



2012 Outstanding Rangeland Management Award Recipient Werner Ranch and 2012 TSSRM President Ken Cearley

Texas Section Society for Rangeland Management
Outstanding Rangeland Management Award
Werner Ranch

The current 1,556 acre Werner Ranch is located in Kendall County about four miles East of Sisterdale, Texas on the North side of Highway 473. The original ranch was settled circa 1854 by George Werner, and, although its acres have fluctuated in number and owners/management has changed over the years, it has always been a working cattle, sheep and goat ranch. It wasn't until January of 2000 that the current owners, Ken and Rebecca Fine, purchased the property and began their expedition of ranching. At the time of purchase, despite it being leased for grazing, the ranch was in the process of being subdivided, with plats of roads and lots already mapped. The Fines purchased the land in whole preventing the subdivision from getting a foot hold. Fifty percent of the ranch's perimeter is joined by subdivisions of ten to fifty acre tracts and it shares a border with thirty-three different neighbors. Ken and Rebecca are not your typical ranchers; in fact, they will be the first to tell you that they have no background, no heritage and no formal education in agriculture. Ken has a Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate degree in mathematics from the University of Illinois and Rebecca has a

Bachelors degree in child development from UC Davis. Despite their initial lack of knowledge on ranching, they made a conscious decision to maintain the ranch as a productive, viable livestock operation rather than turn it into a wildlife preserve which was among their original considerations. Ken credits local neighbors, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Texas Agrilife Extension and most importantly an invaluable partnership beginning in 2004 with Schneider Brahmans for providing him the guidance and education on the agriculture industry that today has made their ranch one of the most prime examples of excellent management and stewardship the Texas Hill Country has ever seen. Ken is a member of the Kendall County Farm Bureau, was a former treasurer of the Sisterdale Volunteer Fire Department where he is still a member, and a past member of the Texas Section Society for Range Management (TSSRM). Rebecca is currently a member of the Hill Country Cattlewomen's Association, the Hill Country Sheep and Goat Raisers Association, and Impact San Antonio.

In 2004 the individuals who had been leasing the ranch for over twenty years running sheep and cattle, gave it up due to management changes on their own ranch, and understanding the importance of livestock grazing on the rangelands ecosystem, Ken and Rebecca set out to find another lessee. Due to their lack of knowledge in the livestock world, they were more comfortable leasing their land for livestock use rather than owning and managing their own. They approached an individual who declined the opportunity because the ranch was too "run down", over grown with cedar, had badly deteriorated fencing and the water situation on the ranch was in poor shape. Finally, on a recommendation from the previous lessee, the Fines approached Schneider Brahmans, consisting of O.W. & Donna Schneider and sons Will & Wes, who recognized the potential of the Werner ranch and jumped at the opportunity. They described to the Fines their interest in taking the ranch through an intense management and restoration process, from the neglected state it was in to a viable and productive cattle ranch.

The Fines and Schneider Brahmans immediately began to develop a conservation plan which deemed fencing the perimeter along county Highway 473 the first priority due to the potential liability of livestock escaping and entering the roadway. Shortly after, they approached the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and entered into an Environmental Qualities Incentives Program (EQIP) contract for several more miles of interior cross fencing, which was their second priority. In total the Werner Ranch completed approximately ten miles of perimeter and interior cross fencing, replacing old existing and constructing new, to provide better grazing distribution among the many ecological regions of the ranch. With a "do it right the first time" attitude, the Werner Ranch constructed a fence which far exceeded the NRCS's specifications consisting of a nine strand barbed wire using all galvanized posts and stays. The EQIP contract also included brush management and by 2008 the Werner Ranch had also completed clearing literally the entire 1,556 acres of Ashe Juniper in

which they also stacked and to date have over eighty percent of the piles burned. Being extremely conscious of the fragility of the ecological sites on the ranch every acre was cleared and stacked by hand and not one tire or track of a machine touched the property. The Fines take pride in the Hill Country landscape and explained to the contractors that all Ashe Juniper is fair game, but touch one Oak tree and they will be looking for another job. Approximately thirty-five percent of the ranch has been treated for re-growth ashe juniper and constant monitoring and hand clipping keeps it in check. During the burning of the piles, patch burning was achieved across a majority of the ranch which helped stimulate the soil for an increase in forage production and assist with the establishment of a variety of grass species and forbs.

Also in 2008, O.W. Schneider had great visions for the four fields, totaling eighty acres, scattered across the ranch which had been left neglected since the early 1990's and had grown up in ashe juniper and undesirable grasses and weeds rendering them virtually useless for livestock or any other agricultural use. Once the ashe juniper was removed, repairs were done on deep ephemeral gullies cutting through portions of the fields so as to allow for a proper seed bed to be established prior to planting. They wanted to plant something that was tolerant to drought, low maintenance, and most importantly would be good supplemental forage for the cattle, and so the seemingly obvious grass of choice was WW-B. Dahl Bluestem, which has proven itself year after year. The four fields are now well established and essentially weed free resulting in a highly productive asset to the grazing plan on the ranch. Prior to fertilizing or working the fields, soil tests were obtained to provide a foundation of data to utilize as a guide to determine what direction management needs to go. The fields are incorporated into the ranch's two herd, ten pasture rotational grazing system and are never hayed, but are solely used to supplement grazing across the ranch to allow the six rangeland pastures to be rested an average of four to six months each year. A moderate stocking rate of 30 acres per animal units or about fifty head are maintained across the ranch.

The water situation was also in dire need of modification. Three existing wells were scattered across the ranch, but were extremely old and their reservoirs were depleted, and only three troughs existed on the entire 1,556 acres. The Fines deepened one of the existing wells, drilled two new wells, installed 3,500 feet of pipeline and strategically placed nine new troughs throughout the ranch to supplement water and provide a more uniform grazing distribution. By increasing the water distribution, and thusly the grazing distribution, they have begun to notice their plant communities become more adverse and abundant. Indian grass and Big bluestem have shown up on the ranch in places that were once cedar breaks. Desirable tree species that have been in decline are increasing including the Escarpment Cherry, Rusty Black Haw, Carolina Buckthorn and Eve's Necklace. The creeks and riparian areas have improved and switchgrass has established on many of the banks providing stabilization.

Ken and Rebecca are sound managers and take the environment and maintaining and preserving history seriously. Rebecca has taken an active role in the preservation of the old Werner homesteads consisting of several structures and an old family cemetery. Descendents of the Werner family come to the ranch each year to visit the remaining homesteads and gather at the cemetery of their ancestors and have a day of fellowship. Ken and Rebecca will provide tours to key locations throughout the ranch that the early descendents of the Werner family started. Rebecca was influential and adamant on stabilizing the creek bank below the oldest existing homestead to prevent further erosion from eating away. A rock wall was constructed to help protect the creek bank and ultimately help preserve the site of that early Werner homestead. Ken and Rebecca also are advocates and practice the use of no caustic chemicals on their ranch. Rather all brush and/or weeds are controlled either mechanically or by using a mixture of orange oil and vinegar. With intense management and utilizing these methods over the last several years, much of the ranch is void of noxious weeds. In 2009, Ken had three trenches cut, totaling over a mile in perimeter, where oak wilt had taken hold, in hopes of slowing or preventing the spread of the potentially devastating phenomenon. As of today the oak wilt appears to be in check, but drought conditions over the last several months have provided stressful situations for the Oaks.

Schneider Brahman, as the name suggests, raises registered Brahman cattle and O.W. and Donna purchased their first registered Brahman bull together before they were even married and now 35+ years later have become one of the most prominent registered breeders in the Hill Country and across the state of Texas where they own/operate over 4,000 acres of rangeland and have a base herd of 150 animals. O.W. comes from an agricultural background and earned an electrical engineering degree from the University of Texas, and Donna comes from a pioneering ranch family in Gillespie County. The Brahman business really blossomed in 1974 after observing the hybrid vigor of crossing Bos Indicus cattle with Bos Taurus cattle. The cross breeding of Brahman with Hereford cattle as a base led to the purebred breeding program which has won numerous local, state, national and international awards over the years. Some of their more recent achievements are winning a senior female class division at the Miami International Brahman Show and having the top bull, both high grading and high selling, at the last two San Antonio Stock Shows.

Both O.W. and Donna have been active members of the local community and also hold memberships in the Texas State Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), American Brahman Breeders Association, South Texas Brahman Association, Kendall County Farm Bureau and St. John's Lutheran Church. O.W. is a former director of the Kendall County Junior Livestock Show Association. Donna is a Daughter of the Republic of Texas and also was a founding member of the Hill Country Cattlewomen. Their son, Wes, is a current director of the American Brahman Breeders Association and also of the South Texas Brahman Association. Schneider Brahman's

also host periodic educational field days with various cattle organizations and Texas Agrilife Extension Service.

As any well managed ranch does, the Werner ranch has a strategic ongoing, constantly monitored drought plan. The overall objective on the ranch is to manage grazing in such a way to totally eliminate or greatly reduce the need to feed hay, and this is done through monitoring and having a flexible stocking rate which meets the current forage demands of the livestock. During the ongoing drought, very little hay has been fed on the Werner ranch, and any hay which is used is always purchased locally. The Werner ranch is conscious of the problems of purchasing “foreign” hay such as being a distributor of invasive and undesirable plant species. Supplemental range cubes and mineral are provided to maintain a balance in the livestock’s nutritional needs. Also during times of drought, the rangeland is rested more often and for longer periods of time and livestock numbers fluctuate to provide a constant balance with the forage production. In drought situations, calves will be weaned earlier and marketed through industry publications and registered sales throughout the state, country and world.

In 2009 the Werner Ranch was asked by a group of students and professors in the range department from Texas A&M University if they could come to the ranch and look for a variety of grass and forb species. Their objective was to find at least fifty-one different species during the semester, and they wanted to visit a Hill County ranch to find species typical of the area. After a day of searching and collecting, the group had found a total of forty three species or 84% of the plants on their list, which was amazing to the professors and students. This is a direct result and proof of the intense management that has been done in the last several years on the Werner Ranch. Ken and Rebecca, as owners of the Werner Ranch, have grown fond of being advocates of educating the younger generations to the agricultural industry. Being rather new to it themselves they take pride in educating and providing learning experiences to the next generation and their ranch is always open to opportunities to do so.

In 2010, O.W. Schneider entered into the Conservation Stewardship Program (CStP) through the NRCS, and through this program has taken an active participation in monitoring range conditions across the ranch. One of the monitoring methods O.W. has adopted is the use of photo points which are taken at key grazing areas within the different ecological sites on the ranch. These photo points, along with written notes, are evaluated and kept throughout the year. The data recorded for each site, in conjunction with a written grazing plan, plays a key role in the determination of grazing patterns, stocking rates and distributions of their cattle. Another component of the CStP contract was to rest pastures during the fawning and nesting seasons to help promote the success of the species involved and also to provide wildlife escape ramps in the watering facilities across the ranch to reduce mortality rates caused by drowning.

Wildlife on the Werner Ranch has thrived in recent years, due to the intense rangeland management practices completed on the ranch such as brush management, water development and prescribed grazing, and in addition, the riparian areas have been more intensely managed to provide a greater diversity of wildlife habitat. White-tailed Deer, turkey and quail are the predominant species on the ranch that are managed. Ken and Rebecca are advocates of hunting for the purpose of controlling and managing animal populations but don't condone hunting for sport. When they first purchased the property they seriously considered converting it into a wildlife ranch and even though that objective has changed, their thought process on wildlife has not. They both feel that when they moved to the ranch they were immediately infringing on the wildlife habitat. Ken was once asked about the coyote problem in Phoenix, AZ, where the Fines lived prior to moving to Sisterdale, and he responded, "There isn't a coyote problem in Phoenix, there is a people problem there". The Werner Ranch has a program in place to control feral hogs and Axis Deer, whose populations have boomed in recent years due to lack of control across the entire county, and recently made an agreement to control coyotes and varmints across the ranch to help provide a safer and more successful nesting and hatch for turkey and quail. In recent years the populations of turkey and quail have noticeably increased. Clearing the Ashe Juniper has opened up areas on the ranch to provide nesting cover and spot burning areas of the ranch has stimulated forb species to thrive which is an important food source for quail. As an added bonus the brush management has helped to reestablish spring and creek flow across the ranch which provides much needed watering sources for all wildlife species.

Though Ken and Rebecca Fine were neither raised on a ranch, nor had any formal agricultural education at a university, their love and devotion to the natural resources this land provides and their determination have made them true conservationists. As Ken put it, "We are willing to do anything and everything possible, pragmatism prevailing and regardless of the return, as long as it is the right thing for the land and native wildlife." The ongoing working relationship that has been developed between Ken and Rebecca Fine and Schneider Brahman's is comparable to finally finding that lost piece to a puzzle that was required to complete a crowning achievement.

Rancher narrative of goals, objectives and philosophies

Kenneth Fine:

Rebecca and I were attracted to the 1,556 acre Werner Ranch in 2000 because it was one of larger remaining undeveloped properties in Kendall County. We saw it as an opportunity

to purchase and preserve a reasonably large piece of the Texas Hill Country, a sensitive eco-system that is becoming increasingly developed and/or fragmented into smaller properties.

Our short term goal was to reclaim the property which had degraded into thick Ashe Juniper pastures with barren fields, little to no usable cross-fencing and few watering sources. To accomplish this goal, we utilized the assistance of the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Texas Agrilife Extension and the formation of a valuable partnership with O.W. Schneider and his family of Schneider Brahmans as ranch manager and operator.

Our short term goals have been accomplished with the removal of the Ashe Juniper, reclamation of the fields with permanent grass and the completion of extensive cross fencing and watering source installations. The result has been a resurgence of desirable native grass and plant species, increased natural spring flows and enhanced use of the property by livestock and native wildlife.

Longer range goals include continued access to the property for educational purposes by the Range Science Department at Texas A&M and other Universities and increased access by local students and other groups. The purpose being to educate youth and others about land conservation practices and the important role private landowners and ranchers play in protecting and preserving our unique and fragile Texas Hill Country eco-system.

An additional long range goal is to further investigate the feasibility of a conservation easement with the Texas Agricultural Land Trust organization with the purpose of preserving the Werner Ranch's natural resources, wildlife habitat and agricultural heritage as a legacy for future generations to learn and benefit from.

Rebecca and I feel a deep responsibility and connection to the land. As stewards of the Werner Ranch, we are committed to leaving the condition of its rangelands, wildlife habitat and natural resources better than we found them.

O.W. Schneider:

When contacted by Mr. Fine in 2004 regarding our interest in leasing the Werner ranch, we were pleased to have the opportunity to lease another ranch in our immediate area. Before the lease agreement was completed, a tour was made of the ranch to assess its current condition. The rangelands of the ranch were severely overgrown with Ashe Juniper, there was little to no cross-fencing and exterior fences were in very poor condition. The existing fields had been overgrown with unpalatable plant species and had erosion problems, some of which were severe. Watering sources to the pastures were minimal and in poor condition.

Having ranched in the Texas Hill Country for over 35 years, I recognized the potential the Werner Ranch had, with proper rangeland restoration, to become a viable and sustainable ranching operation again. We met with the Fines to discuss our vision for restoring the ranch's rangelands and wildlife habitat. It was a vision that would take a significant amount of time and investment on both our parts over a period of years to accomplish. The Fines were in agreement and supportive of the vision and a partnership was formed.

Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRSC) and utilizing the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), we have successfully accomplished our short term goals over a period of 8 years. This included removal of the Ashe Juniper, installing 10 plus miles of exterior and cross fencing, reclaiming the once fallow fields and adding 9 additional watering sources. After much research, WW-B Dahl Bluestem grass was selected for the fields based on its preference for high PH soils, drought and cold tolerance and has proven to be a good choice.

With the Ashe Juniper removal, moderate stocking rates and rotational grazing through the ranch's now 10 pastures, the ranch's rangelands and natural water springs have rebounded. Healthy stands of desirable native grasses including Little and Big Bluestem, Side Oats Grama, Indian Grass and Switch Grass have returned where once only dense stands of Ashe Juniper stood.

We are a fourth and fifth generation ranching family in the Texas Hill Country. We hold a deep love and appreciation of the Texas Hill Country and the diversity of its lands, plants and wildlife. It has been both a teacher and provider to our family. Long term goals include the continuing management of the Werner Ranch, our own ranches and other leased ranches using best rangeland stewardship practices to sustain and enhance native grasses and wildlife habitats in concert with our livestock operation. We want to show by example and continuing field days and tours, that ranchers are indeed the best land stewards and conservationists.

We greatly appreciate our partnership with Ken and Rebecca Fine, both as friends and stewards of the land.