Bill Barby

Bill Barby of Protection, Kansas, came to Clark County in 1967, when his father, Alfred Barby, purchased the ranch which came to be known as the B bar B.

Diana: Where is the ranch?

Bill: Located along Cimarron River in Clark and Comanche Counties. It is on both sides of 283 highway.

Diana: Who owned it before he bought it?

Bill: He bought it from the Harper family, the Mel Harper, Jim Harper family.

Diana: How many acres is it?

Bill: Ten thousand.

Diana: Was it through like a private treaty or was there an auction?

Bill: Privately.

Diana: So what type of grass is it? Is it all grass?

Bill: It's all grass. It's the Midwest Prairie. It's still considered in the Red Hills because we have the red bluffs along the river. It's Midwest Prairie with tall grasses, the Indian, the Blue Stem, Switch, a lot of Sandlove on the sand hills. We have a lot of the taller grasses.

Diana: Are there any buildings on the property?

Bill: It's minimal. There's a couple of sheds, but nobody's ever lived there and there's never been electricity.

Diana: So where was your dad's main operation?

Bill: The headquarters was on Crooked Creek, 20 miles south and east of Meade, or 20 miles west of Englewood. It was just north of the Kansas/Oklahoma State line

Diana: Was it his original ranch?

Bill: He came out here in the 50s. He was born in a dugout northwest of Laverne, Oklahoma, in 1918. And he'd always been interested in that area.

Diana: Do you still have land in Oklahoma?

Bill: Yes, my brother lives down there on one of the original home places.

Diana: Do you still have land in Meade County?

Bill: No.

Diana: It's just the stuff in Oklahoma and in Clark County now?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: Have you had any other livestock besides cattle on your property here in Clark County?

Bill: No, it's just cattle. We've done cow/calf and then some stockers, but nothing besides cattle. One time, I can't remember the year, but Dad did bring some buffalo in here. He and his brother had a buffalo herd in Oklahoma and they had them there for years. Then they did some dividing up and Dad brought his share up here. I think it was 50 or 60 buffalo. Buffalo kind of go where buffalo want to go; we have great neighbors and it reached a point where they said enough was enough. So the buffalo left.

Diana: There's 10,000 acres. Is it broken down into different pastures?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: Was it in different pastures when you purchased it?

Bill: Yes. In different pastures. Primarily, there is the river-bottom ground along both sides of the river and then there's the sandhills. The previous owners had made that differentiation between the sandhills and the river, which was, you know, very necessary for grazing differences. And they've always operated it like that. Now, the number of pastures in some parts of it have increased and we increased the amount of water. Just typical improvements throughout the years.

Diana: So what kind of water sources do you have on the land?

Bill: Well, it was windmills for years and years, and now it's mostly solar.

Diana: So now, you and your brother own different parts of that now?

Bill: Yes, that's correct. The part that I own, I'm just about 100 percent solar. And he has some solar and still some windmills. Then the cattle, when they're in the river, they have access to that water. They prefer fresh water, if they have it. It doesn't have quite as much salinity to it as what the river water does, due to the salt cedar that grows along the river.

Diana: Is there usually some water in the river that they can get to?

Bill: Since the Starbuck wildfire in 2017, the river has grown ever since then. It shows us how much water the salt cedars and the cedar trees use. If left unchecked, they will eventually choke the river back off. For the lifetime that I knew of, it would go dry around the Fourth of July and come back around Thanksgiving. That hasn't been the case since the Starbuck wildfire.

Diana: OK, so which part of the ranch do you have?

Bill: I'm on the eastern part that goes over into Comanche County. I'm about two thirds in Clark and one third in Comanche. Then my brother's part goes from there to the highway and goes west of the highway as well.

Diana: And do you each have about the same number of acres? On your part, do you graze cattle all the time on it, do you keep it stocked?

Bill: Yes, it's a year-round cow/calf operation

Diana: Do you have a certain breed that you prefer?

Bill: They're mainly Angus.

Diana: Are these cattle that you have been breeding for a long period of time? Or have you just started your cow/calf operation?

Bill: It's genetics that we've worked on to develop the kind of animal that's adapted to that country and doesn't require a lot of inputs.

Diana: Do you have more cows that you've had for a while or do you bring in heifers?

Bill: We raise our own heifers, so we're not bringing cattle in. We're just raising them and we keep the calves. We don't sell them in the fall. We keep them, and eventually, they're retained in a feed yard and finished out under a premium program.

Diana: When they're in the feed yard, do you retain ownership of them until they go to the packer?

Bill: Yes, we retain ownership. Right now, they're under a gap program, which is Global Animal Partnership, and they sell them to Whole Foods. That's where they go now. We get a premium for doing that, being all natural and the way that we handle them

Diana: You go to certain feed yards?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: In Kansas or Oklahoma?

Bill: In Oklahoma, the one feedyard that I primarily work with, that does the all-natural.

Diana: Do they have a nutritionist that...

Bill: Sure, they have a nutritionist and a veterinarian, and all the protocol.

Diana: When you do your cow/calf operation, do you have a certain type of a certain size of calf that you want your cows to have each year?

Bill: We calve later than some of the more traditional people. Rather than calving during the

wintertime of January and February, we're calving in April and May, when they can be on green grass and in warm weather. The calves might be a little bit smaller in the fall, but we retain the ownership and go through the stocker phase before we go into the feed yard. So they get the growth. It's just a little different time frame than some more traditional-type operations.

Diana: On your cows, do you use A.I.?

Bill: We use A.I. some and we use some bulls.

Diana: Do you have a Black Angus?

Bill: Yes, we have Black Angus.

Diana: Is there a difference in the size and conformation of the cattle now from when you first started raising cattle?

Bill: Yes, we have a little bit smaller-framed animal that is more adapted to the grass and that can stay in good flesh year-round without requiring a lot of maintenance. So, they are a little bit smaller, but we still want them to be growthy as well.

Diana: Besides the grass, do you feed grain or hay or anything to them?

Bill: We try not to feed hay. We don't keep hay. And just due to the cost, we graze year-round and change to different paddocks frequently to give the cows fresh grass. We give them supplemental protein and energy in the time of the year that they require it.

Diana: When you go work your cattle, do you have to do a lot of doctoring or... because they're all pretty much homegrown, right?

Bill: Yeah. And therefore, we don't have very much sickness. Sometimes in the fall, when the temperature swings and gets so high from up in the 90s with a 40 to 50-degree swing, we'll get some respiratory problems in the calves before they're weaned. That's not all that common, but it does happen some.

Diana: The protein that you feed, is it a special formula since you're doing all natural? Is it something that makes sure that they continue all natural?

Bill: We buy it from Ashland Feed and Seed. They sell all-natural feeds. You can't have ionophores or antibiotics. That's the two things you can't have.

Diana: Do they mix a special formula for you?

Bill: No, it's just an across-the-counter feed. I mean, they make it there, but it's just what everybody else primarily buys, too.

Diana: Is it in a tub when you buy it?

Bill: They bring it out in a in a semi and put in our overhead bin and we drive a pickup with a

caker underneath that bin and then drive the pickup out to the cattle and give them the range cubes.

Diana: So about how many animals do you have in a pasture?

Bill: We try to keep them all in one pasture and that way we can rotate the cattle and give the grass the most rest. So we try to keep them all together. There are certain times of year we might have the heifers separate if they're breeding or calving.

Diana: About how many do you run a year?

Bill: Three hundred to 350. We go more by animal units, so it would be around 200 cows and then maybe another 50 to 70 heifers.

Diana: The cold weather that we just had, how did that affect the livestock?

Bill: Well, we certainly increased the amount of feed that they were getting. And, we're diligent to keep the water open so they could have access to fresh water. And since we weren't calving, we got along really well.

Diana: When you were younger, did you have a part in your dad's operation?

Bill: Yes, I grew up helping him and did every aspect of it from riding the horse at a very young age. I remember when I was like five years old, I fell off and broke my little finger. That was the first accident, not the last. I helped feed the cattle in the wintertime and it was just always a part of my life.

Diana: Did you have a caker when you were young?

Bill: Oh heavens no. We had 100-pound burlap sacks of cottonseed cake. They would bring it in in semi-loads and we'd stack it in the barn and stack it on the back of the pickups. It was really a lot of work.

Diana: Did they have the pull strings?

Bill: They had the pull strings, but not easy like the sacks. It was a little more complicated to get those old burlap sacks undone. And of course, they got you dirty from the first one you touched.

Diana: How many cattle did he run?

Bill: He ran a couple thousand cows at one time and then he kept their calves and went to wheat with some and then summer grass. He kept he kept the calves generally through the stocker phase as well, and sometimes in the feedlot.

Diana: Did he raise all his own or did he have an order buyer that he got some from?

Bill: He raised them. He started out like everyone, it seems like, being a Hereford guy. Then he transitioned over time, but he always raised his own.

Diana: Did he have wheat pasture? Did he did he farm at all?

Bill: He farmed just a little bit, just enough to get me to where I hated it, but he didn't farm very much. He would lease wheat pasture from other people to put cows on.

Diana: So most of everything he had was pastureland.

Bill: Mostly pastureland.

Diana: So how did the pastureland here in Clark County differ from what he had Meade County, where the headquarters were?

Bill: Well, it's kind of like the difference from where the ranch is to just being out west of Ashland. We get into the short grass country that goes on through western Clark County and through Meade County. It is primarily buffalo, blue grama, very stout, strong grass with a lot of advantages to it. It just doesn't produce a lot of pounds of forage.

Diana: When you were younger, did you have to drive tractor? Was that one of the chores?

Bill: I remember driving a little open-top tractor with a one way, and I wasn't big enough to hardly turn the steering wheel. Since we were small farmers, we didn't have very nice equipment. So I learned to dislike it at a young age.

Diana: Do you have any equipment now?

Bill: I do not have a tractor now. We just have a skid steer to move dirt around tanks or a little bit of work like that, but just primarily everything's horseback with just a pickup and trailer.

Diana: Do you use four-wheeler?

Bill: Not much. I've got a side by side, and that's handy to check water and run around the pastures.

Diana: When you were younger, did your father trade work with other ranchers in the area when it was time to round up?

Bill: Yes. We were always trading help, it seemed to be mostly with family. We had a lot of family there in Oklahoma and we would trade with our ranches. It seemed like branding cattle was a 30-day process. You know, we might stop a little bit to get some work done at home. And of course, it was the highlight of the year. It was a lot of fun.

Diana: When they branded cattle, did they use a chute or did they rope and drag them?

Bill: Yeah, we never had a calf cradle. Growing up, we just got them down the old-fashioned way. And I think the roping is more humane on the cattle and a lot faster and easier on the men and cattle.

Diana: Did your roping skills get pretty good?

Bill: Well, they were better than they are now. When I was younger, they were certainly better.

Diana: When you were younger, did you get to do the roping or were you one of the people on the ground doing the branding?

Bill: Both. You took your turn at each.

Diana: When they branded, did they have a fire or did they use a propane tank?

Bill: When we started out, Dad would just dig the hole and put the wood in it and get the wood going and put the branding irons down in it. And that's just the way it was. Then as time went by, he had the propane and the branding heater that he could put the irons in. As we moved around from place to place, it was lots safer and a lot less likely to have a fire.

Diana: Do you still brand?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: Do you use propane, or do you use freeze branding?

Bill: We still use the propane when we brand the calves.

Diana: Do you have a certain area that you brand your cattle?

Bill: We brand on the left hip.

Diana: And what about ear tags?

Bill: We ear tag them as well, they have to have an individual identification.

Diana: When all the baby calves are born, they get an ear tag, then?

Bill: No. Their moms, know which one's theirs. We simply ear tag them when we brand them, and that's so that I can identify them.

Diana: And then when this calf is going on to the feedyard, do you have to send some record with it as to where it was born?

Bill: Yes, there's quite a little bit of paperwork that goes with it, in a natural program. So it's not an individual animal per say, but I do keep records of when the first and last calf is born and some other things.

Diana: Is it a computerized record system that you have or is it mainly the little red book in your pocket?

Bill: It is both. The little red book goes with me every day. And then we transfer the information that we need to.

Diana: OK, let's talk about horses. Did your family always have work horses, saddle horses?

Bill: Yes, and at one time we raised a lot of them. At some point, we got out of that, but we've always had horses and horses are an important part of the ranch work.

Diana: Do you have a certain type of horse?

Bill: They're all quarter horses.

Diana: Are they Palominos or...

Bill: I had a beautiful Palomino mare that when I was in high school and 4-H, that I showed and roped on. I got some colts out of her. But you know, my dad had this saying, "If you buy a horse for color, all you get is color". So, I guess that we just want a good horse. We don't worry about the color.

Diana: So that how many horses would you keep that were used for the ranching part?

Bill: I think we had around 25. There wouldn't have been too many mares. I mean, when they were younger, we would ride them and then later on, they might have some babies. But I just keep a few horses out there now.

Diana: Did you train those horses then?

Bill: Yeah, we would train them back then. I remember getting bucked off and my head being all bloody and my dad finding me. I remember him getting on that horse and wow, we didn't know he could ride like that! I didn't know she could buck like that, but it was quite a show. He won.

Diana: Did you have favorite horse names?

Bill: No. I remember my favorite horse's names, but I mean, they were just names.

Diana: What about dogs, did you have any pets?

Bill: Yeah, we used border collies on the ranch and of course, there were pets that stayed in the house. They were pretty spoiled, but they were good work dogs.

Diana: Did they do work? Were they used with the cattle?

Bill: Yes, they do work. Yeah, when I'm out there by myself, I can get a lot done. They can go and gather cattle and help move cattle. The cows respect them and so it works very well.

Diana: When you were younger, when you went out and check cattle, was it mostly done on horseback?

Bill: Yes, it was mostly done on horseback and we had dogs then. I've always had to have a cow dog of some kind.

Diana: Did he have any employees?

Bill: Yes, he always had employees. Some of the ranches that he wasn't at full time would have an employee, but he kept one at the home ranch as well.

Diana: And how were they paid? Was it just wages or was the house part of their wages?

Bill: I remember what he paid them back then when I was a kid, and of course, the house was just right across the driveway from Mom and Dad's house. We had a milk cow so they could have all the milk they wanted. Mom had chickens, so they got eggs and Mom made butter. I don't know if they made their own or she got that, but Dad always gave them beef. I think it was an unlimited supply, but they always had beef. But he paid them by the month, he wrote a check once a month. And I remember that check was like $150 and I remember when it was $200 and $250. It wasn't much, and they always had a whole house full of children.

Diana: Did your mom have a garden?

Bill: A big garden.

Diana: Do you remember some of the things she grew?

Bill: She grew green beans and I was supposed to roto-till between the rows. And I remember when I couldn't tell the green beans from the weeds and I plowed up some of them, so I lost that job. Well, I tried to lose that job, but I think I got to pull the weeds after that.

Diana: So were the employees usually there a long time?

Bill: No, they didn't. We had some longtime employees on the ranch, but there was also a steady turnover from, I think it's from all the hard work and long hours.

Diana: Did they have their own horses?

Bill: Some had their own horses and some wouldn't. It would just depend.

Diana: Yeah. So now do you have employees?

Bill: I just have some guys who help me part-time.

Diana: When you need extra help?

Bill: Well, when we need extra help for cattle work. I just need help different times of the year. Maybe a little more frequently than I used to.

Diana: You mentioned the cedar trees on this grassland down there because it's close to water. Before the fire, were there a lot of cedar trees? And did you have a way to manage?

Bill: Yes, the property unfortunately became heavily infested with the eastern red cedar trees. In 2013, I mechanically cut the ones that were on my property, and there were thousands and thousands and it took months and months to cut them. And once we cut them off, then the little seedlings would come back that were already there. Then we started using prescribed fire to burn the pastures to kill those little cedar trees while they were little. We have them under control now, and we still periodically burn, a prescribed burn, to keep the woody species thinned out and keep the cedar trees from coming back.

Diana: What's involved in a prescribed burn?

Bill: In a prescribed burn there are a number of things. The number one thing is safety, and following the prescription that you set with the wind not over 16 miles an hour and humidity not below 20 percent. Then we want to have the wind direction in the direction that we have planned and properly made firebreaks are wide enough and free of any material like trees or tree limbs that could stay and burn, and then wide enough to be a safety margin to the edge of where the fire is. And then we mow that as well. So we go about being real safe when doing that.

Diana: Is there a certain time of the year when it's good to burn?

Bill: Well, when we first started out about six years ago and we had so much fuel that needed burned up from all the old trees and brush, we were doing springtime burns. And they were pretty ferocious. Now that we're matured and we're wanting to control more brush like sumac and sandhill plums and sand sage and things like that, having a summertime burn in July and August works really well because the carbohydrates are out into the leaves, and therefore we can impact the species that we designate a lot more. If you burn in the springtime, you might get rid of a portion of the plant, but the carbohydrates are in the roots, in the reserves, and so when springtime comes and the moisture comes, they just grow back.

Diana: So about how many acres do you plan to burn in one burn?

Bill: It'll vary from 500 to 1,000. It could be any number we picked. We just try to not make it so big that the fire line, the men, get too spread out or make it too long and they get too tired. We go pretty fast, but sometimes you get six or seven miles of fire line. That's enough for us.

Diana: So this is a group.

Bill: Yeah, it's really neighbors helping neighbors where it is. They belong to the, we call it, Cherokee strip, a prescribed burn association. They pay dues and we have annual meetings and we talk about what we're going to burn and talk about our equipment. We own some equipment that we've received on grants. We work with the State Prescribed Burn Association under their 501 3C umbrella. So it's really well organized.

Diana: You have a cooperation with the local fire departments?

Bill: We do. They're respectful, and we have written burn plans that we operate from and we try to give them that burn plan prior to burning, so they can look at it and talk about it and

understand it. And they're welcome to come to our meeting and encouraged to do so. Previously, you know, they came out and looked at our property with us when we first started and were trying to trying to gain their cooperation. The cooperation's growing, our experience levels are growing and so far it's a win-win.

Diana: So about how many people are in the organization?

Bill: There's nine ranches involved currently.

Diana: Where do you keep the equipment? On the different ranches?

Bill: Most everybody, even if it's owned by the association, whoever is using it would house it and maintain it and preferably keep it undercover.

Diana: What type of equipment?

Bill: We have several slide-in pickup units, some of them are equipped to knock down a fire, meaning they have high capacity.

Diana: Is it like a tank? A water tank?

Bill: Yes, 250 or 300 gallons. Maybe some of them are even bigger.

Diana: With a generator?

Bill: They have a motor and a pump and there's some hose. They're something that you could slide in and out of a pickup. And there's some made for side by sides. A few people have full-time designated fire units, whether it be a one-ton pick up or some of them have bigger trucks. So there's a variety of different units.

Diana: Is that because they're so far from like a department or something that they've got to take care of themselves?

Bill: Well, after the Starbuck wildfire, more people are thinking about the need to own them. But when you belong to a prescribed burn association, you know you need to contribute something. You know have to have some equipment or maintain some associations, and then you can show up and be ready to help because to do our burns we need our other members and for them to do theirs and then help back. It isn't something you can do on your own safely.

Diana: Do you try to accomplish it in a day?

Bill: Yes. Well, depending on the on the weather, but it'll be accomplished in a day and usually it doesn't take that long to get around the fire line and get it blacked in to where it's safe. And then somebody stays and monitors the fire until it goes out.

Diana: So, since the fire, have you had to do a lot of controlled burns?

Bill: We still do some, pretty much every year. Moving to the summertime burns is just a

whole new level of burning. For the first couple of years, some of the members didn't have very much that needed burned because they got burned so heavily. But now people are going back and starting to burn on a regular basis.

Diana: Like some of the cedar trees or some of the other stuff starting to come back.

Bill: Well, I don't know about the cedar trees coming back, but they have other goals that they're trying to accomplish, whether it's some type of brush that they're wanting to control, or usually something along the brush line that they're trying to thin out and control.

Diana: Where your ranch is, is there tamarack on the river?

Bill: There is tamarack on the river and something called salt cedar and we have been doing some burning of that in the summertime in an effort to control the growth of it. It doesn't kill it, but it's hurting it and we'll see where that goes. But summertime is a good time to burn that.

Diana: Is tamarack a native plant or did it get brought in?

Bill: It's invasive. It got brought in back in the homestead days because it grew fast and gave them some shelter. Then the floods came and took it downstream. And here we are today infested with them.

Diana: There's a bunch, right?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: And the burning didn't really take care of it?

Bill: Amazingly, it went through that and it actually killed some of it, and it burned a lot of it off and thinned it out tremendously. It did things that we couldn't even dream of doing in a prescribed fire because of the intensity, the low humidity, the high wind speed, all the things. This wouldn't be safe for us to do. It was amazing what it did. But that silly stuff is coming back, getting bigger each year.

Diana: Let's talk a little bit about what the fire did in that area because like you said, it's mostly pasture land and it had the cedar and the tamarack and all that. Did it destroy all the pasture land there or...

Bill: It did as much harm as it did by burning up fences and people's homes and all the things they didn't want burned. It did a lot of good to the pasture land, as far as you know, removing some invasive species like the eastern red cedar that it killed. It doesn't come back unless a new seedling comes up. But it did even kill some grasses. It killed the crowns because it was so hot and it took a few years for those plant crowns to come back and that that made for some thinning of the grasses and allowed some undesirables to come in. But even though it did all that, it came back and filled in. If a person didn't overgraze and gave it some time to rest, it was very manageable. But it was a very intense fire.

Diana: So, the grass isn't quite back up to what it was before 2017.

Bill: No, it's back. It's been back for a few years. It just took a couple of years for the plant crowns to spread the rhizomes that filled back and it just took a little bit of time. You could look out there and see some dead crowns now, if you look closely.

Diana: Did you lose cattle?

Bill: By the grace of God we didn't lose any cows, and we weren't calving when that happened.

Diana: What about fence? Did you lose all your fence?

Bill: We lost a lot of fence.

Diana: Did you have five wire before?

Bill: Yes, we had five wire before, and a lot of those were new. Some of that, the hedge corner posts had burned up. So, we went back with pipe. Why we didn't think of that years ago, but we didn't. Back then, we used all hedge posts, even for the line, so there would be hedge and some steel. So the hedge posts would be burned out. On fences like that, we had to put back in corners and replaced the wooden posts and then we were back in business.

Diana: Did you do it yourself or did you have fence builders come in?

Bill: Well, we did both. We took advantage of the generosity of the volunteers that came, and we built a lot of that ourselves. And when that played out, we could get the crews and we used crews as well.

Diana: Do you remember where they came from?

Bill: Of all the volunteers, still friends with a lot of them, and surprisingly, it will be a little bit less now, but I hear from them from time to time. We had neighbors that were out of the area that I'm friends with that came and volunteered and helped. And some of them would show up and stay a week. So everybody was very generous in every way.

Diana: Did you take advantage of the different programs that they had at the time, like Community Foundation and the ones for fencing through the government?

Bill: Yes, both of those. Without the generosity of Ashland Community Foundation and with the help of the State Cattlemen's Association, Kansas Livestock Association, we would have been able to have made up the difference between what the government assistance was and what our actual cost was. So it was very helpful. The donations from individuals to those organizations that were distributed out to the ranchers were amazing beyond anything I could have ever dreamed about. It was more.

Diana: They just showed up, some of the volunteers?

Bill: Yeah, it was amazing how many volunteers came in and the people sending supplies of every kind, from fencing supplies to hay to drinking water. People were so caring and loving

and generous. And this certainly played in our minds at helping other areas when they've had disasters. We're on Facebook with one of the groups called Wildfire Disaster and when something happens in another place, we'll see it. Oftentimes, we've sent some support that way, and it's made us just a lot more aware of people's needs.

Diana: When you were younger, do you remember any big fires?

Bill: I remember fighting a lot of wildfires growing up and we'd have an old pickup, the sprayer went on the oldest pickup. We'd use it to spray cattle with pesticides back in those days for flies. But we would fill it with water and we would go to those fires and we'd take those burlap sacks that we talked about that the cattle cake came in, and we'd wet those in a five-gallon bucket of water. We'd go out there and swing those, sometimes one in each hand and be putting out the fire with it. And that was just the common way. But everybody would show up. There'd be lots of people out there. It might be during the night time, but people were quick to respond, and it seemed like we were pretty successful. This was before we had organized fire departments out in the country.

Diana: Were they mostly lightning strikes?

Bill: Mostly lightning strikes. I remember one time coming home from working cattle and we could see all the different fires out there. And of course, we picked one and went to it. But sometimes there'd be several of them.

Diana: I know in the 60s they started a fire association for ranchers, and they could either pay so much or they could bring their own equipment. Do you know, if your dad was part of something like that?

Bill: I don't remember that. I probably had a lot more important things to think about back then, being a kid! But no, I don't remember that. But that's a great idea, whoever thought of it.

Diana: I can't remember how much they paid, and then that became the start of the county fire department.

Bill: That's interesting.

Diana: What about snowstorms?

Bill: Well, everybody remembers the snowstorm that came in March of '71 and was so bad for us.

Diana: Where were you?

Bill: I remember we got in an airplane in Meade, Kansas because we couldn't get to the ranch in Oklahoma down by Laverne. So they cleared the runway at Laverne and we flew down there and landed. We went to town and this one business got in a truckload of snowmobiles and we picked up a snowmobile. That's basically what I was in charge of for the next couple of weeks. I had a little sled. I think I could put eight or 10 bales on that thing and go out in the snow storms and find the cattle and feed them. And then they used helicopters and different things. But that was quite a battle down there, in that part of the country.

Diana: Did you have the helicopters drop off hay to your cattle?

Bill: Yes, it was the National Guard. But everybody had little square bales then. They would land out there and you'd carry them over and stack the helicopter full of it. Then somebody would go with them and show them where the cattle were. Then we used our tractors with what little... if they had a dozer blade. It was slow, hard going work. Tractors weren't big like we have nowadays, and it was difficult. We lost a lot of cattle back then.

Diana: So where's your ranch from Laverne?

Bill: North and west.

Diana: And so how many acres were there?

Bill: Well, back then, the ranch was 25,000 acres.

Diana: There in Oklahoma. So, you were in Meade.

Bill: South of Meade, then my uncle was north of Knowles on the Cimarron, and then they had that ranch at Laverne.

Diana: Did you lose electricity during that snowstorm?

Bill: Oh, I don't remember. I know we didn't go back and forth to home because I don't think we could. I don't even remember where I stayed. With some of the family, I suppose. I don't remember that part.

Diana: Do you know how many cattle that you fed?

Bill: No, and I don't remember the amount that we lost. I know it was considerable, but I really don't remember.

Diana: Did you take cattle or feed to different cattle in different areas?

Bill: Yes, I would go to the little square bale pile of hay and fill my sled. I remember getting stuck in the river and dumping the sled. And you know, it was quite an adventure, getting it done.

Diana: Did you have to go across a lot of big snowdrifts?

Bill: Yes, and sometimes the sled would tip over them and you have to go back and restack it. Somehow, amongst all that, still being in high school, I found some fun and maybe it was getting out of school. Or maybe it was just the fact of driving a snowmobile, but it was a lot of work along with the fun.

Diana: Did anyone go with you. Or were you always by yourself?

Bill: I think I was by myself.

Diana: What about water? Was it hard to get the cattle to water during that snowstorm?

Bill: Yeah, it was. They would be stranded in a little small area. Maybe, you know, behind a plum bush, behind a hill, and they really couldn't venture out of that because the snow was so deep and the drifts were so deep. Yeah, it was. It was a real difficult problem.

Diana: How did it affect the horses?

Bill: I don't remember us doing anything with horses. It was so bad.

Diana: It was pretty deep. What about any other storms since then?

Bill: I remember some before that, as kids, it would drift up over the corral fence. We've always had our blizzards and snowstorms. Maybe everything is bigger when you're smaller, but I don't remember. The snowstorms always seem larger. Back then, it seemed like we had bigger drifts and they stayed on the ground longer than they do nowadays and were more frequent. Yes, it seemed like every winter we had them.

Diana: Did you get to go sledding or anything like that, or was it mostly having to do work?

Bill: No, I think we had a sled. So I'm sure we did some.

Diana: What about tornadoes? Do you ever see any or have damage from?

Bill: Mom and Dad's house got hit by one in the late 50s and it damaged almost every room. It was a large two-story ranch house and they had a large brick fireplace. It fell over onto the house and damaged almost every room. And then another time I had a ranch at Fort Supply and a tornado hit the house and it damaged several buildings and our home. And we were in the home; it was quite a scary deal.

Diana: Did they have to replace the two-story house?

Bill: They didn't replace it, but it damaged the roof and let water come in and it was a big deal repairing all that. And of course, they rebuilt that brick fireplace, but it did a lot of damage.

Diana: What about floods?

Bill: I remember I lived along the Beaver River there at Fort Supply, and they had this dike out there and I remember it had this cut in it so people could drive through. It didn't seem to matter much, but yeah, I remember when it flooded one time I had to go out there with a tractor and put that dike back in to keep the water... That dike was actually there to keep the water from coming up to the ranch house. We had like three houses there and barns, and it was to keep it. Without that dike all around the property, and if I wouldn't have filled the cut in, it would have flooded our homes and the barns.

Diana: Did it take a long time to repair it?

Bill: Oh, it was just sand, so it was just grabbing sand and trying to make it taller than the water.

Diana: Did you ever go into partnership with your dad or your brother?

Bill: Never did.

Diana: So you each had your own operation?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: So how has your current operation changed since you first started? Is it pretty much the same?

Bill: Well, I've been ranching for a long time, so it's taken changes over the years. I guess there's times it's been larger. At different times, I've been totally in the stocker business with less cows. Now I have cows and less stockers. So I guess it changes along that line.

Diana: And the way you keep records?

Bill: Oh yeah. Now we use a lot of spreadsheets and everything and we are a lot more high-tech than we used to be. There's a lot available to us nowadays,

Diana: A lot of information that you can get online or going to seminars.

Bill: Yes, we access them every way, all the genetic information, there's just so much out there. There's a lot to keep up with.

Diana: Do you keep improving your genetics on your cattle?

Bill: Well, we certainly try to.

Diana: Do you have a plan to continue your operation? Do you have someone that's going to take your operation over?

Bill: Well, that's something that we're actually working on actively now. We have been for a few years, is starting to implement a succession plan. It's nothing that happens quickly, but we are working on it and it's still a work in progress.

Diana: Do you have lots of decisions that need to be made when you do a succession plan?

Bill: Yes, it's more complicated than meets the eye,

Diana: Because it involves everybody that's going to be in the whole succession plan. How do you think ranching has changed in the last hundred years?

Bill: Well, people have a lot more knowledge about conservation and about ecology and how things work. And it needs to be the soil first, and that takes care of the grass, and if you have

healthy soil and healthy grass, you have healthy cattle. So, the more astute rancher looks at it from that point, not just the fact that, the wealth's in the cattle, it's all about the cattle. It starts from the soil and goes up.

Diana: How is the cattle market entwined with the grain markets?

Bill: Well, there's the old saying that if grains are high, it'll eventually make the cattle high and cheap grain means cheap cattle. People would tend to think it's just the opposite, but it's really not. So, they're very intertwined.

Diana: So how do you think the pandemic impacted the cattle industry and agriculture?

Bill: It made people more aware of where their food comes from and a lot of people are wanting to have the ability to have their own food, like the meat anyway, processed and have larger supplies at home. So it hasn't been all-bad situation. It's definitely created some challenges along the way.

Diana: A lot of people have gone back to doing things the old-fashioned way.

Bill: Yes.

Diana: You've lived in several different communities and your folks did. How have you been involved in the different communities that you've been in?

Bill: Well, community is very important in being involved from the church level to the community activities and on different boards and part of organizations that affect you. I've always tried to be involved at whatever level that I had the opportunity to be, and it is important to help others and be involved.

Diana: Have you been on several boards?

Bill: Yes.

Diana: Like, give me an example.

Bill: Well, I think I'm on three or four currently, like the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, which would be a state organization for having healthy land and regenerative land management. And our Prescribed Burning Association, I'm one of the officers in that, the Cattlemen's Association. I'm on the local church board. And then there's some other state boards that I'm a part of, so there's different levels, but I try to stay involved at basically all levels.

Diana: The way that the boards meet now, has it kind of changed since 2020?

Bill: A year or so ago, we didn't know what Zoom was, but now everybody's pretty familiar with it and probably getting just a little bit tired of it.

Diana: Do you think meeting virtually it's going to be with us from now on?

Bill: It probably will be. There for a while, it was nice not to have to drive clear across the state to go to a meeting, when your drive-time would be twice as long as the meeting-time. But then there's something to be said about having face to face meetings, but I think Zoom or that type of meeting will probably be here to stay because that's just the way technology is and people are used to it now. And it's easy to stop and give them a couple of hours, and go right back to what you're doing. And oftentimes we can be doing that right on our phones, even when we're doing something else.

Diana: This is kind of like an economic advantage. Looking back, what's the smartest thing you ever did?

Bill: Marry my wife.

Diana: That's the top answer? If you could, what would you change?

Bill: I might say be younger again, but then again, we seem to get a little wiser as we get older, so... Well, there's certainly some decisions I made in my past that I could probably make better decisions on. So, I would probably think back and if I could do do-overs, I'd probably do some of them over.

Diana: Do you have some goals for your ranch that you are striving to meet still?

Bill: Yeah, we still have goals that we're wanting to meet and we are very conservation-minded and we're wanting to see that those are maintained and the ecology and biology of the ranch is there to last through the generations, and that's one of the main things that we're working to put things in place, to have that happen. We just hopefully are setting the next generation up for success.

Diana: Do you still has five- or 10-year goals?

Bill: Yes, some of them in perpetuity.

Diana: Is there anything that you think we haven't covered that you'd like to cover?

Bill: No. It's just nice to get to be a part of history. It takes effort from everybody, and it's just good to be a part of it and part of the community.

Diana: Well, thank you very much for taking this time to do this.