People From The Past
John L. "Chip" Merrill, Sr.

Editor's Note: As we commemorate the 25th Anniversary of Rangelands magazine, we pay tribute to SRM members who have helped shape the profession of rangeland management.

By Kindra Gordon

Conservation enthusiast; spokesperson and advocate would all be accurate depictions of John "Chip" Merrill's involvement with conservation efforts over the last 50 years. But the title he seems to relish most is that of rancher – where he gets to practice what he has often preached.

Today, he and son John, Jr. operate the XXX Ranch, Inc., which variously has been a registered and commercial cow-calf, stocker and farming operation near Crowley, Texas. They represent the 4th and 5th generation of their family to ranch in Texas and range management is a big part of their history.

Over the last 41 years, the Merrills have utilized rotational grazing on their ranch, first with deferred-rotation and for 20 years with one herd intensive rotation units. Nearly a decade ago, they made the switch from a cow-calf operation to a seasonal stocker operation grazing the range from March through about June. In 2001, they produced 97 pounds/acre in 100 days with stockers on native range stocked at one steer per 2 acres with no inputs except salt and mineral. Those gains came in their fourth year of drought and grasshopper invasion. Merrill says the key to their success is always to stock according to forage available.

Off the ranch, Merrill has made numerous contributions to the range management profession as well. He is a past president (1981) and fellow of the Society for Range Management and has received the Frederick G. Renner award for contributions to the profession. He was the first recipient of the W.R. Chapline Land Stewardship Award from SRM. He served as president of the Texas SRM Section in 1974, and over the years has been involved in many of the SRM committees, as well as the SRM Endowment Fund Board of Governors.

Merrill was also a large part of the beginnings of the *Rangeman's Journal*, now *Rangelands*. "Twenty five years ago, several of us discussed the fact that the *Journal of Range Management* is absolutely necessary, but did not meet the needs and interests of the majority of SRM membership. From that discussion, I then drafted a resolution to create the *Rangeman's Journal* (now *Rangelands*), a separate and co-equal journal of the society that was technically sound, but written in laymen's language, and we took it to the SRM board where it was passed. It's also our best means of communicating with non-member professionals and the public." Merrill believes Rangelands still serves that purpose, and he would like to see the magazine's distribution extended.

Today, Merrill maintains his involvement with SRM, as well as, the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, the Natural Resources Foundation of Texas, the Botanical Research Institute of Texas, the Texas Wildlife Association, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) and many other conservation-minded programs. He is a past director of the National Cattlemen's Association; was named Man of the Year in Service to Texas Agriculture by *Progressive Farmer Magazine* in 1995; and was inducted into the State Fair of Texas Heritage Hall of Honor in 1998.

From 1961 to 1996, while living on and operating his ranch, Merrill also directed the Ranch Management Program at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. He says he'd "never taught anything

but Sunday school" prior to that. Evidently that didn't matter, under his guidance the TCU Ranch Management Program became known and respected internationally.

A Family Heritage

Merrill's introduction to conservation and land management came via his father Louis P. Merrill, who was one of the "founding fathers" of the Soil Conservation Service and served as the regional conservationist for Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana for the first twenty years.

"I literally grew up with the Soil Conservation Service and those early people who approached conservation with a missionary zeal," Merrill says. His father was charter member number four of the Soil Conservation Society of America (today known as SWCS), so to say he's followed in his father's footsteps is a bit of an understatement.

Merrill earned his degree from Texas A&M in range and forestry and worked for the Soil Conservation Service briefly before and after a stint with the U.S. Air Force. But he has spent most of his life ranching and teaching.

Asked what changes he's noted in natural resource management issues over the last 25–30 years, Merrill says, "Most devastating is the shift from science-based professional management of private and public rangelands to misinformation, over-regulation and lack of qualified technical assistance for both. Environmental activists have damaged rangelands severely with lawsuits and mismanagement (wrong or lack of) from the court bench. Natural resources are constantly changing and require on-site management by competent land managers and adequate technical assistance to make needed and timely adjustments."

Merrill's advice to future rangeland managers is this: "Be prepared and updated as a lifelong learner to take advantage of science-based knowledge and practical experience to understand the capabilities and limitations of soil, water, plant, animal, human and economic resources; establish reasonable goals, evaluate alternatives, select the most appropriate, apply them judiciously and make timely adjustments as necessary. We must aggressively support wise, science-based rangeland management and oppose with equal vigor, that which is not."

Today, as a producer representative on the GLCI national steering committee, Merrill is a strong advocate for providing technical grazing assistance to private landowners. "These lands are the breeding and growing ground for the country's cattle and sheep; they constitute major watersheds, wildlife habitat, and are a source of recreation and open space amenities," Merrill says.

He adds, "GLCI has become one of the strongest forces in support of conservation legislation...Funding for technical assistance is still inadequate. The next greatest danger is for NRCS to be program driven. It needs to be driven by conservation planning to be cost effective."

Merrill likens his philosophy toward conservation assistance to a quote by President Lincoln: "The government should do for the people only that which needs to be done in the public interest that the people cannot do for themselves." Says Merrill, "If we'd stayed with that in all things, we'd be much better off."

Chip Merrill and his wife of over fifty years, Virginia, have three children and three grandchildren. All have been involved in the ranch over the years. "It's a real team effort," says Merrill.