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Engl 1101

Workshop 2

Miles of Land Feels Like Home To Me

I remember thinking to myself; *I am living my dream*. The day starts like any other day.

Walking out the basement door where the cool, crisp early July morning air gently wraps around my skin. My boots, with a color resembling midnight, squish into the dew-covered grass. We jump in the truck, and drive 15 minutes to the other side of the ranch. We saddle up the horses and get working. Our first job is to bring a herd of heifers back to the corrals. Four other ranchers and I went to gather the cattle from a pasture. *Clop, clop, clack, clop*. I took my horse, Duke, to the top of the hill to make a plan for rounding up these animals. While I am miles away from any city, Duke acts like a security blanket. His quick legs and sturdy body are well prepared for the terrain I am just getting used to. We arrive at the top, I tilt my hat back to take in the sunrise. I can see for miles. I see the brown and green hills holding dozens of cattle. The hills meet the skyline where a tint of pink slices into the still dark sky. At 7:00 am the air still feels crisp when I breathe it into my lungs. Duke stamps his hoof; bringing me back to reality. I remember thinking to myself; *I am living my dream*.

Duke trots down to bring the herd together and then we start pushing.

It was my first exposure to cattle. I figured it out as I went along. One of those things I learned is that rounding up cattle can be equivalent to playing defense. I played defense in soccer. It was calming to do a familiar task. The herd follows the truck. And the ranch hands, we just ride along behind and maybe on the sides of the herd to keep it moving in the right direction. I’m positioned at the rear. Usually once the leaders of the herd begin moving the rest follow and it all goes well. Once in a while a heifer would turn and face me. Then it’s like a stand still or a staring contest . I’m lucky they put me on a good cow horse that wasn’t nervous around these creatures. These working horses have quick feet and respond well to the riders’ movements. Here, the heifer steps one direction and my horse and I move in the same direction. The goal: to prevent her from breaking from the herd. Just like when I prevent the opposing player from getting to the goal. That’s one of my favorite parts of working cattle.

Here it seems as though the land can go on forever and the sky never ends. The land is dry and tough. The people are humble and generous. That is what I love about the Giles Ranch. It’s a family owned ranch. Roger and Cathy are at the top, they have four daughters who grew up ranching. All of them went to school and three of them returned to the ranch with their husbands. Now all three daughters live in their respective houses (on the ranch, of course) and have kids. The young ones split their time at Grandma’s house (which is Cathy) or riding along in a tuck. I spent time each summer during high school working on this 30,000 acre ranch located in Southwest Kansas. It’s a commercial cow-calf, stocker-feeder operation. They grow dry land wheat, sorghum hay, alfalfa, and native prairie hay. They also raise irrigated wheat and alfalfa. But I wasn’t interested in the crops. My passion is the livestock. Majority of the calves are fed through a commercial feed yard and marketed through US Premium Beef. In 2011, a grower lot was added to the operation and is being used to start their calves. (Note: my life up until my first visit to the ranch was living and growing up in suburbia of Denver, Colorado. I never considered it the city though. Tall buildings and one-way streets were the city, not my neighborhood with parks and pools. As defined by the ranchers; a city is any place with more than one stoplight. Well, I can easily count 4 on my way to school, which is a 10 minute drive. I definitely lived in the city.) I was amazed that someone could drive for 30 minutes, while still remaining on the property; it also took a good 40 minutes to get into town.

Surprisingly, the Kansas land is filled with hills, which the cowboys call, "Kansas' hidden mountains". Rugged and steep; but flawless. The hills present obstacles when climbing, but once you reach the top they give you a feeling that the world is yours, you can achieve anything and also a brief moment to thank God your horse didn't slip. That really was one of my fears while working.

We usually worked livestock in the morning while it was still cool and shadows didn’t get in the way of sending calves through the chute. We’d stop for noon dinner. Then spend the afternoons delivering salt and mineral, checking water, fixing fence, or running errands to town. I am guilty of falling asleep once or twice during afternoon truck rides. Some afternoons were spent in the ATV. It seemed to rain grasshoppers. They were everywhere jumping up and bouncing off your leg. These grasshoppers were 5x bigger than any I’d ever seen.

I had a very proud moment during one afternoon. CJ, a rancher from Texas that married one of the daughters, and I had gone out in the truck to check on a cattle gate. It was taking longer than anticipated, and it was a one-man job, so I had a great idea to catch a frog. They were jumping all over the place and I’d never caught a frog before. The frogs I’d seen were in PetSmart. I was so new to this; I asked CJ if it was okay to catch one. Being used to my ridiculous questions, he laughed and said “yes”. Peyton and Ethan, probably 5-8 years old, caught them all the time. *Cool, the little guys were catching them, how hard could it be?* Reality check, I’d get within two feet of it and it would jump away. When I did manage to get one cornered, I touched it and the slippery feeling surprised me so I dropped it. Then, I took off my hat and scooped a frog up. Once I was mentally prepared for the feeling I grabbed it with my fingers on it’s belly and my thumb on the top. I was so proud. I took a picture. I even carried it around for a few minutes. I guess it was on the small side because when we got back to the barn CJ wanted to show me “a real frog” and he caught a much bigger one. I took it from him and it peed on me, but I still took another picture.

Despite catching frogs and taking pictures while living with the Giles, I learned what hard work looks like. It looks like starting work before the sun and ending it after the sun goes down. The ranch is like a bee-hive, everyone has their part to uphold. I learned what generosity looks like. It looks like welcoming a city slicker stranger into your life and letting that stranger work along side the pros. I learned what respect looks like. It looks like treating the animals and people kindly and with dignity. Happiness in the country has a lot to do with a good heart, and a good heart has a lot to do with good people.

Day after day I woke up at 5:00 am, ate breakfast at 5:30 (or breakfast was brought out to us in a pasture or barn) and was saddled up by 6:00am. I adored every minute. You can bet though, I slept very well.

Then, *beep, beep, beep*, is my wake up call. Like all my other mornings, I was out the door and we started working cattle right away- moving them to a different pasture. All of us were on horseback. This was my very first day, brand new, not a scuff on my boots. Just up ahead of me CJ jumps off his horse and starts beating the ground with his reins. Turned out to be a rattlesnake and he’s just lucky he saw it before his horse. He cuts off the rattle and brings it to me. He used a pocketknife, not a clean cut, there was still blood and flesh attached. I put the rattle in my pocket and to this day they have a home on a shelf in my room.

The land has seen a lot and has wits only gained from experience. The land is incredible. It’s been in the family since 1947, but the Giles ancestors have been in Kansas, in the cattle industry, since 1872. It blows my mind to think of all the land has witnessed, the number of cattle that have treaded on it, number of droughts and hurricanes. It passed another test of Mother Nature while I was there when lightening struck. Of course, it was the first time lightening struck at the ranch but I hadn’t had too many run-ins with lightening before. All the rivers and roads flooded from the rain, that put us behind in work a little bit but eventually things started to dry out. No one complained too much because moisture was much needed.

Roger and the land are kind of like a team. They have to work together if they are going to be successful. He can't wear out the soil or overuse the resources and in return the land will give back luscious grass and filled rivers. His skin is permanently sun-tanned, and wrinkles run over his cheeks like rivers in a valley. He wears muddy boots and stained jeans with a well worn button up shirt. A true cowboy. I hope in the future, the ranch is still full of hard working people, who love the hard work. I hope that future generations know the purpose of taking care of the land and stick to good morals in the business world. People need to stick together to get through the hard times and celebrate when good fortune comes.

The nearby (well nearby as in 40 min away) town, Ashland, KS, is also something special. My last year working on this ranch happened to coincide with the county fair. I had never been to a fair before in my life, and 4-h? Here I was 17 years old and I’d never known 4-h existed. It was 108 degrees and we all headed into town. We watched the parade, it consisted of about five floats. To escape the heat, we went inside and looked at the baked goods and crafts produced by the children of Ashland. Then eventually made our way to the arena to see Peyton and Ethan show their bucket calves. They’d been out at the fairgrounds all day bathing the calves, and it was Ethan’s very first year, he did great. Everybody ate dinner together that consisted of BBQ prepared by community members. They had no clue who I was and still treated me like family. Ashland will always have a special place in my heart.

The ranch is open and fresh. It smells of clean air and the creek water is clear to the bottom where millions of rocks embed themselves in the deep, rich soil. I was raised on an asphalt farm but I wish for the open, raw country-side. I feel right at home at the ranch. The open space, wonderful people - just the way I like it. The Giles Ranch is a giant office, playground, and home. Surrounded by the beauty of nature and the presence of good people, it was here I realized my reality was actually better than my dreams.