

# Gardiner

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– he might not make it out alive.

With the compass in his head telling him where he was, he fled. He began to try to drive out of the fire through the flying embers and passing by the small pockets of flames. A shelter belt exploded as he was leaving.

His guilt was growing. He had left Mark and Eva behind.

“When I got out, the fireman thought I was the last man out,” Greg said. But he yelled through the noise of cracking flames.

“They are still down there. Mark and Eva – they are still down there.”

For 30 minutes, as he and others congregated in the safety of a green wheat field, he agonized. His brother is his best friend – the family leader. He couldn’t run the ranch without him.

“For a half hour, I thought I’d be going back to see their charred bodies in the yard,” Greg said, tears flowing at the thought of it. “The rest of this is nothing. I can’t go forward without Mark.”

Then, just out of the dark, in the smoke and fire, a fireman appeared, taking off his mask.

“It’s all clear,” the man said into his radio. “They all made it out.”

## Clark County tradition

It’s day four of the Clark County fires – which burned about two-thirds of the 625,000-acre county that rests along the Oklahoma border.

Greg Gardiner pulled up from the pastures – a single-action Colt Peacemaker in one hand. He had been shooting burned cattle for the past two days. A dead pit already has been dug just to the north of Mark’s burned-out house.

“It’s grizzly out there,” he said as he stepped into the family’s purple shed. “It’s like a battlefield.”

He figures there are at least 500 head of dead cattle scattered on the 40,000 acres of prairie that burned. His brother Mark was flying a drone across their ranch to document the dead for insurance purposes.

This is their livelihood out there, Greg said. He and his brothers Mark and Garth are recognized national leaders in the Angus genetics business.

It’s also their heritage. The Gardiner family has been making a living on the southwestern Kansas landscape since 1885 when Henry Clay Gardiner traveled with



Dead cattle lie on the scorched earth at Gardiner Angus Ranch on Thursday in Ashland. The ranch lost approximately 500 cattle in Monday’s wildfire.

Photos by Lindsey Bauman/  
Staff photographer

the brunt of the trigger pulling so the hired hands – some still in shock – won’t have to do it.

But as they scour the pastures, hired hand Eric Campbell came across a cow burned from the fire and possibly blind in one eye but moving around. He called Greg for guidance – not wanting to make a fatal decision if he didn’t have to. Hold off for now, said Greg.

“I know this is a bad question – but do you have enough ammo?” Campbell asked Greg, who told him he is stocked up on 44-40 shells.

“I know it is a terrible job, if you get tired of shooting them, just call me,” Campbell added.

There are some cattle that

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## PHOTOS

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his family by covered wagon to the newly organized town of Ashland, making a home in a dugout on their 160-acre homestead. A son, Ralph, was born in 1889.

The brothers’ father, Henry, was born in 1931. While Ralph had a few head of cattle, Henry loved Angus cattle and dedicated his life to perfecting the breed. It started with his home-raised Angus steer he showed at the Kansas State Fair.

Henry was revolutionary when it came to leading the way in the Angus industry. In the 1970s, he began selecting traits based on merits in an effort to provide the best seedstock to his customers. Henry died in January 2015, but his passion for breeding the best beef product continues on with his sons, who are using the latest technology and DNA testing to develop high-quality beef.

The brothers – and now with the help of their children – have grown Gardiner Angus Ranch into a 48,000-acre operation that includes three production sales a year – the latest scheduled

for April 1. While Greg is the oldest, he credits his middle brother, Mark, for taking the ranch to the next level, calling him the ranch’s genetic genius.

While Native Americans used fire to burn the grasslands to attract buffalo, the brothers’ ancestors never experienced a fire like this one.

“I never thought I’d see this ranch burn – totally burn – from one end to the other,” Greg said. “All the grass, all the fences, are gone.”

The conditions were right for a wildfire. After a lengthy drought, rain began to fall in the area over the past two years. The good moisture meant good, thick grass.

The fire burned the grass to the sand, which is now blowing, gathering like snow against the feed bunks. It’s blowing enough it has partially buried the baby calves that succumbed to the fire.

Friends have offered to move cattle to their uncharred pastures. But the brothers’ answer to these offers is evident as Greg drives through the ranch – surveying the damages.

“There is nothing to move,” he said. “They’re dead.”



Burned fencing lines U.S. 160 near Ashland on Thursday.



Cattle with burns are held in a corral at Gardiner Angus Ranch in Ashland on Thursday after being injured in Monday’s wildfires. The ranch is working to save as many of the cattle as possible.

**Killing cattle**  
Every so often, another gunshot ripples through the horizon.

“There goes another one down,” said Greg. Dealing with the dead is all that has been going on the past two days since the fires ceased. Greg has taken

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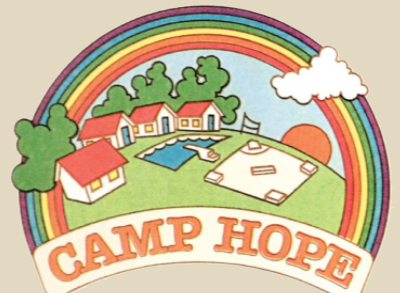
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