

Fulfilling Their Destiny

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Noble Foundation helps couple achieve their lifelong dream



William and Karen Payne pose on the front porch of their home at Destiny Ranch near St. Louis, Okla.



Looking out on the pastureland on their ranch near St. Louis, Okla., William and Karen Payne believe they selected the perfect name for their home - Destiny Ranch.

After decades of starts and stops, the couple have realized their dream of owning a self-sustaining ranch, a dream that began when they were both children. Karen grew up on a farm in Beaver County

that her grandparents homesteaded during the Oklahoma Land Run. William was raised in the mountains of Colorado and Wyoming, and spent the summers working on cattle ranches.

The couple met in 1968 as sophomores in high school after his family moved from Colorado to the Oklahoma Panhandle. In March 1971, the Paynes married and left the farm for San Diego for William's stint in the Navy, but the couple returned to Balko, Okla., in 1974 and began building their own stocker cattle and wheat operation. The dream was stifled after three years of a poor economy and severe drought forced the Paynes from the farm. William began work in town as a diesel mechanic. A few promotions within the company eventually led the couple to the Colorado region in 1985 where they once again began working toward their ranching dream. For a time, the ranch seemed to prosper, but again drought - this time an eight-year span - ravaged their land.

"Our grass died, and black nubs were all that remained," William said. "We tried to hold off for a while, but experts had forecast that the drought could last another eight to 10 years. We had to make a move if we were going to continue our goal and this lifestyle."

After 20 years, the Paynes decided in 2006 that they would leave Colorado.

The decision on where to relocate became a family affair. Of their three daughters - Shelly, Sherry and Shanna - two (Sherry and Shanna) had made their homes in Oklahoma while Shelly lived in Omaha, Neb. William and Karen set out to find a parcel of land centrally located to their daughters, soon narrowing their search to the Sooner State.

Finding their destiny

During their search, the couple heard about a ranch that had been for sale for a few years near St. Louis, Okla., about an hour southeast of Oklahoma City. The land sounded almost too good to be true, and - as it turns out - it was.

When the Paynes arrived, they could have simply seen the 900-acre ranch as it was: overgrazed and thick with Eastern red-cedars. Instead, they saw a place full of potential with nice rolling hills, a workable house and two solid barns. "It didn't look quite like the owner made it sound on the phone," said William, adding that the previous owner had not set foot on the land in more than 15 years. "I couldn't even see across the property, but something about the place called to us."

The Paynes returned to the land three more times and walked it for several miles. They consulted with the NRCS about the unfamiliar grasses. In July 2006, the Paynes made an offer for the ranch. At the same time, the couple reached out to the Noble Foundation for possible assistance.

"We had heard about the Noble Foundation. We had even sent in soil samples for them to test," Karen said. "But we had never lived close enough to use their in-person consultation services. Now we had a chance to see them in action."

After several phone conversations, Consultation Program Manager Hugh Aljoe and a team of consultants arrived to give Destiny Ranch a once-over. "I thought it was one of the three most overgrazed places I had ever seen," said Eddie Funderburg, Ed.D., soils and crops consultant.

Aljoe agreed. He, too, saw pastures that had unfortunately been abused for a long time. There was not enough grass residue left to even identify the species that were present, so he advised the Paynes not to plan to stock the pastures until the next spring.

The Paynes took possession of the ranch in September 2006. While they waited for the grasses to rebound, they cleared almost 125 acres of trees and brush from what looked to be the most productive areas for grass.

The Paynes made good use of the expertise of the Noble consultants. Mike Porter helped the couple develop a wildlife management program; Deke Alkire, Ph.D., assisted in developing feed rations for the native grass pastures; and Funderburg identified soil types and directed them on fertilizer usage for different species of grass. "And the list goes on and on," said Karen, recalling all the advice the consultants provided. "They were wonderful teachers with an amazing amount of knowledge. We were eager to learn. They were eager to teach."

During winter of the first year, the Paynes also worked on cutting lanes through the trees to install electric fencing, hoping to sustain 200 to 300 head of stocker cattle on the ranch year-round, while keeping costs down.

Their ranching dream took hold the next year when they started with 290 steer calves. Feed costs totaled a staggering \$40,000 the first year, but the ranch became more efficient with the help of

Noble's consultants. By 2011, feed costs had been cut to under \$10,000; and Destiny Ranch was running 1,000 head of stocker cattle.

Rise of the Cattle Baroness

Today, the Paynes maintain 300 stockers year-round with annual marketing of about 1,000 head. Cattle stay on the ranch for 90-100 days to gain 200 pounds and are sold directly to feedlots in uniform lots.

"During the first five years, we had many learning curves. Everything from the amount of rain we received to the types of grasses and grazing methods," William said. "In our second year, we attended the Noble Foundation grazing seminar for three days. This was one of the events which changed the direction of our ranch."

At the urging of Aljoe, the Paynes set up a strict rotational grazing system, changing from 5- to 10-acre paddocks to 1- to 3-acre paddocks by using about 30 miles of electric fence. Key to this process is the need to move the cattle daily instead of every five days. According to William Payne, the constant moves are not simply a rotation to new grass, but are moves onto the grass where protein and nutrients are best for animal performance.

The system requires dedication by the landowners. Karen quickly saw the opportunity to interact more with the cattle. Soon, William nicknamed her "The Cattle Baroness" because of all the time she spends walking the ranch with the cattle, observing their changes. Karen laughs at the nickname, but is quick to give credit for the success to her team of consultants at the Noble Foundation.

"The bottom line is that the Noble Foundation was instrumental in assisting us with our grazing and gave us a better understanding of how to get maximum gains with our herds," she said. "From the consultants like Hugh Aljoe and Eddie Funderburg to Noble's forage sample program, we had all the important tools necessary to be successful."

A True Gem

Conservationists at heart, the Paynes treasure the land and their quiet way of life. They fence off their ponds, do not allow cattle to graze the ravines and work to keep wildlife on the ranch at all times.

"The Payne family has been exceptional to work with," Aljoe said. "They take in every educational event possible and are always looking to acquire new knowledge to apply to their ranch. What really sets them apart is how carefully they plan their operation. When you look at the surrounding area, their property is truly a gem."

Funderburg echoed Aljoe's comments: "Through a combination of intelligence and hard work, they have used planting, weed control, fertilizer use and rotational grazing to turn the place completely around."

The Paynes' "wow" moment came in September 2011 when they hosted a Noble Foundation grazing workshop on their ranch. Dozens of ranchers facing similar obstacles visited Destiny Ranch to learn from the Paynes' experiences on a variety of topics that included range management and planning for land renovation.

"When Hugh asked us to host the seminar, we couldn't believe it," William said. "This was truly one of the most special moments of our lives. You can't appreciate the ranch now if you hadn't seen it before. It's 500 percent different. There were times when we probably would have quit, but the team from the Noble Foundation saw us through every challenge. What we have is a working ranch that can last, and we are proud of the direction we are going. It's like we found our destiny."