Ranching The LBJ Way In Texas Hill Country

By Jennifer Bain
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A bull named Domino is shown at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park/Jennifer Bain

In an open-air barn in Texas Hill Country, a bull named Domino and a cow named Miss Battle patiently tolerate visitors transfixed by the fact the initials "LBJ" are branded on their right horns. Only their offspring, an unnamed calf born Sept. 23 and so far identified as 635, plays hard to get and dozes in the back of a stall.

The Herefords, with their rusty coloring and white faces, should be out grazing in the pre-Christmas sunshine with the rest of the herd but, like LBJ Ranch foreman Clint Herriman, they have come in to greet our small tour group.

When Lyndon Baines Johnson donated a small chunk of his ranch near Fredericksburg to the National Park Service in 1972, America's 36th president stipulated that it remain a working ranch and not become a "sterile relic of the past."

Clint Herriman, LBJ Ranch foreman for the NPS, walks in the Show Barn at Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park/Jennifer Bain

So that's how the Park Service has come to manage, interpret and even sell Herefords that are descended from Johnson's original registered herd. You can visit the ranch on a self-guided driving tour once you pick up a free permit and map.

"The beautiful thing today is that Texas is primarily a privately owned state, and we're one of the few ranches you can still drive on publicly and see and tour," Herriman points out.

"This has never been your typical ranch," he stresses. "It has always been a showplace, or a gentleman's ranch. I can't help but think that President Johnson could see we were losing a direct tie to a family farm, or a family ranch, and he wanted people to be able to see and enjoy this as he had always done. And thankfully he gave us the heart of his ranch and a portion of his herd."

You'll drive over a cattle guard when you drive into LBJ Ranch at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park in Texas/Jennifer Bain

First established in 1969 as a national historic site, Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park is one of just two working cattle ranches under the federal agency's care — the other being Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Montana. Of course there are other units with hobby or demonstration farms, like Booker T. Washington National Monument in Virginia, but those have just a handful of animals.

I've come to Texas Hill Country to see these Herefords with presidential pedigree, but also to discover why this is the second most visited wine region in America after Napa. Nearby Fredericksburg, where I stay for three nights, is a beloved weekend getaway for people from Austin and San Antonio and boasts German heritage plus a rare, thriving downtown full of independent shops instead of chains.

This part of Texas is also on my radar because it's on the path of the Apr. 8 total solar eclipse as it moves from Mexico through the U.S. and into Canada. At 1:33 p.m. that day, the moon will blot out the sun and park visitors will experience four minutes and 14 seconds of darkness. Details are being worked out, but chances are there will be a weekend full of activities at LBJ, and crowds will get to park on the 6,300-foot asphalt airstrip that Johnson famously used to work from home while president.

"We do anticipate literally thousands of people," says interpretive park ranger Cynthia Dorminey, sharing a *Junior Ranger Eclipse Explorer* booklet and NPS eclipse safety glasses. "We're going to get one of the longest lengths of totality — just over four minutes."

Interpretive park ranger Cynthia Dorminey stands near the reconstructed birthplace of Lyndon B. Johnson along the LBJ Ranch Driving Tour/Jennifer Bain

Dorminey is on hand to guide our media group through the LBJ Ranch District, which is about a half hour from the president's boyhood home in its Johnson City District. Put the two districts together and you'll see where Johnson was born, lived, died and was buried — a "circle of life" story that rangers like Dorminey love to share and that presents the most complete picture of any American president. The ranch is surrounded by land the family still owns.

What immediately strikes me is how the national park and Lyndon B. Johnson State Park & Historic Site play nice with each other. The LBJ Ranch Driving Tour starts at the state park's visitor center where you pick up the permit and map, runs six miles and ends at the Texas White House complex, which has been closed since 2018 due to structural and mold issues but is finally being rehabilitated. The hangar is also closed but I do get to see the airstrip Johnson used when traveling to and from Washington, and the presidential plane he jokingly dubbed Air Force "One-Half."

My December visit actually begins at the state park's Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm, which interprets the experiences of early Texas-German farm families. The midwife who delivered the president, Augusta Sauer Lindig, was from here. Then, just past the one-room schoolhouse that Johnson once attended, we drive over a cattle guard and enter the LBJ Ranch. I visit the president's reconstructed birthplace and peer through a fence into the family cemetery where he and his wife, Claudia "Lady Bird" Johnson, are buried. Then it's finally time to see the Show Barn.

While the Texas White House is closed for rehabilitation work, you can still pop into what's cheekily called Air Force \

Johnson spent one-quarter of his presidency at his ranch, and visitors included other American presidents, world leaders and dignitaries. Guests would be loaded into white Lincoln Continental convertibles for ranch tours that always involved driving through the center of the Show Barn to admire the prize-winning Hereford cattle.

There was a lot of money to be made selling registered Herefords for breeding purposes, and ranchers pampered and groomed the animals for stock shows in a bid to win prizes and boost prices for the animals. The barn was built in 1966 as a place to bring the show bulls. There might have been a dozen on hand during the president's driving tours.

"The whole idea was to bring visitors from all over the world," explains Herriman. "They'd land right out here on this airstrip on the north end of the runway right out here. So if you were a guest of his, once your feet were on the ground, he would quickly get you in these Lincoln Continentals like in the picture behind me, and he personally would give you a tour of the ranch. Most of his guests had never been to Texas, they'd never been on a ranch before, and he wanted to put his best foot forward so to speak. So you would have got the same tour from the president pretty much that you're driving today, only there would not have been paved roads."

President Lyndon B. Johnson pulls a calf by a rope in a vintage black-and-white photo taken at his ranch/LBJ Library, Yoichi Okamoto

Back then, the cattle would have been washed and blow dried and then had their hair curled and horns polished for Johnson's guests. I only get to see three Herefords and they clearly haven't been gussied up.

Miss Battle is a direct descendant of the cows that Johnson purchased in 1957, though, because the park maintains a maternal bloodline while mixing in other registered Hereford bulls. It's also taking steps to make the cattle look like 1960s-era Herefords.

"What that means is that they're a little bit shorter, and they're a little bit fatter, than most modern cattle," Herriman explains. "And then we do things like use horn weights to train their horns to grow down. We want their horns to frame their faces. That makes them safer as opposed to sticking up in the air."

A rancher brands the horn of a Hereford at LBJ Ranch/NPS Photo, Douglas Smith

Every animal wears a horn weight for 10 to 12 months before it's removed and the horns grow down naturally. Then it's time to brand the horns. It was and still is an uncommon method because, unlike hide brands, these ones must must be redone every year and a half to two years since they grow and fade from being rubbed on trees and feeding troughs. Horn brands don't improve the quality of the beef, or the health of the animal — they're just cosmetic. Horn is made of the same material as human fingernails (keratin) and as long as the brand doesn't go too deep, it doesn't hurt the animals, although it apparently smells like burning hair when it's being applied.

Back in Johnson's era, Herefords were the hot breed. But with red bodies, white faces and necks, and stripes on their necks, they all looked the same. "If you've got brands on your horns, you're going to stand out, you're going to get noticed a little quicker," explains Herriman.

We take a closer look at Miss Battle. Like all the Herefords here, she has "LBJ" on the front of her right horn, and a unique three-digit ID number on the front left one as well as the back sides of both horns. Her letters and numbers started up close to her hairline about two years ago but now they're half way down her horns, so she's clearly due for a rebranding.

Miss LBJ Battle 262 shows of her horn brands at LBJ Ranch/Jennifer Bain

Talk turns to what Herriman calls "the biggest takeaway" he offers to visitors.

"President Johnson was grooming and cultivating this image of being a western rancher and a businessman, and this got him away from that stigma of being a small-town, southern politician," he explains. "This image that he cultivated, it's not purely made up, but he did work at it, he did work at refining it. So the cattle, all of the land, the wildlife, everything — he loved it. He spent a quarter of his presidency here. He was born and raised on this property. But it was also a big tool for him to use. This image was the key takeaway here."

That said, during his presidency, Johnson did sign into law almost 300 bills dealing with environmental protection and other resource conservation issues. The NPS says he used new ranching practices here that demonstrated these stewardship concepts and increased the revenue potential. He fenced pasture for grazing rotation, terraced fields to prevent soil erosion, constructed "tanks" or ponds to catch surface water run-off, planted more than 1,100 acres in improved varieties of grasses, built one of the first liquid fertilizer plants in this area and had the ranch soil analyzed to determine the proper ingredients for the fertilizer.

Johnson's ranch foreman, Dale Malechek, became the first foreman when the NPS took over.

LBJ Ranch foreman Clint Herriman inspects the cattle/NPS Photo, Douglas Smith

In NPS speak, Herriman is a supervisory range technician but goes by "foreman" to the public. Raised in Oklahoma, he planned to be a history teacher but started as a seasonal ranch worker here in October 2007 and worked his way up. "I get to be in a place where history actually happens," he muses. "I get to work the cattle, plow fields, fix fences — and I get to talk to visitors from all over the world. For me, it's a match made in heaven."

While Herriman jokes "I get to do play ranching" because he has a salary, benefits and set work hours, everything that happens on a typical ranch happens here in 15 pastures spread over 680-odd acres. The ranch workers raise crops and bale their own hay. The cattle are sold a couple times a year at public auctions in Fredericksburg so "any taxpayer has a fair chance to bid on them there." The goal is always to get the animals to pay for their own cost.

"Without the cattle, we have a beautiful national park," says Herriman. "The cattle are what make it still a ranch today. The cattle are what really add the richness to the experience and give you a better sense of place. It's a symbiotic relationship."

LBJ Ranch foreman Clint Herriman stands in a stall with a bull named Domino who has just made a cow patty/Jennifer Bain

There's one more point that the foreman wants to make before we leave the Show Barn and finish our driving tour at the Texas White House complex. The cattle — all registered with the American Hereford Association — are selectively bred to be historically accurate and are now considered a cultural resource.

"We want everything out here to be as historically accurate as possible so if you were a guest driving you'd be seeing the same sights as the president would," Herriman explains. "Having said that, we sell animals off the ranch. A bull like this (Domino) is going to be somewhere between $2,000 to $4,000, depending on the market. A cow (like Miss Battle) would be $1,000. The weaned calves are going to bring $800 to $1,000."

The herd averages 120 animals. Each bull should be able to breed 30 cows. Right now there are three mature bulls that are "old enough to be of service," plus another five young bulls. All the LBJ cattle are trained to be led by a halter and are gentle enough that they can roam freely and be invited into the Show Barn to interact with visitors.

It's interesting to note that there was no real tourism here when this was just a poor, rural agrarian area. But, as Herriman points out, "people have been coming to the Texas Hill Country ever since LBJ put it on the radar."

An interpretive sign in the LBJ Ranch Show Barn explains that a good bath is the first step in grooming a show animal/Jennifer Bain

Domino's full name — for the record — is LBJ Domino RCR KAP 285. Battle's full name is Miss LBJ Battle 262. Cattle are usually named for their fourth or fifth grandparents, but the ID number is unique and what the ranch hands call them. Herriman also lovingly calls them "living, breathing museum objects" and reiterates that they're viewed as cultural resources — as well as "a tool to help up manage the grasses."

Domino, Miss Battle and their sweet young calf were brought into the barn early this morning and given grain with their rations as a "reward for putting up with us." They'll rejoin the herd around 3:45 p.m. He doesn't know it yet, but Domino will be sent to a pasture tomorrow with the fall herd to breed the cows. When the docile bull stands as if to signal the end of our short visit, he casually relieves himself.

"That's part of the show, too," says Herriman with a grin.

If you don't spot cattle or cowboys in the LBJ Ranch Show Barn, there is always interpretive signage/Jennifer Bain

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