

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

Hillingdon Ranch Preserving a Legacy

By Charles E. Gilliland

People buy land for a variety of reasons. It may be a home for a thriving, expanding family.

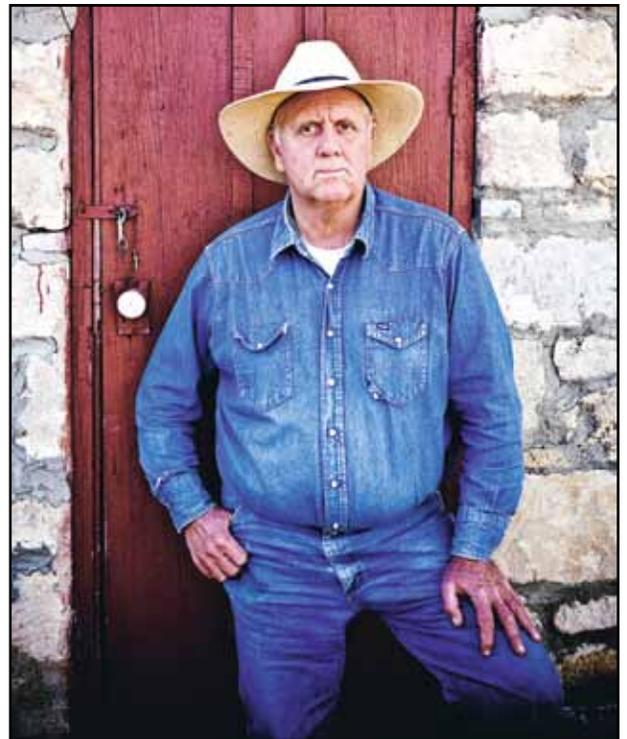
It might be a platform for livestock production.

It might be strictly for recreation.

Regardless of the plans for the property, an owner's management decisions and philosophies shape his or her stewardship practices.

These in turn directly affect the composition of the flora and fauna that define the health and appearance of the countryside.

"The land doesn't belong to us," says owner Robin Giles of the Hillingdon Ranch near Comfort. "We sort of belong to it."



Hillingdon Ranch is an historic, unique property. Managed by the same family for more than 120 years, the ranch produces high-quality beef plus ultrafine wool and mohair. Because of this healthy mix of cattle, sheep and goats, problems faced by typical Texas Hill Country range sites are absent on the ranch.

On the other side of the fence, ashe juniper (popularly known as cedar) predominates, often forming a verdant and impenetrable curtain along the hills and creeks. Sizable clusters of thorny, shoulder-high prickly pear leaves glint in the sunlight.

But on the Hillingdon side of the fence, neither plant can be found. Instead, the land hosts oak forests with healthy stands of native grasses and manageable motts of brush.

Before a growing population tamed the frontier, fire frequently raged across Texas rangelands, purging the

countryside of cedar and fostering open grasslands much like those seen on Hillingdon. Once settlers began to fight the fires, evergreen clumps of cedar sprang up everywhere.

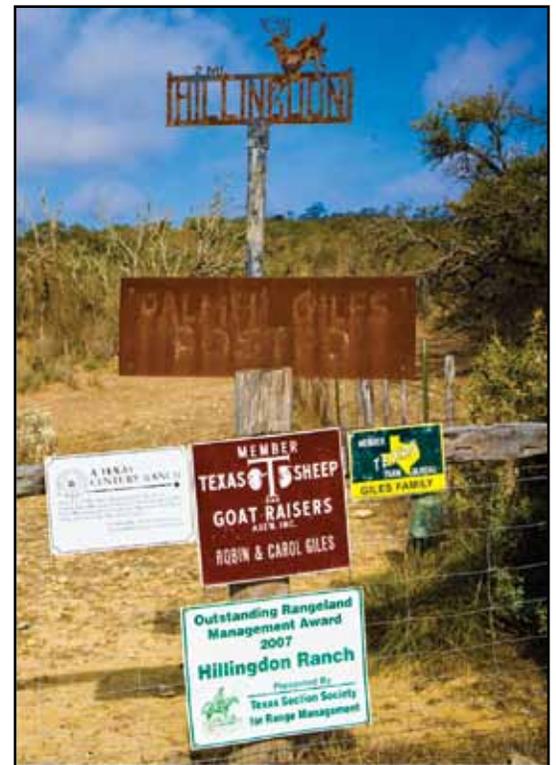
Throughout the Texas Hill Country, cedar dominates the landscape, obscuring views and slurping up enormous quantities of groundwater. By preventing rains from reaching and soaking into the soil, heavy stands of cedar dry up flowing springs.

On Hillingdon Ranch, the countryside teems with grasses, forbs (herbs) and trees while generous springs send crystal clear rills down rocky creek bottoms. The springs run year round.

This remarkable landscape owes its existence to a ranch management system designed to match livestock and game with the land's productive capabilities, using little or no nutritional supplementation.

This approach to ranching comes from the creative minds of ranchers Robin and Carol Giles and their son Grant. Together, they have shepherded the more than 20,000-acre family-owned property as the focus that unites and sustains the descendants of Alfred Giles, the ranch's founder.

Giles was born in Hillingdon, Middlesex, England. After establishing a thriving architectural firm in San Antonio, he began to acquire land in 1885 between Comfort and Fredericksburg.





ROBIN GILES (p. 1) AND HIS FAMILY work the ranch founded by his grandfather in 1887. Sheep and goats (top, pg. 2) keep water-hogging cedar at bay by feeding on the shoots. The ranch's black angus cattle (bottom left, pg. 2) are descendants of three cows imported from England by Giles' grandfather. Signs at the entrance to the ranch (bottom right, pg. 2) acknowledge the 120 years the ranch has been owned by the family and their successful ranch management efforts. Giles, wife Carol, and son Grant (seated, right) produce beef consistently ranked as prime or choice, and high-quality wool and mohair products.

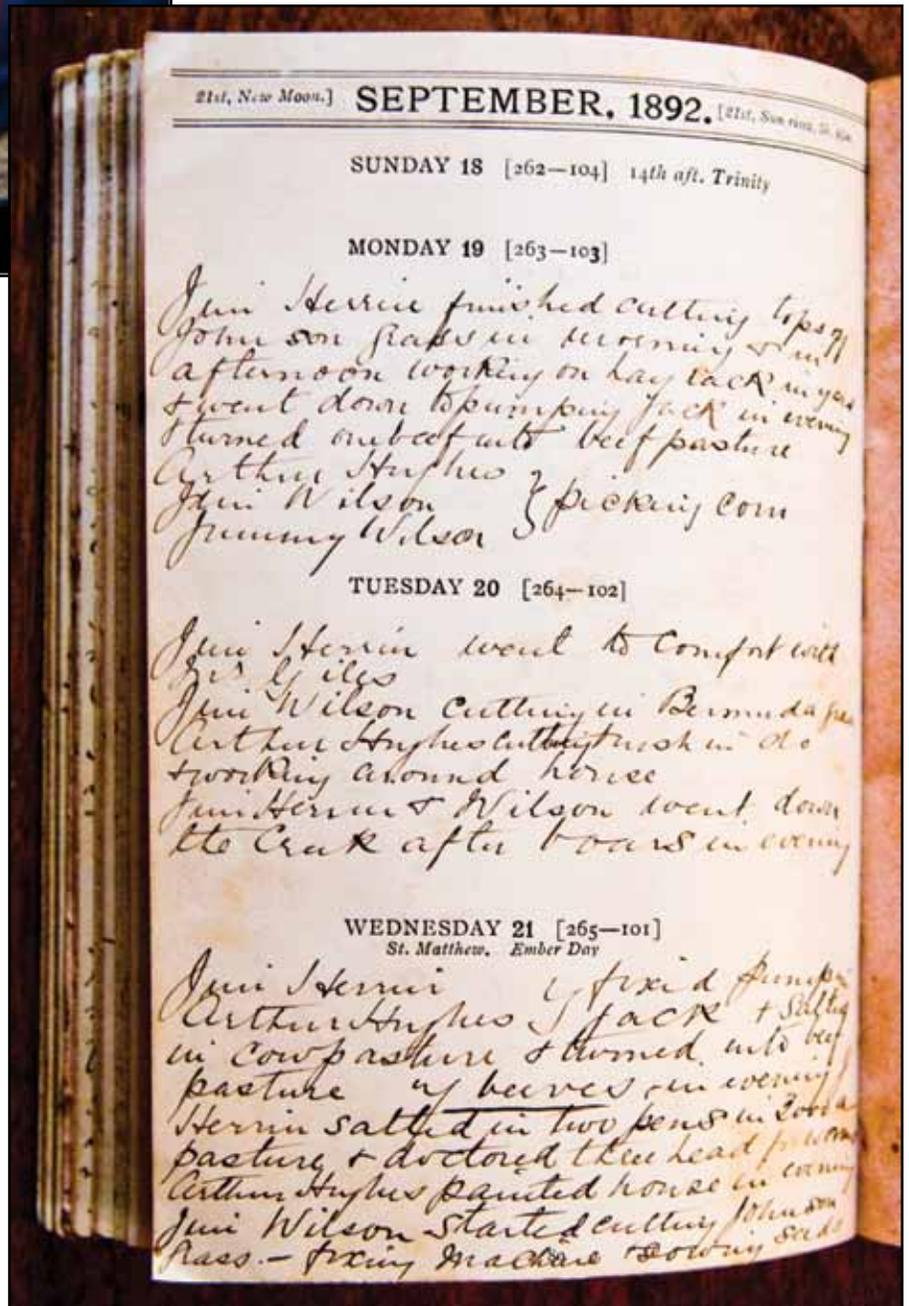
In 1887, he founded Hillingdon Ranch at its present location, adding more lands as time passed.

Robin, Alfred's grandson, notes that his herd of black angus cattle all descended from three cows imported by his grandfather. By most standards they are small, averaging about 950 pounds, but as Robin notes, "It's important to have an animal that can live off of your land. Those big cows can't get enough to eat to survive."

Their smaller size enables Hillingdon's angus to thrive on forage from the land. They require supplemental feeding only one day a week for two months in the winter. Larger cattle would need substantially more supplemental feeding just to survive. Not only do the Hillingdon cattle flourish on this feeding schedule, but 95 percent of the time, the beef produced on the ranch ranks as prime or choice.

The ranch is home to Angora goats, sheep and white-tailed deer as well. While many landowners perceive a competitive relationship between these animals, Robin sees a complementary one. He manages the various species to realize the greatest return while preserving the land.

The sheep and goats play a vital role in controlling unwanted cedar. If cedar seedlings sprout in an area, Robin dispatches a herd of sheep or Angoras to happily munch the shoots back to the ground. Sheep and goats have effectively replaced fire as a brush control method.



A RANCH HAND'S JOURNAL gives a glimpse into life on Hillingdon in days gone by.

Because of the careful orchestration of pasture rotations, springs that once dried up each summer now flow throughout the year. Every usable plant figures into production plans.

In addition to his encyclopedic knowledge of the plant life found on the ranch, Robin relies on state-of-the-art analytical techniques, including wool analysis done on each animal in the herd, conducted by a lab in Australia. Based on this information, Robin relentlessly culls his herds. Following this management model ensures that the ranch produces superior quality mohair and wool that exceeds the highest industry standards. To capture the added value of those extra-fine quality levels, the family markets finished fabrics and yarns rather than raw wool and mohair.

In addition to uniting the more than 200 descendants of Alfred Giles, the ranch serves as an instructional laboratory by hosting tours for various groups and university classes during which they describe their approach to ranch management. Robin, Carol and Grant strive to be both good neighbors and ambassadors for their styles of stewardship.

The Hillingdon Ranch dramatically demonstrates their success in preserving a thriving rangeland. In recognition of their efforts, the Texas Section of the Society for Range Management honored them with the 2007 Outstanding Rangeland Management Award (www.rangelands.org/texas/index.htm). The ranch also was recognized as a Texas Century Ranch in 1986 (www.hillingdonranch.com). 📍

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THE TAKEAWAY

The Hillingdon Ranch near Comfort operates under a range management system that matches the number and types of livestock with the land's ability to produce forage. The result is high-quality products and a healthy, thriving landscape.



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