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**DIVERSITY** is the name of the game for Ron and Janet Helm's ranching operation in Jeff Davis County in far West Texas. Their latest venture is a for-profit horse retirement program. The retired horses typically would have spent their final years standing in a stall or in a small paddock. Now, for essentially a long-term grazing fee, the horses have the chance to spend their final years running free on thousands of acres of native rangeland.

## Ranchers Diversify Operation With Horse Retirement Program

**By Colleen Schreiber**

VAN HORN — Imagine that a treasured horse, one that has been with you for many years and done all it was asked to do is now in its final years. Where or how would you want your horse to retire to spend its final days?

For horses that belong to city dwellers, there are typically few choices. The most common choices — the only choices, really — are a stable or a small paddock. But given an option, would you prefer that your horse be standing in a stall or a small paddock or running free on a large West Texas ranch?

Anyone who knows much at all about horses would easily choose the latter. After all, the arid climate of West Texas, with its undulating terrain is, according to West Texas rancher Ron Helm, ideal for a horse. Helm has spent the last 39 years of his life living on and operating a large cattle ranch in Jeff Davis County.

In 2010 he and his wife, Janet, embarked on a rather unique twist

to ranch diversification. They started a “Natural Horse Retirement Program”, which Helm says is a fancy name for a long-term pasturage agreement. “Natural” is the key word, because it is what really sets their program apart from any other horse retirement program in the country.

“As far as I can tell, so far, we are the only ones that truly allow horses to be turned out on big native pastures in varied terrain,” says Helm. “Others tout that they’ll turn out a horse — in a small three or so acre pasture — and put a blanket on him when needed and feed him twice a day and groom him and have a farrier trim his feet once a month. None of that is needed out here. This is wonderful horse country, and a horse does great out here if you leave it alone.”

Their country has enough varied terrain for a horse to deal with all the elements, be it the wind or the cold. There are also enough bushes that they can shade up during the hot summer months.

The year after they started the program, all of Texas suffered through the worst one-year drought on record. Helm refers to it as the “atomic bomb drought” of 2011 and 2012. What he noticed, though, was that even though the cattle got thin, the horses all stayed in good shape.

“I attribute that to the fact that horses graze different than cattle. Horses graze further; they travel and cover a lot more country, whereas cows don’t necessarily do that, plus, they’ll graze plants that cattle won’t eat.”

The Helms learned a long time ago that to survive in what can be a harsh environment where droughts are more common than not, diversification and thinking out of the box was their key to survival, at least if they wanted to stay on the ranch. The idea for NHRP came about because they’d had several friends who visited them on the ranch comment about a favorite old horse that they no longer rode and wouldn’t they like to have it?

“No,” was always Ron’s response. Then Janet’s mare got too old to work, and they didn’t want to sell or ship her.

“That mare and I grew up together,” says Janet. “We learned everything together on this ranch, and when she couldn’t work anymore, she was the first horse that we kept. She ruled the roost for a long time.”

All of this got Ron to thinking about how he could perhaps turn this idea that kept coming to him into a profit center. Then the horse slaughter ban was implemented, and Ron could see the handwriting on the wall.

“I could see a wreck coming,” says Helm.

Helm had a number of conversations with BLM representatives about putting horses on their ranch, but decided it wasn’t worth

meeting the agency's regulations, specifications and inspections.

"It's just uneconomical to consider doing all that, and it's not necessary."

Helm does not blame the BLM for the mess they are in. He refers to the horse slaughter ban as "one of the most misguided efforts" that animal welfare people have ever taken on.

"They thought they were doing a good thing, and they made the situation worse than it was. There are now more horses that are abused and suffering from malnutrition, and it's because of the ban," Helm insists. "Now an owner who maybe can't afford to pay to keep a horse to the end of its life is forced to send them to Mexico or to Canada, or some just turn them out on federal lands or on their neighbors."

As with most new business enterprises, it took a couple of years for the Helms' NHRP to really get some traction. Today, though, it is an economically viable part of their overall ranching operation.

"On a per head basis they pay better than the cows," quips Helm. "I consider them kind of like little oil wells. They pay every month with very little inputs. Other than the advertising, feed, and of course, my time, the operating costs are minimal."

Helm says they will always be a traditional cow ranch, but the NHRP dovetails perfectly into the operation, as he has to check the waters anyway for the cattle.

To date, right at 25 horses have come to spend their final years at the Helm ranch. They've come from all over the country, but the majority have come from the east or west coasts. They currently have four from the state of Washington, one from Syracuse, N.Y., others from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Vermont, Florida, Arizona, and a few from Texas. Most have been performance horses — dressage and hunter jumpers — though they've had a few barrel racing horses and some recreational trail ride type horses.

Helm admits he did not have a good feel for his audience when he got the idea to start the business.

"I thought for sure the market would be teenage girls who conned their dad into buying them a horse, and then they go off to college and dad decides it's time to get rid of the horse but the daughter doesn't want to sell it. I thought there'd be a million of those."

That's not been the case, though. The vast majority of their clients are middleaged women who are fond of their horses.

"That's pretty much the market," says Helm. "Either these women are no longer riding, or their horse can no longer compete, and they don't want to sell the horse and they don't want to put them down."

Their website and *Facebook* page, designed and kept by their

rancher friend Katy Hoskins, have been by far their most effective means for garnering customers. As Janet points out, without the Internet they never would have been able to diversify their ranching operation as much as they have. After all, they did not have a telephone on the ranch until 1990.

“The Internet has changed country life,” says Janet.

One hurdle they’ve had to overcome and still have to deal with is that no matter what the website says and no matter how clear Helm has been — and he’s very clear — they still get inquiries from those looking for an adoption or rescue facility.

“We are a ‘for profit’ business, and it’s sustainable because of that,” says Helm.

Only about a third of the clientele bring the horse to the ranch themselves and/or come out later to visit. Their customers have access to all kinds of video and pictures of the horses posted on the NHRP website and *Facebook* page, and Helm sends individuals pictures and video on occasion as well, now that he too has a smart phone.

Typically those who call about the program have lots of questions. He takes the time to listen to their stories about each horse and then he spends time calming their fears.

“No, I’m not just going to turn them out and never see them again,” he assures the potential clients. “Yes, they’ll lose weight at first, because most town horses are fat, but then their muscles will start hardening up and their feet start hardening up, and they’ll be like a horse ought to be.”

He had one customer whose horse had been fed all its life and kept in a stall or paddock ask how her horse would know it was time to eat if it was turned out in a big pasture.

“My first thought was, ‘This cannot be for real,’ but she didn’t know any different,” says Helm. “I never thought about that kind of stuff. It never entered my mind that someone wouldn’t know that a horse knows how to put his head down and eat/graze anytime of the day or night that he wants to. But, if you’ve never seen that, I can see how you might think that a horse only knows to eat when someone comes with a bucket to feed them.”

Janet says it reinforced to them just how far removed from the land people are today.

“They simply don’t know because they’ve never seen it and never experienced it. I think that may be one of the biggest challenges for our entire industry,” she says.

Helm sums up all the questions he’s had over the years with one. They simply want to know if their horse would do well in this environment. For him it’s a simple answer, and he now has more than

20 horses from all parts of the country that have proven him right.

“When you put a horse in a pen or in a lot, that’s when things start going south,” he reiterates. “A horse does absolutely the best when they are not confined; that’s when they are the healthiest. That’s when they don’t have the common maladies like colic and founder or hoof or feet problems.”

Another positive, Janet offers, is that after speaking with Ron for just a short period of time, it’s easy to tell that Ron is knowledgeable about horses and about the country. The client is assured that Ron is the one responsible for the horse, not some other ranch manager, once it arrives at the ranch.

The customer must sign an extensive contract before the Helms ever receive a horse on the ranch. Rancher, attorney and friend Ben Love helped Ron develop the contract. One of the stipulations of the contract is that Helm makes the decisions about the horse once it arrives on the ranch. If one has an injury, perhaps a broken leg, that he can’t handle, he can call on a vet, but by and large Ron is capable of handling most maladies.

“If it’s something catastrophic like a broken leg, we’d probably put the horse down anyway, and I do have the authority to make those decisions.”

He does first inform the owner, and if the customer doesn’t like what Helm says, the customer has the right to collect the horse within 30 days. The Helms never take ownership of the horse, though the contract specifies that if someone doesn’t pay, they have 30 days to collect the horse or the Helms can take ownership of the horse and do whatever is necessary to remedy the delinquent bill.

Because most of the horses are coming from a confinement situation, on arrival the horse is kept in a set of working pens along with another of the retired horses or one of the Helms’ gentle saddle horses so as to have a chance to “buddy up” and get adjusted to its new surroundings. The horse has access to feed and water. Most times the owner sends what they’ve been feeding, and typically they’ll send all the other “stuff”, such as probiotics and supplements.

“Most all horses nowadays are on some type of alfalfa feed,” says Helm. “They use it because it’s high energy and they can just give them a flake, but it’s not a natural range feed.”

The good thing about turning horses out onto the native range is that they’re typically going from a rich feed to a less rich feed, so the transition is much smoother. Helm also noted that being a single stomach animal, the vast majority of a horse’s digestion is dependent upon movement and travel.

“That’s why with a colic horse the vet says ‘Get him up, walk him, walk him, walk him. Don’t let him lay down and start rolling and bust a gut.’”

“We’ve never had a turned out horse on this ranch that had colic. We’ve never had one founder on our native pasture.”

Some of the horses have shoes when they arrive at the ranch, but Helm prefers that they pull the shoes and not trim the feet.

“I like to let the country trim the feet back naturally,” he explains. “Most of these farriers will trim a horse’s foot wrong in terms of a pattern, and they’ll trim them too deep. And we’ve had some that have been trimmed back so far that their feet are real sensitive.”

Typically, the adjustment period for a new arrival takes a couple of days to a week. He takes the horse through what he refers to as a “soft” release, whereby the gate to the pen is opened and left open and the horse has a chance to move into a larger pasture, what most West Texas ranchers refer to as a “trap.” Then soon after, the horse is turned out permanently and is allowed to roam pretty well anywhere on the ranch.

Helm checks the horses when he’s out checking waters and checking the cattle. He also gives the horses some range cubes to keep them coming up to him for inspection, and to keep them gentle. Some years back Ron developed an extensive pipeline watering system, thus the horses have ample access to water as well as salt and mineral and plenty of native grass.

Helm says he’s still learning about horses.

“The dynamics of horses in a herd is something that is largely lost today other than on the big ranches that still carry lots of saddle horses.”

Every horse eventually chooses a group that it hangs with in retirement. What Helm has found is that like-tempered horses and liked-aged horses tend to hang together. A group also typically has a home range. The younger horses might move a couple of miles or more from that home range, but they typically come back to home base every few days.

He’s also found that running the retired horses in with his cattle has helped gentle the cattle to the point that they’re not nearly as flighty now when someone rides among them horseback.

Helm is astute enough to see when the time is nearing to put a horse down.

“Nearly all of them go through a normal pattern,” says Helm. “First they’ll begin losing weight. Once they get to that point they can’t keep weight on regardless, and it’s easy to see. Then they’ll start coming up slow to the group, and the last thing is they’ll quit running with their group, which is not natural for a horse, because they’re very gregarious animals.”

When that downward spiral begins, Helm has a conversation with

the owner. He explains what he's seeing and shows them through pictures if necessary. The owner has the option of paying to have a vet take care of it or Helm takes care of it himself. It is for the most part the owner's decision.

"Some can't say the words, and I consider it a service to understand when they are struggling with that," says Helm. "The contract gives me the authority to put an animal down if it's suffering, so if they can't say the words, I take care of it and send them a final invoice and that's it."

Sometimes it's not easy.

"We've had some owners who want us to keep their horse going. That's not what we do; we're not in a resuscitation mode here," says Helm. "When an animal that has had all it could want in its final stage of its life, when it breaks over and starts going down, why would you want to put them back in a pen and try to feed them and keep them going? It's not right."

Customers pay a set per head per month fee, and billing is done quarterly.

"Originally it was set up that they could also choose to pay a \$5000 one-time upfront fee," says Helm. "It didn't take long for us to realize that some of the horses coming to us were relatively young and could live another 10 to 15 years. We did away with that option pretty quick."

Ron and Janet are pleased and admittedly a bit surprised how the program has taken off. Ron, in particular, says he's been caught off guard to see just how attached these people are to their horses. Janet says dealing with these circumstances has taken off some of that typical rancher crustiness.

"He's definitely mellowed," Janet says.

Ron figures that their numbers will continually naturally adjust over time, and while they're not really looking to grow the program, they have had some rancher friends ask if they might be interested in using their land for a fee to do the same thing.

Maybe one day. For now though, they're just happy to take it as it comes — keeping it all simple and natural — just the way a horse likes it.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions?

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