

Dusty and the Flying A's

A monumental decision and an impossible leap.

By Stephen L. Wilmeth

"Dusty is the hardest working guy I ever saw.... He works every day."—Lex Schadel

Near the southern tip of that deep-V footprint that plunges down the backbone of the Rocky Mountains on the national weather map that is cooler than places west, south, or eastward, there is a ranch that brands the famous (open) flying A. Locals who still know something about the cow business call it "The Flying A's." The brand is registered in the state brand book in two different locations, the right rib and the

Mexico. When he was in Grant County he resided at Oak Grove, the main headquarters just off Highway 90 near the original Phelps Dodge mining company town of Tyrone.

During those years, the ranch manager was Roy Wilmeth. He would say the Flying A's was the best of the great Grant County ranches of that era. Made up largely of savanna woodlands and many south-facing hillsides, it was wonderful winter country. From the Burro Mountains on the south to Bullard Cone and Schoolhouse Mountain to the north, the rain shadow it forms

contributes to the history of the ranch and how ranches were put together.

The family Edgar was Irish. They immigrated to the United States and by the time James Edgar was born in 1878 the family resided in New Jersey. James' father, William, was a timber buyer in Canada but died when James was in his teens. James' mother, Charlotte, burdened with four children, returned to Ireland with two of the four. James stayed, and at age 19 he and a friend pooled their money and went west with the intention of settling wherever it played out. That somewhere became the lonely train depot at Separ, N.M.

James found employment at area ranches. At some point, he heard about an old Mexican fellow in the Redrock area north of Lordsburg who was running Angora goats. On a visit out there, two major events took root. Without suggestion of order, he met his future wife, whose family had come from Texas and by then were local ranchers. He also wound up paying the goat herder enough money to leave, turning his goat herd over to him.

Married to Vonia Cloudt in 1912, the couple ranched up the Gila from Redrock until the Great Depression when their bank failed, robbing them of their life savings. The ranch would be known as the Edgar Place even after the Flying A's acquired it and the subsequent sale of it later to families in the modern era.

The ranch reached its greatest size under Hamilton. It was a time when copper and cattle dominated Grant County economics. Some will say it was in the golden years and improvements were starting to be addressed universally. This included relationships with the Forest Service and the Gila National Forest, which dominated the landscape.

In the mid-1960s, the Hamilton estate transferred title of the ranch to John's son, Jack. Jack built a home on a private inholding on the Redrock road and appeared to be settling in for a continued Hamilton tenure. It was during that time, though, that the original Flying A ranch entered a period of transition. Various parcels were sold leading up to its modern configuration, which does not include the Edgar Place, the original

COURTESY FRANK KENNEY



Dusty Hunt is many things, but his growing legacy offers a best case glimpse of the modern American West.

left rib. Both registrations, 55473 and 70080, are assigned to Duston L. Hunt Jr. in the former, and Duston L. Hunt Jr. and Patricia E. Hunt in the latter.

Arguably, that brand is the most elegantly simplistic and symmetrical brand in the state of New Mexico.

Hamilton Run-Up

Under all the fences 75 years ago, the ranch was owned by the Hamilton family. Its patriarch, John Hamilton, swung a big loop with cattle operations in Montana, Idaho and New

catches monsoonal rain consistently and often in greater amounts than other areas. That makes warm season summer growing conditions better.

The west side of the ranch which then included what is still known as the Edgar Place falls off into the Gila River drainage. It's good spring country due to its western slope and degree-day accumulations. What makes it warmer in the spring also creates summer heat, which makes higher elevations to the east preferred summer country. The Edgar Place, however, is an interesting story and

headquarters at Oak Grove, or majority of the Mangus drainage that is now controlled by copper company Freeport-McMoRan.

Change always alters the landscape, and only occasionally does that imply what is best for a ranch. With the modern Flying A's, the case can be made it is good.

The Hunt Era

The story of the ranch can be couched in further subchapters of the Wilmeth brothers, the McMillen family, the Jolly family, the continuing chronicles of Dick Hays, young cowboys like Lee Robbins, remnant Barzona cattle inherited in the sale and transition of the ranch, and the addition of the Schoolhouse Allotment, but, most importantly, it is the story line in the emergence of the owners and the modern era.

That story is entitled Dusty and Pat Hunt.

Few ranch operations in the American West are now bought and paid for by the sweat and effort of the rancher on the ranch itself. In the case of the modern Flying A's, that is exactly what took place, and it is a story that, if repeated, holds the secret to future successes. Original ranches were built by individuals who dedicated their lives to the nuances that balance every aspect of ranching.

Ranches cannot be made sustainable if the owner/operator doesn't commit body and soul to the effort, nor can they be successful if cash flow is so interminably short that vital expenses can't be covered. Interestingly, the corollary to that statement, too much cash spent that doesn't reflect balance can be destructive, too.

Dusty didn't come from a ranching family. His father was from Oklahoma with rural roots and his mom came from Wis-



PHOTOS FROM HUNT FAMILY ARCHIVES COURTESY PAT HUNT AND ALIDA BURCHETT

ABOVE: The lower Gila country of the Flying A's ranch is beautiful especially when the monsoons bless it with abundance. BELOW: Dusty and Pat Hunt's daughter, Alida Burchett, and her husband, Robert, have come back to the ranch. Alida is seen here dragging calves. AT BOTTOM: The ranch also has a farming component built around ranch use. Dusty, Alida, and one of the grandsons are baling hay.



consin, but there was no ranch in the mix. His accomplishments have come totally from his efforts and his decision to make an impossible leap.

Living a life engaged with the mountains, the fauna and the flora of southwestern New Mexico, and becoming one of the great packers of Gila history, he closed the Forest Service's Schoolhouse Allotment north of the Flying A in the early '80s. In that move, he left his job with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (DGF) and immersed himself into making that allotment work. Of course, he had to work outside.

He got certified in preg testing and artificial insemination so he could generate income directly related to his ranching commitment. The allotment, located downstream in the Mangus drainage, had some water rights where he grew produce and sold it and eggs alongside his home on Highway 180. He and a former DGF colleague, Steve Harvel, also put together an outfitting business, and clients were packed into the Gila to hunt, fish, and ride.

He worked all the time and every extra cent was plowed back into the business. And he wasn't alone. His wife, Pat, worked outside for a needed paycheck and insurance benefits when available. This put them in a position to take a run at the Flying A's when it became



available off their southern boundary at the turn of the 21st century.

They got that done and made it work.

Early on, the couple was blessed with the arrival of their daughter, Alida. Passing travelers on the highway often saw Dusty horseback or on the tractor with the baby in her backpack with him. She was horseback by herself long before the couple felt they had a real kid horse. There is a story when she was just little about saddling a bunch of horses and mules to pack salt. Dusty had sat her up on a horse to keep her out of the way as he finished saddling. Her horse jerked loose and in the melee started down the tie line of the mules causing a wreck. It also got spooked and commenced to buck. Trying to get to her with the situation only getting worse all Dusty could do was get her attention and make her help herself.

"Alida, I can't get to you," he yelled. "You are going to have to ride him!"

She did.

Today Alida and her husband, Robert Burchett, are on the ranch with Dusty and Pat. They have two little boys, Rowan and Brennan, who are wearing cowboy hats and boots like their elders. At the time this was written, Dusty reported that after all these years he thinks he has finally found a kid horse! How both will be mounted will probably become reminiscent of the days of their mom's youth. The little cowboy with the most gumption will have to ride a ranch horse!

Dusty

The title of this article could well have been, "Friends." Dusty Hunt and I started kindergarten and graduated from college together. We have shared many things, but the theme all along has been our friendship. Many times, the suggestion we've never had a cross word rings true.



ABOVE: If there is a hobby for Dusty Hunt, it's probably camp cooking. He can make a Dutch oven sing and many memorable meals are the result. From biscuits, to cassaroles and beans, to desserts, his offerings are epic. BELOW: Irrigation turnouts and little boys have a place on every ranch. Rowan and Brennan Burchett were on their way to a good sunburn when this picture was taken. BOTTOM: Robert Burchett has become invaluable to the Hunt cow operation. He is adapting to a horseback outfit and life.



Dusty was running the state elk project when he came to Las Cruces to visit while I was still in graduate school at NMSU. He told me he was contemplating making a major change in his life by buying the Schoolhouse Allotment. I told him what I thought.

Later when I was in California we would see each other once a year. A fall trip to hunt or to work cows with Dusty starting with those first-generation auction-barn Brangus lovelies was the only suggestion of holiday that was ever experienced. It was more than a homecoming. In an agreement that was never formalized, we commenced hunting each year in a different place that we had dreamed about as kids. Tents were pitched at the mouth of Mogollon Creek, on the east fork of Mogollon Creek, at Lilly Park, at the mouth of the Sapillo, in Woodland Park, at the head of Little Bear, at Miller Springs, and on and on. If we killed a deer, great. If we didn't, that was great too.

Dusty has touched many lives. His work in conservation—including appointments and/or elected positions to the State Water Commission, the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts, the Upper Gila Watershed District, the local and regional soil and water conservation district boards, and others—has made him a leader and now an elder of his craft.

He is a lifelong student and a voracious reader of books. He is a taxonomist, a squaw-hitch packer, a great camp cook, a mechanic, a carpenter, a trained biologist, a competent businessman, and an arbiter of federal-lands conflict, and, most of all, a rancher and native son of the American West who has earned the respect of his peers and his colleagues to the highest degree. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. He says: "Dusty Hunt demonstrates what takes place among bright stars who blaze trails without the dominating influences of others. He's a pathfinder. His approaches were never locked down by traditions or entrenched dogma. His success mirrors the great J.R. Williams' cartoon of long ago, 'The Rusty King,' when the scene was set by Curley and Wes horseback behind Stiffy and a fellow with a well-worn kack but reputed to be 'one of th' best and biggest cattlemen in th' whole country.' Curley is answering Wes' question about why a fellow like that doesn't dress like movie star cowboys. Curley responds in 'Old Rock' fashion. 'He told me his secret of success was that every time he saved enough money to look like a cowboy's s'posed to look, he'd buy another ranch.'"



PHOTOS FROM HUNT FAMILY ARCHIVES
COURTESY/PAT HUNT AND ALIDA BURCHETT