent's face. "It's my most impressive grass program... It's a simple program, but you've got to have guts enough to do it.

"You've got to spread out and get something that's going to cover your expenses in a time when all you have are expenses," he says. For Radcliff, steers were the addition needed.

"Now the success of this steer program didn't occur because I was so smart," the rancher says. "It's just that I took advantage of the opportunity of being able to pick the brains of the experts. First time I bought steers and burned pasture—if I'd been a little older, I'd of had an ulcer or heart attack. I worried and I sweated about them and what they were doing. And when they went through the scales and weighed as much as they did, I just about fell over. I thought, 'Man, what a way to go!'

Although Radcliff doesn't think the program will work for everyone, he does believe it has potential throughout the Flint Hills of Kansas.

In late summer, after his decision to buy steers is made, he sits down with his oldest son, Byron James, and his foreman, Melvin Young. They determine together which pasture to use for steers the following spring and the number of steers to get for a stocking rate of 2 acres per head.

The early intensive grazing technique of doubling the stocking rate and cutting the normal 180-day grazing season in half is the only way Radcliff will run steers. He claims it
provides the cheapest gain he’s ever experienced. Other than eyeballing the creeks, the fences, and salt blocks, he says the only thing he has to do is watch the steers go around the pasture putting on 3 pounds of beef a day. “With those new insecticidal ear-tags, we don’t even have to bring them in to spray for flies anymore. We turn them in the first of April and the two tags carry them for 90 days. Oh, we go out and horse-back them once in a while to make sure everything is okay. But we don’t have to hustle them, rassemble them, get them hot or anything like that. We don’t fertilize the pasture, no tractor driving; and no fuel expended. All it costs is the interest on the money I’ve got in the steers.” Radcliff finds the most critical part of his program is making sure he has the best market possible during the first week in July. He says, “That's the week they go—regardless of the market! That's when we take our best short.

“IN EFFECT WHAT YOU’RE doing is putting up prairie hay. Your highest level of protein on bluestem grass is achieved the last week in June and the first week in July. In my younger days we used to put up prairie hay from the native meadow, my dad always said he didn’t care what we did on the 3rd and 4th of July. He didn’t care how sick we got, or what. But on the morning of the 5th, he wanted the mowing machine started in the hay field. You didn’t put up prairie hay in August; you did it right after the first of July. Dad gave us a slight advantage because of the holiday, but by then he had trapped in the grass the highest protein content he could get.

“Clenton Owensby’s (Kansas State University professor of range management) theory is to harvest that grass between the first of April and the first week in July—when it’s at its best, when it’s the greenest and the lushest, and when it has the highest protein content. And do it with a bunch of steers. That way you can double the stocking rate for 90 days and let them mow it.

“My best gain on the program was 3.05 pounds a day. Last year they made 2.99 and another year it was 2.92. I remember those averages because they are phenomenal as far as I’m concerned for steers on grass.”

WHAT IF THE MARKET WON’T light a firecracker that first week of July? Well, just move half of the early intensive steers to another pasture and postpone their market date. Right?

Wrong! “In about 25 to 30 days,” Kent warns, “you’ll be out there with a cake truck trying to maintain the same protein in-take into those steers in spite of what you’re losing in the grass. After the first of July, the protein level starts dropping. You can put that steer out there on grass as high as your truck door and he’ll still lose weight. “You see feed trucks going out the middle of August trying to put 11/2 to 2 pounds on to keep them maintained for market in September, October or November—whenever the best price comes. But think how much money is being put into that cake.”

The rancher’s insistence on letting go of the steers during the first week in July shoots down three worries: the cost of feed to maintain the steers to market; further interest on the original steer purchase money; and the lack of rain to keep the grass coming on.

ANOTHER HARD AND FAST rule: let the steer pasture rest from July to the following spring. By July, Kent says, the steers have cleaned it. “You’ve already ‘mowed’ your hay, so to speak. Anything in there after that is going to damage the pasture. The old saying is, ‘take half and leave half’. Well, I’ve taken my half by the first week in July.”

“Three years ago, I had 450 steers on the early intensive grazing system. I paid 70 cents a pound and put 300 pounds on them and sold them for 81 cents. A deal like that comes along maybe once or twice in a lifetime. I had $81,000 in these steers when I sold them the first week in July and the guy wrote a check to me for $181,000. My wife said, ‘We’re going to build that house.’ I handed her the check.

“It’s a little different this year. I haven’t contracted yet but I’m working on it. Overall right now it’s a losing proposition. Steers are good. Cows and calves are bad. If you investigate you’ll find over a period of years that when steers are bad, cows and calves are good. At least the calves are good. What you wind up with is good calves that will become good steers later on. I figure I’m taking a loss now on calves. In about 3/4 years the steers are going to be lousy. It will just trip over, like the domino effect you hear about. It will just keep tripping on down until pretty soon cows and calves will be good and steers will be in the poor situation.”

Although chores connected with the steer program are a breeze in the spring, it’s a different case in the fall when the animals come in. “Then it’s labor intensive. You work very hard at branding, implanting, doing medical work, and everything else when loads of cattle show up at the ranch.”

The six years Radcliff has run early intensive steers he has purchased them from Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas. He averages about 300 a year with weights from 410 to 457 pounds each. They arrive at the ranch from October to December.

The animals are wintered on brome and alfalfa stubble, where they are fed 2 pounds of 20% protein cake and all the alfalfa hay they will clean up. This results in a winter gain of 3/4 to 1 pound a day.

BY PUTTING A MATCH TO the steers’ native pasture in April, Radcliff triggers a kind of perpetual motion. He gets a relatively clean burn, which starts new grass growing over the whole pasture at once. With sunshine and little rainfall the steers are soon clipping off tender, young shoots of grass. They take it down to about 2 inches and then move on in a clockwise direction.

“It goes into that astrology thing,” Radcliff explains, “just
like the reason bath water whirlpools down the drain in a clockwise direction in the northern hemisphere and the other way in the southern hemisphere."

Usually 2½ to 3 weeks go by before the steers make it back to their starting point, according to Radcliff. By then, the grass at that location is five or six inches high. "It's kept in a growing situation instead of a mature, tough situation. The steers move around the pasture mowing it off, keeping it green, soft, lush, and full of protein. That's why you burn. Fire starts the grass that way, and then the steers keep it that way—for 90 days—if you go early intensive.

"BUT REMEMBER, YOU'RE using 90% of the growth that grass will have that year. And if you want to kill that pasture out, then just keep those steers in there the rest of the year.

"The first year you'll stunt it. The second year you'll eat it all, and the third year you'll go to town and get a job, if that pasture is what you're depending on for a living. Even if it's not, it will take 3 to 5 years to get that pasture back into excellent condition.

"You won't have the grass to run cattle on and if you do this you are stupid. We have them too. You know, we have bad truck drivers, bad policemen, bad firemen, and bad ranchers. They aren't exactly bad; they just don't comprehend what they have to take care of or how to take care of it. What was good enough for Dad, is good enough for me, they say."

RADCLIFF EMPHASIZES THAT fighting brush and improving grass should not be considered a temporary project. Influences on a pasture are going to vary from year to year. He believes a lifelong obligation of a rancher is to evaluate these influences and their effect on his grassland and manage accordingly.

Stocking rates were established for the 11 pastures on the ranch based on their soil types and range sites. But Radcliff notes that even adherence to those rates during—say drought conditions—might still add up to a case of overgrazing. For this very reason, he is, this day, contemplating heavier culling of his cowherd. Also, the only pasture on the ranch burned this year was for steers. "You have to burn the early intensive or they will spot graze the pasture, stay in one spot," Radcliff explains.

This rancher, who is an animal husbandry graduate of Oklahoma State University, places as high a value on the lessons he picks up from "cowmen" as those he learns from "experts." The key is that he listens to people wearing different hats and then drops a loop on any practice that appears sound for his operation.

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