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His golden year at Chimney Creek turns up green
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Going with the grain

By J.T. SMITH

THE towering Texan looks over part of his 1,800 acres of wheat crop and wonders exactly how he evolved into a "wheat farmer."

At 6-foot-7, Danny Lewis stands far above his tallest wheat, even after an unseasonably, wildly wet January through May this year. It's the best wheat he's had in many years at Hamby, Texas. So during May, he nervously watched storm clouds every day down the final stretch.

At his size, Danny might have gone into sports. Coaches at Abilene High would have liked that.

"But Dad thought I needed to come home from school in the evenings and work — do my chores," Danny allows with a chuckle.

His father, Perry, instilled his work ethic. Unlike Danny today, Perry grew lots of cotton, grain sorghum and wheat.

"Dad always said he liked to raise wheat — but he paid his bills with cotton," Danny reflects.

The elder Lewis made up to 2½ bales of dryland cotton with traditional varieties of the day, which still would be a respected yield for nonirrigated cotton today.

"He just liked cotton," Danny notes, "and I liked it, too, but it just sort of disappeared in this area."

Key Points

- Danny Lewis has transitioned to an all-wheat grower today.
- Lewis grew up on diverse farm where his dad grew cotton.
- Hamby, Texas, farmer learned work ethic early from father.

Back in time

There used to be many cotton gins nearby when Danny was growing up in the 1950s and '60s. Now, there are no cotton gins near Hamby anymore. They're gone.

At that time, Danny was the tallest in his graduating class of 1966. He always was.

"You know how they make the pyramid photograph [of classes]?" Danny quips. "I was always the top of the pyramid, so I already knew where I was supposed to stand."

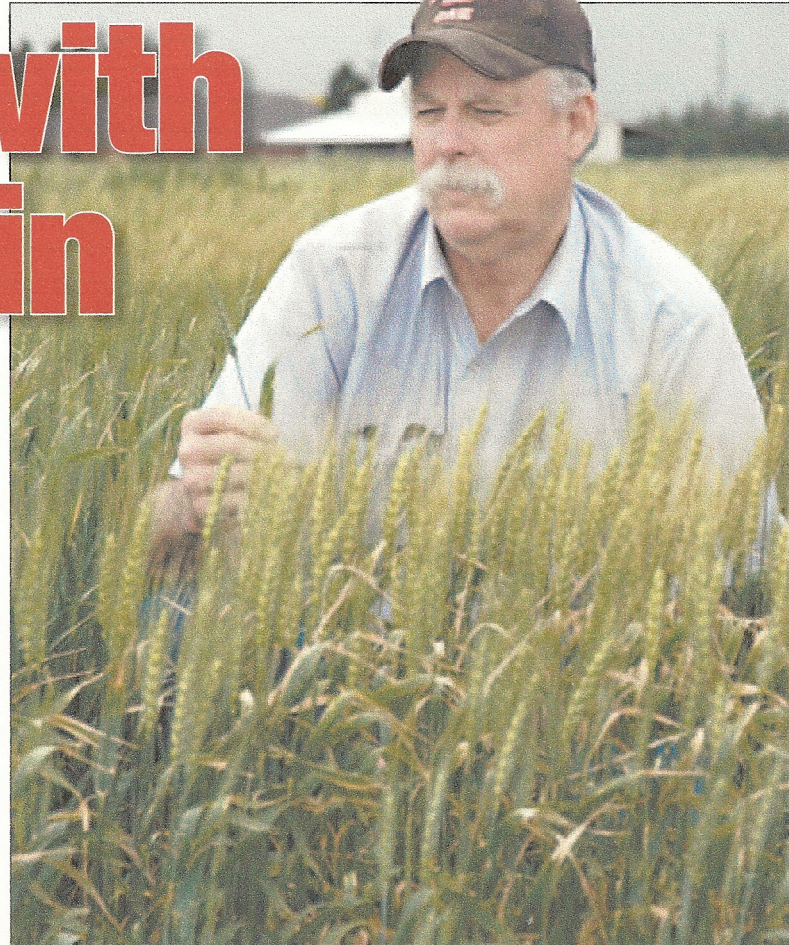
While the war in Iraq is in the news daily today, back in 1966, it was the Vietnam War that was raging.

Farm boy Danny found himself on his way there with the U.S. Army. However, the Army wanted to put some meat on the tall, lanky Texan's bones.

Danny laughs when he remembers the Army told him bluntly: "You're too tall and too skinny, so we're going to put some weight on you."

"And they did put the weight on me," he assures.

Danny recalls that while in Vietnam the Infantry advised



WINNING WHEAT: Hamby, Texas, wheat grower Danny Lewis stoops down to examine his outstanding wheat, blessed by wet months during the first half of the year. For about 30 years, his farm has also hosted wheat variety demonstration plots in cooperation with Texas Cooperative Extension.

him as a rather big target, "You'll just have to 'duck' a little lower."

After Vietnam, Danny returned to Hamby to find his father still hadn't given up on cotton.

"He had an old cotton stripper and hired me out," Danny remembers about his return.

Besides farming, Perry was a welder by trade and knew how to work with machinery. "If he didn't like the way something was made, he would make it the way he wanted it," Danny notes. "He made about half his tools and machinery."

His father would be amazed at how farm equipment has changed so dramatically since

farming in the 1970s.

Danny's father passed away 30 years ago after a battle with leukemia. And although the cotton fields are long gone, there's no doubt he'd be mighty pleased if he could walk through some of Danny's wheat today.

■ Read more on Pages 6-7.

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Livestock

Golden year turns green

By J.T. SMITH

FREQUENT and heavy rains during the first half of 2007 have left the historic Chimney Creek Ranch at Albany, Texas, with its Sunday clothes on.

July 2007 marks 50 years that Robert B. Waller has managed Chimney Creek, and he's seldom seen the 14,000-acre ranch look any greener. What's more, this July also celebrates 60 years of marriage for Waller and his bride, Ruby. The couple married on July 19, 1947.

"Honey, was it the 17th or the 19th?" Waller chides his wife.

"It was the 19th!" Ruby shoots back from another room in the ranch house.

Part of their house was built in 1870. There was only Camp Cooper and then Fort Griffin in the entire prairie region back then. The famed Butterfield Stage ran through the ranch. The stage went from St. Louis to California. The Chimney Creek Ranch was one of the relay stations on the famous stage route.

Multitudes of cattle also moved through area range for more than 20 years following the War Between the States during the Great Trail Drives. Later, cattle were loaded nearby in boxcars when the railroad arrived, and the great open range was fenced.

The ranch is so old even Waller, despite managing it for 50 years, isn't 100% certain where the "Chimney Creek" name originated. "But legend has it an old chimney that is on the creek gave the ranch its name," he allows.

Waller was born in Stephens County, adjacent to Shackelford

Key Points

- Chimney Creek Ranch manages range and cows.
- Robert B. Waller managed ranch for 50 years.
- Pasture rotations are key to good stewardship.

County, where he ranches now. He was with the Navy in 1944-46 during World War II, just before he and Ruby married. He later earned an agricultural education degree from the Agricultural & Mechanical College of Texas (Texas A&M University) in 1950.

By 1957, Waller and his father, Charlie, had leased the Chimney Creek Ranch. Waller has been operating the ranch ever since. Today, the Robbie Davis Johnson Trust owns the ranch.

The Waller family leases the grass and runs the cattle operation. The trust owners of the ranch lease the hunting on the ranch separately, as Chimney Creek is prolific in wildlife, including deer, bobwhite quail, some turkey and too many feral hogs.

"But the feral hogs are more of a liability — a nuisance," Waller assures. "We sure don't encourage them. We try to trap the hogs." That includes bringing in trappers to the ranch. But the wild hogs are mighty tough to stop.

Pasture rotation key

The cow-calf operation is the basic foundation of the ranch with about 50 registered Angus cows, roughly 50 Charolais cows, and the balance in Maine-Anjou/Angus crossbred stock.

Crucial to management is a 15-pasture rotation for the

14,000 acres.

"We do rotation and grazing deferment with the cattle," Waller notes. "There's no farming or cultivated land on the ranch."

Grasses include sideoats grama (the state grass of Texas), buffalograss, some bluestem, indiagrass, and lots of Texas wintergrass, which does well on the ranch.

"A lot of people don't like Texas wintergrass, but it can be real helpful in the fall and winter grazing," Waller says from experience.

He has no set magic formula on when to rotate cattle from one pasture to a fresh one. Instead, from his many years in ranching, he depends on visual appraisal of the range.

Cattle get 20% protein range cubes and are fed loose mineral in a covered feeder as needed. The ranch catches water in stock tanks and has a line from Hubbard Creek Lake.

"Our winters have been milder in recent years, but that will change sometime," Waller reflects.

The ranch is geared for fall calving. Chimney Creek puts bulls on the range during November, and leaves them December, January, February and, generally, part of March before removing.

On replacement heifers, Waller likes a half Angus and half Jersey bull. On mature cows, he opts for Angus, Maine-Anjou and Charolais bulls. He aims at fairly light birth weights for easy calving.



EXPERIENCE COUNTS: Robert B. Waller has learned from 50 years' experience managing the Chimney Creek Ranch. He rotates 15 pastures on the 14,000-acre ranch in deferred grazing. Frequent rains during the first six months of 2007 on the ranch produced a spectacular splash of Texas bluebonnets, the state flower of Texas, in spring. Both wildflowers and grass have flourished with the return of rainfall in some of Texas' very best ranch country.



JULY CELEBRATION: Robert B. Waller and Ruby, his bride of 60 years this July, run the day-to-day operations of the historic Chimney Creek Ranch at Albany, Texas. The ranch has earned many top awards for its range stewardship of soil and water resources.

Family excellence, stewardship

THE longtime Waller dedication to ranching excellence at Albany, Texas, continues with Robert B. and Ruby's son, Robert C. "Bobby" Waller, helping ramrod daily operations on the Chimney Creek Ranch.

Bobby's sons, Robert D. "Rob" Waller and Will, are coming along as the fourth generation of Waller ranchers as they complete their formal education.

"The grandsons already are mighty handy when we're shipping cattle," their grandfather notes.

Just a few of the many ranch accolades include:

■ Robert and Bobby were jointly recognized with the Robert B. Waller and Robert C. Waller Farmer/Rancher of the Year award from the Albany Chamber of Commerce in April 2004.

■ Waller Cattle Co. was honored as Outstanding Conservation Ranch from the Lower Clear Fork of the Brazos Soil and Water Conservation District for 2004.

■ Robert B. Waller was named Region V Resident Conservation Rancher 2005 by the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Texas.

■ Waller Cattle Co. was recognized for the Best Shackelford County Bred and Raised Steer by the Shackelford County Youth and Livestock Show 2005.

Of his lifetime in ranching — except for WW II and college — Robert is most amazed by the change in land prices for ranch land.

"When I grew up, rangeland was \$30 and \$40 per acre," Robert recalls. "Even just 15 or 20 years ago, rangeland stabilized for a while then at about \$100 per acre. Now, \$1,500 per acre — or more — is common on the same ranch land. It's recreation and hunting driving the land prices now. It's sure priced higher than its agricultural production capability."

But with Shackelford County nationally lauded for its recreation and hunting, Western culture, food, and historic sites, this real estate trend is likely to continue, the seasoned rancher expects.