

COOL RANCH

The Lazy KT Ranch near Freedom has a long history and a bright future thanks to a family's passion and a lot of hard work.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENT FUCHS

AS BLACK CLOUDS of dust darkened the Oklahoma skies again and again in the 1930s, hardscrabble farmers and ranchers held onto their land and livelihoods as long as they could. Katie Blunk's grandfather Glenn Blunk was one of those determined to keep his 1,500 acres near Freedom.

Some six decades later, when Katie's father passed, her mother, Rose Kline Blunk, inherited that parcel in northwestern Oklahoma.

"Mom wanted to sell off this ranch, because it was pretty much an albatross out here, just one big cedar-infested piece of property," she says. "But when she called and told me, I got weepy and sentimental, and she realized it has special meaning to me and my brother."

So, Katie says, her mother got to work.

"She went to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service and developed relationships with those people," Katie says. "She got involved with cutting cedars, conservation programs, and prescribed burning."

For fifteen years, Rose cleared old barbed-wire fences, cut down innumerable trees, replaced perimeter fences, and more. In 2012, Katie decided to retire from her career as a veterinarian in Nevada and return to her family's land. Though Rose had laid the groundwork, Katie and her husband Michael Horntvedt had a long path ahead readying the ranch for production.

"We let the land rest for three years while we worked on getting infrastructure built, and we got our feet wet with the local conservation and prescribed burn associations," Katie says.

Now president of the local prescribed burn association, the namesake of the Lazy KT Ranch has seen her homestead transformed into a thriving, ecologically diverse cattle ranch thanks to regular burns, rotational grazing, and replanting native grasses and flowers. In 2021, the ranch was awarded the Oklahoma Leopold Conservation Award from the Wisconsin-based Sand County Foundation, which was founded in 1965 and rewards voluntary conservation efforts all over the country.

Those with fewer than 1,500 acres might feel less able to positively impact the environment. Some Oklahomans might not have their own outdoor space for growing a garden, let alone a veritable meadow's worth of food for pollinators. But everyone, no matter their background, can do something to help preserve the abundance of natural beauty the state has to offer. Follow all local hunting rules and regulations to preserve species for generations of hunters. Pick up all trash before you leave a campsite so it looks nice for the next visitors. Plant milkweed and other plants butterflies love.

We're taught to love our human neighbors, but there are millions of living beings all around us, each one struggling to feed themselves and find shelter and raise their young and go about being alive. If Oklahomans take a second to consider all of their neighbors, we can make sure future generations can enjoy the state's natural majesty.

Katie Blunk and her husband Michael Horntvedt at the Lazy KT Ranch near Freedom. The ranch has been recognized for its environmental practices.

