

The Way It Was And Is

This small West Texas university has been graduating sons, daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of farmers and ranchers since the early 1920s. By Barney Nelson, Ph.D.

Most ranchers and farmers have run into government workers like the USDA farm service agent who doesn't know corn from soybeans, the new Forest Service ranger who thinks fire is destructive, or the young BLM agent who considers all grazing as overgrazing. These folks are often well-intentioned, but the problem is that they've been indoctrinated more than they've

brand, first registered in 1922. Local ranchers promoted establishment of a university before the highways were paved. They often housed students and took them on an annual picnic, and Sul Ross' Jackson Field is named for J.D. Jackson, a local rancher who was a driving force behind establishment of the college. The famous o6 Ranch built a beautiful baseball park, other local ranch families



PHOTO COURTESY STEVE LANG

With a year-round mild climate, cool summers and warm winters, Sul Ross offers a beautiful campus in a small town, surrounded by big-ranch country. The famous o6 Ranch begins just beyond the Bar SR Bar mountain at the top of the photo.

been trained in their institutions of higher learning.

One solution for that problem is to encourage more farm- and ranch-raised kids to apply for those state and federal management jobs. In order for that to happen, we desperately need our smart, rural youth to go get those college degrees. But where? Rural parents and communities are probably at least somewhat justifiably nervous about sending their sons and daughters off to those huge campuses in big cities.

Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas, is a fine example of an alternative. Sul Ross—named after Texas Ranger and former Texas governor, Lawrence Sullivan Ross—is located in the heart of West Texas big-ranch country, and still maintains its Bar SR Bar livestock

donated livestock for scholarships, donated a picnic area around a spring where the Civilian Conservation Corps added a lodge and outdoor theatre, and contributed to the college in many other ways.

Although Alpine is a college town, it's still homey. The town doesn't yet have any real stoplights (only two blinking red lights) and its citizens, including students, take up only 20 white pages in the phone book. Rural kids will feel right at home here. Coffee shops still have a locals' table and part-time jobs are often available at the feedstore, saddle shop, large-animal vet clinic, and on local ranches.

Along with all the standard degrees offered at any university—in English, art, education, and science—Sul Ross offers degrees in ag business, range and wildlife

management, meat science and equine science. It offers an excellent, fully accredited veterinary technology program. Course examples include: predators in literature, history of ranching, horseshoeing, and sausage making. Classes are usually small, so students at Sul Ross have names, not numbers. Students interested in the arts, education or business enjoy a beautiful, quiet campus and can also add the outdoors to their studies by honing in on courses like landscape oil painting, nature writing, photography, field geology, and environmental chemistry. Local and outdoor-related businesses range from sidewalk cafes to bike or horse rental to guided river rafting. The ranching world also supports outdoor businesses like windmill service, saddle and tack makers, hunting guides, fence contractors, and dirt movers.

The Sul Ross criminal-justice graduates go on to careers with the U.S. Border Patrol, Highway Patrol, sheriffs' departments, or state and federal fish and game. A former football player and theater major was Dan Blocker, also known as Hoss on TV's "Bonanza." Since college rodeo began on the Sul Ross campus in 1949, the rodeo team is believed to have won more national and regional championships than any other school. Sul Ross alumni host a regional ranch rodeo every fall and an alumni team roping and barrel race every summer (www.sulross.edu/pages/3244.asp).

Besides Dan Blocker, Sul Ross graduates include Kim Davis Barmann (animal health tech '81), whose family owns and operates the CS Ranch in Cimarron, N.M., and is winner of the 2000 AQHA Remuda Award (cscattle.com/t.ranch_history.html); Tom Moorhouse (B.S. '69), fifth-generation Texas rancher operating in King, Stonewall, and Hall counties; Don Coleman (B.S. '71), owner and operator of Coleman Well Service; Roy and Rocky McBride (B.S. '61, MS '76 and B.S. '84) a family known around the world for both control and research on large predators; and Gary Dunshee (B.S. '73) and Bret Collier



PHOTO COURTESY JASON HENNINGTON

The Sul Ross Bar SR Bar brand is used on everything from a college-owned cattle herd to football helmets.

PHOTO COURTESY DR. KEVIN URBANCZYK



Sul Ross geology professor, Dr. Kevin Urbanczyk, leads students on a raft trip down the Rio Grande to measure sandbars. Almost every known geologic formation appears in West Texas, often drawing buses of geology students from Harvard.



PHOTO COURTESY LOUIS HARVESON

SRSU students Travis Bryan, left, Jose Martinez and Misty Sumner work in tandem to quickly re-collar, measure and monitor vitals of this trophy mule deer buck.

(B.B.A. '82), owners and operators of Big Bend Saddlery, who have turned their small-town business into an international one (www.bigbendsaddlery.com/home.html). Numerous alumni work for various government agencies, including Jonathan Cole (B.S. '07), Royal Canadian Mounted Police; George Peacock (B.S. '79), Grazing Lands Team Leader for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service; and some have even been elected to the Texas House of Representatives, like the Hon. Pete P. Gallego (B.S. '82), a Democrat with bipartisan popularity who

represents District 74—covering 13 counties in the largest Texas House district and largest U.S./Mexico border district—and who enjoys the support and loyalty of the West Texas ranching community, towns, and university (house.state.tx.us/members/dist74/gallego.php).

Sul Ross students come from anywhere livestock, wildlife and small towns coexist: Montana, Northern California, Florida, Nebraska, Arizona, New Mexico, South Dakota, and more. Many faculty members are first-generation college graduates from small-town backgrounds themselves. The new Sul

encouraged to become good thinkers who recognize bias, propaganda and corruption. Outdoor learning and hands-on problem solving help to develop that kind of thinking. When students are able to see for themselves and compare their observations over time, they are not as easily fooled. Most rural kids already have a background in this kind of thinking and hands-on observation.

Of course, not everyone likes life in a small town. Students from urban areas often complain that “there’s nothing to do in Alpine.” Rural kids who don’t need shopping, nightclubs or heavy traffic, but prefer instead to watch the sun set, stare at a campfire, or picnic at a windmill usually love it and feel at home within hours.

In her Winter 2010 “Up Front” editorial, RANGE editor C.J. Hadley quoted Montana logger Bruce Vincent as saying, “If we’re going to figure out how to provide food, clothing and shelter for 10 billion people, then we bloody well better have our smart kids back on our farms, our ranches and in our logging jobs. It’s going to take some pretty smart kids doing some pretty creative things to provide for that mass of humanity without destroying the planet.”

We also need some of our smart rural kids in classrooms, in Congress, in the newsrooms and courtrooms, and especially in those dang government offices. ■

Dr. Barney Nelson teaches English classes at her alma mater, Sul Ross (B.S. '71, M.A. '90, Ph.D. University of Nevada, Reno '97), and will be glad to personally correspond with rural kids and their parents interested in Sul Ross. Contact her at bnelson@sulross.edu or c/o Languages and Literature Department, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, TX 79832.

Real World Hands-On

Down-to-earth, hands-on research on ranches as well as public areas, even for undergraduates, abounds at Sul Ross, with plenty of volunteer opportunities for job experience with government agencies. Range and wildlife research is conducted through the Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management at Sul Ross State University. According to director, Dr. Louis Harveson, “Our goal is working with the landowners in order to identify their real questions about conservation and wildlife, then we try to find the funding and do the research to answer those questions.” Some recent BRI research academic-sounding projects are: flora, fauna, and water quality of stock tanks; restoration of severely degraded rangelands in the Chihuahuan Desert using cotton bur/burlap wattles; transboundary movements of large carnivores; Monitoring grassland birds in the Chihuahuan Desert; site fidelity of translocated mule deer in Mexico; use of guzzlers by bighorn sheep in the Chihuahuan Desert; ecology of Montezuma quail; winter ecology of American black bears in a desert montane island; and many more. See www.sulross.edu/brinrm.

PHOTO COURTESY DR. PAUL WILL



The university offers a degree in meat science with state-of-the-art facilities.

Ross president, Dr. Ricardo Maestas, was raised in the small town of Chamisal (similar to Alpine, Texas) in the mountains of northern New Mexico.

Like any university, Sul Ross has a few radicals—some on the right and some on the left. Most educators believe that students need to be exposed to various points of view to learn to recognize ignorance, stereotypes, political rhetoric, or empty claims and promises in order to avoid being taken in by a smooth talker. At Sul Ross, students are