

Once-parched ranch is conservation model

Bamberger Ranch wins state's top voluntary land stewardship award.

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JOHNSON CITY — Standing on a hilltop on his Blanco County ranch, J. David Bamberger throws his arms in the air like a tent-revival preacher.

"Hallelujah!" he shouts to a group of visitors, mainly Texas Parks and Wildlife Department employees who are touring the property and inspecting a series of low-stacked rock berms that snake around the ridgeline. The berms slow runoff and allow the land to soak up more water, all part of Bamberger's plan to capture as much of the rain that falls here as possible.

He points a few hundred yards down the hill, where water percolates out of a pipe at the rate of about a gallon per minute. "You see the evidence coming right out of the earth!"

That water, along with another spring on the property, is enough to supply the four resident families and the 3,500 other people who visit each year at Selah Bamberger Ranch Preserve.

The 5,500-acre ranch, an hour west of Austin and six miles south of Johnson City, is legendary in conservation circles.

Bamberger, a former door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman who became a millionaire when he and his partner franchised Church's Fried Chicken in 1969, bought the property 40 years ago, intentionally seeking out the most overgrazed, damaged ranchland he could find. He paid \$124 an acre for the eroded, rocky parcel, overgrown with ashe juniper and cactus.

His goal? To show others that by removing invasive species, replanting native grasses and trees and managing livestock more carefully, even the most mismanaged land could rebound.

He calls the spread Selah, a word found in the Bible that means a pause or moment of reflection.

When he started, Bamberger drilled seven wells to 500 feet. None hit water. But as he ripped out most of the water-sucking ashe juniper, commonly known as cedar, planted 3,000 native trees and scattered seed for native grasses, things gradually changed.

Today, Bamberger, white-haired but spry at 80, his dog Corye at his side, practically vibrates with enthusiasm as he describes how two streams now run through the property and 11 springs have been cased, or contained to catch water.

He charges down the slope, blue eyes flashing, egging on his small troupe of followers. The land looks lush, even though drought caused the creeks to stop flowing last July, for the first time since Bamberger brought them back.

Last month, Selah Bamberger Ranch Preserve received the 2009 Leopold Conservation Award, the state's top land stewardship award, from Sand County Foundation and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. The award is bittersweet for Bamberger, whose wife, Margaret, a partner in his conservation efforts, died March 6 of lung cancer.

"David has poured his heart and soul into transforming that Hill Country ranch into a model of land stewardship," says Carter Smith, executive director of the Parks and Wildlife Department. "Everywhere you look, you can see the fingerprints of his stewardship and good management."

Today the ranch, now a nonprofit conservancy, serves as a model, hosting environmental education and outreach to schools and rural landowners. It operates on an annual budget of about \$400,000, funded mainly through donations and ranch operations, including the sale of cattle and goats.

Although he has cut the size of his herds in half because of drought, Bamberger still keeps about 250 goats and 60 head of cattle. The ranch is also home to 60 endangered African antelope called the scimitar-horned oryx and a "chiroptorium," or artificial bat cave, where an estimated 200,000 Mexican free-tailed bats spend their summers.

The largest restoration effort in the state for the endangered flowering trees called Texas snowbells is also headquartered here.

George Cofer, executive director of the Hill Country Conservancy, calls Bamberger's work significant because he not only nursed a beautiful corner of Central Texas back to ecological health, but he also showed other landowners they could similarly transform their own ranches.

"Thousands of landowners and others come through every year," Cofer says. "The landowning and ranching community sees them as a source of very solid information backed up by on-the-ground experience."

The next generation is learning from Bamberger as well.

Deborah Mann, a biology teacher at Austin Waldorf School, takes students on overnight trips to the ranch every year. It's a transforming experience for many of them, she says.

"The children experience it — they experience the science; they experience the lifestyle; they experience a way to be if you want to make a difference," Mann says.

A decade ago, Bamberger created a foundation to prevent future development of the property, and he's proud to note that deed restrictions prohibit cell phone towers, gift shops, vending machines and paved parking lots from ever popping up on the land.

"I believe in speaking the word, the gospel of conservation," he says.

A big part of his gospel is water conservation, and visitors are treated to a demonstration of how native grasses — unlike ashe juniper — encourage water retention and hold soil in place with their tangled roots.

"The key to getting water into the ground is slowing it down. Cedar just doesn't slow it down," says Steven Fulton, the ranch's staff biologist.

The Hill Country was once predominantly grassland, kept in that state by occasional wildfires and large migrating buffalo herds, Fulton says. More than 150 years of fire suppression and cattle overgrazing caused a transformation into the ashe juniper forest that Bamberger purchased.

A few years after Bamberger removed most, but not all, of that ashe juniper and planted \$20,000 worth of grass seed, the habitat rebounded and wildlife returned. The number of bird species alone has increased from 48 to more than 200.

"There is nothing you can do that works as quickly and is as cheap as having good grass cover on the ground," Bamberger says. "It's the greatest conservation measure there is."

At places like the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, scientists use words to paint a picture of what Central Texas once looked like, with its grassy, open savannahs and occasional trees.

"There's nowhere you can go to see that — except at the Bamberger ranch. Because (Bamberger) has been working there so long, you can actually see what Texas was like," says Mark Simmons, a restoration ecologist at the wildflower center and Deborah Mann's husband. "In terms of going onto a piece of property and saying, 'How can I make this better?' he set the precedent for that."

Such measures don't have to be expensive, Bamberger insists, although he has invested a small fortune in restoring his ranch.

Smaller landowners can collect native grass seed for free by using their hands to strip seeds from the seed shafts of the grasses growing along highway rights of way, he says. They can plant native grasses in alternating swaths instead of solid expanses, letting it fill in on its own.

The stone collection berms — an idea he credits to the ancient Phoenicians — can be built on a smaller scale, too. The berms trap rain (an average of 31 inches a year) that falls on the ranch's natural "perch aquifers," localized, natural collectors of water just below the surface of the hilly land.

"We're trying to rescue every drop of water that falls on this aquifer," Bamberger says. "It's not rocket science; it's just the geology of the land."

Volunteers have helped him build more than a mile of the system, which includes shallow ditches, or water pans, to collect rainfall on top of the ridges. The system operates on simple gravity flow and uses no pumps. The water is tested but not treated with chemicals.

Bamberger envisions another 27 miles of berms before he is finished.

"It's practical, common sense, and you don't have to be a millionaire," Bamberger says. "To be a conservationist, love the natural world and do right by your neighbors doesn't take tons of money. It just takes commitment."

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