

Grassland improvement essential for Alma rancher

By: Frank J. Buchman

"Pride of ownership counts more than the money one makes from a ranch."

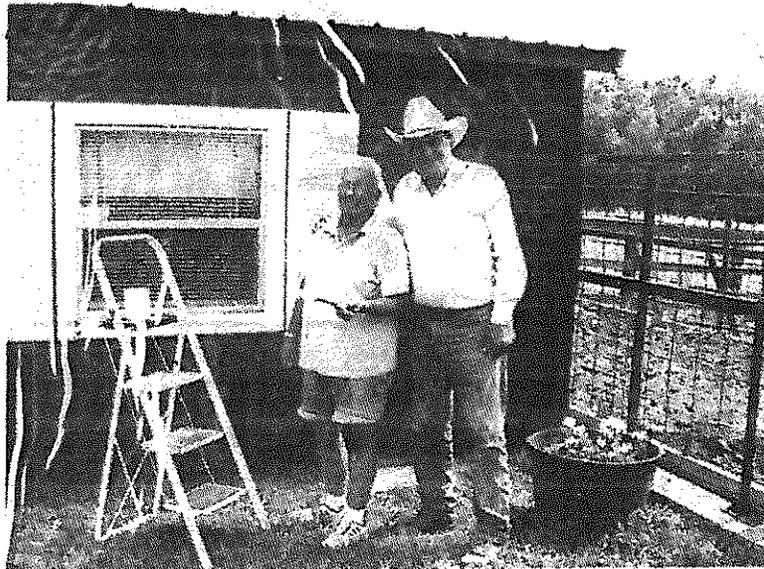
Gilbert Capoun's philosophy for managing his CX Ranch, east of Alma, is obvious as the lifelong cattleman proudly hosts a tour of the previously neglected and abused Wabaunsee County land which he's renovated into lush green Flint Hills pastures.

"This is what I've been dreaming of all my life," insisted Capoun, 78, as he and his wife of nine years, Nancy, happily toiled in the yard of the picturesque ranch headquarters.

Their beautiful native stone home, started in 1865 and completed in 1906, overlooks immaculate barns, garages, guard rail cattle pens and a scale house decorated by Nancy inside and out to resemble a miniature home suitable for living.

"I bought this place in 1963," Capoun recalled. "The house had been abandoned for seven years. The varmints had moved in, and Dad didn't think it was worth restoring."

However, lots of work has gone into the headquarters, and Capoun emphatically credited, "Nancy has been a great help in fixing it up, painting and the yard work."



The scale building on the CX Ranch, Alma, resembles a small home as Nancy Capoun has painted and furnished it for comfortable use when Gilbert Capoun brings cattle onto the scales from accompanying recently completed stockyards. Highway guardrails bolted to new railroad tie posts make a newly indestructible facility, with easy swing gates, for moving cattle. (photo by Frank J. Buchman)

Although Capoun has always been a cowboy, and took pride in the quality of his horses, he now rides a Yamaha Rhino 4x4 ATV.

"I had good horses, a number of really good horses," Capoun verified. "I made the mistake of selling my broke horses, then I got so I didn't always land right in the saddle on some young horses and ended up on the ground. We sold our last horses a year ago. This 4-wheeler is safer for me now."

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Anxious to host an inspection of his beautiful grasslands, Capoun quickly told the story behind it all. "My family came to Kansas in 1938 when I was seven after the drought and Depression forced us off a ranch in Nebraska," he noted.

Times were still hard despite opportunities in the area. "Wabaunsee County is the best place in the world to raise cattle. I've been all through the Flint Hills, and there's nothing like the pastures around Mill Creek," Capoun emphasized.

Hardships experienced during his early years made Capoun's dad, Albert, forever cautious of mortgages necessary for land ownership.

"My dad and my three brothers and I had cattle on rented land, but Jimmy and Richard both died young," Capoun commented. "After I got back from the service, my other brother, Alfred, did buy some land, and helped me get started, but he was only 42 when he passed away."

Capoun returned from Germany after two years of Army service to this country in 1956. The home place of 500 acres was purchased for \$87 an acre.

"I always dreamed of owning my own ranch, and it finally came true," Capoun expressed. "Later, I was lucky to add another section and then 500 more acres. They were higher priced, but still cheap by today's values."

With his first wife, Geneva, who passed away several years ago after an extended illness, Capoun had two sons, Joe and Glen, who both live nearby. His sons and their wives each have three children.



Alma rancher Gilbert Capoun has replaced his horses, used for over seven decades to look after cattle, with this four-wheeler. It's easier to get on, doesn't ever offer to buck him off, doesn't eat or need a drink when he's not using it, and works fine for gathering and checking cattle, he indicated. Capoun takes special pride in the pasture renovation he's done on his CX Ranch, as indicated by diligent efforts to clear timber and other intrusions. Apparent in the background are areas he's cleared, with stumps and downed trunks obvious, where grass now grows abundantly in place of trees. (photo by Frank J. Buchman)

"My boys are cowboys, too," Capoun credited. "They just ate it up when they were at home. I'd keep five shod horses in the barn. The boys would bring two of their friends home the night before; we'd saddle the horses and be in the pasture to work cattle before sunup in the morning."

A cow herd has always been part of the operation, and today Capoun and son Joe have 150 spring calves, along with a large double stock grazing program. Glen works as a machinist in Wamego.

Capoun's cow herd now is all black. "That's another thing that's changed," he inserted. "Used to be a herd had to be all Hereford or you didn't have anything. Now they have to be black." Home-raised calves are sold through the local auction barn a weaning time.

"We shipped another pasture of grass cattle this morning," Capoun related. "We graze for 90 days. There were 660 head on our land, and I don't know how many more Joe looks after. But he puts out 91 sacks of mineral every 10 days."

Some trees in the draws along with a few stumps and down trees on the pasture slopes give an inkling of what the CX pastures may have been like before Capoun's efforts began. "That was solid timber all up the hillside, before I came in with the chain saw, knocked them down, started burning and blasting every year," he described.

Once in farmland, the low land tracts on the ranch are now all seeded to brome. "That requires expensive fertilizer, but I really don't farm anything now," Capoun indicated. "I put up prairie and brome hay for feeding our cows in the winter, but we graze a lot of the brome, too."

Much improved in the past four decades, the native rangeland requires continued annual management. The pastures are almost completely free of intrusive hedge, cedar, sunnyc, buck brush and thistles.

While some ranchers don't burn annually, Capoun recognized, "It's a given for us to burn all of the pastures without fail."

Yet, chemical application is still necessary. "I have my special formula, and it does work, too," aired Capoun, who has hosted four ranch tours over the years to parlay his management techniques to others.

"Dogwood has really been a problem, but we are getting it under control, too," Capoun declared. "Our biggest concern now is the locust trees. We can cut and treat them, but it really doesn't do the job, unless the parent tree is killed, and that's often hard to find."

Fortunately, sericea lespedeza has not been a problem. "We know it's in some Wabaunsee County pastures, but as

far as we know, there's none in ours," Capoun evaluated.

Obviously, many miles of fence are required on a ranch the size of his. "While the boys were still home, we built lots of fence, and it still has to be gone over every year," Capoun said.

Water helps to improve grazing distribution. "I have developed several springs with open water tanks year round and also still use windmills, along with the ponds and creeks," Capoun shared.

"I have to give credit to my sons, Glen and Joe," Capoun emphasized. "Without them, I never would have been able to acquire this land and pay for it."

He pointed out that his sons never owned a vehicle during their four years of high school, always riding the bus morning and night. "When I would come in for dinner, I would make a

list of things, sometimes a full page, that had to be done before supper," Capoun recalled. "The boys always made sure they were finished."

Even though no horses are in the corrals or pastures, the Capouns still have fond memories of their former mounts. "We had work horses that we could also ride when I was growing up, but the first real cow pony we had was a white gelding called Sam. Now, he was a real cow horse, and I rode him a lot as a teenager," Capoun reflected.

After returning from the Army, Capoun bought a bay gelding by the Deuce horse Dan Casement had at Manhattan.

"He made a top horse. I bought a good gelding from Raymond Adams, and a nice working buckskin mare from Bob Eastman raised me several colts," Capoun continued. "I broke and trained my own horses, and if they weren't what I wanted, they went down the road. Life is too short to put up with junk."

Always first attempting to pen cattle for doctoring, the Capouns often had to drop down their lariats to get the necessary chore completed.

"I never roped seriously in competition, but I'd have fun practicing at the arena I helped build there on the fairgrounds in Alma," affirmed Capoun, who has been a spectator of the annual steer roping at Pawhuska, Oklahoma, for over 50 years.

His sons don't have horses anymore, either. "Joe had some good horses, but he lost several and has gone completely to using four-wheelers. We didn't use horses gathering cattle to ship this morning and got along fine," Capoun contended.

Pictures of a number of horses ridden by the Capouns are still proudly displayed in their home. Two guitars are in cases in the living room, where Capoun frequently pulls one out to play while singing along with his wife.

"I've always liked to sing, and when I was in the service, I started playing the guitar. I don't know notes, but I can carry a tune and play by chords," verified the rancher, who enjoys jam sessions with others and plays at rural gatherings.

Bucket calves are Mrs. Capoun's special project. She buys baby calves during the fall and winter and then grazes them during the summer. "Nancy has raised over 60 calves in the past few years with very little loss," Capoun credited.

There are 27 former bucket calves on Flint Hills pastures now to be sold this fall. Three younger calves are still being hand fed daily to graze next year. "I'll start getting some new calves before long," Mrs. Capoun vowed.

"I think the cow business is going to continue to be good, but these expenses, parts and fertilizer, are what really hurt us now," Capoun critiqued.

Looking forward in the horse business, Capoun calculated, "There are just way too many horses standing around doing nothing. These good-doers have really messed up the industry. It's inhumane the way horses are suffering and starving. They need to get some slaughter facilities opened up."

Continued improvements are planned at the CX Ranch. Capoun's parents were both long-lived, with his mother passing away at 101 years of age. "I don't want to live that long, but we're going to keep going as long as we can," vouched Capoun.

A CX insignia has been created with native limestone and painted white in one of the ranch pastures, and the Capouns intend to move that brand replica near the headquarters for easier view by passersby. "I'll be buried right there," Capoun indicated.

"My sons' high school activities were far and few between, and all they ever got for their labor was spending money, but some day this ranch will be theirs debt free. I hope and pray to God they will cherish it like I do," he concluded.