The 11,000-acre Rolling Hills ranch in central Kansas is run pretty much in the same traditional cowboy way the ranch has been worked since 1887.

Something Old, Something New

This Kansas Outfit combines 1887 practices with the latest technology.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BERT ENTWISTLE

The morning started out cool and damp from several days of rain, but to everyone's relief the first bit of sunlight showed clear skies. It's branding day at the Rolling Hills Ranch and cowboys from around the area mingle with the cowboys from the ranch, making last minute adjustments to their gear. They're preparing to gather some 250 mother cows with calves and move them into the trap.

Ranch foreman Bruce Miller, his wife, Jill, daughter, Rylee, and son, Chance, are already saddled and moving out. The chuckwagon is in place and a good fire of Hedge is already popping and crackling, waiting for the arrival of the irons. As the cowboys disappear over the hill in search of cattle it becomes obvious in the early morning light that the Rolling Hills Ranch is something of a hidden jewel. A few miles of dirt roads and a hundred years of history conceal its thick grass pastures and gentle hills from passing highway travelers. These days most people don't take the time to search out such places – but most people aren't cowboys.

Miller runs the 11,000-acre central Kansas operation in the same traditional cowboy way the ranch has been worked since 1887. It is strictly a cow/calf operation running 550-Horned Hereford / Angus cross spring cows with another 56 fall calvers in an all-natural breeding program. Along the hillsides and well-watered meadows the cattle flourish, finding it a bit easier to fill their bellies than some of their southwestern cousins. The ranch can support more than the current 606 units but Miller prefers not to push the land to its limits. There is room for a 600-acre hay operation as well, including a quarter-section under pivot irrigation.

Current owner, Charlie Walker, started the operation known as Rolling Hills Ranch in 1987. The history of the land goes back a hundred years before that to 1887 when an Englishman by the name of Frothingham started the ranch and hired a foreman named Will Gregory. Frothingham sent his sons to the Kansas ranch from Boston to try and teach them the ranching business, but the East Coast boys turned out to be too wild to handle and they were eventually sent back to Boston. Frothingham soon lost interest in his 'Wild West' investment and sold the ranch to Gregory. The ranch eventually passed into the hands of Gregory's wife's family and was known for generations as the Forkner Ranch.

COWBOY BY DEFINITION

If you were looking for a definition of a cowboy, Bruce Miller would fill the bill nicely. A former rodeo cowboy, day worker and cowboss, his long chaps, Taco style hat and denim jacket help frame his weathered face into a picture of today's working cowboy. Like many Great Plains cowboys, his style is a mix of cultures from around the West. Also, like many cowboys, he prefers to run his operation from horseback.

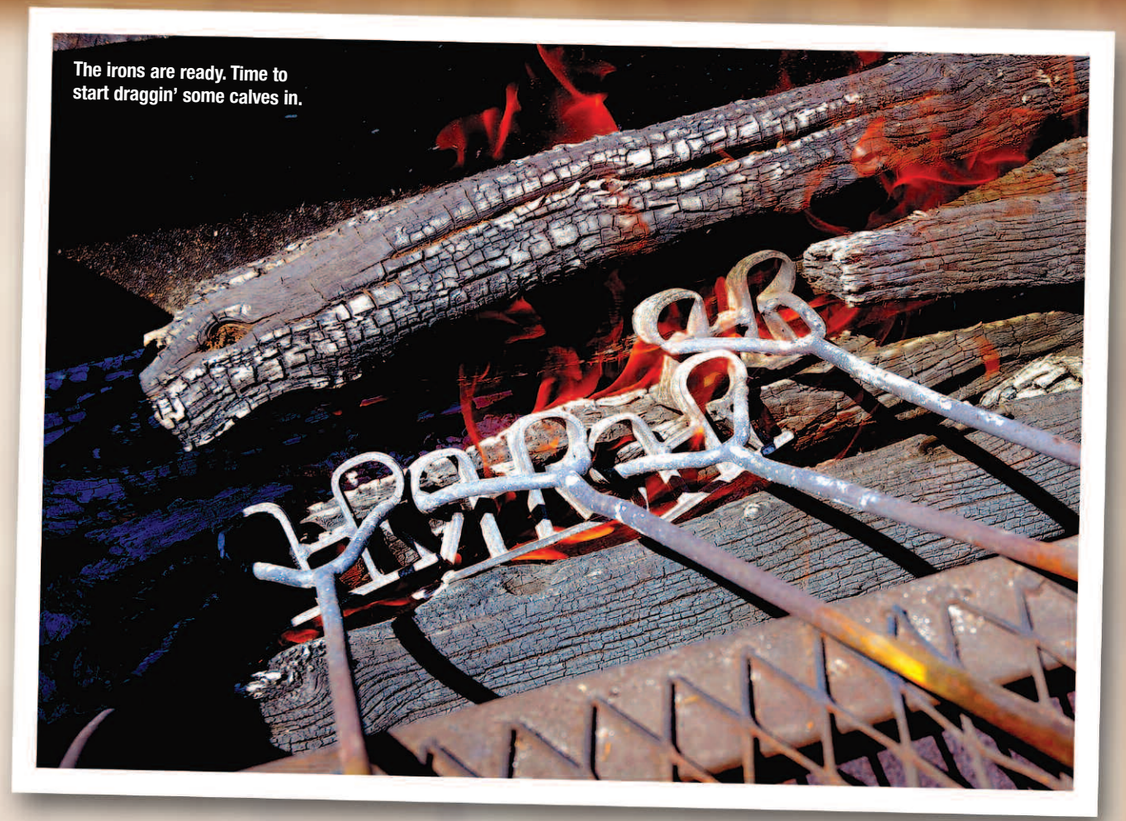
In 1987 the new owners started with a yearling operation, and after three years they decided to change to a Charolais-cross cow/calf operation. "I came here in '93," says Miller. "They hired me as the cowboss to manage the cow herd, and I changed their breeding program to the black cows." Now foreman of the Rolling Hills Ranch, he credits the owner for much of the success of the program by allowing him a free hand to build the ranch up the way he felt was best.

Miller decided early on to start the switch. "We started putting Angus bulls on the original cow herd to end up with black cows. Then we kept back all the black heifers originally. Right now we use Angus and Horned Hereford bulls on the cows and keep back the black baldy heifers for replacements. We'll calve out between 80 and 140 heifers a year." Every one of the 550 cows on the ranch has been raised from Rolling Hills heifers; the history of each well-documented.

PAINTED NAILS IN THE BRANDING PEN

In the sea of bawling moma cows, the branding goes on. Jill Miller, born and raised in the ranching business, gets the honor of cutting the first calf and Bruce puts the Rolling Hills brand on the hip. Jill's painted nails are proof that cowgirls can look good while they work. The cowboys on horseback heel the calves and drag them to the fire - waiting for the ground crew to release the rope so they can repeat it again and again. They will have their turn on the ground soon enough.


Jordon Lindquist, a local cowboy, takes his turn on the ground.


The irons are ready. Time to start draggin' some calves in.

Chance Miller, age 10, is already an experienced cowboy and riding, roping & branding is nothing new to him. He grabs the hind leg of a scrappy calf and holds on while it's cut, inoculated, implanted and branded. The smoke and the kicking don't seem to bother him much; it's not his first branding. The youngest Miller has his own definition of a cowboy, "It's someone who pushes cattle around, they got to rope and drag calves and doctor." When asked what he wants to be when he graduates from school it's a simple one-word answer. "Cowboy." At 10 years old he already has a registered brand of his own design, the 'Flying C', and his dad reports he has started throwing together a modest cow herd.

The branding takes place on the winter range and ranch headquarters ground, and on the first of May they will drive them about 12 miles to their summer pasture. "Everything is natural service, and we run about 26 bulls on the cows and we'll buy about 10 – 12 heifer bulls each year," says Miller. The ranch sells the steers off after they have been weaned for 45 days and the weight runs 650-700 pounds. The heifers he sells as replacements for local ranches. "The heifers I generally sell on the ranch, but one bunch went to Florida and another bunch went to South Texas which kind of helped to build up a reputation of having really nice replacement heifers. We never have any problem selling them."

BIG BALES OF HAY

Part of the success of the ranch can be credited to the quality of the hay operation and the abundance of good grass. Though they lease out some of their farm ground, their own cattle still have plenty of good pasture. "The grass is like 5,500 acres, our stocking rate we figure at about 8 acres per cow/calf. Right now we have 360 acres in alfalfa and right at 400 in brome and another 320 in native grass we put up." The ranch has a quarter section under the pivot irrigation, growing alfalfa for 5 or 6 years then rotating it through sorghum and back to alfalfa. For all the work put into maintaining the grass and hayfields, there is more work required to keep a non-native weed called musk thistle at bay. Introduced in the early 1800's on the East Coast the noxious plant, if left unchecked, will swallow up the country it inhabits.

In the winter, Miller supplements with a 20% range cube until they get bad weather and then they feed with brome hay. "We feed from the big 3 x 4 square bales and flake them off by hand." Like most ranches, water is a key factor in the business and this part of the world is blessed with good springs. "We have a lot of springs that we developed," says Miller. "We put in spring tanks, we run perforated pipe and a gravel bed under that. Then we pipe them into concrete tanks. We have one pasture that has flowing water through it all year long."

Miller loves the place traditional cattle ranching has in his life and particularly the cow/calf side of the business. The ranch has a large heated

At 10 years old, Chance Miller isn't a bit afraid of the kicking steer or the smoke, he already has a registered brand – the Flying C – and a small herd of his own.

calving shed and a chute designed specifically for their first-calf heifers. The shed also has an attached bunkhouse with two bunks for the hands on calving duty. "We generally sleep here in two-hour shifts, this year we calved about 60 head, next year we should do about 120. I really love this part of it," said Miller. Clearly, the cowboy life suits him well and shows on his face when he talks about it.

Many people not involved with the live cattle industry understand little about raising cattle and even less about what it takes to deliver a healthy product to the supermarket. On branding day the amount of work required involves more than just handling the hot branding iron. Like all producers, Miller has a program tailored for his location and particular cattle. While the calves are being branded, they are inoculated with both seven-way black leg and five-way red nose vaccines. The bull calves are given a growth implant in their ear and then castrated. During the year the calves will be vaccinated, dewormed, doctored and have a better health care program than many people could afford for themselves.

These days, the traditional cow business bumps up against technology on a regular basis, with advances that benefit everyone. One of the newest things is the EID implant (Electronic Identification) used on all Rolling Hills cattle. "We put them in at weaning, it stays in the replacement heifer her whole life unless she tears it out, and they're really hard to tear out. Eventually our whole cow herd will have them in their ears." Miller has been doing the implants for three years.

HORSES PART OF THE TEAMWORK

The heart of any traditional cow operation is horses, and Rolling Hills Ranch has not only conventional ranch horses but keeps draft horses for work and fun. "We have two teams of Belgians and two teams of Percherons," says Miller. "We (also) raise a few horses and we have ten mares and keep around 10 – 12 broke geldings on the ranch."

Horses and cattle aren't the only things that keep Chance and Rylee occupied these days. Chance is in 4th grade and loves flag football, and Rylee is a sophomore in High School and loves softball. Jill Miller says that the cowboy business is their recreation as well as their business. "For enjoyment we team rope in the summer, a lot of the people here do also." The family also belongs to the WRCA (Working Ranch Cowboys Association) and the WRRA (Women's Ranch Rodeo Association).

Jill and Rylee participate on the Women's Ranch Rodeo team and won last year's rodeo at Ellsworth (Kansas). Jill has also won the Top Hand twice as well as the top horse buckle. Bruce has been competing in the ranch rodeo at Medicine Lodge, Kansas for fifteen years and has been a WRCA member since the start. Miller won the bronc riding at Medicine Lodge four times and the penning once.

Ranch life isn't always perfect; included in the deal are seasons with flooding and snow so deep that the cowboys had to haul calves in the bucket of the loader and put them in the calving shed so Jill could tend to them. They recall a few run-ins with the local rattlesnake population and the Millers joke about the scorpions, including one that found its way into their bedding. Then there was the incident of the skunk just the morning of the branding that rendered one cowboy, shall we say – less than fit for a public appearance. Cowboy life seems to be in the genes of certain people like some mysterious calling, racing through their veins. Those who succumb to it see their world as a viable alternative to big cities, high-rise offices or a 9-5 job, and the Millers wouldn't have it any other way.

When asked for her definition of a cowboy, Rylee said, without so much as a moment's hesitation – "My Dad."

Bruce Miller, the lifetime cowboy and bronc rider, could only sit quietly and look at his daughter. His sunglasses concealed the emotion in his eyes but everyone knew why he couldn't talk. Neither could anyone else for that matter. WR

(Here) Jill Miller heads for the fire. (Below) The Miller clan gathers for a family portrait beside the RR chuckwagon, L-R Bruce, Chance, Rylee and Jill.