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Water holes or “cattle tanks”, dug in the 1950s during “The Great Dry Up” on the Bar V, has little water available for the herd.

RANDELL LAURENCE
THE WATER WELL MAN
APRIL 21, 1935
OCTOBER 15, 1997

Gregory R.C. Hasman/For the DRC

The grave, marked “The Water Well Man,” lies in the Miller family plot in Borden County after Randell Laurence, a friend a ranch hand, died during a water drilling incident on the property in 1997.

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Mesquite trees, which proliferate Texas ranches particularly during droughts, are difficult to eradicate.

BORDEN COUNTY — A crisp breeze rips across the prairie as Ralph Miller steps from his dirt-encrusted Ford F-250. He adjusts a sweep of gray hair under his black Stetson and stands over a grave marked “The Water Well Man.”

Miller’s good friend and ranch hand, Randell Laurence, is buried here under the Bar V’s most sacred ground. Laurence played a key role in keeping the cattle, the grass and the rest of the ranch going for decades. But on a fall day in 1997, tragedy struck.

As Laurence lowered his water drill into the ground, the machinery sucked him in with it. A young boy who was helping him backed off in fear, and as the derrick was raised, the rig hit a power line and electrocuted Laurence. He was 62.

Miller, the owner of the 32,000-acre Bar V Ranch in drought-stricken West Texas, was so grateful to Laurence for devoting his life to digging, repairing and servicing the ranch’s water wells that he made sure Laurence rested in peace inside the family cemetery, a grassy knoll surrounded by pecan trees and a creek nearby that murmured with the melody of flowing water.

Standing inside the cemetery, Miller gazes over the gravestones of “The Water Well Man,” his father, “Mr. Clyde,” his mother, Bessie, their cook and their faithful cowboy, contemplating the future of the ranch. All of the men and women buried here lived and died fighting to keep the Bar V alive through the now legendary droughts of the 1930s, ’50s and ’70s.

Now, a brutal and relentless drought that’s ruined ranches and farms throughout Texas and the Southwest over the last decade seems hell-bent on sending the 114-year-old ranch to its grave.

Some drought-weary ranchers in West Texas, the hardest-hit region in the state, have given up hope that the drought will ever end. And there’s no shortage of drought experts who agree with them.

“It may take a hurricane to end this,” says Raymond Slade, a former hydrologist for the U.S. Geological Survey who now is an adjunct professor at Austin Community College.

Consequently, some West Texas ranchers are liquidating their herds and selling their land to anyone willing to make an offer. But Miller says he’ll never sell the ranch. To him, the Bar V is not just a ranch, it’s a family heirloom.

Miller’s pride in the Bar V and his ranching heritage is embodied in a plaque mounted on the west gate of the ranch. The plaque, awarded by the state of Texas to Miller in 2000, designates the Bar V a “century ranch,” meaning it’s been operated continually by the same family for 100 years.

And the family has taken steps to make sure it stays that way. Miller’s brother, Riley, owns and operates half of the original homestead and Ralph Miller has partitioned some sections of the ranch to his daughters, Tammy and Rebecca.

The Bar V’s history is deeply intertwined with Texas’s storied history. Quanah Parker and his tribe of Comanche Indians established a large village alongside Gavett Creek, hunting vast herds of bison and deer. Cattle drives and wagon trains heading west stopped here to water their cattle herds and horses.

And many of Ralph Miller’s ancestors and ranch hands buried in the family cemetery gave their lives to the Bar V. The ranch is hallowed ground, says Miller, and the idea of abandoning it is unimaginable.

“You have to stay and keep a-fightin’,” says the 82-year-old rancher. “This is my life. I’m a rancher. That’s all there is to it.”

Miller is no Pollyanna. But having lived through some of the worst droughts in Texas history, he considers himself a survivor.

During the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, for example, when little rain, high winds and heavy tilling of the topsoil formed black blizzards across the great southern plains, tens of thousands of farms, ranches and banks went under. With no money, no water and no grass to feed their cattle, the federal government ordered the mass slaughter of cattle herds in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas.

“They shot 400 on our land,” recalls Miller. “My dad had to round up cattle and a man hired by the government shot them and rolled them off the caprock (a rocky ledge at one corner of the ranch) where they rotted for five or six years. Their bones were eventually ground up for their calcium and phosphorus, which were used (as a feed supplement) for livestock. The bones brought in more money than a living calf.”

As a 3-year-old, watching his dad’s steers and calves shot in the head and shoved off the edge of their ranch nearly sent him off the caprock.

“We had a calf feeding on a bottle and his mother had died,” Miller says. “A man said we had to kill the calf. So he did. Blood came out of its mouth and she ran around bleeding.” That scene, stuck in his memory, still deeply pains him today.

During the 1950s, a time Texas ranchers refer to as “The Great Dry Up,” severe drought devastated the region’s ranches. Soaring temperatures and low rainfall scorched the Bar V’s grasslands.

With grass scarce, hay prices skyrocketed, forcing the Millers and some other ranchers in the region to feed their cattle a mixture of prickly pear cactus and molasses. By the time the drought subsided in 1957, many counties across Texas, including Borden County, home of the Bar V, were declared federal drought disaster areas.

But to Miller, the Great Dry Up seems almost picayune compared to the pernicious, present-day drought that has been sucking the life out of the Bar V and surrounding ranches in Borden County since 1983.

“We’ve run out of water and grass,” he says.

Miller steps out of the family cemetery and walks a few feet to a gaping, 100-foot-wide, 25-foot-deep hole in the hard ground.

It’s one of 200 “cattle tanks” dug with bulldozers during the Great Dry Up to hold as much as 1,000-acre feet of water, enough water to fill up 500 Olympic-size swimming pools. As a boy, Miller couldn’t wait after completing his chores to dive into the tank.

“It was like a giant swimming pool,” he says.

But the water tank on the outskirts of the family cemetery, like all the other tanks on the Bar V, has little water in it these days. There simply hasn’t been enough rainfall, and the Mesquite Creek that once fed the tank has since dried up. Now this tank and all the others contain a murky mixture of mud, silt, manure and dead flies.

Sometimes Miller’s steers wander into one of the tanks only to get swallowed up in the mud. When he sees one of his steers, stuck up to their necks, scratching and fighting for its life, Miller will quickly dispatch a Caterpillar loader with rubber tires to haul the distressed steer out of the tank.

Two years ago, with his creeks dry, all of his water tanks evaporating by the minute and his “drought-resistant” buffalo grass turning brown, Miller had to make a hard choice.

He had done everything he could — including digging 100 water wells under his ranch in search of water. But all of them were dry holes — except for one that hardly produced enough water to fill a bird bath. In desperation, Miller sold his entire herd — nearly 2,000 head in all. It was the first time in 111 years that the Bar V had no cattle grazing anywhere on the ranch.

For Miller, it was one of the most distressing days of his life. Having survived the monstrous droughts of the ’30s and ’50s, Miller never thought he’d face the day when the Bar V would have to liquidate an entire herd. But the Texas inferno had baked the Bar V into scorched earth, he says, leaving him no choice.

His only consolation was that he wasn’t alone. Day and night, every rural back road in Borden County was jammed with cattle trailers hauling their bawling steers off to area auction barns and selling them at prices that didn’t begin to cover the costs of raising them.

But while some of the ranchers in Borden County and the surrounding region liquidated their herds and said goodbye to ranching altogether, Miller told himself he’d stick it out, somehow, until the drought subsided.

For the last two years, he’s been slowly rebuilding his herd, planting Sudan and other hybrid grasses considered more drought resistant than native buffalo grass and signed up with an Israeli company that, he says, plans to build a giant water purification plant on the ranch that will be able to process abundant quantities of brackish water flowing deep under the Bar V into “fresh water.”

The rancher hopes that the Israeli company can turn back the clock to the time when his grandfather moved to the area in 1900. He crossed Little Bull Creek a few miles southwest of Miller’s current home, complaining to his wife and other family members “that the only drawback of Borden County is that there was too much water,” Miller recalls. “Too much water!”

Even during the Great Dry Up, Miller recalls that after he and his wife got married in 1951, there was a big lake below the house they built that they used for drinking water.

“Everyone said, ‘You got the best water I’ve ever tasted,’” he says.

But starting in 1983, the big lake that supplied Miller’s drinking water dried up. Miller blames an invasion of mesquite trees that spread across the Bar V like a plague, aided by the drought.

Mesquite sprouts during prolonged drought because the seeds don’t wash away. Today, Miller says he’s got “hundreds of thousands” of mesquite trees that have taken over his ranch, burrowing their roots 30 to 40 feet into the ground. Each tree, he says, will vacuum up to 20 gallons of water a day.

“They consumed our water and the springs quit running,” Miller says, as if he’s referring to an enemy combatant.

The family has tried to destroy the enemy with chemicals or by uprooting them with giant machines called grubbers. But none of these efforts has met with much success.

“They are tougher than we are,” Miller says.

The drought also proved tougher than the Bar V’s daring effort to grow hay on dry land last year. But with his grass wilting and the cost of imported hay skyrocketing, Miller felt it was worth a try. So he plowed under about 3,200 acres of his prairie and planted hay seed. But without sufficient rainfall, it never even sprouted.

With little rainfall and the price of hay skyrocketing, the state's cattle inventory has fallen to 4 million, the lowest level since 1959. As a result, cattle prices have risen 20 percent in the last few years, making Miller's quest to restock the Bar V Ranch seem quixotic.

In Borden County and throughout Texas, many ranchers aren't restocking their herds because they can't afford to.

"Ranchers throughout Texas have thinned their herds because they cannot provide enough ambient grazing and cannot afford to import hay," says Alyssa Burgin, director of the Texas Drought Project, which brings together ranchers, hydrologists and climatologists to study the drought's impact on Texas and suggest ways to cope with it.

Just a few months ago, in fact, Miller, his son-in-law, two of his grandsons and a few cowboys in Wrangler shirts and leather chaps found themselves rounding up a herd of steers and calves they had just bought the year before.

A siren wails, calling a curious herd of Black Angus and Herefords toward Miller's truck.

Using his truck to guide them, Miller and his crew circle the herd and slowly guide them into a 150-foot holding pen where a special ranger from the Texas Southwest Cattle Association is standing by to inspect them.

The calves are separated from the Herefords and Black Angus steers and coaxed into a separate pen. The calves that Miller plans to sell that day are weighed and loaded onto a gigantic trailer.

As the grandsons and cowboys wave goodbye to the 142 calves getting shipped off — about a quarter of the Bar V's herd — Miller drives away slowly, and starts spreading "cake" — cubes of barley and other grains that, Miller hopes, will make up for the nutrients his cattle aren't getting in their drought-ravaged grass.

Leaving his herd and his grandsons behind, Miller heads north on a gravel road, passing by his house, patches of buffalo grass and a few pump jacks cranking and grinding from old age.

The old rancher gazes at the endless expanse of his parched land and turns nostalgic. For eight decades now, the Bar V has been his life, his love, his obsession. Having withstood the fury of the most ferocious droughts in Texas history, Miller says his greatest hope is that "my kids will hold onto it."

Miller stops by the family cemetery once again to pay his respects to his father and mother, “The Water Well Man” and the other ranch hands who battled to keep the Bar V going for the last 114 years. He hopes his children and grandchildren embrace the hard lessons he learned from giving his life to the Bar V.

“If you turn around and say you got it made and sit down, you’ll lose everything you got,” he says. “If you ever decide that you did all you can do, you’ll lose everything you got.”

Simply surviving — not now, not ever — is never a sure thing on the Bar V.

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