

Gary Jacobs

Gary Jacobs and his wife Johann operate an intensive grazing operation. The 300 acres more or less has been in the family since the 1930's. Grandpa started out farming the ground north and southwest of the farmstead. He planted it to wheat like so many did in the 30's. After planting his first wheat crop the very next day the wind came up and the land started to blow. As was the practice at that time he started going through with a lister and stripped the ground to keep it from blowing. He continued stripping as the wind continued to cause blowing, all winter long. Spring came and he had no wheat. Due to the financial situation at the time the bank sent them to the newly formed Federal Housing Administration to carry their loan. This was a common event during the "Dirty 30's" when banks were having trouble and trying to help landowners save their farms. A few years later, having survived the 30's drought, they were able to go back to the local bank.

The land was cropped until 1960. It then was enrolled in the old soil bank program and put back to grass. About this time the grandparents moved to Medicine lodge. After 10 years in the soil bank the grass north of the house was broken out to farm again while the ground to the south stayed grass. The grass was rented out for a few years. Gary remembers, fondly I might add, plowing the north field with a 9N Ford and a W9 International tractor. The grass was 5 foot tall at the time and the plowing was slow going. Wheat was planted for 10 years or so. When the Conservation Reserve Program came into the picture in the 80's it was decided to enroll the ground. Once again the field was planted to grass. When the CRP expired it was decided to not re-enroll but to graze the native grass. Gary ran a few cow calf pairs for several years in the late 90's to early 2000.

All this time Gary was watching and reading about grazing, and grazing systems. Since he worked on several ranches helping with gathering and working calves, etc. he was able to see some of the differences in how they operated first hand. For Gary it raised questions about management.

One ranch in the western part of the county he had been involved with had a change in ownership. As the new owner started cleaning the pasture up, removing cedars and brush he saw a difference. As Gary watched he saw a steady improvement. The rancher also cross fenced and started rotational grazing. The result was impressive, more grass on the same acres. On another

ranch in the SW part of Barber County he saw a rancher who he had worked with take a ranch and divide it into several pastures to allow for rotational grazing. After this was accomplished Gary saw a ranch go from being historically over grazed and looking like a pool table by the end of summer, to having grass standing in the fall – all the while running 200 more steers in just a 2 to 3 year time frame. How could that be? It's simple, just a little management instead of opening the gate in the spring, turning out, then gathering in the fall. Now the question is how to apply this on a smaller acreage and get similar results.

In early 2000 Gary split his South pasture 4 ways. An existing windmill was close to the center of the pasture so he built a trap of sorts around the windmill. This allowed moving the cattle from one cell to the other through the watering site. This worked so well that he wanted to divide the North pasture as well but he had a water problem. The only way he had to water was from a garden hose at the house. That was the limiting factor in the ability to split the pasture. Seeing how well the watering center worked out in the south pasture, he wanted to create the same system in the North pasture. He came into the NRCS office asking if there was any assistance with drilling a well. Through the EQIP program he was able to receive cost share on a well and a solar pumping plant that provides enough water in the center of the pasture to create the watering center he wanted.

Originally Gary planned to split that pasture 4 ways also. This gave him 9 pastures to rotate through. Gary has since divided the pastures again. The South pasture has been split from 4 cells to 12 and the North pasture went from 4 cells to 8, making 24 cells – including the 2 pastures on the east side. The small west pasture to the west is go-back ground, meaning it wasn't planted back to grass, just doing it on its own. Gary moves the cattle every day. It seems like a lot of work but it takes no longer than checking water which most people do often anyway. Gary said that he also gets a good look at the cattle everyday so he can identify a sick animal and treat it before it is too far gone to help.

One interesting note is that from aerial photography the grazing rotation is apparent. Like a clock you can see the change in color in each cell. Just 12 days difference in rest is enough to hide the fences from aerial photography. Another item worth mentioning is that some native plants are showing up that are usually grazed out under high grazing pressure. Lead Plant is one that we found during the tour. This native plant is one of the indicators of good range health. Lead Plant

is loved by cattle. The rest that Gary's rotation gives is enough for this native legume to come back. Rest is key to so many native species.

Gary has plans for this upcoming grazing season that include higher stocking density for fewer days. Going from 180 days to 120 days will allow the forage to get the rest it needs in August and September to build reserves for the next growing season. We should mention he is also running a few head in the winter for 120 days. Yes, that means cattle on his ground for 240 days a year. You have to remember that each acre is getting used for just 10 days a year. Gary has learned that with some management, cross fencing, good water in the right places he can maximize the use of his pastures and have more income than planting wheat.

Gary would tell you that it took him some time to come around to this way of ranching. Talking to and watching area ranchers who cut trees and burned, installed cross fences and rotated their herds convinced Gary it could work for him on a smaller scale, around 300 acres of grass. Gary has read more articles than you can imagine and listened to many experts on range management to come up with his experiment as he once called it, now it is a system. Gary has a few acres that he still calls his experiment acres allowing him to try more new ideas.

Congratulations to Gary Jacobs, 2014 Bankers Conservation Award.