



Signs at the cattle guard give an idea of management practices on the Lasater Ranch.



That's Dale Lasater, at left, with his father Tom.

• The • LASATER RANCH

Home of the Beefmasters.

— By T. L. Davis

THE LASATER Ranch lies just west of Matheson, Colo., north of Highway 24. After pulling off the blacktop, you head up the long drive and pass through a gate bearing two signs. One reads, "Wildlife Sanctuary," and the other, "Society for Range Management: Excellence of Grazing Award." It is easy to get mixed signals. One sign seems to suggest environmentalism and the other, good old-fashioned, smart ranching.

As the drive continues, the mind tries to work out the seeming contradiction. It is like a puzzle with one piece that just doesn't fit. In fact, the more information you have about the accomplishments of Tom Lasater, the less it makes sense.

Lasater grew up on his father's ranch in south Texas, near the town of Falfurrias. At the time, his father, Ed Lasater, ran Herefords and Shorthorns on the large, brush-country ranch. In 1908,

Ed bought a herd of Brahma cattle from the Pierce Ranch and began to cross-breed the cattle, drawing the more resilient aspects of the Brahma blood into the Hereford and Shorthorn breeds.

When Ed Lasater died in 1930, Tom was 19 years old and a freshman in college. The following year, he left school and tried to salvage what he could of the ranching operation. Unfortunately, the Lasater Ranch, like most big outfits of the day, was heavily leveraged; most was sold off during the Depression to satisfy creditors. By the time Tom returned, he was faced with a much depleted ranch and no way to raise working capital.

"The land was worthless and the cattle were almost worthless. Everything that had value and had produced a great life was gone. It was a time when no one had any cash," says Dale Lasater, describing the conditions

under which his father, Tom, began his career as a cattleman. "His goal was simply to be able to be in the cattle business."

As Tom struggled to survive, he developed a train of thought. Perhaps it was nothing more than a notion driven on by desperation and success, but he developed a philosophy that would provide the key to the puzzle. He began to implement this philosophy by breeding better cattle.

Dale recalls that his father's idea of "better" cattle was something that would make the lease payment. "He didn't have any complicated genetic goals in mind. He had watched his father breed and cross-breed cattle, and he had an idea of what he wanted from the process."

As Tom experimented, searching for the most productive combination, he eventually developed one of the most dominant breeds of beef cattle

*Ranch foreman
Eddie Stanko throws
on a blanket as he
and Rod Koepke
prepare for a
day's work.*

*Eddie Stanko,
Rod Koepke, and
Ronnie Hoefler
going to work.*



in the nation—the Beefmaster. This breed was created by crossing Shorthorn with Brahma, Hereford with Brahma, and then breeding those half-breeds back to each other. When he felt that he had come up with a pretty good combination, Tom wrote to the various breed associations to determine what criteria they considered ideal for the different breeds. As the responses began to come in, and after surveying the long lists of criteria, he realized that most of what the associations found desirable had little or

nothing to do with beef production.

Tom then set out to determine what he thought were the most desirable traits for beef production. He came up with six essentials that are still a part of the Lasater philosophy of raising cattle—disposition, fertility, weight, conformation, hardiness, and milk production.

To put together a herd that satisfied the six essentials, Tom developed a method of direct selection and ruthlessly culled the Beefmaster cattle he had already developed. He also vig-

orously bred strength into his herd.

After developing Beefmasters, it became apparent that the strength that made a good beef animal also made the animal adaptable to varying climates and conditions. Word of this strong, adaptable breed began to spread around San Antonio sale barns.

To best take advantage of the growing interest in the breed, Lasater considered various names for his new breed and finally settled on Beefmaster. In 1945, Tom began to take out advertising space in several publications,



Disposition, fertility, weight, conformation, hardiness, and milk production are the six essentials Tom Lasater considers important in breeding cattle.



A 4-year-old Beefmaster sire from the Lasater Ranch.

LASATER RANCH

promoting his cattle. This was somewhat innovative in those days, but it got word of this unique breed to ranchers all over the country and helped to make Beefmaster one of the most popular beef breeds in the world.

As a continuation of his culling program, Tom spent a great deal of time studying the herd to find its weaknesses and strengths. He noticed that some bulls were covered with flies, while others were not bothered by them. He noticed that some of his cows had lice, and some did not.

It occurred to him then, that there was more going on than just raising cattle. Nature was playing a big part in the process as well. Tom began to cull the afflicted animals from the herd, refusing to pass those weak tendencies on to the next generation. This practice of culling and breeding would be the cornerstone for the development of Beefmaster cattle, and it continues to this day.

This might sound too drastic to most cattlemen, but the basic concept is that whatever makes an animal weak or unable to produce is something to be dealt with. Sometimes it may be the animal's fault or it may not. The bottom line: An animal must produce. Tom Lasater is not in the habit of making excuses for his cattle.

"The way we approach raising cattle on the short-grass prairie," notes Dale Lasater, "might be summarized by the



The hardy breed does well in varying climates.



Tom Lasater's Beefmaster cattle are user-friendly, if this photograph is any indication.

phrase, 'working with nature.' In 1969, before the environmentalists came onto the front pages of our consciousness, Dad had stopped using all insecticides. That wasn't in response to environmentalists' concerns about insecticides; he was simply tying that into his method of natural selection."

As the Beefmaster breed became more established, the elder Lasater found this approach to be valid. He was able to produce better beef animals and contain the costs of insecticides. Yet, there was more to be learned from watching nature at work.

"Two or three years ago, I got a form from the Colorado Department of Agriculture," Dale recalls. "It was a survey on pests—pocket gophers, prairie dogs, red ants, etc. The survey wanted to know how many acres we had that were infested with these pests, and some estimate of what the economic damage might be.

"Using the pocket gopher as an example, a person can look out at hill-sides on the ranch and find that they are covered with fresh mounds from the gophers. There are mounds that are a month old, and mounds that are a year old. This is going on constantly, but they are not pests—they are doing a very vital job.

"Along with red ants and other burrowing animals, the gophers are aerating the soil. It is fascinating to me that you can go out and look at a live red ant hill and find a 3- or 4-foot bare space. But, you can go off a few feet and find another one that was abandoned 2 or 3 years ago, and it will be solid western wheat grass.

"So, here we have 3 or 4 feet of western wheat grass that has been given a seed bed, where the soil has been turned over and cultivated. All of a sudden, this bare spot where the ants have been is a solid area of grass."

The Lasater philosophy encompasses not only pests, but predators as well. "If we lose any calves to coyotes, it would be very few," observes Dale. "We don't watch our mature cows at all with their calves, but we see our first-calf heifers every day. When you've got 150 first-calf heifers, you're going to lose a few calves, and you know what happens when the calves die.

"The coyotes are right there to clean up the carcass. But, we lose very few to the coyotes. Again, it gets back to the cow and whether she is taking care of her calf.

"I've seen coyotes ambling right through a herd of cows and calves that
(Continued on page 166)

The Lasater Ranch

(Continued from page 61)

are 2 or 3 months old. The cows could care less because they don't sense any danger. But, if you let that coyote come close when there are newborn calves, there will be four or five cows bellowing and running him off into the distance.

"That is what the cows are supposed to be doing, and if they lose that trait, they have lost something very important. If a cow has been in a place where there have been no predators, she will lose that trait."

Whether it is raising cattle or managing the range, the Lasater Ranch follows one common thread—work with nature, watch the results, and act in the best interest of the land and the herd. This practice makes as much economic sense as common sense.

"We live in a day and age where there are many products and someone on every corner saying, 'If you spend a dollar here, it will return you \$3,' and, 'If you want to be a good manager, you better do this to control that,'" says Dale.

"Now, all of these things are good on paper, but we're still putting too much emphasis on treating the weakest, and we are continuing to breed weak animals. Somewhere along the line, that has to have a cumulative effect."

The Lasater philosophy extends to the Foundation Beefmaster Association, which came into existence in 1961 as a result of the changing ideas within Beefmaster Breeders Universal. Tom Lasater, the founder of BBU, felt that many of its members were paying too much attention to science in breeding procedures and were not allowing nature to make decisions. Subsequently, he formed the FBA when the differences could not be reconciled.

"The difference, basically, is that some people feel better able to make genetic progress with more numbers, more measurements, more weights, and more direct involvement," explains Dale. "We feel these decisions should be left to the natural process. We have every confidence in that natural approach that dictates that the strongest, the fittest, and the most environmentally adaptive animal will survive."

Tom Lasater has no real confidence in breeders' associations, partly from his experiences with them in the 1930s, and partly because he recognizes their limitations.

"Dad doesn't believe in their ability to monitor quality and/or integrity," says Dale. "So he feels that, if an asso-

ciation can't do it, the burden ought to be placed on the individual breeder."

If a breeder works hard, and does the right things, he will develop a better herd. If the breeder does not, then he will spend his profits correcting the genetic mistakes, rather than building the herd. This makes the breeder accountable, especially because FBA prefers to hyphenate Beefmaster with the name of the ranch or individual breeder. This links the ranch or individual with his product rather than making the association responsible for the whole spectrum of different approaches to breeding Beefmaster cattle.

One of the things that makes the Lasater Ranch unique is the recognition of nature as a partner, not an obstacle. "I think our principal problem in cattle breeding," Dale said, speaking of people in general, "is that we would like to think that, because we have great minds, because we are creative thinkers, because we have science and technology, we ought to be able to design the perfect beef animal.

"I think it requires an element of humility to be able to take a step back and say, 'Maybe we aren't going to come up with the perfect design, but maybe there is a way to get there by letting other things happen by themselves.' And, by us being on the sidelines saying, 'You didn't make it, and you did,' and not trying to decide ahead of time which one will breed."

Nature has its way at the Lasater Ranch. A brief visit might easily reveal the large numbers of antelope that roam on the fringes of the cattle herd. A lone coyote might trot across the lawn near the office. A rattlesnake might slither across the drive in the afternoon.

Perhaps CNN was able to witness such sights on their recent visit. Perhaps they found it unique and strange, and therefore, newsworthy.

Then again, maybe it is just sad that ranchers and environmentalists seem on different ends of the spectrum. At the Lasater Ranch, it is a partnership that has been able to yield great dividends.

The Lasater Ranch in Colorado is one of many ranches in the Lasater family partnership, which owns or leases ranches from Texas to Colorado. Only two ranches are managed by Tom Lasater's children; Lawrence manages a ranch in San Angelo, Tex., and Dale is the managing partner in charge of the Matheson ranch.

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