

Corcoran Ranch recognized for continuous agriculture production

Editor's note - This is the second of three Cooke County farms recognized Nov. 3 by the Texas Family Land Heritage (TFLH) program for continuous agriculture production for 100 years or longer. The Fisher Farm and Howell Ranch also were recognized. The Howell Ranch will be featured in a future issue.

By Kit Chase
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GAINESVILLE - The Corcoran Ranch on CR 451 has been in continuous agriculture production since 1910 and Rita Corcoran and her son John Russell Corcoran were recently recognized by the Texas Family Land Heritage (TFLH) program in Austin.

For 100 years, a Corcoran man has plowed the same fields, fed cattle, sowed seed, harvested crops, walked the 140 acres and watched the sun set.

The story begins when John William Corcoran sent his 14-year-old son John Franklin from Forney to Gainesville and on Nov. 9, 1910 he stepped off the train and walked the many miles to the new family homestead to prepare the area for farming. Accompanying him was a hired hand and two greyhound dogs.

John William and his wife, Gertrude Ruwaldt, and his two other sons, William and Charles arrived shortly afterward and began working the 140 acres and another 220 acres north of their farm with mules and hand plows. Within five years, their son, William died at 21.

"My family moved here in 1910, the same year they built the (Cooke County) courthouse," John Russell said.

The work was back breaking and it was not until 1936 that the first piece of mechanized equipment - a tractor - was brought to the farm. Today that same tractor is parked inside the barn and is still operational. Also stored in the barn are Harold John Corcoran's 1960 tractor and John Russell's restored 1935 tractor.

"Sometimes when I'm out working on my tractor I think of Grandpa's tractor and how it took in 19-inches on every swathe and compare it to today and the 30-foot or more swathe that my tractor will take in," John Russell said. "Back then gasoline was five cents a gallon and kerosene only two cents so tractors were fueled mostly with kerosene."

John Russell's grandfather, John Franklin Corcoran - the boy who stepped down from the train - married Catherine Herr in 1923 and together had seven children. Six were born at home and the youngest daughter was



Celebrating a legacy - John Russell Corcoran, left and his mother Rita Corcoran stand on the front porch of the Corcoran home on CR 451 in Gainesville. The Texas Department of Agriculture recognized the Corcoran Ranch and family who have kept their farm in continuous agriculture production for more than 100 years. (Staff Photo)

born in the Gainesville hospital. They tended the land and raised corn, cotton, hay, oats and wheat and had a dairy.

John Russell's father, Harold John Corcoran was born in 1925. He served in the Army and worked for Halliburton Oil Company before returning home in 1961. He married Rita Catherine Hermes in 1955 and they had six children.

"My dad had some fascinating stories about his life growing up on the farm," John Russell said. "He talked of cutting grain with a binder, shocking bundles, picking cotton and corn. He told of cutting wood, fixing fences and milking cows."

Harold John worked on a threshing crew when he was 13 years old and earned \$0.50 a day. He became aware that other boys who had teams of horses earned \$1 a day. The following summer he rode his bicycle to town and to see if he could buy a team of horses. Finding a team for sale, he bought the horses and harness for \$11. As he pulled up the lane to the house his father came across the yard to inspect the team.

"Grandpa told dad to get them to stand real close to

each other and get all their feet matched," John Russell said. "With a little work he got them to stand as a perfectly matched pair. Grandpa looked at him and grinned saying, 'I think they'll do all right, together they make a shadow.' They needed a little fattening, which did happen and the family used the team for several years."

Life was full of hard work and sometimes tragedy such as when the family home burned to the ground on Nov. 3, 1939.

"Dad spoke of how vivid that sight of the burning house remained in his memory," John Russell said. "The fire department did come, but by then the home was completely engulfed in flames."

John Russell said it was discovered later that one of the previous owners of the land and house had belonged to the late Sen. Joseph Weldon Bailey. The farm had been used to breed and raise his racehorses. At the barn were the horse stables that blew down during a 2007 storm, except for one building that is still an original building when Bailey owned the place.

"This was his brood farm for his race horses and his

race track was up here at the (Gainesville Municipal) airport," John Russell said. "This CR 451, which wasn't really a road, it was an alley for him to get his horses to where the airport's at. The road was a livestock road."

Bailey's and then the Corcoran's house had 14-foot ceilings and a wooden porch all the way around it. It burned in November 1939. "One of my older aunts was ironing clothes with a gas iron, they didn't have electricity," John Russell said. "It flashed and caught the curtains on fire and the house burned."

"I know that they bought this farm and they bought another probably 150 or 200 acres up pretty close to

Camp Howze," John Russell said. "This one was the homestead. The place north of here they lost that. They raised cotton and they had boll weevils and they lost that place."

"This was a farm back during grandfather and dad's day and a Grade B dairy," John Russell said. "It was really common during the 30s, 40s and 50s. Grade B is what they made cheese out of. They processed it in Gainesville."

John Russell now raises cattle on the farm and is manager of Pettit Machinery. He is married to Laurie Roberts Russell and their children are Cathy, Melinda and T.J.

Since the Corcoran's first moved to Cooke County they have attended St. Mary's Catholic Church and the children attended the parish school.

Harold John passed away in 2001. His wife, Rita, still

lives on the farm.

For 100 years a Corcoran man has plowed these same fields. John Russell lives and respects his family's heritage and pays tribute to their lives by continuing the farming legacy.

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