

Going Holistic

A California ranch blends holistic management with vaquero tradition.

By Jesse Bussard

The assumption that “you can’t make a living in the cattle business” has never held much sway with Joe Morris. Growing up in San Francisco, he took every chance he could to visit his grandfather, J.J. Baumgartner, at T.O. Cattle Company, relishing the early morning breakfasts, water checks and cattle work.

“They say I was born with my boots on,” Joe says. “I found the ranch a wonderful place. It struck me pretty deeply as a kid, that that’s where I wanted to be.”

The T.O. Cattle Company’s roots trace back to 1881. Joe’s great-great grandfather, Richard O’Neill, then a butcher in the San Francisco financial district, formed a partnership with a friend, James Flood, to purchase Rancho Santa Margarita, now Camp Pendleton.

In 1927, Joe’s grandfather, J.J., moved the ranch business to San Juan Bautista, in San Benito County,

and founded TOCC. Today the ranch remains one of California’s oldest working ranches in the central coastal region.

Joe continued to spend time on the ranch through-

out his childhood and adolescent years, but eventually his interests sent him elsewhere. A stint in Notre Dame, two years in Venezuela, and graduate studies at UC Berkeley filled the next several years of his life. All the while, the desire to ranch remained in the back of his mind. After college and against the advice of his grandfather, Joe went to work on several large ranches in Nevada, including the historic Spanish Ranch.

“I left Nevada after a couple years thinking you couldn’t make money in the cattle business and I sure couldn’t as a buckaroo,” Joe says. “I wanted to do something bigger with my life, but I wasn’t sure how



photos by Keni Reeves

Joe Morris amid creeping wild rye on the historic TOCC outfit.

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Joe and Julie Morris.

ranching fit into that picture.”

Joe had two options: give up his dream of ranching because he didn't have money to lose, or figure out a way to do it differently. He chose the latter and, in that moment, a paradigm shift occurred, pushing Joe to a new way of thinking.

“I had to do things differently,” he says. “And [circumstances] liberated me to explore what those differences might be.”

In his quest for answers, Joe came across authors – such as Wendell Berry and Allan Savory – who spoke about ranching in a larger, holistic context. The practical philosophies of these innovators, especially Savory's teachings on holistic management, resonated with Joe.

“That was exactly how I conceived myself in ranching,” he says.

Holistic management, began as the “Savory grazing method,” also known as “holistic planned grazing,” in the 1960s and was the result of Savory's days working as a wildlife biologist in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. He concluded the desertification, loss of wildlife species, and human impoverishment seen in the region were the result of the decrease in herds of wild grazers and the behavioral changes seen in remaining animals. Savory's remedy involved substituting livestock onto the land to mimic nature's grazer-grass relationship and rekindle the ecosystem. In the 1980s, Savory began teaching HM in the United States, and the approach to

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managing resources was quickly adopted by many progressive ranchers.

At that time, says Joe, “the most shining examples of ranching were from people doing holistic management. They were the profitable ones. They had lands whose ecology was ascending. It was getting more interesting, with more biodiversity, and more productive.”

The newfound decision-making framework of holistic management gave Joe the thing he had been seeking – a way to do something meaningful with his life while making a living for himself and his family.

In 1991, Joe and his wife, Julie, took over management of TOCC from Joe’s grandfather, J.J., and decided they would give ranching another try. They would attempt to do what everyone had told Joe was impossible: *make a living in the cattle business*.

Joe and Julie started ranching with only 200 acres and a couple dozen cows. They began exploring ideas involved with holistic management and how best to implement these concepts on their operation.

Over time, and with a little creativity, the operation expanded and Joe was able to develop relationships with neighboring ranches. He now leases approximately 4,700 acres from six different entities, in addition to using the original 200 acres where TOCC headquarters lies. These ranches consist of a mixture of public and privately owned lands.

By 1993, Joe had transitioned to managing the entire ranch holistically. Today, he manages his cattle to mimic historic disturbance regimes (the patterns that shape an ecosystem) of native grazing wildlife. This is accomplished by combining herds, moving animals rapidly to coincide with plant growth rates, herding animals with dogs, using temporary fencing, and incorporating livestock behavioral changes to mimic wild grazers in the presence of predators.

These management changes have allowed TOCC

to work toward restoring and improving natural plant and animal communities and ecosystems, as well as native grasslands. Thanks to improved grazing management, Joe has increased the length of his forage-growing season, while boosting native grasses, oaks and vegetation along streams and riparian areas. Wetlands have expanded. And improved water and nutrient cycles have enhanced water quality while allowing manure to break down more rapidly.

“Ecologically,” he says, “our land is getting better and better every year.”

The most impressive change seen on Joe’s ranch, though, might be the carbon he is building in the soil. Soil carbon, also referred to as organic matter, is a key component in soil greatly affecting its physical, chemical and biological properties, and contributing to the health of its surrounding ecosystem. By increasing soil carbon, water and nutrient retention is improved, soil structure is healthier, erosion is reduced, and quality of groundwater and surface water is improved.

Four years ago, Joe joined forces with the non-profit Soil Carbon Coalition, and became part of their Soil Carbon Challenge, an international competition to see how fast land managers can turn atmospheric carbon into soil organic matter. This 10-year monitoring program allows landowners to set up permanent plots, take field samples and conduct elemental analyses of soil carbon, beginning with a baseline reading, followed by resampling at years three, six and 10. Results from TOCC’s second reading since the baseline monitoring showed convincing results that Joe’s management strategies are working.

“We found there was a seven percent increase in soil carbon in the top 10 centimeters of soil,” Joe says. “There was an 11 percent increase at 10 to 25 centimeters, and a five percent increase below that, at 25 to 40 centimeters.”

Even more impressive: the results were achieved





in drought conditions, at a time when the ranch had a higher stocking rate (more animals) than neighboring operations. The results on Joe’s ranch, so far, illustrate how land management that is both ecologically and holistically focused can improve land health. (You can actually follow Joe’s progress via the Soil Carbon Coalition’s map of soil carbon change: www.soilcarboncoalition.org/changemap.htm.)

Through all these changes, Joe’s family has been integral. Shortly after taking over management of the ranch, Joe and his wife decided to start producing grass-fed beef products from the cattle they raised. They market under the Morris Grassfed label, and sell beef to over 800 families in the central coastal region of California.

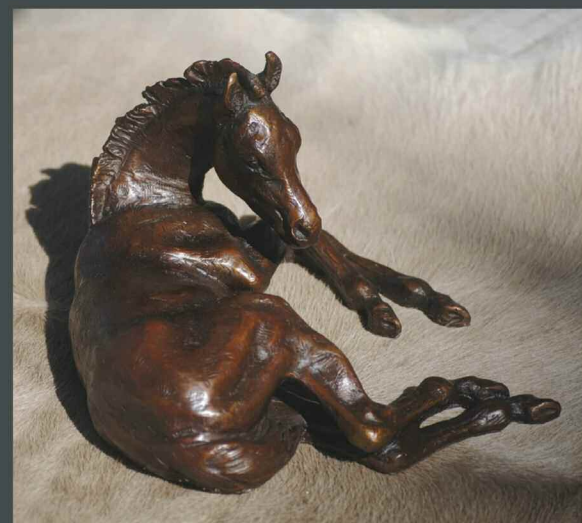
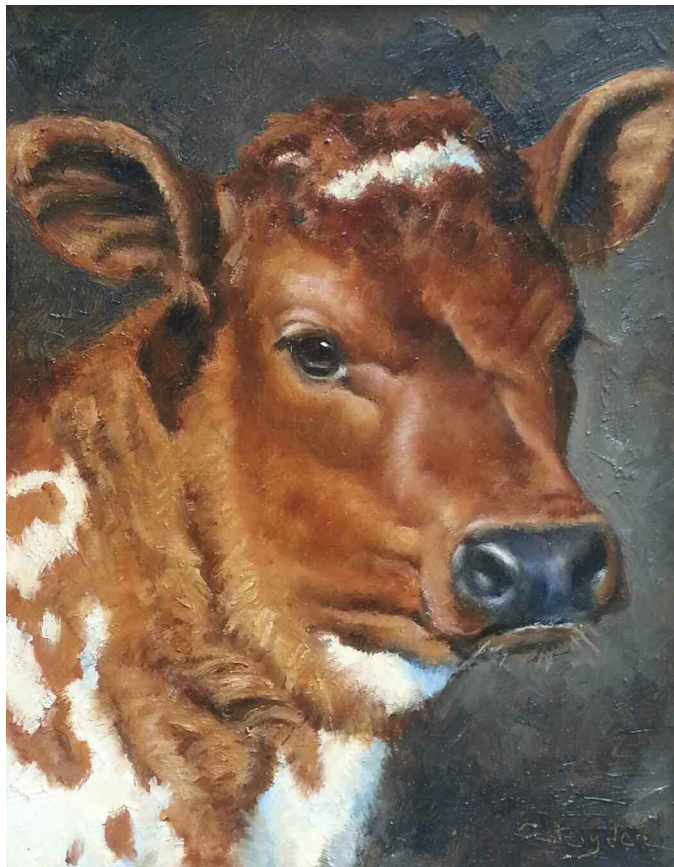
Julie, Joe’s wife, handles media and marketing for the ranch. Their children, Sarah, 20, and Jack, 18, help gather cattle, deliver beef to customers, and assist their

parents with ranch work.

When asked how holistic management has benefited his family, Joe says it provides them with a more complete understanding of the world around them – cycles, energy flow, carbon, water, biodiversity.

“It helps them understand how to manage any kind of resource,” he says. “Holistic management goes way beyond ranching. It gives them a basis for making decisions, a way to think about what we are doing, why we are doing it, how we can monitor what we do and make decisions that benefit all of us.”

The holistic approach extends to relationships with customers, helping Joe articulate what occurs daily on the ranch. The Morrises tell the ranch’s story in newsletters and through field days, during which customers see firsthand how grass-fed beef is raised. In the process, customers gain insight into ranching and an appreciation



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for the processes involved.

“It has helped our customers gain a deeper understanding of what we do,” Joe says. “They realize grass-fed beef is not only about a delicious hamburger or steak, but embedded in that steak or hamburger is a whole suite of values important to their lives, such as water and the carbon cycle.”

One would think that, with his advocacy of holistic-management practices, Joe has dismissed the ranching traditions with which he grew up. Reality tells a different story. In Joe’s mind, ranching culture goes hand in hand with land stewardship.

“I think maintaining ranch traditions is important,” he says. “The way ranchers live from their work on the land, how they fit into the landscape, the interaction between that relationship and people, land and animals – it’s a beautiful culture. Ranching fills an interesting and beautiful cultural and economic niche, as well as an ecological niche essential to human life.”

TOCC is still a ranch steeped in the *Californios* tradition, and Joe continues to practice, in harmony with his holistic philosophies, many of the stockmanship techniques he learned from his grandfather. Joe practices low-stress cattle handling and horsemanship. He continues to use horses to move and gather cattle, and ropes when necessary. However, he does all of this in conjunction with a holistic grazing plan. This means gathering cattle more often, moving them with intention, and being mindful of



Joe explains holistic management during one of the ranch’s field days.

what the cattle will do for the land and why they need to be in a particular pasture at a particular point in time.

“It’s melding holistic grazing, stockmanship, economics driven by my need to make a living,” Joe says, “and historical traditions [passed down] from the *vaquero*, that I learned from my grandfather.”

All this, Joe notes, increases productivity and biodiversity, and creates beauty and a sense of accomplishment. So why aren’t more ranchers open to these ways of thinking? Joe believes it is due to a lack of interest in doing things differently, and a fear of unknown risks.

“People have given up hope that there is a possibility of making a living from ranching,” he says. “It’s been said so many times, it’s actually believed. So now ranchers just defend what they do because it’s a lifestyle.”



<https://youtu.be/yFS21dLo1-k>

Learn more about Morris Grassfed in this brief video.

Jesse Bussard is a writer living in Montana.

