



Dee and Phyllis Scherich carry items to a trailer from their home at Merrill Ranch near Coldwater on Thursday. They're moving to McPherson and retiring as managers of the ranch after 40 years.

Dee and Phyllis Scherich visit the location of three graves on the Merrill Ranch near Coldwater on Thursday. The three men died during the time of Evansville, a small town located on the grounds of Merrill Ranch prior to its establishment.

Photos by Lindsey Bauman/The Hutchinson News

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"You would smell like that stuff the rest of the day," he said.

Dee attended Ottawa University and met Phyllis Uhrig of McPherson. She was a city girl, as Phyllis calls herself, recalling the first day she visited the ranch. It was wheat harvest. She wore white pants.

After college, Dee taught for 14 years, first in Troy, Kansas, then 11 years as a science teacher and coach at Inman High School. But in the mid-1970s, with a boom in oil prices, his father's ranch crew began to take jobs in the oil field.

By then, his dad had been ranching here for 30 years. "Dad was tired, wore out and frustrated," said Dee. Moreover, teaching was changing amid an era of consolidation. With three boys from fifth grade to high school, he and Phyllis made a decision to move back to the ranch in 1976 and manage it for the H.A. Merrill trust.

"We thought it was a good opportunity to get them on the tractors, have the ranch life," Phyllis said of the boys.

The last battle

Typically, no two days are the same, but for the past several weeks, Dee and the crew have been rebuilding fence—80 miles or so that the Anderson Creek wildfire damaged.

It will take a few years before they are all done with fence repair, said Dee—adding with humor that he won't see the day it is completed. Not as the manager of the Merrill.

It was the worst wildfire in the state's history, sweeping across 400,000 acres of Barber and Comanche counties in late March. Three times the fire threatened their home. Twice they got the call to evacuate.

Somehow, thanks to fire crews, Dee and their ranch hands, along with their reliable 1960s-era fire truck, Bam Bam, their ranch headquarters was spared.

Three months later, the once charcoal-stained earth has been covered by a carpet of green regrowth, although evidence of the fire still lingers. Skeletons of cedar trees dot the Gyp Hills for miles. Dee pointed to fence row not far from where the cattle are grazing. Pieces of the blackened hedge posts swayed on the barbed wire.

On this June morning, Dee sent his two hired hands to work on the fence line. He and Phyllis drove to check on cattle that were recently returned to the ranch that an area rancher fostered for them after the fire. The grass now is in better condition for grazing and water is flowing better in the creeks.

They stop at the top of a hill dotted with echinacea, yellow cone flowers and silver lake nightshades—the site of Evansville's cemetery. Dee had a well witcher who was searching for oil find the location of the graves—which includes the resting spot of two men who died in a drinking gunfight. The witcher found three graves in one location, and Dee marked each with a stone.

"I've never seen so many wildflowers like this year," said Phyllis, noting the diversity of flowers.

They take a tour to find



Dee Scherich visits his horses at Merrill Ranch near Coldwater on Thursday. The Scherich's are retiring as managers of Merrill Ranch after 40 years.

more amid the bluestem and buffalo grasses—crossing the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River—a clear, sandy waterway where their children and grandchildren and their ranch hands' children love to play.

Dee stopped the truck so Phyllis could climb to the top of the hill to scout more flowers. Dee, however, glanced across the prairie. "I never went back to a classroom after I got out here," he said, adding, "I don't know anything different."

His deep connection to the land and the cattle makes leaving even more difficult.

Yet, he said solemnly, he also knows it is time.

Dee wasn't on his usual horse that day nine years ago when the accident occurred. The horse threw him off—breaking his pelvis and causing bladder injuries.

An ambulance took him to Coldwater, where the airport recently was revamped to take fixed-wing airplanes. That allowed an air ambulance to fly him to Wichita.

He arrived barely alive. Doctors began to repair him a few days later "after they decided I was going to live," said Dee, who spent four months in the hospital and rehab.

Cowboy's last ride

Now it's the end of an era. Seventy years of Scherich tradition on the ranch is over this month. No more watching the sun rise on their deck. No more standing amid a stand of buffalo grass with nothing but the sound of bawling calves or birds fluttering. No more checking cattle on horseback.

The Scherich's packed up their house in mid-June—going from the remote

countryside to a home with a pool in McPherson—the town where Phyllis grew up. They are still unpacking boxes, said Phyllis.

"It feels like we are just playing house," Dee told Phyllis one evening at the dinner table after spending several days in McPherson. "It really isn't real, yet," Phyllis said.

Dee plans to make day trips back and forth to help two remaining ranch hands get situated, a team led by hand Jamie Miller.

Miller, who grew up on a hog and row crop farm in Iowa, said Dee is his mentor. He came to the ranch in 2007 to help pour the basement of the Scherich's new ranch house.

"I fell in love with the place," Miller said. But it wasn't until 2012 that he had contact with Dee again. Miller was working for his friends' Pratt-based scrap metal business. Dee had called needing someone to remove junk off the ranch.

Miller asked Dee if he was hiring. Miller and his wife, Tina, and their boys moved to the ranch in January 2013.

Dee is a natural with the cattle, said Miller, adding Dee taught him how to handle the livestock using low-stress techniques.

"Another thing he is taught me is the love of the land, nature, the flowers, the grasses," said Miller.

Dee taught him to be observant, even stopping to point out the different wildflowers growing.

"You know what it is like living in a populated area," he said. "You fly past things on the road, you don't stop and smell the roses, so to say."

Someday, Miller said, he might have the knowledge of the plants that Dee and

Phyllis have, or Dee's way of knowing the livestock so well he could pick individual animals out of the herd.

"The local veterinarian who has dealt with the ranch 25 years told me he had learned more from Dee Scherich than any of the other ranchers," Miller said. "We'll keep on like he taught us."

Leaving is bittersweet, said Phyllis as the couple drove across the ranch on this June afternoon. There have been so many people they shared the ranch with. For years, they welcomed folks for their annual trail rides, which raised enough money to help build the Comanche County Health Clinic. Professors, scientists and others have come to the ranch to study the ecology, including the ranch's bat caves.

"It's such a unique piece of property," said Phyllis, adding, "It was a great place to raise a family."

Like a true cowboy, Dee tries to keep his emotions to himself.

"We've had a good ride," he said softly as he surveyed what little was left in their home on this June day. "We have a new life ahead of us."



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