

# WEST TEXAS Country Trader



The West Texas Country Trader is a Supplement of:

Abernathy  
Weekly Review  
The Canyon News

The Castro County News  
The Clarendon News

The Lorenzo  
**HEREFORD BRAND**

Plainview Daily Herald  
Ralls Reporter-News

Thursday, March 10, 1994

The Slatonite  
The Tulla Herald

## Water: New pivot systems spur drilling



Woody Williams The Canyon News

Water rigs have shown up across the Plains region in recent months to drill wells for tie-in to new center pivot systems.

## LEPA use growing by leaps and bounds

By GORDON ZEIGLER  
AgReview Writer

**L**UBBOCK — Informed sources around the Plains region say the year 1994 appears to be looking like the "Year of the Pivot" on many farms and ranches.

Power companies reportedly are working through heavy schedules of new installations for center pivot hookups, according to one Soil Conservation Service official in the area.

A growing number of new systems are the new Low Energy Precision Application (LEPA) systems, which approach 95 percent efficiency with use of various attachments like watering socks, one source said.

A good crop year in 1993, with extra profits that could be plowed back into improvements, is credited with setting up the current surge of interest.

Of course, conservationists point to the investment in pivots as a wise move for several reasons — the most frequently quoted one being the belief that the systems will pay for themselves in anywhere from four to eight years due to efficiency and lower labor costs.

Despite the current surge, interest in pivots has been growing for several years, according to statistics available from the High Plains Water Conservation District in Lubbock.

An additional 1,507 center pivot irrigation systems have been put into operation between 1990 and 1993 within the 15-county district, according to a recent inventory update.

That brings the total number of systems in use in the district to 6,433.

The current tally shows Parmer County with 1,258 center pivots; Lamb County, 1,250; Castro County, 786; Bailey County, 671; and Hale County, 604.

The total in other counties is Deaf Smith, 433; Hockley, 349; Cochran, 347; Lubbock, 304; Lynn, 170; Crosby, 141; Floyd, 78; Randall, 389; Potter, 3; and Armstrong, 0.

The largest increase was found in Castro, with 230 new pivots.

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# AgReview



South Plains

## Ag News

March 10-12

**CHESTER WHITE SWINE SHOW IN LUB-BOCK** — A total of 375 boars, open gilts and bred gilts will be offered for sale from leading swine herds from 17 states.

The event will be held at the Panhandle South Plains Fairgrounds.

March 11

4-H Teen Leader Retreat, Wilkes Lodge, Avinger

March 16-27

**AUSTIN LIVESTOCK SHOW** — To be held in the Travis County Exposition Center.

March 18-20

**OLD TRACTOR SHOW IN PLAINVIEW** — The second annual Plainview Old Tractor Show will be held at Ollie Liner Center, with unloading and set up set for the 18th.

March 23

**TEXAS COMMERCIAL EGG CLINIC** — Ramada Inn, College Station.

# Man finds wheat is kitty litter substitute

Special to AgReview

FERGUS FALLS, Minn. — In 1987 cat owner Ted Kiebke set out to find a way to solve his litter box problems — and his answer may come as good news to the nation's wheat growers.

Wheat, in fact, may be the answer to a perfect kitty litter ingredient, he discovered.

His odyssey of inspiration and invention took him into a realm that led him to turn up a totally new and unexpected litter box recipe — wheat.

Any cat owner will know what you're talking about here: the continual purchase of pound upon pound of replacement clay litter, endless box cleaning, and, probably worst of all, the smell.

"I was one of those consumers purchasing litter every three days," Kiebke said. "When the scoopable litters came out, I bought some, thinking it was going to be great. But the first time I tried it, I said, 'That's enough of this stuff.'"

"It did form scoopable clumps from the cat urine like it was supposed to,"

he said. "But it smelled, the clumps broke up, and the cats tracked it all over the house."

Kiebke thought the concept (of a scoopable litter) was a good one, though, and set out to find a way to make it better.

What he came up with, over the years, was a product called Litter Mate, which hit store shelves in several Midwestern states this year.

Kiebke expects it to be a hit for solving four problems:

1. It is good for cat owners tired of the smell, and continual trips to market to replenish the supply.

2. It's good for the environment: it's flushable, and 100 percent biodegradable.

3. It's created a new market for America's farmers, since it is made with 100 percent renewable ag products — wheat, corn cobs, baking soda and natural fragrance — not clay, like traditional fillers.

4. It's meant jobs for local people in the Midwest, where it is produced.

The cat litter industry in the United States alone is big — serving 70 million domestic cats with about 1 million

tons of litter every year. There are hopes the product — produced by Productive Alternatives in Fergus Falls, Minn., — can capture a good percentage of that market one day.

The product grew from trial and error, Kiebke explains.

He experimented with many materials at first — rosin, cement and other additives like corn meal, but none was quite right.

The elusive ingredient, wheat, hit him between the eyes one night when his wife was boiling spaghetti noodles for dinner.

Reading a list of ingredients, it dawned on him why spaghetti was so hard. It was the high gluten content of durum wheat, or semolina.

Durum wheat turned out to be the ingredient he had sought.

Liquid poured on it formed a clump, which dried and held together well — making it easy to scoop out and dispose of.

Yes, the near-perfect cat litter was in his reach.

A second spinoff was the fact the litter box didn't smell. Live enzymes in the wheat interact with enzymes of cat urine, neutralizing smell. Oxidation, the natural fermentation process, created alcohol as the end result, not ammonia.

His product was, at first, just an additive for clay litters. But market research revealed consumers probably would be unwilling to go to the trouble of mixing.

At that point, Kiebke teamed with a firm called Productive Alternatives to develop a pre-mixed formula. It currently is about 25 percent durum wheat and 75 percent hard red spring wheat, which is raised in the Midwest and purchased at mills in processed form.

Along the way, the company producing Litter Mate was helped along the way by Minnesota's Agricultural Utilization Research Institute, a state agency providing technical and financial support to companies introducing new commercial and industrial products made from ag commodities.

At first, Minnesota-based Target stores sold Litter Mate at locations in Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin on a test marketing basis.

See KITTY, Page 3

## Evidence of herd expansion afoot in industry

The U.S. cattle and calves herd is entering its sixth consecutive year of expansion. On Jan. 1, 1989, the U.S. cattle herd numbered 98.1 million head, the lowest inventory since 1961. Since 1989 U.S. cattle and calves inventories have increased relatively slowly and numbered 101.75 million head on Jan. 1, 1994.

That means the herd has been growing at a rate of 736,000 head per year or at an average rate of less than 1 percent per year over the 5-year period. In 1993 the U.S. cattle herd grew by 1 percent, but the beef cow herd grew by 3 percent.

This, along with a 4 percent increase in heifers being held as beef cow replacements, indicates that cattlemen may be planning for increased rates of herd expansion in the future.

The continued decline of the U.S. dairy cow herd has contributed to the slow expansion of total U.S. cattle and calves numbers. The slow herd expansion, coupled with increased exports of U.S. beef have contributed to a relatively strong market for cattle and calves since the last half of 1987. Six and one-half years of favorable prices for cattle and calves was unheard of prior to this market. In the past, rapid herd build-up in reaction to good prices has usually



## LIVESTOCK MARKET UPDATE

Dr. Ernie Davis

killed a good market within two years. This has not been the case as herd expansion has been surprisingly slow. Probably the single most important factor contributing to the more deliberate herd expansion is the 1986 tax reform. The tax reform eliminated those people that were in the cattle business for tax benefits. Most people in the cattle business today are there to make a profit and even with the more favorable prices, profits have not been large.

**HERD EXPANSION:** Ranchers indicated in the January 1 report they were holding 6.4 million heifers for beef cow replacements. That is 4 percent more than were being held a

year ago and the largest number in 12 years. Usually, however, heifer replacement intentions and what actually makes it into the cow herd is only about 70 percent. For example, on January 1, 1993 beef cow replacements were 7 percent greater than those being held in January 1992, yet the beef cow herd only grew by 3 percent. Last year, numbers of beef heifers kept as replacements were about 18 percent of the beef cow herd. Again, this year the number of beef heifers being held as replacements equal about 18 percent of the nation's beef cow herd. If 75 percent of the intended replacement heifers actually make it into the beef cow herd, that will be 4.82 million heifers actually entering the herd. Last year's beef cow slaughter was 2.96 million head. Usually death losses and exports run about 2.5 percent of the beef cow inventory, which would be 872,000 additional beef cows lost from the herd. Therefore, the net heifers' addition to the beef cow herd would be about 1 million head, or an increase of 3 percent in the U.S. beef cow herd from January 1994 to January 1995.

**CALF CROP:** Probably the most significant number in the January 1, 1994 Cattle Inventory report was the revised estimates of the 39.64 million head calf crop. The 1994 calf

See DAVIS, Page 6



# Historical locale is gardener's dream

By **AUDREY WOODS**  
Associated Press Writer

OXFORD, England (AP) — Between the Thames and the River Cherwell, Oxford spreads green and gold in the sun, its velvety lawns and meadows scattered among the spires and stone quadrangles of the university.

The cloisters and gardens of Oxford's oldest colleges have been offering scholars a place for peaceful study and contemplation for seven centuries.

Some of the newer ones, too, have admirable gardens. For example St. Hugh's, founded in 1886 as a women's college, has a large garden where, between the wars, tutor Annie Rogers developed a wild garden, shrubberies, winding paths and a terrace garden.

There are 35 colleges at the university now, and the luckiest have fine gardens. Most fortunate of all are Worcester, Magdalen, Trinity and St. John's, which were built outside the walls of the medieval market town and weren't restricted by the narrow streets.

Worcester College has a secluded lake and ornately carved stone benches where students can sit and watch the college ducks.

The large gardens at St. John's include a famous rockery and wide lawns where drifts of purple and lavender crocuses blossom in February with the last of the snowdrops.

Christ Church College, built within the town walls,

has a literary link of universal appeal.

All who have read "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Alice Through The Looking Glass" will have shared some of the joy of a childhood in the Christ Church gardens.

The stories were written in the mid-19th century for Alice Liddell, daughter of the college dean, by mathematics tutor the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, whose pen name was Lewis Carroll.

Alice's door is still in the Deanery garden, and so is the chestnut tree where Dinah the cat, "alias the Cheshire cat, used to sit and listen to the storytelling," wrote Mavis Batey in "Oxford Gardens."

It is not certain, she wrote, whether the rabbit hole was in the garden or the river bank, "but it was undeniably at Christ Church, through the Alice books, that Lewis Carroll captured for all time the wonder of childhood and its unending happy summer days."

Today's children still can walk where Dodgson took Alice and her sisters — to Christ Church Meadows adjacent to the college, to feed the ducks at Worcester, and to the Botanic Garden.

Founded in 1621 as a physic garden for the study of medicinal plants, Oxford's Botanic Garden is one of the oldest in the world. It remains a center for horticulture and a haven from the traffic of High Street.

There are formal beds, a walled garden, hothouses with tropical plants, and a walk along the Cherwell.

Across the High Street at the foot of Magdalen Bridge is Magdalen (pronounced Maudlen) College, founded in 1458 and blessed with 80 acres — including a deer park and lovely, tree-shaded riverside paths called Addison's Walk. They are named after 18th century essayist Joseph Addison, a fellow of Magdalen, who delighted in his strolls there.

Despite encounters with the 20th century plagues of vandalism and petty theft, Magdalen welcomes the public to its gardens.

You enter through a wooden door in a wall of pale, honey-colored stone and walk among the college's splendid buildings to the cloister.

There, a covered walkway surrounds a rectangle of perfect lawn. "Grotesques" carved in the stonework in the early 16th century represent the virtues and vices and biblical figures. Goliath is there with a pebble in his forehead, and David with his sling. If you go in early summer you may see the huge wisteria in bloom on one wall, its pale purple panicles of blossom scenting the whole cloister.

A passageway opens onto the gardens.

Across the pristine lawns are the New Buildings (new in the 1730s), which have another magnificent wisteria and benches where students

can read and sit in the sun. A huge, 193-year-old plane tree shades the westward path that runs between the deer park and herbaceous beds.

Eastward from the plane tree, the path goes to the River Cherwell. A tall wrought-iron gateway, flanked by colorful herbaceous borders, opens onto a small bridge across the river, which is very narrow at this point. A path shaded by chestnut trees runs along the Cherwell, brambles, ferns, periwinkle and long grass thick along its banks.

A wooden bridge crosses the water into the Fellows' Garden, richly planted with shrubs and trees. At the bridge you can turn for a fine view of Magdalen's 144-foot tower, across the meadow where the deer graze.

In spring the water meadow is one of Magdalen's glories, covered in drifts of snakeshead fritillaries that have grown there for centuries — "since medieval times, anyway," says Magdalen's youthful head gardener Tony Young.

"They used to be everywhere along the Thames basin," he said. But when farming practices changed, many were lost. Magdalen's is one of the biggest concentrations of snakeshead fritillaries in England.

Young, who came to Magdalen six years ago when he was only 25, tends the gardens with a staff of six.

His responsibilities include the 60 deer that graze in the

meadow in summer, after the fritillaries have finished and gone to seed.

"We have to wait for them to seed so we can't actually cut until July," he explained. "It has to be cut in the old-fashioned way, bound up and let the seeds drop."

Then the deer keep the meadow trimmed and fertilize it with manure at the same time. It is a water meadow and the Cherwell floods it, enriching the soil with silt. And so it has gone for centuries, providing a natural preserve for the fritillaries.

In the 18th century, culled deer provided meat for the college. Now Magdalen's own venison is used only for special occasions.

The deer were first mentioned in college accounts in 1706 and 1707. But swans have graced the Cherwell from earliest times. R.T. Guenther, in his "Oxford Gardens," reports that in 1490, the swankeeper was allotted 3 shillings 1 pence for their care and feeding.

The college made a present of one of its swans and a peacock to King Henry VII's queen, Elizabeth, in 1490, and two swans to the archbishop of Canterbury in 1496. Magdalen gave up the peacocks in the 1850s.

Change is not taken lightly in Oxford.

A case in point: Around the turn of this century the ivy that clothed the walls of Magdalen's tower was causing some worry among those who feared damage to the 16th century masonry.

In his 1912 book, Guenther said the ivy was "felled in the prime of life" in 1908 after two attempts to get rid of it were voted down in 1892 and 1904.

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Canyon News

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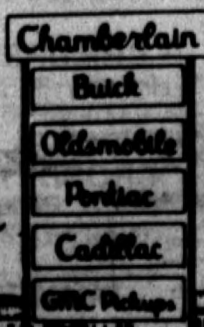
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"It's down hill all the way"

# DAVIS

From Page 2

## STRUCTURE OF THE BEEF COW HERD

The number of farms and ranches having beef cows increased to 910,080 operations in 1993. There was an increase of 2,850 operations from the previous year. Texas had 130,000 operations with beef cows. Those operations having 1 to 49 head of beef cows comprised 80.8 percent of the operations and had 32.6 percent of the U.S. beef cow herd. Operations having 50 to 99 beef cows comprised 11.3 percent of the operation and have 19.5 percent of the beef cows. Operations having 100-499 head of beef cows comprised 7.3 percent of the operations and have 35 percent of the beef cow herd. Operations having 500 head or more comprised 0.6 percent of the operations and have 12.9 percent of the beef cows. What this says is farms and ranches with less than 100 head of beef cows control 52 percent of the herd. From a production and marketing stand point this would be too small to achieve most production and marketing efficiencies available to the industry.

## TEXAS NUMBERS

Texas cattle and calves were estimated at 14.8 million

head on January 1, 1994. This represented an increase in the Texas herd of 3 percent from a year ago and is in response to relatively high cattle prices. Cow inventories in Texas were estimated at 6.2 million head, up 4 percent from a year ago. Texas' beef cows totaled 5.81 million head, up 4 percent from last year. Dairy cows numbered 390 thousand head, up 3 percent from January 1, 1993.

Heifers 500 pounds and over were listed at 2.55 million head, up 4 percent from last year. Heifers 500 pounds and over and being kept as beef cow replacements totaled 980 thousand head, down 6 percent from a year ago. This implies Texas ranchers are currently planning not to continue beef cow herd expansion at the higher 1993 rates during 1994.

Texas' calf crop was 4 percent greater in 1993 relative to 1992. The 1993 Texas calf crop was estimated at 5.35 million head. The average value of Texas' cattle and calves was estimated to be \$595 per head, bringing the total value of Texas cattle and calves to \$8.81 billion, an increase of just a fraction over last year's value.

## JANUARY FEEDER CATTLE SUPPLIES

Prior to the release of the January 1, 1994 Cattle Inventory report, expectations were for a 1993 calf crop increase of around 3 percent over that of 1992. The increase in the 1993 calf crop, however, was only 1 percent. As of January 1, 1994, however, there was 0.3 percent fewer cattle and calves outside feedlots than a year ago. With more

steers and heifers on feed January 1, it contributed to a fractional decrease in January 1 feeder cattle supplies relative to a year ago.

Estimated January Feeder Cattle Supply Slrs and Holhrs, 1980-1994 Million had

Total January 1 feeder cattle supplies numbered 33.263 million head, down 103 thousand head from a year ago, just a marginal decrease.

There will not be an estimate of the number of calves weighing less than 500 or feeder cattle weighing over 500 that were not in feedlots on January 1, 1994. These were useful statistics because they provided estimates of available supplies of cattle and calves available to feedlots during the year. With the discontinuation of the weight group breakdowns in the Quarterly Cattle on Feed report, weight groups can no longer be estimated. All we know is the total estimate of the feeder cattle and calves.

Nevertheless, it is known that with larger supplies of cattle and calves already on feed this year, there are fewer left in the country. Tighter supplies should keep feeder cattle and calves prices more in line with year ago prices. Now, instead of expecting 1994's 40000 pound steer prices to average \$8 to \$12 per hundredweight (cwt.) below 1993's average prices, they should average only \$4 to \$8 cwt. below year ago prices. Lower prices are still expected because of higher feed grain prices and because feedlot monetary losses from lower priced fed cattle should reduce the demand for feeding cattle.

# Farmer, 39, typifies changing face of ag industry

By BARNABY J. FEDER

NY Times News

BROADLANDS, Ill. — It is more than two months before David Rothermel starts running flat out to plant corn and soybeans on nearly 3,000 acres here in central Illinois, but the tall, 39-year-old farmer with the neatly trimmed beard is still pretty busy by most people's standards.

There are hours spent on big decisions, like which strains he will plant, how he will spend close to \$100,000 on fertilizer and a similar amount on chemicals, and how he will market his crops.

Many more hours are gobbled up by smaller chores, like a trip last week to Paxton, Ill., to get an irrigation engine repaired.

Whether it all pays off will not matter much outside the small circle of two full-time employees, investors who own a large part of his farm and, of course, the Rothermel family, which includes his wife, Judith, and their daughters, Christine, 9, and Patricia, 11.

But in the longer term, the world clearly needs Ameri-

can farmers like Rothermel, who have large operations and a willingness to innovate, to make a lot of smart decisions.

"We have to grow as much food worldwide in the next 40 years as we have in the last 14,000," said Dean Kleckner, head of the Farm Bureau, a farm group in Park Ridge, Ill., with more than four million members, including Rothermel.

The Rothermel home — a white, tree-sheltered, two-story farmhouse, which the family shares share with a golden retriever and assorted cats — was built 50 years ago when Rothermel's grandfather was farming the rich land here, about 150 miles south of Chicago.

About 98 percent of all farms are still operated by families like the Rothermels, but there are far fewer farmers and far greater differences among them than Rothermel's grandfather could have imagined.

Indeed, while policy-makers in Washington and some farm advocacy groups talk of a mythical "average family farmer," agricultural economists say attempts to

draw useful insights from such averaging are doomed by the disparities in size, specialization, and most of all, between those who rely largely on their farms for income and the majority who have substantial nonfarm earnings.

Rothermel is part of a crucial minority that operates farms big enough to generate annual revenues of more than \$500,000.

Families like the Rothermels owned slightly more than 2 percent of the nation's farms in 1992, but accounted for more than 35 percent of the output as measured in cash receipts.

Farms that are almost as large accounted for another big chunk, so that the top 5 percent, with revenues of \$250,000 and more, accounted for more than half the total output.

The larger farms are not only dominating production but are also the quickest to adopt new technology. And they are leading the way toward what some experts call the industrialization of agri-

culture, a process in which more farmers work directly under contract to food processors.

The trend is furthest along

in the poultry and hog segments, but in regions where food processors have set up big purchasing stations, as Frito-Lay has done just north

of here, in Sydney, Ill., large grain farmers have also begun to grow much if not all of their crops for them.

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South Plains

# Ag News

**COMMERCIAL EGG CLINIC** — Ramada Inn, College Station.

**March 27**

**TEXAS & SOUTHWESTERN CATTLE RAISERS** — Will hold 117th Annual Convention in the Tarrant County Conventnion Center in Fort Worth.

**March 29**

**PECAN SHORTCOURSE** — Set for the Goldthwaite Civic Center in Goldthwaite.

**April 16-17**

**COTTON GIN FESTIVAL** — The 4th Annual Cotton Gin Festival will be held in Burton in South Central Texas featuring cotton gin, antique farm equipment, folklife demonstrations, parade, contests, kids stuff, entertainment and arts and crafts.

**May 6-8**

**PAWNEE, OKLA., OLD TRACTOR SHOW** — Typical old tractor event. Information available at 405-282-7008.

**May 28**

**FLOYD COUNTY OLD SETTLERS** — Day of celebrating and fun, plus a parade including antique tractors.

**June 11**

**ARMSTRONG FARM TRACTOR PLAYDAY** — Paul and Jackie Armstrong of Amarillo will host their annual tractor show on their farm 3 1/2 miles west of Hart on FM 145, then three miles south. A slow race, parade and plowing contest will be held.

**July 9**

**LEVELLAND CELEBRATION AND TTRACTOR PARADE** — Parade and celebration including old tractors. For information contact Preston Reeves.

**July 16**

**CHILDRESS REUNION** — Day of celebrating and downtown parade.

**SEAGRAVES REUNION** — Day of fun and displays of old tractors as part of Seagraves Day events.

**TULIA'S SWISHER COUNTY PICNIC** — Traditional picnic celebration features noon barbecue meal.

**July 28**

**OKLAHOMA STATE TWO-CYLINDER SHOW** — One of the major tractor shows in the Southwest, to be held in Fairview, Okla.

## Price to farmers is steady

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Agriculture Department's index that measures movements in prices farmers receive for the goods they sell was unchanged in February from January.

The department reported Monday that producers received higher prices for cotton, hogs, lettuce and strawberries in February, but they received lower prices for cattle, milk, tomatoes and sweet corn.

Prices were 5 percent higher than in February 1993. Increases for corn, milk, onions and soybeans offset declines for cattle, celery, lettuce and sweet corn.

Despite the stable index, there were some changes for crops grown in the 1993 disaster areas.

Soybean prices dropped 8 cents in February, to \$6.64 a bushel, largely on news of improved crop prospects in South America, but were up from \$5.56 a year earlier. The index of all oilseeds, including soybeans, was 17 percent higher than a year earlier.

Corn prices rose by 3 cents, to \$2.73 a bushel, compared with \$2 a year earlier.

Durum wheat, used to make pasta, rose 26 cents, to \$5.23 a bushel. It sold for \$3.08 a year ago.

Some of the prices paid to farmers in February:

—Upland cotton was reported at 66.2 cents a pound in February, up from 63.7 cents in January. A year earlier, cotton was 53.8 cents a pound.

—Hogs averaged \$47.30 a hundredweight, up from \$43.50 in January and \$44 a year earlier.

—Lettuce was \$10.70 a hundredweight, up from \$8.03 in January but down from \$18.80 a year earlier.

—Strawberries were \$1.01 a pound, compared with 80.1 cents in January and 93.6 cents in February 1993.

—Cattle were \$69.10 a hundredweight, down from

\$70 in January and \$75.80 a year earlier.

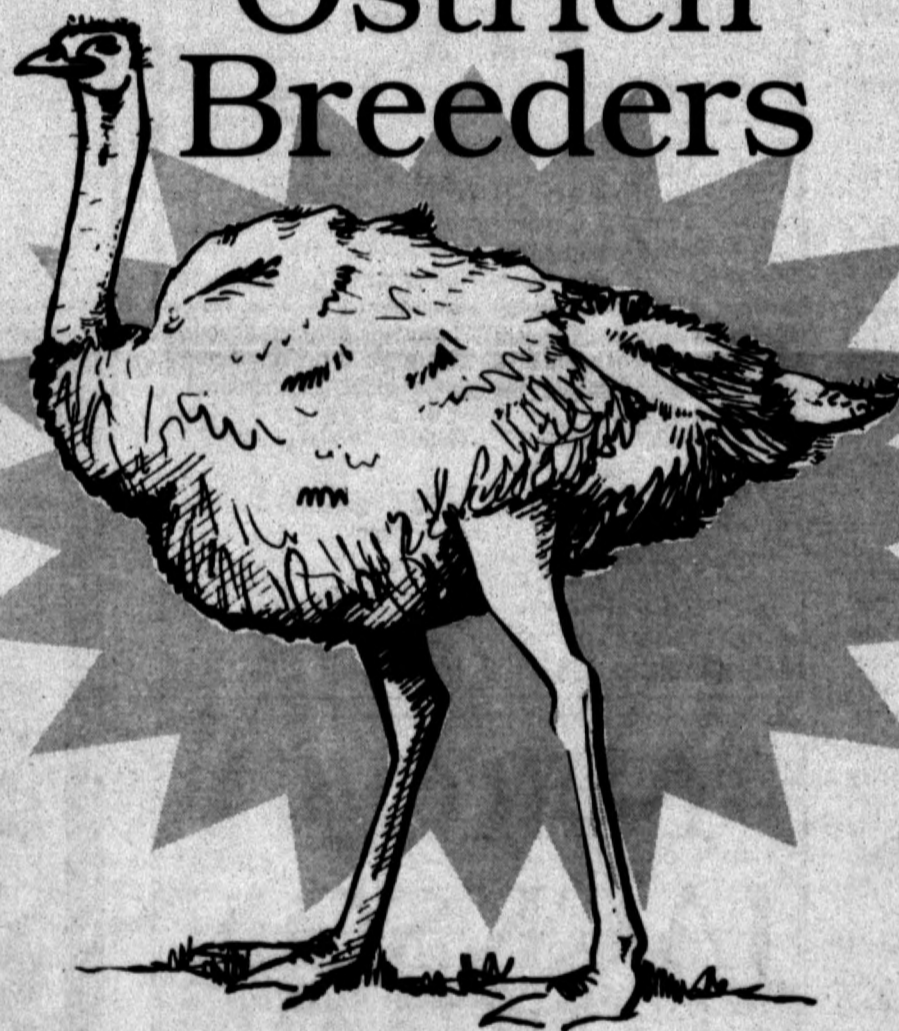
—Milk was \$13.50 a hundredweight, down from \$13.70 in January but up from \$12.30 the previous year.

—Tomatoes were \$23.50 a hundredweight, down from \$41.10 in January but up from \$21.90 in February 1993. Increased supplies from Florida and Mexico combined with lighter demand to push down prices.

—Sweet corn was \$20.40 a hundredweight, down from \$26.40 in January and from \$36.80 the previous February.

# ATTENTION

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# 'Libbie' Custer novel looks past legend

C. 1994 Star-Telegram

FORT WORTH — Elizabeth Bacon Custer spent 12 years married to one of the most controversial men in American history, and then the next 56 telling his story the way she wanted the world to believe it — that Gen. George Armstrong Custer was a full-fledged, no-warts hero.

Now Fort Worth author Judy Alter has used fiction carefully based on fact to produce "Libbie" (\$9.95 paperback), a new novel from Bantam Press. Alter hopes it will bring attention to the distaff side of the Custer legend and, not coincidentally, embellish her own reputation as a writer.

"I wanted to do a book New York (publishers) would see as important," Alter, 55, said candidly in a recent interview in her office at TCU Press, where she is director. "I've done other books, juvenile fiction and short stories. This time I really wanted one that would advance my career, so I needed to write about a person the public would know."

With a writing track record firmly established in Old West themes, Alter looked for a similar subject.

"I have a funny feeling about writers, that we all find our voices in one place or another," she said. "I'm better at writing about the last century, not this one."

Alter considered writing about Libbie Custer, best remembered for three reminiscences of her husband that were more whitewash than dirty laundry, and then almost rejected her.

"I read about her, and she came across as a picture-perfect lady," Alter recalled. "When I thought about her, I got bored. Then I talked to the westerns editor at Bantam and he said he was very interested in her. I read some more contemporary accounts of her life with (Custer) and I came to see she was a wonderful character. I felt I could create a good, strong story with her."

The Libbie portrayed by Judy Alter retains some 19th-century prissiness; as the pampered daughter of a Michigan judge it would have been ludicrous to portray her otherwise. But Alter's description of the sometimes-stormy Custer marriage and Libbie's candid perceptions of her husband's weaknesses as well as strengths ring true.

"I think everybody who remembers her thinks of her as Custer's apologist, but there were hints everywhere that theirs was not a perfect marriage," Alter mused. "It's documented he fathered a child by a Cheyenne woman, hints in his own letters that he had a strong eye for other women, whether he acted on that or not. And she apparently had outside interests, too, relationships with other men that may not have been love affairs. There are even hints she was involved with (Custer's) brother."

Alter's interpretation of the Custers' relationship, therefore, emphasizes strong mutual attraction marred by frequent suspicion. It's obvious that Alter took some of history's hints as fact.

"Well, at least Libbie didn't have any children who could rise up and sue me for slander," she said. "I ended up interpreting her life the way I would have lived it and thought about it if she were me. That's what I have to do, what writers have to do. I get inside people's heads and try to see what happened through their eyes. Inevitably for writers, what we see is colored by our own experiences."

Alter's experience as a writer has been colored by perceptions that she writes short books for children. Several of Alter's juvenile titles have been published in

paperback by Maggie Books of Dallas (distributed by Taylor Publishing), and in 1984 "Luke and the Van Zandt County War" was named best juvenile novel of the year by the Texas Institute of Letters.

"Libbie" may change that. Early sales are booming, reviews are positive and Bantam is paying for extensive national advertising. It's the first in a three-book Bantam contract, and Alter has already completed No. 2, a fact-based fictionalization of the life of Jessie Fremont, wife of the controversial Civil War general.

"But the editor has said to

me, 'Stop writing about wives.'" Alter said, chuckling. "And the third book is about half-done, a story about a rodeo cowgirl in the first part of this century. Lucille Mulhall inspired the character, but it's more fiction than the first two. Lucille was something, though. There's a legend Teddy Roosevelt coined the term 'cowgirl' to describe her."

In between books, Alter plans to continue running the

publishing operation at Texas Christian University, which is focused mostly on "scholarly" works that mainstream publishers might not find marketable enough.

"I've been here for 11 years and I expect I have another 10 to go," Alter said. "This is my little kingdom. TCU Press is very important to me. I don't see myself ever just staying home and writing. I'm single, my kids are home but not too much

anymore. I need contact, socialization, the sense every day of being out in the world.


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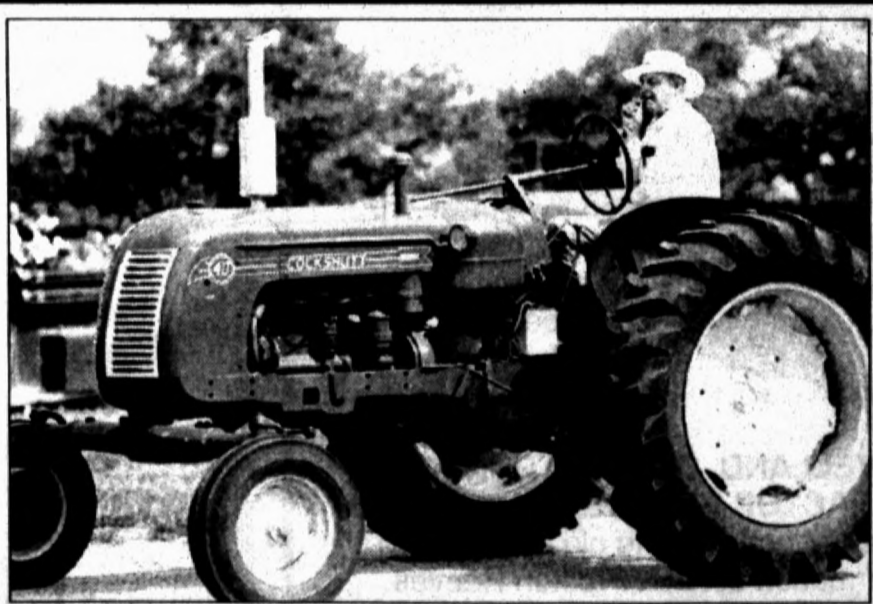
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