12-30-2020

*Diana:* What is your name?

*Mark:* My name is Mark Ralph Gardiner.

*Diana:* Where do you live?

*Mark:* I live 12 miles southwest of Ashland, Kansas, along the old railroad track that went down to Englewood, Kansas.

*Diana:* When did your family come to Clark County?

*Mark:* My great-grandfather, Henry Clay Gardiner, homesteaded here in 1885. So he and seven other families came from northeast Kansas, around Hoyt, Kansas, which is north of Topeka. And interestingly enough, Dr. Burkett's family was in that same caravan. And Mr. Hinkle that settled two miles west of Ashland, they were all in that same group of people. They homesteaded there in the same general area where we are now about 10 miles southwest of Ashland in 1885. My grandfather, Ralph Gardiner, was born in that dugout in 1889.

*Diana:* They lived in the dugout when they first came.

*Mark:* They lived in the dugout. They stayed there for nine years. They started out then, you know, in the old days of the Homestead Act, if you lived there for seven years, you got to stay there. But they also-- probably a little-known fact was the Tree Stand Act, which if you planted X amount of trees, you got another hundred and sixty acres.

They did that. My great grandfather, Henry Clay, he pretty much drove a supply wagon from Fort Dodge, Kansas to Fort Supply, Oklahoma. And my understanding of that is, you know, of course, we all came here just after the Indians had been here. It wasn't totally-- you know, the indigenous people were still around and such. But the military, of course, as you know, Diana, Ashland was Soldier's Grave long before it was Ashland, because some soldiers that have been killed were buried here. But there were redoubts which were earthwork forts for about every 25 miles or so. North of Ashland would have been the Bluff Creek Redoubt. South of Ashland would have been the Cimarron Redoubt.

And he was hauling supplies back and forth from Fort Dodge to Fort Supply to all of those readouts. And he would do that every week.

*Diana:* Did he own his own wagon.

*Mark:* I really don't know.

*Diana:* Do you know what they used to pull it?

*Mark:* They used horses.

*Diana:* Horses, not oxen or mules.

*Mark:* They used horses. That's what Dad told me, that's what I'm assuming is correct.

*Diana:* Why did they come to Clark County?

*Mark:* It was the Promised Land! You know, I think the lure, like for all pioneers, of a new start, new beginnings. We're no different than every other American. Our migration came from the east and the Gardiner descendants came from England. So they, if you track them, they were in New York and then Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri and ultimately Kansas. And I think just the longing for a new fresh start and free land.

If you think back to the history of Clark County, Kansas, the population in the year 1900 was larger than at any time in the history of the whole county. Since my father, Henry Gardner, was a real student of all these things, everything is a function of rain as far as agriculture goes, and they all came from the east. And even coming from eastern Kansas, we would get half the amount of rain that they get. And so they came here, and 160 acres might work at Hoyt, Kansas, but it won't work at Ashland, Kansas. We both know of homesteads and areas that were inhabited by people that are just remnants because essentially they starved out because it didn't rain enough and they were trying to farm the way they would in eastern Kansas. It just took more acres per family and more acres per farm to actually have a critical mass to be large enough to survive. And that's what they lived and learned and they lost that place and several other places. And fortunately for me and my family, they stayed in Clark County, Kansas, and my granddaddy was born in that dugout. He started putting together a place. He lost that place in the 30s and moved back in with his father. My dad was seven years old. And Helen, his sister, they remember moving back and they lived there for five or ten years, but they kept reorganizing and and starting over again. And so the land that we have today, or part of it, was put together in the for the most part in the 1930s after they moved for about the fourth time.

*Diana:* So when your great-grandfather came, was he married?

*Mark:* He was. You know, his daughter was Ida. I don't remember Henry Clay's wife's name. I should know that from the Centennial History book, but I don't. So, yeah, but they had Ethel, which Ethel Wilson, which would have been Jerry Wilson's mother, who, you know, was married to Peggy Wilson here locally. But they would have been... Ethel and Ralph were brother and sister and they had one sibling that passed as an infant. But Ethel and Ralph grew up here.

*Diana:* So how soon were they able to move out of the dugout? Did they build a house?

*Mark:* You know, that's a little bit sketchy because they left there and they came back to Ashland. I'm not really sure, but if you know where Helen's place was north of town, which is kind of the Randall Spare area now, he bought a lot of that from the Arnold family, but that's where Henry Clay Gardiner ultimately bought some land and they built a house there. In my understanding, that would have been more in probably the 1920s. So, I assume they found somewhere to stay in Ashland when they left that place and did various work to regroup and then bought that land and started over again.

*Diana:* Was your grandfather mainly a farmer or a rancher?

*Mark:* Well, we would say rancher, but they had everything from chickens to milk cows. And, you know, he was mainly a freighter. Yeah. But they would have thought of themselves as cattlemen and they had cattle. And actually, Ralph Gardiner, he got started a lot with sheep because they were more numerous and had a cheaper entry fee. And he always loved cattle. Dad and Ralph, Henry remembered when he was young, they loaded like 3,000 ewes at the Acres, Kansas, stockyards. Acres, of course, is nothing more than an elevator today, but it's halfway between Ashland and Englewood and they hauled those ewes and sold them all. Dad and Ralph rode that train with them. To my understanding, it was to either Kansas City or Chicago. Chicago seems far away, but I think it was Kansas City.

*Diana:* About how many would they run?

*Mark:* Well, I know they had 3,000 ewes and when they sold them, they sold all of them.

*Diana:* Did they raise babies?

*Mark:* They did, yeah. You know, there's a brick house that was Ralph's house, and today my son Ransom lives there. But Dan Strang lived there for a number of years. Lloyd Carter. But it's just there on what we would call the Gardiner homeplace. But when I was younger, there were all these tin sheds and wire pens, and that was actually where they would lamb the ewes as they were having their lambs. And it was just kind of in ruins there in the 70s. But that's where they did lots of that. You'd find little places out in the pastures, they're pretty much gone now, but a few posts and a little piece of tin and I'd say, "What's this?" And it's like, "Oh, we had a sheepherder." And of course, Dad was very, very young. He said they would go out and graze those sheep during the day and he had built that just for some shade. They would bring them in at night because the coyotes would eat too many of them.

*Diana:* So, they employed some people to go and watch?

*Mark:* That one herder. I think him and Granddad Ralph did that because but there weren't very many. And I think Muriel Gardiner, Ralph's wife, would have been part of that. But Dad knew at times, like when they were farming and things, they would have a sheepherder that would go with the ewes while they were farming.

*Diana:* Did they raise crops for their sheep or was it more commercial?

*Mark:* It was more commercial. And, you know, I think with all ranching in this area and certainly just like it is today, it was, "You can raise your own feed versus buy it," and they would. They would have primarily raised those sheep but they were farming wheat back then too and sheep are a ruminant animal quite capable of eating wheat. So I'm sure they used that too.

*Diana:* Any other crops they would have grazed?

*Mark:* You know, outside of gardens, they would have tried various things. I know they had a big garden with corn and various produce, but mainly it was always wheat and a little bit of alfalfa. Wheat and grass is primarily what our family has specialized in.

*Diana:* So when did they start getting larger animals, like going to cattle?

*Mark:* You know, they had cattle all along, even when they first came here. In the notes of the history, they brought X amount of horses and cattle, in my mind without reviewing it, which I should have done. But in my mind, you know, they came out here with probably five or 10 cows.

*Diana:* Mostly milk cows?

*Mark:* Probably a couple of milk cows and some beef cattle.

*Diana:* Any specific breed at that time?

*Mark:* Oh, it would have just been probably the native mix, which, you know, not too long after that, it would have been Herefords. But Ralph Gardiner got his first Angus cattle in 1931. And growing up a youngster in a Angus family, I'd always say to Dad, "So did Granddad Ralph get Angus cattle because he knew they were very efficient, maternal, good in product and just had all these things?" And Dad always enjoyed just laughing and saying, "No, he was a contrarian. Everybody else had Herefords, so he got Angus."

*Diana:* Where'd he get them, do you know?

*Mark:* Folks in Mullinville, Kansas. I don't remember their name, but it was some of the very... I mean, the first Angus cattle, to delve into Angus history, came to Victoria, Kansas, in 1873. So, you know, they had been around. But Hereford were the dominant breed. And, of course, Herefords were the dominant breed up until probably just about 30 to 40 years ago. But he got those from Mullinville, Kansas and I'm not remembering the folks' name. Dad told me, but I forgot.

*Diana:* Do you know, when they became registered, when they started?

*Mark:* I do. You know, Dad had a great love of cattle and they got those commercial cows in the early thirties. Dad was always working with the cattle. And he liked the job because he didn't enjoy milking cows. He learned at an early age he didn't want to be a dairy farmer because that was... that and gathering eggs. He would get chewed out if they spilt the milk or if they broke an egg. Of course, that was growing up in the Depression. We think we have challenges now, but they probably had bigger ones. But that being said, I understand enough in 1947 that Dad had the grand champion steer at the Kansas State Fair.

One of the prizes for that was some money towards the Kansas Angus sale, so Dad actually bought two registered heifers at that sale in 1947. And the plan was that they were going to use those heifers to raise some bulls for their commercial cattle herd. Now, Dad would say those two weren't any good, so not many of the cattle descended from them, but that was the beginning of the registered cowherd in 1947 and he continued with that. He would have graduated from Ashland High School in 1949. And when you think about the technologies that are available to us today, think back to that point time. Artificial insemination had not been invented yet. But fortunately for our family, when Dad went to school at Kansas State University, that was at the beginning of artificial insemination and he actually learned how to do AI and the techniques then. It wasn't terribly successful there in the early 50s, but he kept working at it and getting better and better at it.

So ultimately, it was a pretty revolutionary choice to make in 1964 when AI was really still pretty new, let alone Henry Gardiner deciding that would be the only way that the cattle would be bred on our place. I was actually three years old at that point in time, and Dad made the decision to be totally AI without the use of cleanup bulls. Now, we didn't have near as many cattle then as we do today, but essentially it was Dad, Mom and a couple of men that helped him. So that was pretty novel, and I think one of the things when you grow up and don't know anything any different, I often tell folks when they talk about the history of that it's like, you know, Dad made the mention that he was starting and he was raising some registered cattle and selling a few bulls. And in the early 1970s, and my brother Greg and I were the main heat detectors. You detect the heifer or the cow in heat and then bring them in to breed them. Well, I'd never seen a bull breed a cow. So one night at supper, Dad made the comment that, you know, "I sold a bull today." I always joke and I'd like to believe it's true that I was kind of observant and paying attention. I go, "So what's the bull do?" And he said, "He breeds the cow."

And remember, I'm a 10-year-old boy that has never seen anything but his father breed a cow. And so I finally ask the question, "So does he stick his leg up there or what?" And so we had a good discussion about that.

But that was probably the minor league training on reproduction and trying to learn and understand more. But really his thirst and quest was to make beef cattle better. And I know we're talking about ranching in southwest Kansas, but that that curiosity that Henry had to try that technique and he worked his guts out all through that time, trying to make cattle better. And we didn't really have the tools to make those changes in the 60s and 70s. But he kept wonderful records and he documented it. He would always say and I remember this, he would always say, "Maybe we can't make changes in the beef industry, but dang it, we ought to. Look at what the dairy industry has done." And he would follow that and see that. And I remember in the fall of 1980. We got those same tools that the dairy industry had. And it's a database system. It's called the BLUP Procedure, which is the best linear unbiased prediction. And it was the first time that it took all the traits of cattle and compared them for the economically important traits and ranked them.

So in the fall of 1980, I was coming home from Kansas State for Thanksgiving and Dad said, "I finally know what we're going to do." I said, "What's that?" He said, "We're going to only use high accuracy progeny, proven bulls for the traits of merit." Well, "How do you know who those are?" And he goes, "Well, that's in this new American AG Association Sire software."

"So how do you know it's right?"

He said, "Look, from 1964 to 1980, we have been total AI without the use of cleanup bulls, the very best bulls of the Angus breed, our average weaning weight at 10 months of age is 523 pounds. In 1964, it was 523 pounds and in 1980 it's 523 pounds. I took all the bulls that I used during that time period. I averaged them up and I looked at this and what the sire summary said is, "If you use these bulls in a total AI system, you'll make no change." And so that's really what made Henry Gardiner a pioneer, because he’s the one who had the information. He could objectively look at the information. He could look at that that sire summary and say, "It's right."

So that's really what made Gardiner Angus Ranch what it is today. We still implement Henry's disciplined selection scheme to use what I call the Michael Jordans of the Angus breed, the multi-trait specialists. But all those things happened that were able to let us go from a break-even to a loss business, to be able to grow our business to where today several families are able to make a living at Gardiner Angus Ranch.

*Diana:* Is somebody in charge of keeping the records that your dad kept?

*Mark:* Well, we all are. He had a rule and we will always follow his rules and in today's world we have, of course, computer systems and all that, but we write it all down. I mean, I left early to come in here for this, but they're breeding cows right now. And it'll be written in the notebook. It'll be put in the computer and that goes to the server. But from my two sons and my nephew to Greg to myself, we all write it down. The system's in place, but I guess technically, I would be in charge of those meetings today. I mean, I'm putting that off on the boys and they do it more and more and more.

But we have a system that's exactly the same as Dad's. He had a clipboard that we kept it all on. And we still we have the clipboard system that's been put onto the computer, but we always write it all down in a notebook and those notebooks are treated like the Bible so you can't lose them.

*Diana:* So let's go back to Ralph, because he had a cow calf operation and he moved it into being an Angus operation.

*Mark:* He did that with Henry. Ralph was actually one of the reasons, and I always say, you know, as young as I am, how can I be connected to the grandfather was born 1889. Well, he didn't get married until he was 43. Yeah. And he married Muriel Small. Muriel Small came here with her family, it would have been in the 20s in there somewhere and she was a schoolteacher. You think about the local history and such, there's the Acres School. The schoolhouse is still there today, owned by Frantz Betschart. Actually, the classroom and the desks are still in there and the chalkboards are still there, but Muriel lived with the McCarty's, Mike McCarty's grandparents. She taught at... I don't remember the name of the school, but it was right over there by McCarty's house, very close to Highway 283. And so my assumption, I guess, by the schoolhouse is that I remember being younger, that they were probably every 10 to 15 miles apart. This community was just like Sitka.

*Diana:* Were there any schoolhouses on the Gardiner property there?

*Mark:* You know, the Acres Schoolhouse is within a quarter mile of it, but to my knowledge, there were not. Now that I always called it the McCarty school, but that's not the right. It had a different name, but it was on, you know, the McCarty land there just over by Highway 283. Yeah, but Muriel... Well, Henry was born in 1931 and Ralph got married when he was 43. So, I mean, they got married somewhere in that time period, but Ralph sold the ewes and the sheep to where he could have more cattle. And, my understanding would be that they would have been a traditional mix of native cattle. So I would have thought before he got the Angus cattle in about 1931 or 1932, that he had just crossbred cattle or probably a lot of Hereford cattle in all reality.

*Diana:* Tell me a little bit about the land that they had. Was it all grassy. Does it have a lot of farmland in it? Is it good soil. Is it...?

*Mark:* Well it's what they call Class C Highly Alluvial, which means it's blow sand. Which is what a lot of southwestern Clark County is. And on one hand, we can smile about that because the dirty 30s were made out of that kind of land because they would use a one-way plough and they'd go round and round and round and keep it really slick so it would blow away, so to speak. But they learned from that. But the beauty of sand and one of our real advantages is with wheat pasture today, and Triticale mixes, that sand, even when it's pretty wet today and we're fortunate that it is. We have a lot of cattle out and because of that sand, it really doesn't tear it up. So it would be considered an advantage, but from a true farmer like, let's say, Sumner County. They would not think of it as good land. But the thing about it is when it rains, that sand catches it all, and then you learn how to harness the sand.

When I was growing up, my dad used to call ourselves trash farmers in that we tried to leave as much cover on top as possible. And Dad was an innovator there. We started doing minimum-till practices in the late 1980s and we've continued that to this day. Because we graze it so much, we can get compaction on the farm ground. So, we'll try to undercut it with a blade again to leave as much on top to keep it from blowing as possible. But the rest of it we treat chemically.

But to answer your question, you know, they were always in the original days, about half farm ground and half grass. And today the ranch consists of, well, it's 48,000 acres and about 6,000 acres of that... 5,000 in wheat and about 1,000 in alfalfa and some sorghum and sedan crops. And then the balance would be would be all native range.

*Diana:* So you try to keep a lot of the feed for your cattle. I mean, like you do alfalfa. Raise your own instead of...

*Mark:* Yes, we raise about a section of alfalfa. You know, when I was a younger guy, half of our income or would come from wheat and half from cattle. Dad and Grandma and Mom used to say, you know, "If one's bad, then the other is better," but for the last 30 years, everything has been the cattle. I mean, 99.99 percent of our income comes from cattle. So even the farming we do today is to raise feed for the cattle. So we are fortunate to have that grass and have that wheat ground to be able to raise the forage. And, you know, we joke about how they used to make fun of this area. Zebulon Pike named Kansas and the Great Plains, the Great American Desert. Well, all that being said, this Great American Desert, if we can just get average rainfall, we can have green grazing most months of the year, from wheat pasture to native range to improved sorghum/sedan grass.

*Diana:* Do you remember your dad talking about how they used to work cattle or how if they had to doctor, a lot?

*Mark:* You know, I do! I smiled when you said, "Do I remember how?" If you ever gathered a pasture or done anything with cattle, with Henry Gardiner, school just began because we're going to do it this way and there's one way-- his way and it's the right way. We're going to do it quietly and efficiently and then we're going to review it when it's all over.

My dad was the greatest, but he was a micromanager. And so that being said, they didn't doctor cattle all that much, because I can remember growing up, I mean, once in a blue moon, we might give something a penicillin shot. Cattle were more spread out. And, you know, there really weren't as many drugs available. They didn't wean those cattle, I mean, even to this day, because of our forage system, we'll wean our fall calves at 10 months of age. That's uncommon, but that's because of the forage and we won't get in the weeds on that. But, you know, he did talk about when screwworms came through this area, having to catch a lot of those cattle and treat them. Remember, he got some screwworms in his feet one time. That was kind of not very fun. But they were over large areas. And, you know, neighbors would help each other to gather and such.

*Diana:* Gather using horses?

*Mark:* By horses, yes.

*Diana:* Did they often move cattle from one drive cattle from one pasture to another one?

*Mark:* Well, you know Dad, he was fortunate to get a good education and he was a real student. I mean, Helen's husband was Phil Arnold and he was a good grass manager. And they used to have these contests all the time. And I was the beneficiary or whatever you will call it, but they always tried to name all these species of grasses and what was in it. So I remember always getting tested.

And even to this day, we ride through a pasture and I'll go "What's that grass. Greg?" He'll go, "I don't know." And I go, "Did you miss the test?" And he said, "I guess so". OK, if you've got switchgrass over here, that means that you have not overgrazed the pasture. And I mean, he knew all those species and he studied it intensely and he knew the rotational grazing was very beneficial. So we would put, long before it was called “rotational grazing,” we would put larger amounts of cattle into pastures and rotate them as rain and the environment would dictate, but also to be better for all of those pastures and the plants. And he did a good job of that. And we follow those same basic core strategies today to rotate it. And, you know, his philosophy was, “Take half, leave half,” but get in and get out fairly quickly and, you know, rest those pastures at different times in the growing season, throughout the years and every ten years or so, to rest of pasture entirely.

*Diana:* When your grandfather had cattle, how did he market them?

*Mark:* You know, they would sell them at weaning, and in the early days, they would load them on those railroad cars. And I can remember being a youngster still doing that. My grandmother would come out and it was a big event, you know, because we were going to load these cattle and they went to... Paul Freed was the man from Iowa and he was a cattle feeder from Iowa and he would buy those cattle. As a little kid, we deemed it the Paul Freed Cattle Drive and we would go gather those cattle, strip them off, sort them by sex and in the early days, they put them on rail cars. I'm not remembering well enough to know, I can't imagine it was at Acres that they got on the railroad and did that. But, you know, by the time I was more cognizant of what was going on, trucks would come in and haul them to Iowa. But, you know, they would weigh in at Ashland and then go all the way to the Paulina, Iowa, actually, it's a long way from here.

*Diana:* They didn't sell anything locally?

*Mark:* You know, they would go to Winter Livestock, which was McKinley/Winter at that time.

*Diana:* What about the salebarn here?

*Mark:* I don't know when that closed, but I don't remember ever going to a sale there. So my assumption is in the 60s, you know, my granddad had a lot of horses and he enjoyed those horses, but they had a big horse sale that they had at the Ashland Sales Company, and that was in actually 1964 or '65. So I was three or four years old, whatever it was. But I know they sold cattle there. That would have been the most convenient place to go a lot of times. But you know, they would sell those Angus steers and load lots most of the time from the 70s until we started retaining ownership in the 80s.

*Diana:* Did they buy cattle through the salebarn?

*Mark:* You know, mostly they didn't. As we've grown and more family members have come back, you've got to diversify. We did this in the 80s where we would buy some customer cattle on a small basis when we had feed and such. But as we grew as a family and grew as a ranch for the last ten years, especially, we buy about 3,000 head of customer cattle per year, a mix of both steers and heifers. We will buy a thousand plus heifers and we breed them and sell those. And then the steers we'll graze them on grass or wheat pasture. And most of them we retain ownership and feed through U.S. Premium Beef, which is a producer- owned company that owns part of National Beef in Dodge and Liberal, which our family's been a part of that since its inception. We've been very fortunate for that. But I can remember we would buy a couple of hundred in the 80s, here and there and graze those out. Dad was always a student, again, of a lot of things and he always admired what Bouzidens did. He said they'd got a very good formula in that they buy lightweight cattle and they put a lot of pounds on those cheaply, which is what we can do with grass and wheat, too. And so, the Bouziden family would actually most of the time take them all the way through the feed yard. So, they go from 400 pounds to, at that time, say 1,200 pounds. That was a lot of pounds that they put on there to sell. He admired that and we tried to emulate it some. Today we only buy from our customers, so we know the genetic side of that, which makes a good synergy to buy from people that buy it from you and vice versa. We would retain ownership on the majority of those to go through U.S. Premium Beef.

*Diana:* So your dad did most of the building of the operation back in the 60s and 70s.

*Mark:* Yes and no, I don't want to sound boastful, but we built our original sale facility in the summer of 1979, which frankly, we built the barn and we put those pens up. Today they look very small. We still use them very hard, but we had our first sale in April of 1980 and we sold 52 bulls and like 36 females or so. They averaged right at $1,200 a head and I remember this like it was yesterday. The sale was at noon, and at 10 o'clock, nobody was there. And 11 o'clock, nobody was there. Mom finally said, "I can't take it." And then a little bit after that, people start showing up. And it was one of the best days of our lives, actually, because those bull sold for $1,200 or so. We had never sold a bull for more than a $1,000. I used to like to get Dad that we never asked for more than a $1,000, and he said, "Well, they weren't very good, so I couldn't do that." But that was the beginning of our production sales.

*Diana:* So, I remember livestock judging. Do they still do that, or was that something that happened mostly in the 70s?

*Mark:* No, it's actually one of the things that got me excited about the beef business and the cattle business. But, you know, Clark County, we actually had a good time during my time period. I'm sure you did too, Diana. Mike Betschart, Greg, my brother and myself, we were pretty successful and we enjoyed that. And we'd go to one of those bigger contests and actually the Kansas State Judging Team would be there to officiate and take reasons, and I kind of noticed that. I always wanted to judge for Kansas State and fortunately, I got to do that. You think about football and basketball and all this and sports, but judging teams, especially what I would call the big 12 schools and the big eight schools, you're expected to be good and you're expected to win. And we were fortunate that we did. We had the very best coaches and like many others, but we worked exceedingly hard. I remember when I went out for the team, there were right at 30 kids that went out and they'd try to kill you. I mean, you're basically working 20 hours a day over Christmas break and you have to give up your Christmas break. They just wanted to see who was serious, but you would you would work at it 40 to 50 hours a week. And so, I say all that, I got to judge for Kansas State, both on the livestock team, we were very successful, the same way with the horse judging team, we were successful. Greg was on the meats judging team at Kansas State and he was on the horse judging team. But it's still the ability to think on your feet and reasons were very important to be able to justify why you did it. It was still one of the greatest experiences I ever had. And as an alumnus of Kansas State, it's still very much a blood sport, Kansas State won the national championship this year. So we're all very proud of them for that.

*Diana:* So you have to have more reasons than, "She has a thick looking head..."

*Mark:* Yes, you do. You have to do a lot. I mean, you go in there and say, "This is why I place them this way." We literally, I mean, you might place cattle... I remember joking about this place or that place, you know, in my 80th class of the day or whatever. But at a contest, you would judge 12 classes and would give eight sets of reasons, but when you were practicing, you would probably on a daily basis, on the weekends you might view 50 or 60 sets of reasons over the weekend. It was a lot of fun. Everybody joked that it was a wonderful experience that you wouldn't give a nickel to do again. But it was a great experience.

*Diana:* How does it help you now?

*Mark:* You know, and what I tell students, because a lot of teams come here and work out, it's not so much that I blessed them with my eyes, but you need to be able to logically think, to logically, you know... Henry used to do a lot, and then he sent me, and I've actually sent Ransom and Cole to do this. Well, we give a lot of talks all over and with the virus, I've given a lot more virtual talks than I ever thought I would. But, yeah, it helps you to be able to speak logically and hopefully consistently to be able to communicate. I think that ability to stand up in front of people and not be... the first time you give a set of reasons, you think everybody is laughing at you. I mean, they don't care. They've got the same anxiety as you. So you learn to be able to speak and justify your position. So I think that helps to this day. The more you do it, the better you get at it.

*Diana:* The type of animal you're looking for today, has it changed from what would have been an outstanding animal when you were judging?

*Mark:* When you think back to when we were younger, the type and kind in the 60s were the shorty blacks, the shorty Herefords and really even in the 70s. When you look at the exotic cattle that came in, let's just say Charleigh, Simental, whatever. They were looking for-- when I judged, a lot of our terms were the latest maturing, the largest frame, the longer design and the biggest. Today, there is more moderation because it's not so much just getting them big, bigger and bigger, because that's not necessarily better, but how you can get them more alive, how they can get to the end point fast and efficiently, but leave a sister in the herd that will work in range environments or whatever environment you're going to work that's not too big. So I would say there's more moderation today than there was when I judged for Kansas State in 1982. But, you know, the pendulum always swings. Yes. But it's more middle of the road as it should be today from a physical standpoint.

*Diana:* In your own cowherd, do you have a certain number of years that you keep a cow before you send her on down the road?

*Mark:* You know, one of the things that when you're marketing as many cattle as we are, especially with genetics, when you learn early on about generational interval and generation turnover. Now that we have these genetic predictions and we do DNA marker work on all of our cattle, that helps us know which ones are the right ones to multiply. In our early sales, you know, we've always sold females, but we sell our females very rapidly and we're at a model today where I've always joked that the more it hurts to sell them, the better they are to sell because there's more demand for them. We sell the cattle very young on the registered side of it and the model again has followed the dairy industry. We used to call it, we would have a mature cowherd version. We'd sell 25 percent of our cow herd every year. In four years, you'd have a whole new cow herd.

Well, we accelerated that to where it was all of them gone every two years. Since the fire and those things, we had our largest sale in our history this past April. At that large sale, we sold all the cows we had. So our new model for the foreseeable future is one to have enough critical mass, to sell that at a value sale. Everything we're going to be selling is going to be two years old or a year of age or younger. With genomics, which genomics or the DNA markers that tell us which are the right ones to multiply, it allows us to sell.

I mean, we will sell cattle that are the only cattle in the whole United States for these traits of merit this April. So I say all that, we still have 2,000 commercial cows. As long as they have a calf every year and as long as their production ratios are in order and don't have a major problem, they can stay as long as they have a calf every year. So those cows, you know, they'll on average get to 10 or 12 years of age. Some of them out of courtesy and to see how long they can go, will go to longer, but probably to 10 years of age.

But on the registered side, we roll that generation interval because they're more valuable and because we're like everybody else, we have bills to pay. And so, they're more valuable and it helps us pay our bills.

*Diana:* Speaking of bulls, do you always sell the actual animal or do you just sell straws, semen?

*Mark:* Well, we do both, and we keep a piece of every bull we sell. The reality of it is that 99.99 percent are never going to sell any semen. But the reason we keep that, we didn't used to do that. There was a bull in about 1990 and he sold for $3,500 or so. And the fellow that bought that bull got data on the bull and he proved to be unique and he wanted us to buy him back. So we did. And that was a good decision, but it cost us ten thousand dollars.

So we made the decision, I mean frankly I made the decision, it's just banking the book to say we're going to retain a piece of each and every bull we sell. So to answer the question, we sell about 2,600 bulls per year and one or two or three of those, maybe up to five, will sell any semen.

But even like our Lot One bull that is always going to Select Sires, we have an agreement since 2000, that bull goes to Select Sires and he's our high priced bull for the year. And that bull may sell half a million units of semen, but we still sell half of him because of cash flow and the value of him. We've been fortunate that a lot of those Lot One bulls have brought six figures and so he may or may not make it, and if you don't sell him, you didn't get six figures for that. So we sell the 2,600 bulls per year and with the bulls that we have in bull studs and selling semen, the very best bulls... there's a bull this year that will sell 70,000 units of semen. That's rare. Most of them sell from five to ten thousand units. But there's about a half a million units of semen on our bulls sold per year.

*Diana:* Do you raise any horses? Do you sell them?

*Mark:* We do. We've always enjoyed our horses and used them. And, you know, we used to compete in roping and we raised some cowhorses and like to cut a little bit today. My granddad loved horses. My dad kept them going, and he always said, "No horse ever, ever made any money."

We've always joked that we'd like to break even, which we won't. But if you figure that probably 300 to 325 days a year, they're working also, it's for fun. And we sell a few and we do use them a lot. So they're a good tool, but we don't make any money with them. But that's probably not the goal.

*Diana:* When you gather cattle now, do you use horses or four wheelers?

*Mark:* We use horses, you know, we're kind of hard headed that way. We like to use horses. Yeah.

*Diana:* OK, so let's go back and talk about employees. Did Ralph have employees besides the sheepherder?

*Mark:* I mean, I do know like Loftus Messes' father helped, Loftus can remember helping out there. I think he would usually have one person helping and of course, Helen and Henry were a lot of the labor force, just like Greg and Mark were. But I think he usually had one man to help him because there were a lot of acres, let's say two or three thousand acres to farm with, not as big of equipment and not as good of equipment as what we have today. So he usually had one man.

*Diana:* Well, what about your dad?

*Mark:* He usually had two.

*Diana:* And they were long lasting and lived there?

*Mark:* There usually were. I mean, when I was younger, Floyd Carter, which would be Mike Carter, Ronnie Carter, Rick Carter, Angela Carter's dad, he was with us for 25, maybe, about 25 years.

And there was a guy and I remember young Cotton Carter and he wasn't there as long. But Nick McMurphy and Anne McMurphy, which was Diane MacPhail. Nick helped us as I was growing up. But he was probably there for 15 or 18 years. And when Floyd retired, Dan Strang came here and Dan was with us for nearly 30 years. Charlie Hugater was here for a long time.

Rogene Hugater, who was formerly the county clerk here. Charlie was probably here about fifteen years in the late 70s and the 80s. Today, Jeff Golden, we went to school with Jeff at Kansas State, and Jeff started helping us in the summers in the early 1980s (he married, of course, Cheryl Salyer) and from basically 1984 or '85 until today. Jeff has got his own operation and he was full time with Jim Salyer for a time, but he's been back with us since about 2000 or '01 or '02. So I say, in general, he's approaching 40 years that he's helped us. He has his own operation, but it's been a good brotherhood.

*Diana:* What how do you pay your employees? Is it mostly wages or a house, meat?

*Mark:* It's all of that, and we have a 401k plan. And we all work hard, just like everybody in this community does. I haven't mentioned Kurt Borgelt, who's been with us about twenty years now, Eric Campbell sixteen years, and Scott Tune about twenty years. In our opinion, and just comparing to other wages, we pay very well, but we work very hard and, you know, it's a lot of it is monotonous. A lot of it is seven days a week. Our traditional hours or eight to six Monday through Friday and Saturday till noon. Anything beyond that is overtime. And we have a bonus program where on the April sale, they get a bonus of the average of whatever the bulls bring. So all those things come together. They have a house. Their utilities are provided for and a vehicle.

*Diana:* Do you have certain ones that work with the cattle and certain ones that farm or do they all do a little bit?

*Mark:* We all do a little bit of everything, but they gravitate to what they're best at. Scott and Eric and Kurt, would do a lot of the farm work and Landon, Kurt's son, is home full time with us now. We're very excited about that, Landon is really quite good with equipment and he does a lot of the minimum-till spraying. He likes cattle a lot and he likes to ride, so he goes with us, too. But in general, Ransom and Cole and Grant, on the day to day basis, a lot of us would do a lot of the actual cattle work, not that the others couldn't, but they're going to handle the equipment. But we all do some; I mean, I'll help drill wheat and they'll help us sell cattle or work cattle. But on a day to day basis, many of the men are going to be with equipment more, I mean Landon than the younger kids are going to be with the cattle.

*Diana:* Let's talk about equipment. How has it changed since Ralph was there?

*Mark:* Well, I remember growing up driving a tractor. Let's go back to Ralph. They had these Caterpillars. And Dad talked about, they would strap him to the Caterpillar tractor and give him a lunch, and he was supposed to stay there from dark to dark. They'd check on him. But those were great, big, hard to maneuver and just....

They tore up a lot of land and they did it. When I started farming and driving a tractor, which would be in the late 60s, early 70s, you know, we had John Deere tractors and they were 5020's. We had two of them, and our main job the whole summer was Greg and I would drive those 5020's. And I laugh because we had a buggy top. And luxury was when you would turn around that and the dirt was wasn't covering you up because you could breathe. And then you would hold your breath while you were going the other round, half of the direction. But we were probably one of the last farmers in the community to have tractors that had a cab. We would trade tractors maybe every 10 years or so, but Dad would never... We would trade with Bucklin Tractor in Bucklin, Kansas, and he would never buy one with a cab because he said, "OK, the last thing on Earth that I'm ever going to have is a tractor broke down because the air conditioner doesn't work." And that finally changed in the mid-1980s when you had to pay more to get a tractor with a buggy top, that didn't come with a cab. So, I remember those first tractors, those air conditioners, they weren't too whippy. They didn't work too well, you were hot in a different way. You weren't covered with dirt, but it was hard to breathe in there. So today, you know, with GPS, I kind of laugh at it and I can do it, too. But you just push the button. You know, we used to worry about having straight rows and everything, but the GPS handles that. We used to worry about skips and they'd make fun of if you had crooked angles and things. It's a lot more automated today. I've had kids watch movies and play on their phones and everything in between rounds. The equipment's better.

*Diana:* What about hay bales?

*Mark:* Well, you know, that's another thing. We were probably some of the last ones to only have small square bales. We used to have five hay sheds that averaged about 6,000 bales per shed to fill them up. We used to joke that we hauled them in all summer and we hauled them out all winter. And so, you know, we were actually loading, hauling and stacking 35 to 40 thousand small squares per year, and we did that all through the 70s and until we built what we call our AI facility in 1992. I joke with my kids, we were a lot better shape back then. And actually, eating was refueling because we would haul and feed and reload for the next day during breeding season 750 bales a day and that was Greg, Mark, and Jeff Golden. We were very good.

I mean, I can make a bale roll from here to there, and we would stack on a moving stack near the top of those. But all that being said, when we built that larger facility, we got our first round bale in the summer of 1992, and I think that has made ranching easier for lots of cattlemen just to not have to handle all those small squares so much and to be able to use the loader to load them up and just spread them out. So that we were late to that part, but we use them a great deal today.

*Diana:* Do you cake also?

*Mark:* We didn't used to. Well, we did in the 80s. We would do it all with the side because we didn't have cakers. But as we've gotten more grass, I mean, we leased the Dunn Ranch from 2004 to 2012 and we're still working on paying for that till 2037. But we closed on that in 2012, so we put a lot of cattle out there, and we do give them cake from Ashland Feed and Seed. You can feed 40 percent cubes on grass and still get a good gain on them. And a lot of these stocker cattle have never seen a human. So we can cheat a little bit, get them to come to the truck and humanize them a little more so we can move them here and there with horses.

*Diana:* Speaking of more land, so did your dad start adding to the ranch?

*Mark:* He and mom made it possible. We were just like you, Diane, in that we had for 4-H heifers. We never had steers so much because Dad said, "If you'll get a heifer, then you can breed her or she'll have a calf." Greg and I paid our way through college with those. They made it possible for us and they let us run those, but starting in high school, I remember Greg and I bought our first 160 acres together.

*Mark:* It was actually the Hulstein family owned that quarter about four miles west of Ashland. I think we paid $140 an acre for it. It was every dime we had but we put it together. So, with their help and with those 4-H heifers and growing the herd. Greg and I have always done it together in partnership. It was with Mom and Dad's help, but it was Greg and I. When I was in high school, Gardiner Angus Ranch was 10,000 acres. Today it's 48,000 acres and that includes 21,000 acres from the Dunn Ranch. The balance of that was the Gabbert Ranch in 1995, the Harper family owned that, and you know, you walk before you run, so I'm coming from the Dunn Ranch backwards, where we would buy a quarter to a half section at a time.

Most of the time, as you recall, when CRP came along, CRP was good for a lot of families. But again, I'll quote Henry in that it was bad for a lot of businesses because a lot of those families that all of a sudden planted their farm ground to CRP were no longer farming, no longer buying fuel and equipment. So that was an early retirement program for a lot of those folks. Well, their kids did not come back into the operation. So we ended up buying a lot of land that was formerly CRP that we were the neighbors of and nobody else wanted it. So we bought that.

*Diana:* And the CRP was up, right?

*Mark:* And we wanted it for the grass. Yeah.

*Diana:* And it was in native grass.

*Mark:* Right, and it was right next to us. So we did that through the 80s and early 90s and in 1995, and this is for history, so I'm saying it. I mean it's funny now that we're the grownups, I'm not ready to be that, but whatever. But Jim Harper wanted to come see us because they had the Gabbert Ranch which the Krier family had operated mainly, you know, Lawrence Krier. We all called him Pappy Krier, but they operated the Gabbert Ranch for a long, long time. It was in a trust, and the Gabbert family, when that trust ran out, they wanted to sell it. Jim Harper was, you know, Mrs. Harper was a Gabbert. And Kathy Harper, she was a Gabbert. So, all that being said, Dad said, "Well, they're going to come to us and they're going to ask a million dollars." I said, "A million dollars!" He said, "It's worth it. The land's worth that. A $150 to $175 an acre would be a fair price."

*Diana:* How many acres was it?

*Mark:* It was 6,500 acres. And he said, "They're going to ask a million dollars or so, and the math on that was $158. We were sitting in our house and Jim Harper came in and he said, "Well, we would like to sell this for a million dollars."

I still remember Jim's face when Dad said, "That's fair and we'll accept that." It was $158 an acre and he about fell out of the chair and said, "A million dollars." Well, by the end of that conversation, remember interest was nine, 10, 11, 12 percent. And you think back to the 80s and again, you're a kid learning all these things at that point, it was a sin for us to borrow money in the 80s and then in the 90s as the interest came along, I mean, it made more sense, but the Harper family chose to finance it. They financed us for ten years at seven percent. It was good for them and good for us three percent less than we could borrow it for. But yeah, I still remember today that we bought that land for $158 an acre. And, you know, that was the biggest... I mean, we've never really... maybe we bought a section at one time from some folks by the name of Perry down there by Acres, and that was like 750 acres.

So that was like a huge move, and I remember, Greg and I bought it together. And you think, how do you come up with a million dollars? Well, we had to make a payment on May 1st and November 1st. Twenty-eight thousand apiece, twice a year. It's baby steps, one day at a time. We learned how to do that and operate on a bigger basis. You know, that was almost over half of what Gardiner Angus already was. When we leased that Dunn operation in 2004, I mean, that seems so big. And so how are we going to be able to do that? And we'd always gone over there when I was a kid and helped Virgil Bolan and Ross Macfarlane work cattle.

I mean, I'm was thinking, "This is a real ranch. This is big ranch." We had helped over there and we had that opportunity, Less Cooper had run that with a lot of other big outfits and they ran lots and lots of steers there, but we learned how to do that. And then that family offered that to us in 2012.

*Diana:* So what's some of the history of the Dunn Ranch?

*Mark:* You know, I need Miss Shreve here to back me up, and Dad knew this very well and I know it relatively well. But interestingly enough, southern Clark County, if you think about the 1870s and early 80s, before actually the immigrants or the settlers got here with the Homestead Act, it was the M.C. Campbell Ranch and Mr. Gabbert, Mr. Gabbert was married to a Campbell. So from Sitka to Englewood was all the same family.

And when you look at the Dunn Ranch and you look at the basis of that, there were some terrible times in the 1930s and some bad weather and such. And Glenn Dunn. It was the Glenn Dunn Trust, he was an oil man from Wichita, Kansas. I'll be right on this within a year or two, but as I recall, the paperwork, he bought that in 1936. And he bought it for like six or seven dollars an acre because they had droughted out and then they blizzarded out and they just couldn't make their payments.

And so we came along and Mr. Cooper, Less Cooper, had run that farm for probably for 15 years and he had leased it. Mr. Cooper was older in age and the Dunn family was a little bit like the Gabbert family, there were 42 heirs on that Glenn Dunn Trust.

Dad, like he always did, he was good at analyzing things, said, "You know, someday," (and Dad was slipping a bit at that point in time), "You'll probably have the opportunity to do something with this." And he said, "You need to, if you can." So, they approached us about selling that, and if you think back to 2011, that was extremely dry. I remember at the beginning of the Dunn Ranch, it had been run hard because those folks, the only way they made a dollar was to take pounds of beef off of there. So, they run several thousand head of steers both winter and summer all year long, and that's what they needed to do. But the Dunn family thought it had been mismanaged. It really hadn't, because they didn't go anywhere besides headquarters. And that was only corral in the entire 21,000-acre place. They had to stage those cattle there to ship them, so that got pounded down more. But all that being said, they wanted to sell it because they had 42 heirs and we worked through that. And I remember the original. We leased that, and again, this is history. So when we're long gone, maybe someone will hear it, but we were leasing that for $8.50 an acre originally. And you'd want to do that forever versus having to own it, but you couldn't guarantee yourself. And I remember it was a 12-month lease.

I always used to say to Dad, "This isn't very long term." He’d made very good friends with some of the Dunns that were in charge and he was excited about kind of putting things back together. This isn't a joke, but there were 35 windmills on there and 36 of them didn't work. So, we put all that back, and he said, "Would you chill out?" He enrolled in the Equip program and we did some watering and fencing. So that gave us a five-year contract to complete that. He did that and we went through it. But in 2011, we had received three and a half inches for the whole year and the Dunns weren't very well. They had some realtors that were trying to sell it like a Jackson Hole, Wyoming ranch.

I remember thinking through this, if you're going to have a big old ranch, you've got to know how to run a big old ranch. And just not everybody's going to do that. There's been a lot of famous people, you know, from Richard Childress to Jeff Foxworthy and they come in here and hunt. Richard Childress actually bought some cattle from us when I was younger. He’d keep me posted on that Dunn Ranch and that's when I first thought about, you know, considered leasing it. So we went through all that and they were going to evict us and all that because we had overrun it.

It was, "Mr. Dunn, we haven't had any cattle in here since 2011 because there is nothing here. We haven't had anything for 10 months of the year. We moved them.”And we went back and forth and like all negotiations, you don't think they're going anywhere, they had it priced probably double what it was worth.

One day as we were negotiating, he was talking to me. He said, "You know, we can sell the oil rights for what you're wanting to offer." And that gave me an idea. And I said, "Great, we'll buy the surface rights, the agricultural rights." And that's when we were able to make a deal. They kept all those mineral rights and they view themselves as oil people and they have been. But that was the breakthrough that allowed us to do that. And I remember telling Mom that we'd come to terms and she said, "Oh, my God, that's so big and so scary!" You know, people from Henry Clay Gardiner to Ralph Gardiner, to Henry Gardiner, Nan Gardiner. They all worked their whole life to give us an opportunity to work, and that's really how I view my job. I mean, if we have children that want to work into this business, that have an interest in it, our job is to provide a sound business for them to do that. And as I told Mom, "We want the next generation to have a chance. I'm more afraid not to buy it than I am to buy it." And we were fortunate to be able to do that, because if we lost that place, we'd have to cut our production by 60 to 70 % because we have grown to the point where we need that acreage to support all those cattle.

The benefit of running it for eight years was knowing how to operate it and knowing how to work it, and also, once you were in control and not worried about being evicted within 12 months, we could make longer-term plans. So, we came to terms.

And again, I want to stress Clark County, especially the people of Ashland, Kansas, Kendall Kay has been a trusted partner and the Stockgrowers State Bank. All our history and all our building we talked about, in about 1936 or '37, Ralph went in and said, "Mr. Berryman, I can't make the payments." And Mr. Berryman said, "I know that Ralph, get your butt back out there and get to work and pay me when you can." Stockgrowers State Bank and people like that, that stood behind you, whether it was the Depression of the 30s or the fire of 2017, that's why we're here today.

Well, I'm saying, "Kendall, we can't do this in 10 years or 20 years. And he had no reason to do so other than to try to help me. He learned and found out about a program called Farmer Mac, which is a federal program for large land purchases like this and through Farmer Mac, he was able to get us into that with a 25-year deal at 4.77%. That's pretty good rate, when back in the 80s, you know, it was in the teens. So we joke that in the year 2037, we'll have that sucker paid for if everything goes according to plan.

*Diana:* That'll be good! You talked about the Depression a little bit. What kind of effect did it have on the way your dad did things since he grew up mostly in that era.

*Mark:* Every penny counted. If you tore something up or broke it... on the one hand, I don't really believe that we were spoiled, but versus the hardships that they went through. I mean, his favorite meal was always a peanut butter and jelly sandwich because that's what he took to drive those Caterpillar tractors and his mother Muriel would make that. But it was very frugal and it was very lean and he put that into us too.

*Diana:* Did he tell you anything about dust storms?

*Mark:* Oh, yeah. He remembered Black Sunday. I said, "What did you think?" He said, "I was scared. It was sunlight and then it just turned dark as night and you can't see anything, you can't even see in front of your face."

He said, "After it was over, you could go write your name on the furniture. There was a quarter inch to a half inch of dust everywhere." And so to that greatest generation, in that Depression they grew up in, life was hard and precious. So that's why they were so diligent and so frugal. I think we have many luxuries today that they never had. And we hope the next generation will be able to do things better. But I just think making every bit of resources. Dad had a saying on time, it wasn't his, but he often said it. And I do today, too. It's like, "To waste is wicked." So, we look at using the resources that God has given us, whether it's grass or wheat or the rainfall, the sun... If we could harvest those cellulose plants that we humans can't eat with beef cattle, ruminant cattle to turn it into the world's finest tasting protein, that's a good thing.

*Diana:* Talk about some of the natural catastrophes, do you remember any floods?

*Mark:* I do. But catastrophes, after the Starbuck Fire, they have different levels of what's really bad, I remember floods that would tear up your water gaps and worse, and kind of make a mess of things, but not like people have had that just washed away their houses and things. It was just more inconvenient and kind of a pain than actually a true catastrophe.

*Diana:* What about snowstorms?

*Mark:* You know, the blizzard of 1971. Dad was gone for some cattle meeting, and we were there by ourselves. At our house, the snow was up to the roof and we could get around on a tractor and feed cattle and such. But, you know, in 1971, I was 10 years old, so I remember my brothers and I, we were pretty much there by ourselves and people would check on us because Mom and Dad couldn't get back for several days. But we didn't really lose many cattle, but it was hard on the cattle. We had a bad blizzard in 1992 or '93, the very first year of the sale, we had just built that and of course, we didn't know how to operate it well yet.

But I remember on Halloween of 1992, it rained for 24 to 36 hours. That was hard on the cattle. We had them penned up and then it snowed for about the next 36 or 48 hours and we lost nearly a hundred head of cows and calves. They piled up and basically either suffocated or trampled each other. And as I recall, that winter from Halloween, really almost till the end of March, there were 73 inches of snow.

And from Halloween until really almost February, we didn't go anywhere except either on a horse or on tractor. So that that was a challenge, but again, by Starbuck Fire measures, it wasn't as catastrophic, but it was a pretty big deal.

*Diana:* What about other fires, lightning fires? Did you have a lot of pastureland?

*Mark:* We did. Before the Starbuck Fire, there were wildfires every year. It's just kind of a fact of life. You put them out. We have a little sprayer that we would take. And I remember we had gunny sacks that we would dip in water and slap them and shovels. But they were pretty small compared to what we've learned a few short years later. But, you know, it's always been a part of it. And, you know, you're cognizant of the conditions and dryness, and we're in a low humidity area, especially in the spring of the year, but it was only... We lost a pickup one time and we lost some fence, but it's been well documented about the big fire of 2017, when most people lost everything. We were some of those people in a lot of cases.

*Diana:* Have you changed the way you manage your ranch since the fire? I mean, did that have you changing some of the ways you did some things?

*Mark:* We do some things minorly different. And, you obviously documented much of it about the Starbuck fire and of course, the Easterners were telling us how we should have and could have done it. Those were circumstances, that came together. My belief is that it'll happen again someday, but it'll be rare if it ever happens again in the next 100 years.

When you take the combination of the ice storm that happened in late January to weaken those lines, then you take the dry weather since then. Then you take the 70, 80 mile an hour wind and slap those lines together to get a spark. And then you take all the changing winds and you take that five percent or less humidity.

So it was the perfect storm for Kansas' largest fire. But to answer your question, we always had fire guards and we always tried to mow that. We're more diligent about it now. And areas around our facilities and things, we're very particular about making sure there's no fuel because most of that grass around there. So we mow that down and we have protocols with some fire guards and of course, Englewood and Ashland, they burned Highway 283 this year.

They burned Highway 283 this year and have in other years, too. Maybe that little thing right there wouldn't have been able to jump Highway 283. There's some similar things and some minor changes. And we're more cognizant and more diligent, but they're not huge changes. They're little things that can make a big difference.

*Diana:* What about fences? Did you replace all your fences in the same place or with them gone, did you make some changes?

*Mark:* We lost all of them, so we had the opportunity to actually... You know, we had fences that had some 1880s wire on it. I used to joke, "Gardiner Angus Ranch, where the gates are tighter than the fences," but losing absolutely all of that infrastructure gave us a new opportunity to be able to rebuild in a better way. So we actually changed quite a bit. You know, where the fence would fit the land better. A lot of those went right straight through some sand hills and it was always an issue. We reconfigured quite a few pastures.

And course, when the Dunn Ranch, all those fences were built, that was when MC Campbell had it, and a lot of those needed some modification. A lot of the places on say, our ranch, needed modifications. We changed it to fit the contour and to be better and less invasive. So we did make a lot of changes.

And, you know, I smile because so many people were so good to us with the Ashland Community Foundation, I mean, it's humbling to know that stuff costs $10,000 a mile. And yeah, when it was happening, I was thinking ten years or maybe longer to ever get that rebuilt. But with all that help, we were able to do it and we got it all rebuilt in about 18 months.

*Diana:* did you go to five wire and steel posts and wood?

*Mark:* No, no, we don't like wood anymore.

*Diana:* Did you do the steel post corners and all that?

*Mark:* We did, and we had started in probably 2010 doing a few miles of fence every year, just because they were 120 or 130-year-old fences that were falling down. Growing up, we built some fence, but I wouldn't say I was very good at it, but you get the professional crews that can build more in a day than we could do in a week or a month. But we, after seeing every single fence that that we have built in the last 10 years because we had used hedge posts in between them, every single one of those were gone. So we went back with the steel posts and the steel corners.

And we actually, you know, as you recall, a year to the day, within a day, they started another fire. And our neighbor up here on the highway, and let's talk about the neighbor. He didn't want to go back to steel posts, he went back with wood posts, so we got to replace that one again because it all burned down. He agreed to put in all steel posts this time. Where we had put in the steel posts, they were good. So there'll be challenges with that. But it's still a good thing.

*Diana:* Yeah. What about windmills? Did you lose windmills?

*Mark:* We did. We melted about eight of them. We've had very good luck, actually our first solar well, we put on the Gabbert Ranch in 1995. We put in two of them and one of those we've had to replace, but another one we've never touched at all.

*Mark:* So as windmills have worn out, burned out, worn out, we've replaced them with solar wells.

*Diana:* Do you have more solar now?

*Mark:* We actually have more windmills, but when my time runs out, it'll probably still be more windmills, but when Ransom and Cole, my sons, run it, I'll bet they have more solar around.

*Diana:* So is it hard to find somebody to fix a windmill?

*Mark:* No, because maybe we talked about how frugal the folks in the Depression were, Mom and Dad, I have lots of funny stories. I think they're funny, but I always used to joke if I go to hell, I'll be sent there as a bailing paradigm, because we bailed all those small square bales and we always had to bail them at night.

Ever since I was a little kid, you know, Dad would bale at night and the fly wheel would fall off of that baler and I have to go help him put it on. I say all that, you know, we used to go pull our windmills and fix all that. And we had this bucket with the pulley and everything and I was the strength. I wasn't very good at it. So there's a part of me that feels guilty, but we use Southwest Windmill Supply, over there in Meade, Kansas.

As we've grown and gotten larger, you know, you think, "OK. When we lose 270 miles of fence, we've got to do what we got to do." So we got professionals to help to do that. But there's quite a few windmill people, oh, the folks that had the doughnut shop. I mean, there's several windmill people in the area, so that has been good to outsource that to them, versus us rinky-dinking around. That's what you had to do back then, but we go do what we do and really Southwest Windmill Supply, they're exceptional to work with. And there's other good folks in the area that work, too.

*Diana:* You are on your fourth generation of Gardiners?

*Mark:* You know, I'm the fourth generation, so Grant and Cole are the fifth.

*Diana:* So you have set up a succession to keep the operation going.

*Mark:* We have. Like anything, you don't know how the plan will work until you have to implement it. But I remember being in high school and Mom and Dad talking about estate planning. I went, "What's that?" "Well, we're going to die. And then you do this." So that was always very open and we had discussion. The boys have their own L.L.C. It's called the GRCQ, for Grant, Ransom, Cole and Quanah.

They're working on purchasing 460 acres that they, four or five years ago, they've been making payments on that. Greg and I, to start that plan, we're called M and G Gardiner, LLC and ultimately, we'll transfer that. I was a revocable trust, Greg was too. But I mean, as we've evolved, it's more of an LLC on the land. And so ultimately, those shares of that LLC will pass to our children. And we've got to do some more restructuring as we get more mature.

But Mom and Dad and I had a good plan and their plan was to really not have anything left in their estate when they passed. And we'll have to work to do the same thing. But we got to get this paid for first.

*Diana:* So are all your children and Greg's children involved in the ranch?

*Mark:* Well, Grant works some and Ransom and Cole are full time. Grant's been home for seven or eight years now and the boys have been home going on five years, full time. My youngest son, Quanah, he's getting a degree in education. He's actually going to do an interview at Hoxie, Kansas, here directly, and is looking at several places. But he wants to come home. He ultimately wants to teach at Ashland and help us, but he's... You don't know what a 22-year-old kid is going to do, but at the same time that's part of his plan is to be a part of the operation. But we'll see where that goes. But that's really what he wants to do. He's going to haul some bulls to Oklahoma for us in the morning. He's worked here summers and vacation, but he's got to teach for a while and maybe he'll teach at Ashland someday.

*Diana:* So you keep doing sales and your sales have increased every year, as far as you have a sale in the spring and now you have one in the fall?

*Mark:* We have four sales a year now. We have a sale in January, April, May, in September and then we have a customer sale in November where we help those customers have their sale, it's a video sale through Superior, it's a video auction. And the reason for that is people want seed stock, primarily bulls, when they want them. There's no one time that fits everybody. So it's more flexible and also draws the line the last week of the sale. So we're going to have our largest January sale here on January 25th, where we'll sell 350 bulls. Our biggest sale of the year is always April. And we typically sell 400 to 500 bulls in that sale and 500 plus females in that one. In May, the little smaller sale, but that is for folks that want the bulls closer to grass and so we sell 175 bulls there. And in the fall, the sale is more for folks that breed for fall calves. And so that's late September and we sell 400 to 500 bulls at that sale.

*Diana:* What's the furthest you've taken an animal to deliver.

*Mark:* Well, we've delivered to all of the 40. Well, typically we sell from 35 to 40 states every year. And I can't say that we ever sold to Connecticut or someplace like that, but Maryland we have. So we've gone to forty plus states and we've actually sent about 2,000 bulls to Russia, and that was very good to us for about five or six years. So we would send several hundred bulls per year. We would get them ready and then we would ship them to Galveston and they rode a boat to Russia. We sent quite a few cattle to Kazakhstan, which it's over there. Yeah, we've sent quite a few to Brazil and Uruguay and Australia.

But in general, we deliver free of charge anywhere in the 48 contiguous states and we've had the Parker Ranch from Hawaii bid on cattle, they didn't get them, but we told them we would get them to the coast.

*Diana:* So now, since you have the AI running, you do have a couple of interns that come and help? And does Eva play a part, since she's a veterinarian, in doing some of this?

*Mark:* She does. We built the AI barn in 1992. We were very worried about getting the cattle in and getting out. A professor friend of ours from Kansas State said, "You need to learn how to ultrasound."

That sounds real technical, but we do ultra. There is a man, a Dr. Bill Biehl from Virginia Tech University. And he had done a sabbatical at K-State. So we had met him and she and I went to Blacksburg, Virginia, and we got training on how to ultrasound. She and I, really, since 1992, they've done most of the ultrasound since the boys have gone home. We've taught them, Ransom and Cole, to do a lot of ultrasound, but we can do early pregnancy diagnosis as soon as 25 days after insemination and get them all kicked out.

So she's been a big part of that. She has worked. When we first got married, she was full time at the Ashland Vet Clinic with Randall Spare and she's been part time there, primarily with veterinary acupuncture. And she's going back to that veterinary chiropractor school this year because she thinks she needs learn something new. She's been a big part of that.

The interns, ever since I was a kid, people would show up and they'd hang around and we always had kids around, but we put some structure to it in 2012. So we have five new interns arriving in three weeks and we'll have as few as one, and this five is the most ever. We'll see how that goes. Four is the most we've ever done. But since 2012, we're approaching 60 interns. And that's just during the fall semester of the spring semester. There were three interns that went home right before Christmas. And we'll start a new set here.

And, you know, a lot of times, I remember as a kid thinking, "They're just in the way." But it helps us to be able explain what we're doing and why we're doing it and makes us be better at our job. But people gave us a chance, and these are good kids. And, you know, there's five of them coming. And the reason there's five there were 15 applicants, and there were five that I really couldn't separate one from the other. And it's like, "Oh, we'll make it work." So give them that opportunity. But we've gotten full time employees from that pool. We have a young lady that's been with us for over a year now that was a former intern. We've had three former interns that have turned into full time employees. It's a little bit like everything we've been talking about. It's about people. I grew up thinking it's actually the cattle. I understand cattle. All right. But really, the cattle are connected to the people. And if you take care of the people, then then you're allowed to have the cattle.

*Mark:* And so it's been good for us and good for a lot of people.

*Diana:* And then you have the new center also. You and Greg have taken up your dad's giving a lot of speeches and stuff. Do your kids do that too?

*Mark:* They do. In 1998, our garage became our office and in the 70s and I think in about the mid-80s we built that garage and turned dad's house into an office. Before cell phones, you know, you made your calls early in the morning or late at night. I remember, we'd usually be sitting in his office after supper and working on records or whatever, and the phone rang, and "Hi, Rodger." And we would hear from Roger, "No, I can't go that day, but I've got somebody that will." So I remember sitting down, this was in 1988, and, "Who was that?" "Oh, it was Roger McGraw, of North Carolina State, they're having a big beef symposium and he wanted me to speak." "Oh, you can't go?" He said, "No." I said, "You said somebody would go." "You're going to. Yeah, you go." I said, "Me?!" And, "Yeah, you're going."

*Diana:* So this was your first...

*Mark:* Oh the first kind of something like that. And the irony of that is a couple of years ago, they wanted me to go somewhere for a cattleman's deal in Virginia, and I sent Ransom. Cole has done several of those too. You know, I probably give, well with Covid… but in regular times, I would give eight to 10 presentations all over. I was supposed to be in Wisconsin back in October and different places, but Dad went to New Zealand and Australia.

I've gone to Canada, Australia and Brazil to present, and in almost every state, the contiguous anyway. And that's part of the whole. On one hand, it's marketing, on the other hand, it's sharing these techniques that allow us to survive and it’s just education. Part of that ends up being the next generation, I mean, they're going to travel more and I'm going to travel less. I want to stay in Clark County, Kansas.

*Diana:* Do you host a lot of tours?

*Mark:* We do. You know, prior to the virus, we would have two to three major tours, and that means like a busload of people per month and almost always two or three people who were in the area, you know, but almost constantly. I'll get back to that at some point in time. But it's a lot of student groups, a lot of producer groups, a lot of foreign groups. But I would say we'd have 12 major groups like that per year and probably five, six or seven, almost one week or one every two weeks. Just to have people that want to come and visit and we'll get back to that.

But, you know, the facility was built for a lot of reasons. It's a multipurpose facility, and we were doing that before, but you can't have four sales a year the way we're doing. I mean, it's an investment in the future. We don't have that paid for either, but that was an investment. If it were just Greg and I, we were winding down and we wouldn't have built that. But the next generation, we couldn't handle 2,600, we couldn't handle 3,000 customer cattle, and we couldn't handle 4,000 Angus cows with the facilities that we built in 1992 that were built to handle 1,500.

So we did all that to be able to do that marketing center. I mean it's for education, it's for sales. It's for all these tour groups at all. All of that is a part of the process of marketing, just to be able to share or show what you're doing and it helps us do our job better.

*Diana:* So your family has a good relationship with K-State. Haven't you established a scholarship or something in your dad's name?

*Mark:* We have and I don't want just the Gardiner family to take credit for that because he had so many friends and customers. And, you know, our family have been very fortunate, but I think this year, I mean, it's been like 43 students have received $150,000 in scholarships since its inception in about 2011, 2012. It's an endowed scholarship and many of his friends, many of our clientele, helped provide for that. And we also started a program called the Henry Gardiner Lecture Series, which is a global food system and that's been endowed by customers and friends and family. And so that's been a very good way to honor him and Mom and to hopefully bring education.

I had lots of opportunities and, you know, Henry had lots of rules. One of his rules was leave it a little better than we found it. So to be able to give back and it wasn't just us, it was all of our friends and customers and family that did that.

*Diana:* So do the students have to be in a specific field?

*Mark:* In agriculture. You know, we're prejudiced towards animal science, but I don't want to exclude somebody that's in ag econ or something. But in general, it's animal science. We've had ag econ and quite a few vet students that have won the scholarship. And at this point time, it's large enough with the endowment that we typically award four scholarships and there's usually 25 to 30 applicants. It's grown and it's been very good. The goal, hopefully, if we can keep making it grow, is to be like a Fulbright scholarship for one year. Right now, it pays them $5,000 for one year. And that's again, because of the generosity of friends and customers.

*Diana:* Let's go back to you. What is the smartest thing you've ever done?

*Mark:* I married Eva Marie. That truly is one of the best moments. And I don't know if it's the smartest thing, but being curious and being observant. Listening, you know, people often say, you know, and you know this from knowing me growing up, but, so you're the outgoing one and you're the extrovert and you know I'm an introvert, but I was the blue healer that went everywhere with Henry.

I think just learning, and I tell kids today, I say, you know, I am an introvert. I still am, and I am that guy would really rather just be with cattle and horses, but learning and understanding that if I take care of the people, make sure they succeed, then we have a chance to do so, too. I think just knowing how much, number one, how good people are, and number two, to just fight like heck to make sure they succeed and we'll be fine.

*Diana:* Is there anything you would change if you could?

*Mark:* No. I mean, that's your education, all your screw ups. And you know, "I would do this, or I wouldn't do that." No, because that's how you learn. My biggest failures... Henry, he was great at lots of things. One of the things that he was great at was giving you enough responsibility and getting out of the way and giving you enough rope not to hang yourself, but you sure enough choked. So I learned from those mistakes on different cattle deals, on different technology. Our early work in embryo transfer was not very successful. It wasn't so much us, but we probably trusted and selected the wrong people. But I think just recognizing that this failure is part of the education and when you learn from that and then you go forward from that.

*Diana:* So the ranch and your brother, do you have specific goals besides paying off the land?

*Mark:* You know, I've heard it said, and I agree with it, that ranching is a wonderful way of life, but it may not be the absolute best business out there. But that's OK. I think one of the great things I've seen in this community since I've been home is, there's never been more young people come back than right now. And I think your generation, my generation, so many of our classmates, just wanted the heck out of here. And I look at this community today and are we perfect? No. Do we have challenges? Yes. But you look at all these young people, they had a good education just like we did. It's a good place to raise your family, just like we were raised.

So my goals are, you know the buzzword in agriculture is sustainability. What does that really mean? That means you made enough money to stay in business and to be sustainable, to have a plan, to use God's resources to have those families be able to raise their families here in Clark County, Kansas. That's my goal.

*Diana:* So is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to include?

*Mark:* Well, I just appreciate all that you do to record this, and I don't think I know enough about the turn of the century. I was thinking about it. I didn't think we would be talking about us, but, you know, it's been enjoyable. You know, people often say, and I believe it's true, "What makes Ashland different?" And I think it's an education level.

I think it's people like you willing to do these kinds of things. I was on a lot of boards throughout my life and I never had time to be on the school board or whatever, but I had a friend of mine say that it might be the most important board that you've been on. And, you know, that's when you're younger and you know it all. I served on that 17 or 18 years. If you invest in your community, and your dad and others saying that if, "You don't do business at home, you won't have a home." And if you don't invest in your home, then you're not going to have it. So, I think all those things are what make Ashland such a great place.

Instead of saying, "We can't," we just say, "Why can't we do this?" I think that's been unique. And is it going to get easier? No, it'll probably get harder, but we'll keep trying.

*Diana:* Yeah, that's true. Thank you for your time and doing this.