

# A Texas Rancher in the 1950s Drought

by Herman Walker with Roger Lambert

**T**hroughout recorded history drought has been a serious problem for Texans, in particular cattle ranchers. In the twentieth century two major droughts, the 1930s and the 1950s, have devastated large areas of Texas. The 1930s drought caused a great migration out of the western drought regions and brought vast government assistance especially the purchase of over two million drought cattle from Texans. The 1950s drought was in many ways more destructive. It started in the far southwest in the forties and slowly moved east. By 1950 the drought had reached the western third of Texas but 1952 was the first severe year with water shortages and heat strokes throughout the western half of the state. In 1953 much of Texas received less rain than in any year of the 1930s and the dry conditions continued through 1956 which was the most arid year for much of Southwest Texas. The Rio Grande River ceased to flow for the first time in recorded history, water wells went dry, cattle and sheep tried to survive on prickly pear and mesquite, and thousands of ranchers were forced to leave the range for factories and aircraft plants.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are many memoirs from ranchers of the glory days of the nineteenth century, few exist from the twentieth century. One young cattle and sheep raiser who launched an independent career in the forties has described the effects of the 1950s drought upon his family, livestock and region.

I can recall the drought of the thirties, I can remember assisting my father-in-law with his cattle buying efforts at that time.<sup>2</sup> The old, weak and sick cattle counted by a government official, then herded into long trenches by cowboys on horseback then machine gunned to death before being covered by the same machine or dozier that had dug their graves. I helped load carloads of calves that had never had a drop of rain on their backs and cows that one could be proud to own in normal times, walking up the gangplank to a box car to be made into canned meat. One had to feel that the animal could make the trip to its

doom without getting down in the train box car and not being able to unload for its slaughter.<sup>3</sup> I have counted cows that fell in the loading chute and never got up again. Mexican townspeople would come kill the animal for its hide and whatever meat that they thought they could use, since the rancher and the railroad was glad for someone to keep them out of the way. How much of this meat was used for eating, I do not know, but the hides were salable, so I do not think there was any trouble getting rid of the downed animals. Many ranchers, with a grim look of defeat would bring his wife and children to see the cattle shot down or put on a train to go to the canneries with the thought in his mind that they would never see such times again, and wanted to impress them of the tragedy that held the country in its grip. Yes, it all made an impression on me, but I was young I had nothing at stake, and it all seemed like a bad dream that would never happen again. The drought of the fifties had a different bearing on my thinking and on my financial status, and even today it may happen again and again for those that love the land and nurse the creatures that are entrusted to you for their being.

Several years prior to the beginning of the drought in the fifties I had had some good years and felt that through hard work and good management I had it made. I was thinking of perhaps buying a little ranch and paying it out instead of leasing, and why not? I had about 2,000 young ewes, 150 head of cattle, saddle horses, milk cows, a good car and pickup truck and to make me feel better a good sum of money in the bank, and did not owe anyone anything, so why not be cocky and independent thinking that I had done it all without the help of the Man Upstairs that brings the rain.<sup>4</sup> So I was thinking of better times and bigger things when a large ranch in the western area came up for lease, I was ripe and ready.<sup>5</sup> One thing that prompted the move was losing the lease that I had been on for ten years and that had been so good to me and my family.<sup>6</sup> But why think of something small when this golden opportunity was at my door step. After looking the ranch over with my family, we decided to make a go of it if we could finance it. Now, we were talking about purchasing another 2,500 sheep and another 100 or 150 cows, paying lease on a much larger place, buying another truck, hiring a regular man instead of a wet Mexican. All this would take money and at that time sheep were bringing around \$28.00 to \$30.00 per head, and cattle were bringing \$300.00 to \$350.00 per head. I would need more working capital too, but so what, I was young, ambitious

and had a wealth of energy, so with the advice of two good men, I started signing notes and buying livestock. After giving checks for lots of sheep, cattle and etc., I can remember going to my banker and signing a note for the sum of \$106,000.00. Also, at that time it did not slow me down when he told me that he knew I was a good boy and would be honest with him and do my best, but to always remember that what he was doing was because my father-in-law had so much confidence in me, and too, the owner of the bank said that he would see to it that I made the thing go. So with their help and advice, it seemed that a recipe for success was for the mere reaching. Move to the larger ranch we did, and all went well for the first year and then.<sup>7</sup>

Spring came and I had been supplementing the cattle with a little cake, but that was the normal operation. Lambs began hitting the ground, and no green feed to make their mothers give milk, so I decided to buy a little alfalfa until it rained.<sup>8</sup> It should rain in the next two or three weeks, so the hay operation began. I put the first load of hay in the barn so that it would not get wet from the rainfall that was coming. The next load went into the barn, the next and the next, then one day I said why put it in the barn when I could stack it outside and it would be so much easier to get to, and so much easier to unload. Now this hay was costing money, and the cake and corn that was being fed was also costing money. I would have to go over and sign a new note every once in awhile, but why worry, it would rain and I could sell the lambs and calves, then things would turn around again.

Still no rain, so I decided it was time to unload some lambs and calves, but something had happened to our market. Prices were on a downward trend, so the check for the offspring was not much help when applied to the stack of notes at the bank. But, why worry, it was going to rain and next year would be a good one and those notes could be torn up and thrown in the wastebasket. So back to breeding the sheep and cows for another go around. People were beginning to talk dry weather and drought in some parts, still it was raining in Central and East Texas, so we would get it soon. Oh, how we watched those clouds that never seemed to materialize. My wife would get out on the porch with the kids hanging on her apron strings and talk and wave to the clouds to come our way. This was supposed to be in fun, but deep down I knew, and she did too, that if it would help then there was no harm in talking and waving to the only thing that we thought would be our salvation.<sup>9</sup>

The area ranchers had a big meeting and we voted on the feasibility to getting a Denver based firm to come and seed our clouds with the hope of making it rain.<sup>10</sup> It was supposed to be on an assessment basis of so much per acre of operation, hence the more a man operated then the more he would pay per month. We had to have a guarantee of so much money before they would start and so much a month until we said quit. I didn't go along with the proposals, that was true of a majority, so we did not in our area try it. But, I had a neighbor that believed in seeding the clouds with silver oxide chemicals. He bought a burner and placed it on his highest mountain, and would rush up there and start burning the chemicals whenever the right kind of cloud came into being. He did not get any rain and I didn't either, so we never knew whether it would work on a wholesale basis or not.

We just borrowed money and fed on and on and on. People were beginning to drop out of the picture, banks and financial institutes were getting a little thoughtful about the course of things, and after feeding all my livestock two winters and one summer without stopping, I backed off and took a good look at what was happening to me. I was paying a high lease on nothing but fresh air and scenery. I sure did not have anything for my livestock to eat, so I began to form a plan to get out while I thought I could break even. To escape from this drought, the first thing I did was to visit my advisors and my banker and feel them out as to what was the best thing to do. To my surprise, they were having as much trouble as I was encountering. I woke up to the fact that I was not in the bed of misery alone. The drought was getting worse and spreading eastward. There was talk of government help, there were banks taking over some of the ranchers' operations. Prices were not slipping any more, but sliding.<sup>11</sup> Maybe I could have sold out and been solvent but I was not ready to give up, so with lots of planning I entered phase two of the drought of the fifties.

It was decided that everything that did not have an offspring would be sold at whatever it would bring. Next, the remaining ewes with lambs and cows with calves would be saved until weaning time. And, surely, it would be raining by that time. I asked for a cancelation on my lease contract, and surprisingly got it without any effort. Still feeling that they knew they could not collect any more rental with the condition things were in any way, so they let me out of one commitment. Then, I sent all my cows and calves to Central Texas and placed them on grass. The

drought had not really hit that area at that time.<sup>10</sup> I tried to sell all the dry ewes, but could not get an offer that was above the slaughter price and I was not quite ready to see them go to the canneries, so I trucked them to a sudan field that was being irrigated close to me. Also sent the only thing that was not mortgaged to the same field and that was the Jersey cow herd that belonged to my wife and kids. The water was very salty and gypsy, but thought that the livestock would do alright on it. But, I should have known that someone else would have already had it if there had not been something wrong with the whole setup. With these animals, I sent a wet Mexican, with his groceries and bed roll, and an old white horse. I saw them unloaded and put into the fields and back to the ranch I went to get more of the ewes and lambs.<sup>11</sup> Now I was beginning to get used to a bed roll and eating out of tin cans. I had my bed roll in the back of the car and had used it time and again when shipping cattle to Central Texas or scouting for places to move livestock. The next two years I almost wore that bed roll out. I made arrangements to take all the ewes and lambs to the Plains and run them on irrigated fields. I had contacted a man there that had wire and posts to fence whatever were grazing and to help me move and erect fence from one place to another. Now this is when all the trouble started and the stack of notes at the bank got thicker and thicker. I thought I had troubles before but now things got worse than ever.

The advice I would give anyone now is to never leave home with your livestock. If you cannot keep them and feed them, then sell them for whatever they will bring, but don't leave home. Here I was with cows and calves in Central Texas, ewes and lambs on the Plains, dry sheep on fields in West Texas along with the Jerseys and I still had a crew hunting livestock with my horses on the ranch that I was vacating. I had no money except what I was borrowing. My family was still at the ranch and I was sure worried about how this was going to turn out. After placing all the sheep in West Texas, I made a trip to Central Texas and found that I would have to start fencing my cows there.<sup>12</sup> The drought was moving about as fast as I was, so back to buying feed for the cattle. Made a trip back to the West Texas irrigated fields and found that the Jersey cows would not drink that bad water and they had simply gone to pot. The sheep looked better, but they were getting out of the fields, the wet Mexican couldn't attend to them from hiding from the immigration officers, so that

deal really looked bad. I went to town and got all the trucks I could, and to the market the Jersey cows went along with the dry sheep. The price was terrible, but it was good to what it was a little later on.

Back to the Plains I went and found things in a terrible mess. In moving from one field to another, by driving the sheep, we had to cross other farmer's land. The poor hungry sheep would get in their crops, the farmers would sic the dogs on them and things would in general be in a mess. I was threatened with bodily harm and had to keep the check book on the hip to pay claims all the time. I sent for my wife to bring two wet Mexicans to help. Now "wets" were all that we could get in the way of help at that time and they were sure all that I could afford to pay. So my wife went into the smuggling business to help whip the drought. I moved the livestock from one field to another and was constantly building fences, fighting farmers and paying bills and damages. It was awful, but the giving up period had not come yet. We decided to put the sheep into a feed lot and feed them ground alfalfa and cottun burs until we could wean the lambs, that way we would get away from the farmers, their dogs, the coyotes and at least be able to spend the night in one place for awhile. This feed lot had a vacant house on it and the two wet Mexicans and I moved into it and started grinding feed and trying to take care of the poor sheep. My wife came and rented an apartment for us to stay, but before she got the dive cleaned up, the plans had changed again. Believe it or not, we never spent one night in that apartment, but it sure got a good cleaning for someone.

I had made a trip back to Central Texas to check up on the cattle situation and found things in bad shape there. No rain and the man that owned the ranch wanted the cattle moved. I heard of some prickly pear north of our home town that a man could get. After talking to my banker and to my two advisors, I hurried back to the Plains and finally found a man that had a lot of stalk fields that would buy my sheep for \$6.00 per head. Now these sheep had cost nearly \$30.00 and I had spent I don't know how much on feed for them before moving them around and fighting the farmers, so they lost a bundle, but, it was not giving up time yet.

It surely would start raining soon and I still had a good set of young cows that I was going to burn pear for and things might work out yet. Now I was not by myself in all of this. Ranchers far and wide were having the same difficulties. The government was

making hay and grain available to anyone that would take a pauper's oath and sign papers that he could not get any feed or credit to buy feed for his livestock unless he obtained this government help." Lots of ranchers were going to the government for help, but I just could not whip myself around to signing a falsehood and getting something for making a false statement. I might add that I never in my name received any help from the government before falling by the wayside. Later there were some exceptions to the grain and hay program, but it was too late for me to enter into the aid program to save my operations.

From the Plains to the pear patch I went with the two wet Mexicans. We pitched a tent and put the pear to those cows every day." A man I knew wanted to move back a big string of cows that were breaking him in Oklahoma and let me burn pear for them along with mine. So I took his 400 cows along with mine and we really did burn that pear and pump that water. We fed them government cake and hay along with the pear which he obtained through his allotments, so I was getting a free ride on my cattle. But, the interest on that stack of notes was goin' on all the time and as soon as hot weather hit I started to think about throwing in the towel." No rain and I had just about had it. The man whose cattle I was feeding made a deal to sell his. Now he had trucked them to Oklahoma and had lots of expense up there and then trucked them back and paid me to burn pear for them and he was in the same shape that I was in on maybe a little larger scale. Anyway, out of the ranching business I went and I owed more money than you could roll in a wheel barrow and no way in the world to pay it back that I could see."

Now I had visited with my hanker lots of times while this was going on, and when it was over, he said that I could take the bankrupt proceedings and of course his bank would take a terrible beating or I could keep paying interest if I could and since I was young that I might some day be able to pay it all back. He believed that it would start raining again some day and when it did I could get back in ranching and straighten out all my financial difficulties. Now ranchers by the scores were in a terrible shape. One of the larger sheep ranchers that ran around 50,000 head of sheep on leased places took the bankrupt law. Good friends had gone broke and took jobs in town. Many said that they never hoped to pay back what they owed. Old timers lost money by the thousands of dollars so I was only one of many

that was looking for better times. Brush died on thousands of acres,<sup>20</sup> grass of any kind was almost unheard of. President Eisenhower made a trip to our area and saw men burning pear and feeding government hay and grain. We had a mass movement of ranching people to towns and cities not because they wanted to live that life, but they had to eat.<sup>21</sup>

Then phase three of the drought hit our little family. The man who owned the bank from which we had borrowed so heavily phoned one night and said he wanted to talk to me about running his ranch for him, and maybe we could work out some method of paying the bank a little along or at least keep up the interest payments. I will admit I was pretty low, I had never worked for wages on a ranch in my life, but maybe it was a chance to get out of town and get to doing something. His ranch was dry, but he was getting government hay by the carloads and grain was coming in by the freight cars most every week. We made a trade for me to take care of his ranch holdings, we would share the profits on one part of the ranch. We were not partners, but it did give me something to work for besides working for a monthly salary. We made up our minds that we would live on what he paid us to take care of his country and all that we made out of the share earnings would go on the note and interest. Now all things have an ending. Sometimes they are good ends and sometimes they are bad, but this turned out well.

We had hardly got settled in our new environment than it started to rain.<sup>22</sup> Not the first day or the first week, but soon. We were burning pear for lots of cows, we were hauling hay from the railroads that was coming from northern states and California. We were getting all the corn that we could use that was raised in the Corn Belt. This we used in two ways. We traded some of it for ready mixed protein cake, and some of it for mixed feed for our sheep. Some of the corn we sacked from the box cars and fed directly to the sheep.

You know something that has always mystified me was the fact that almost everything I have ever seen written on droughts goes into the cattle end of it. Rarely do they bring out the sheep industry and how it suffered. I want to go on record as saying that those old sheep suffered and lost as much money for me as any of the cattle. But bless their hearts they have sure done their part in restoring the ranching industry as it is today.

We lived out the drought here on the ranch that we are now on. We lived on a little for seven long years and paid back all that

we owed plus interest. And, one thing has been imprinted on my mind that I hope I will never forget and that is droughts have been in the past, and rest assured that they will come again. But, above all we must not forget that it is the Almighty that causes them and He is the one that can and will end one when He thinks it is time, and when a man thinks he can do it without the help of the One above then he is thinking wrong. I hope that I never have to live through another drought like the one in the fifties, but if I do then I hope that I can have the faith and power of mind to remember that all things usually happen for the best.

This is a valuable memoir of the fifties drought for a number of reasons. It describes with considerable poignancy the desperate, bitter and for many hopeless struggle of ranchers to care for and preserve their livestock and their ranching endeavors. The desire for independence, the faith that Mother Nature will ultimately change her mind, the opposition to federal involvement, and the hostility to working for wages all come through very clearly. The ranchers and farmers of the drought area sought to obtain private loans, to haul water, to burn prickly pear and to find a multitude of other ways to survive. But many found that individual efforts were ineffectual and either turned to government aid or ceased to farm or ranch.

President Dwight Eisenhower, who made two drought tours, hoped that inspiration of the kind he was so good at providing would be all the drought victims needed. Self-help and inspiration from the White House did not bring rain or feed starving livestock. In 1953 a variety of aid programs was developed—hay was brought to the drought areas, feed was provided, the government bought more meat, and loans were made easier. Before the drought ended, the government poured over twenty million dollars into Texas, and most of the money went to the aid of the independent-oriented cattle and sheep raisers. For many, such as Herman Walker, the aid came too late or violated their principles. Thus, many one-time independent ranchers and farmers became employees. Some managed other peoples' ranches. Others went into the more available labor market, taking jobs in aircraft factories.

Clearly the increased sophistication of operation, increased mechanization and technical knowledge did not make the farmer and rancher immune to natural disaster. Indeed, there is reason to believe that modern developments have simply made the man dependent on the land and nature more dependent than ever before upon the all-saving power of the federal money bags.

Arkansas State University

## NOTES

1. Roger Lambert, "Drought Relief for Cattlemen: The Emergency Purchase Program of 1934-1935." *Panhandle Plains Historical Review*, 45, 1972; "Texas Cattlemen and the AAA, 1933-1935, *Arizona and the West*, 14 Summer 1972; *Amarillo Globe Times*, 1 May to 1 July 1953; *San Angelo Standard Times*, 1 May to 1 July 1953; W. Eugene Hallon. *The Great American Desert* (New York: Oxford, 1966).

2. Lambert, "Drought Relief for Cattlemen: The Emergency Purchase Program."

3. The federal government purchased over eight million cattle in the drought of the mid-thirties. Over two million were purchased in Texas. Many of the cattle were considered unfit for human consumption and were slaughtered and buried. The cattle, sheep and goats determined to be fit for food purposes were donated to the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, the first federal food assistance agency, for relief use.

4. The late forties was a period of expansion and general optimism. Many farmers and ranchers were doing just what Herman Walker planned. Many of those in the plains state would encounter the same drought difficulties as Walker.

5. This ranch is located in Brewster County some 20 miles northeast of Alpine.

6. This ranch was located in the northwest corner of Crockett County.

7. The use of "wets" was a very common thing in the fifties. It was difficult to obtain regular hands and the "wets" worked for considerably less than native born hands. The move from Crockett County to Brewster County was made in the early spring of 1950. The summer of 1950 brought the first significant movement of the drought into southwest Texas.

8. In a normal year a rancher would feed from January 15 to about the middle of May.

9. Indian rain dances were not too common but prayers for rain to induce some mystery force to come to the salvation of the parched land were very common. Some church groups held almost continuous prayer for rain. Governor Allan Shivers led a day of prayer for rain.

10. There were a number of rain makers at work in Texas during the fifties but the best known was Dr. Irving P. Krick who was employed by Fort Worth and Dallas as well as many others. Such rain making efforts went back many years. Some Texans wanted the federal government to sponsor a vast rain making program.

11. Prices did collapse especially in 1953. It became difficult to even give away beef calves. *New York Times* 29 June 1953.

12. In the early fifties many West Texas ranchers moved their livestock into the wetter regions of Texas. Some sent them into Mexico and others as far away as South Dakota.

13. Walker sent some of his stock to Lampasas County. The irrigated field was located outside of Fort Stockton.

14. By 1953 the drought was into central Texas and moving into the even wetter East Texas.

15. Prickly pear is one of the scourges of the rancher but from early settlement it has been used in time of need for feed purposes. Early ranchers burned the spines off by hand but in the fifties a butane burner had been developed that made removal of the spines much easier and faster.

16. The government began large scale assistance in the summer of 1953. Aid included various kinds of loans, a hay and feed program and a greatly expanded purchase of beef for school lunch programs and the military. At first what amounted to a pauper's oath was required for individual aid from the federal government. After bitter

protest this was modified. Many ranchers resisted accepting any federal assistance (charity) but far more accepted and even demanded greater assistance.

17. The pear patch was located about ten miles north of San Angelo.

18. The number of people leaving the land doubled in 1952 and 1953 in Texas. It was almost certainly much higher in West Texas. Some small towns lost half or more of their population.

19. Many one time independent ranchers became hired hands on other ranches but most were forced into the still growing cities to work at unfamiliar factory jobs.

20. Grass, trees—even century old live oak trees—died and by 1956 the two great scourges of the West—prickly pear and the mesquite tree—were also beginning to die.

21. President Dwight D. Eisenhower made two trips to the drought regions of Texas. In 1953 he attended a drought conference in Amarillo and in 1957 he visited briefly in San Angelo where he watched some pear burning. Eisenhower lauded the courage of the Texans and expressed his delight that they were “keeping your chins up.” San Angelo *Standard Times* 13-17 January 1957.

22. The spring of 1954 was much wetter than 1953 and moisture held up better throughout the year. The drought, however, was not ended. There was deficiency in 1954 and 1955 with 1956 the most parched year of all for many Texans. It would not be until 1957 that the drought was truly ended.