

Barbed Wire Past



Half-way between Smyre and Levelland, Texas, on Route 114, drivers will pass by a ranch designated as a historical marker. Many locals pass this sign each day, going to Lubbock or vice versa. Little do these people know that they were driving through what used to be one of the biggest ranches in West Texas.

During a trip to Texas to sell barb wire, Colonel Isaac L. Ellwood decided to purchase 150,000 acres of land in Snyder County, Texas. In 1891, three years his initial purchase, Ellwood bought more than 400,000 acres in Lubbock, Mitchell, and Borden counties. Coming from DeKalb, Ill., this purchase was more land than what the city of Chicago occupies today.

As intended, Ellwood used the land for ranching, but saw an even bigger future for it in agriculture. Besides contributing to the history of the small towns in the area, the ranch also became part of the family's heritage.

When Ellwood died in 1910, his son William took over the ranch. After him, Ellwood's other son Erwin, managed the ranch and updated the houses and area. Erwin took it upon himself to add indoor plumbing and carbide lights to the houses on the ranch, along with installing windmills and water wells every four miles in two lines down the ranch.

As the years passed, the ranch did not keep its peak size. In 1924, the northern acres were put up for sale, and by 1926, 80 percent of the ranch land had been sold. In 1938, about 90% of the remaining acreage (189,000 acres) had been sold.


According to Darren Robertson, the current ranch manager, 18,000 acres are still owned by the Ellwood family descendants today. This acreage still bears barbed wire,

the same wire that Colonel Isaac L. Ellwood held many patents for and was famous for selling, all of which brought him to Texas.

Although the ranch is smaller, it still holds within its fences a rich history of the area and ranching. In fact, the little towns surrounding what land is left were named because of the Spade Ranch.

To see success in the future, Robertson said he believes that what is best for the ranch is inspired by the beliefs and interests of the owners, the descendants of Ellwood.

“The future of any of these family ranches,” Robertson said, “depends on the interest of the young family members.”

So the next time travel brings you through Smyre and onto Levelland, Texas, look for the signature barbed wire fences and white house that still govern the Spade Ranch along Route 114. 

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