





AFTER THE FLAMES

Having largely recovered from the devastating 2017 Starbuck Fire, communities in southwest Kansas emerge with gratitude and conviction

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In the southern reaches of Clark County, where the Cimarron River rises briefly into Kansas before returning to Oklahoma, Greg Gardiner drives amid pasture grass tall, green and hair-thick. Here, the cows are as black and shiny as Kansas crude, as plump as freshly nursed pups. Calves, his main money crop, never looked better.

But there are reminders of March 6, 2017, one of the Gardiner family's worst days in ranching since they arrived by covered wagon in 1885. Amid the rolling grasslands, Gardiner sees dirt mounds that cover over a million-dollars worth of buried cattle. Charred chunks of wood are all that remain of some neighbors' homes.

"The land's mostly healed, especially the grass, but we still see its scars," says Gardiner, who ranches 48,000

acres with his brothers Mark and Garth. "I guess it will always be a part of who we are."

"We" includes residents in parts of Meade and Comanche and almost everyone in Clark County, where an estimated 420,000 acres burned in the horrific fire that caused about \$45 million in damage. Including calves, it killed nearly 10,000 cattle. Twenty-one inhabited homes, spread across a sparsely populated landscape, burned.

Survivors of the Starbuck Fire, named for the chief of a small Oklahoma fire department who spotted the flames, insist good came from the bad. That good, they say, will always continue.

"I know how it sounds, but I think I'll look back and see all of this, from the fire, as one of the best things that ever happened to me," says Bernie Smith, who lost cattle and ranching gear when his ranchlands burned in Kansas and Oklahoma. "It's given me great faith in mankind. I've gotten to see how much good there is in the people of our country."

Fire like no other

Fire is rightfully revered yet feared by ranchers. It's a valued tool for keeping grasslands free of brush and trees, yet few things can be as destructive. The



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— NEIL KAY



BOTTOM Neil Kay, owner of Ashland Feed and Seed, helped coordinate relief efforts after the Starbuck Fire.





2016 Anderson Creek fire, for example, spread from Oklahoma into Barber and Comanche counties, where it burned an estimated 313,000 acres and inflicted \$21 million in damage.

Residents figured they'd never again see a fire the size of the Anderson Creek fire, which was nearly 10 times larger and costlier than the previous worst wildfire in Kansas.

But 12 months later, they did.

The Starbuck fire began when a worn power line snapped in heavy wind and fell on grass grown tall by wet summers then dried by fall and winter. Firefighters never had a chance when the wind increased dramatically in the afternoon and changed directions. Video from that day shows flames pacing a pickup driving at 70 m.p.h.

Ashland and Protection, in Comanche County, were told to evacuate, something never before done. Neither village burned, but flames were close.

Once the fires had been extinguished, over 90-percent of Clark County had burned. Some ranchers lost entire herds, plus their homes, outbuildings and equipment.

Three young ranchers, known as the Giles sisters, lost the ranch homes they shared with their husbands and small children.

Together, they lost half of the 1,000 cattle on their ranch and 80 percent of their calf crop.

For days, rifle shots echoed across a devastated landscape as people put burned cattle out of their misery.

There is no harder chore for a rancher to do.

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“We could handle anything else.”

After the fire, Gardiner toured a blackened pasture that had held many of the 600 cows he lost in the fire. He deemed it the worst natural disaster on a ranch that weathered the Great Dust Bowl, floods, blizzards, and hail storms. He mentally tallied the loss of cattle at more than \$1 million. It would take about \$2.7 million to replace 270 miles of fencing.

“Just like that, you're looking at a loss of about \$4 million,” he says.

There were also human losses. A truck driver traveling through the region died in the flames.

But amid the tears of sadness were tears of relief. There were many “I thought this was it,” stories with happy endings. With flames licking their bumpers,



TOP The Giles sisters each lost a ranch home in the Starbuck Fire, but have since returned to ranching. Photograph by Alyssa Henry, courtesy Jenny Giles Betschart.



fire fighters escaped to a green wheat field that didn't catch fire. A rancher called his wife to say good bye, then an estranged brother drove through the flames to his rescue.

For his longest half-hour, Gardiner feared his brother Mark, and Mark's wife, Eva, had perished behind a wall of smoke and fire.

"After hearing they survived, I just figured everything was going to be alright," he said. "We could handle anything else."

Help for the ranchers came quickly and far beyond what any expected.

Gardiner credited quick funding from the Kansas Livestock Association and other groups for getting his recovery started right away. Jenny Giles Betschart said insurance replaced her and her sisters' homes. Government programs paid for much of the \$1 million in fencing the Giles sisters needed replaced.

Gifts more important than money

The phones at the Ashland Veterinary Clinic were ringing before the fire had died. Veterinarian Randall Spare and his staff dispatched volunteers to help ranchers in need. Some volunteers called ahead. Some just walked in and asked, "Where can I go help?"

Groups of 4-H kids took in orphaned calves and bucket-fed them until the ranches could handle them again. Ranchers from other areas called and offered up lush pastures for as long as needed. Those grazing rights included transporting the livestock to their temporary homes—all for free.

Neil Kay, owner of Ashland Feed and Seed, says ranchers from as far away as both coasts helped amass around 800 semi-trailer loads of hay. That's over 16,000 tons of feed for ranchers who had nothing for their stock. Some loads were deposited at Kay's business. Many were taken directly to ranchers whom the drivers or benefactors had never met.

A Missouri dairy farmer went on Facebook and announced he'd donate hundreds of bales, but he had no way to transport them. By the next morning, long lines of volunteers in trucks arrived to deliver the bales.

Ranchers found stacks of new bales in their ranch yard, with no clue who they were from.

One rickety old pickup towed three bales from southeast Kansas to donate to the cause. The driver probably spent as much on fuel as the hay was worth. Many of the transports flew American flags along the way.

"I'll tell you this," Spare says of the immense generosity, "rural America reached out. The agricultural

BOTTOM Veterinarian Randall Spare and his staff dispatched volunteers to help ranchers in need immediately after the fire. Photograph courtesy Grant Company.

sector from across America came to help us. Americans are good people.”

And it wasn't just hay. Volunteers showed up to take out ruined fencing and help with general clean up.

Giles Betschart said people showed up at the Giles Ranch almost immediately, bringing food and much needed clothing for adults and children.

“Right after the fire, spring breaks started at schools,” she says. “We had families and school groups come from all over the Midwest to help us do anything they could.”

A church camp at the edge of town had to be opened to accommodate an army of volunteers. More volunteers brought donated food and helped cook and care for other volunteers.

“How much that help means”

The donated resources of materials and labor inspired and energized exhausted area residents.

“All of those gifts, all of those people, created a feeling of accountability, an added desire to persevere, to work that much harder to figure things out,” said Spare. “It couldn't heal all of the losses, but it sure gave us a lot of encouragement to come out of this on the good side.”

Every local resident interviewed agreed the huge outpouring of supplies, labor and goodwill added incentive for them to someday help others.

Kay says every time there's a new disaster in ranch country, locals in his area are quick to respond.

“People around here have always been giving, but they are a lot more giving than they ever were before,” he notes. “They really understand what it's like to be down, totally, and need help getting back up, and just how much that help means to someone.”

The Gardiners have long been known for their generosity. Still, Greg Gardiner says seeing so much of the “goodness of mankind” has encouraged him and his brothers to take things like donating hay or cattle for a good cause even further.

“You do whatever you can do to help somebody who needs it,” he said. “It's like agriculture is one big family.”

The grasslands hadn't totally recovered that summer when Smith heard of fires in Montana. After regular chores, he and friends repaired trucks, loaded precious hay on trailers and shipped them to fire-ravaged ranches in Montana. Their “Ashes to Ashes” group has since sent hay to other ranchlands hit by natural disasters.

Every time they help others, thoughts will return to the horrible day in 2017. But that then leads to many great memories of Americans helping Americans. **KM**



Rancher Greg Gardiner says seeing so much of the “goodness of mankind” in response to the Starbuck Fire has encouraged him and his brothers to take things like donating hay or cattle for a good cause even further.