

**SAN ANGELO STANDARD-TIMES**

**Sunday, March 23, 2014**

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**Our past, future found in story of ranch**

"We are passionate about families who have shouldered the responsibility of managing land and water to feed us, clothe us and shelter us, providing habitat for wildlife, recharging aquifers and contributing to environmental flows for creeks, rivers and estuaries," the preface to a new book reads.

"Hillingdon Ranch: Four Seasons, Six Generations," a beautiful book by Comfort photographer David K. Langford and San Angelo writer Lorie Woodward Cantu, is about both our future and past.

The book, published by Texas A&M Press, is a remembrance of six generations who have worked the Texas ranch in the Hill Country for 128 years.

It also describes, in words and photographs, four hard, dry seasons on the ranch and how the future depends on conservation and caring for open spaces.

David, who lives near Comfort, is a member of the Hillingdon ranching family. His 200 or so photos in the book give us an insight into the special place.

Lorie was raised on a ranch near Lexington.

"We are passionate about bridging the gap that exists between those who were born to the land and those who were not," they wrote.

The book not only explains everything from the water cycle to grazing strategies, but it also introduces us to the family members who have taken care of the ranch so well and for so long.

Robin Giles, a grandson of Hillingdon founder Alfred Giles, continues to run cattle, sheep and goats on the ranch with the help of his wife, Carol, their son Grant and Grant's wife, Misty.

The authors remind us the "family's land stewardship efforts have kept the water flowing. The vegetation that sustains the wildlife and the livestock is an integral part of the water cycle. The quilt-like mosaic of grass, forbs, shrubs and trees catches the rain that falls, slowing it down so that it seeps into the underlying aquifers instead of rushing headlong down the steep rocky hillsides, eroding the precious topsoil and clogging nearby creeks and springs. The water that reaches both Block Creek and Flat Rock Creek, the largest of the ranch's many creeks, streams and springs, is clear and clean." The book also reminds us the "Gileses' experience reflects that of thousands of other ranching families across Texas. By opening their gates, ranches not only help keep their land intact, but also share outdoor experiences with their fellow Texans, creating a deeper appreciation for the value of open space.

"Of course, ranches produce food, fiber, and shelter for society, but more importantly, they provide functioning ecological systems that capture and clean our water, produce and purify our air, and give wildlife a place to live. As goes the land, so goes our future in Texas." I especially enjoyed reading the history of the Giles family, which founded Hillingdon Ranch in the late 1800s, naming it after Hillingdon, Middlesex, England, the Gileses' ancestral home.

The family's history includes stories ranging from stagecoach robberies to sending carrier pigeons to carry messages to loved ones.

My favorite story is about the death of Palmer Giles, a second-generation rancher at Hillingdon.

Because of his love for the land, the 92-year-old insisted on being buried on the ranch without a funeral home's help.

Palmer dug his grave himself, selecting a field below the main house. The ranch had far more scenic spots, but they contained shallow bedrock, which made grave digging more difficult than Palmer intended.

"To hell with the views," he told his family when he selected the softer site.

"I'm going where the digging is easy." Copies of the book are available at Cactus Books, 6 E. Concho Ave., 325-659-3788.

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