

Fields of *Dreams* – If you clear it...It will grow

BY REED BOETTCHER

Improving the herd and land with the right equipment and know how

Many

many years ago they went broke farming in the Panhandle of Oklahoma. Now much like the grasses they pay so much attention to Bill and Karen Payne are thriving.

To understand the Paynes unconventional method of cattle production it's important to understand their love and dedication to what they do. They operate a stocker cattle operation in which they take full advantage of their land by practicing a form of rotational grazing known as mob grazing. With mob grazing Bill and Karen Payne discovered that with the right equipment and time their methods required less work yet produced higher returns while improving the land.

The Paynes thoroughly enjoy cattle production and they treat it as a family enterprise, which is the way they always have. Before moving to the panhandle where he met Karen, Bill lived on a high mountain cattle ranch in Wyoming. Karen on the other hand grew up in the panhandle. Her family was homesteaders there, and her grandfather was fortunate enough to make it through the dust bowl, and was able to purchase acreage from farmers that were leaving the area. After the couple got married they started a hog operation in which they practiced rotational grazing. Eventually the harsh conditions led them away from the panhandle and the Paynes started a 400 acre cattle ranch in the mountains of Colorado. It was family

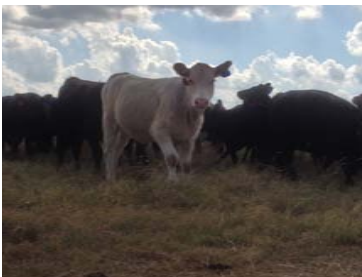
and greener pastures that eventually brought the two back to Oklahoma. They viewed land all across the state trying to find the perfect piece of property to start fresh. It was their daughter Sherry that mentioned a 900 acre ranch just outside of Saint Louis Okla. The

property was in bad shape. Barns were overgrown, structures were run down and the pastures were hardly usable, but their vision saw through the overgrown timber, and they decided to purchase the ranch.

When Bill is called away for other projects Karen operates the ranch by herself, but typically it's the two of them working side by side. Between the two of them they manage about 1000 head of cattle a year. Because of their passion and attention to detail the Paynes have been able to prosper with mob grazing on the given amount of productive acreage their ranch has. The clean and natural look of their place didn't happen over night, but with careful evaluation, and a minimal amount of right equipment nature provided everything needed to create a productive business for the dedicated couple.

They bought their place near Saint Louis with rotational grazing in mind, but knew it would take some work because over 75 percent of the land was covered with trees. For them improvement would start with evaluation. With the aid of the Noble Foundation they found that their land had the potential to support rotational grazing. Bill commented on their plan for improving the grass.

"First of all we didn't plant any of the native grasses that are growing today. The seed bank is there and



we have good ground moisture. We just gave it the opportunity to grow. After clearing trees with my skid steer and tree saw we eventually were able to start grazing. There are two things we utilize to improve the quality of our grass. One is hoof action. The other is speed. By concentrating cattle groups on our one acre grazing tracts hoof action creates seed to soil contact and fertilization. By speeding up the rotating process we found that it actually strengthened the grass and improved weight gains among the cattle,” said Bill.

Over time the once over grazed and under managed ranch began to improve. Working with natural resources available, and providing the opportunity through grazing practices the Paynes have created a natural environment that produces returns for their cattle production and a haven for wildlife. Wild turkey flocks thrive, quail have settled in the area, and deer are thick because of their conservation efforts. The Paynes have completely transformed their land in seven short years in which several of the years experienced severe drought. Now they have some of the prettiest grass you could ever see, and they did so with very little equipment.

You might think to completely alter the look of 900 acres it would require vast amounts of heavy machinery. Their skid steer mounted tree saw was crucial to the clearing process. The fast and versatile nature of the skid steer allowed hundreds of trees to be cleared for grazing in a short amount of time. It also allowed Bill to expose areas that were not as productive therefore eliminating areas for their grazing process. Their tractor is useful for many things especially running their nine strand Power Flex poly wire which has played



Middle: Bill and Karen Payne take a different approach to their cattle production by a method some refer to as mob grazing or rotational grazing. Here the two pose in tall native grass.

Above: Bill Clark and Bill Payne examine a stage of growth after a grazing.

Lower Above: Bill Payne shows how much grass is left after being grazed only three weeks prior.

Photos By: Reed Boettcher



Before



After

Before Bill Payne started the clearing process he evaluated the areas of his land that had the best grass production to begin with. He then carefully plotted out areas to clear for growth which eventually would turn into grazing areas that would hold multiple grazing paddocks. Bill used his skid steer paired with a tree saw to cut cedars and oaks down for future forage. He was able to cut hundreds of trees a day with this equipment.



a key role in their rotational grazing success. They use a Polaris Sportsman to check fences, and prefer to leave it out of the equation when moving their cattle. In fact, the only machine the cattle are exposed to is their red 1992 Ford Ranger. The recognition their Ranger has with the cattle is important to the Paynes because they spend so much personal time with the cattle. Bill stated the importance of other tools that make mob grazing easier.

“The true test to what we do is if it can be moved easy. It’s extremely important that materials can be easily moved because we have over 30 miles of electric fence and 12 miles of poly wire. The Power Flex system we use is incredible. We should’ve been using this from the beginning. We use nine strand braided poly wire and we’ve yet to have cattle break it. Our Stafix charger powers all our electrical fence and with my remote I can control the fence from any part of the ranch. Our grazing method is all about time and speed. Karen and I can move over three groups of 80 or more cattle in less than an hour,” said Bill.

The Paynes mob grazing method is simple in design but requires their devoted time. 80 to 100 branded and inspected heifer stocker cattle arrive on a truck. Once on the Paynes ranch they stay in a holding pen for three to five days, here the Paynes introduce themselves to the cattle. After the cattle have settled in they are released into a paddock that is sectioned off into one acre tracts. Every morning the Paynes rotate the group to a fresh section within the paddocks. They rotate three different groups that are staged 30 days apart across fields of varied grasses. The cattle stay on their ranch about 90 to 100 days and are then sold to a buyer that they have developed a close relation with.



This is a year round process that keeps Bill and Karen busy throughout the week. Physically spending time with the cattle aids their constant rotating of the groups. Karen commented on the importance of spending time with the cattle.

“We spend hours with the cattle. When they first get here we spend a lot of time with them. By the third day they are following us around. They recognize us and our red Ranger. When we drop a poly gate to rotate they are already waiting on us,” said Karen.

The Paynes methodical mob grazing technique aids in conservation and yields results for their production. It takes time and patience to make it work but for them it’s a lifestyle they are equally devoted to and love.



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