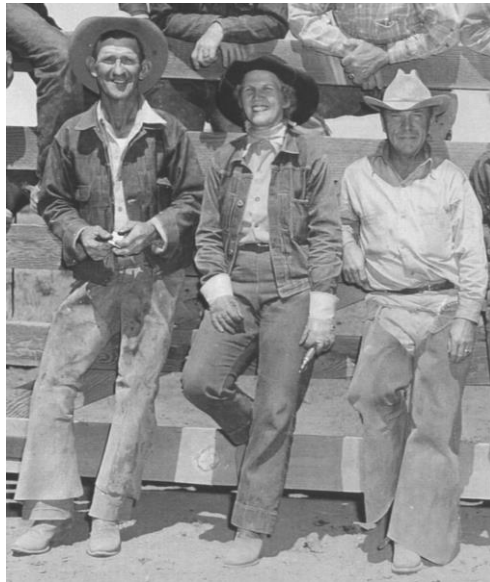


Boice family

Empire Ranch, Sonoita

By Betty Barr

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Wagon boss, Fred Barnett (from left),
and ranchers Mary and Frank Boice

The Purebred Hereford is generally acknowledged as a breed well suited to thrive in inhospitable Arizona, but in the early part of the twentieth century most cattlemen were raising tough Spanish cattle. They were a hardy breed, surviving the extremes of temperature and poor forage, but did not produce much beef. One of the people most responsible for establishing a pure strain of Herefords in Arizona was Henry S. Boice, patriarch of the family destined to become the last private owner of the historic Empire Ranch in Sonoita.

Boice was born in Las Vegas, NM, in 1860. He began cowboying at age 15, earning the princely sum of \$15 a month. He gained hands-on cattle experience and, through what is now called “total immersion,” became fluent in Spanish as well. Thanks to the education provided by his physician father, he learned how to get along in business and was soon swinging cattle deals and arranging complicated financing. By the age of 21, he had risen to the position of foreman and then partner in the Creswell Ranch.

His interest in Herefords led him to Simpson & Gudgell in Independence, Missouri, breeders of the best Hereford bulls money could buy. There he met and married LuBelle Gudgell in 1891 and moved to Kansas City where they raised five children. They spent their summers in Colorado where sons Frank and Henry were thoroughly trained in cattle and ranch life. The boys were only five and six years old when they helped trail 2,000 heifers to Texhoma as full-fledged ranch hands. Their mother was a tough lady, according to her granddaughter, Peggy Boice Rupel. As a diehard Republican, she supported Thomas Dewey for president in 1948. But, Bess Truman had been a bridesmaid in her wedding, so she also wanted to vote for her old hometown friend, Harry. Although her family tried to convince her that it would negate her ballot, she went ahead and voted for both candidates anyway.

Boice later became general manager of the Chiricahua Cattle Co. (CCC) in the Sulphur Springs Valley of southern Arizona. Chiricahua, pronounced quickly, sounds like cherry cows, and that was the name the cowboys always used. The name was changed in 1908 to Boice, Gates & Johnson, but everyone continued to call the huge operation the “Cherry Cows.”

Boice started a purebred bull program on his San Carlos Indian Reservation allotment using the same methods that had worked well for him in the past. With 400 cows purchased from the XIT Ranch in Texas and his purebred Hereford bulls, he began a process of careful elimination and selection to achieve the highest quality range cattle. The XIT covered ten Texas counties, hence the name. X stood for ten, I for in and T for Texas.

Henry S. Boice died in 1919 and his 24-year old son, Henry Gudgell Boice took over. A few short years later the San Carlos Tribe cut off all permits to non-Indians and young Henry was faced with the prospect of moving 20,000 cows – the big question was not only how, but where? He and his brother Frank added to their operation near Pearce, purchasing four more ranches over the next six years: The Eureka near Willcox in 1924, the Empire and Rail X in the Sonoita/Patagonia area in 1928, and finally the Arivaca on the border southwest of Tucson. The benefits of these purchases soon became apparent: they covered a large area of the state, were widely scattered minimizing the possibility of drought hitting all the ranges at once and all four had Forest Service permits coupled with patented land.

It took five years to complete the move from San Carlos. As the steers came of age they were shipped to market and the cow herd was moved in lots on long cattle drives and roundups. The bubble burst around 1939 when the Forest Service limited the number of cows per lessee to 1,200 head. Rather than splitting up their leases, the Boices decided to sell the Eureka and parts of their other ranches. Henry Boice and his family took over the Rail X and Arivaca Ranches and Frank and Mary Boice ran the Empire.

Ranching on the Empire in the late 30s and 40s was done the old-fashioned way. Mary Boice participated in all facets of ranch life, including round-ups, sorting and

shipping. “She did everything but doctor for screw worms,” according to fellow rancher, Bob Bowman. In fact, Mary was well known around these parts as a “good hand.” Jane Woods remembers her father, Stone Collie, remarking, “If you want a good job done (on the range), send Mary Boice.”

Gordon Cooper, who cowboied on the Empire during that era, describes the old Porter’s Saddlery Company in downtown Tucson, where a good saddle ran about \$75. After the shop was locked up for the night, the door to an attic room would be left open and cowboys waiting to go to a ranch could roll out their bed and stay as long as a week, free of charge. The ranchers would come in when they needed hands and Porters would send the boys out. When Cooper and his cousin arrived there in late 1936, he was told, “Frank Boice is a good man to work for.”

The hands would be issued five or six horses each when they arrived at the ranch. They were responsible for shoeing each horse with a special shoe they fashioned that they called a Chiricahua. It was shaped a little longer than the heel and then knocked down on the anvil till it would lay up the side of the hoof. With this design, it was easy for the horse to slide down the rocky hillsides.

Screw worm infestations were the scourge of the range and often each cowboy would rope four or five animals a day to doctor them. Calves were roped and dragged to the fire for branding, using manila ropes about 30 feet long. The Mexican cowboys used longer ropes that they dallied, but the other boys tied hard and fast.

Gordon and his cousin usually rode the rough string - horses that are hard to break. They buck and most cowboys refuse to ride them. On Gordon’s first roundup at the Empire, Frank told him he had a nice cow horse named Trashy that no one could ride. He was what they called a brush horse. When you were holding up in brushy country these horses would turn their heads and twist and jig, and you would know the cattle were coming even before you could hear anything. A horse can’t be trained to do this - it just comes naturally - and Trashy turned out to be one of the best.

The headquarters was a rock adobe building with a long breezeway in the center with hooks to hang the meat. It had screen nets and the wind could blow through. An old pensioner named Dee, was in charge of the storeroom and whenever anyone needed anything to eat they could go to Dee and he would dole it out. He knew all the horses, helped the cowboys out, and acted as a handyman around the place.

The cowboys would help make jerky. They would cut the meat in long pieces, spread it out on tables and pepper it so thickly it would look like flies had been on it, then hang it over a wire to dry. The crisp strips would be packed into flour sacks and sent out to camp where camp cooks would break it up with a hatchet, add water and make stew or fix it in a skillet with gravy and biscuits. The rest of their meal consisted of beans, potatoes and dried fruits.

For entertainment there were the weekend dances at the Elgin Club or the old Sonoita Schoolhouse. When the dance started the cowboys would get their “duty dances” out of the way and then the serious dancing and drinking would begin. The definition of “duty dance” translated to: “If you know what’s good for you, you better dance with at least two or three of the hostess committee ladies and the daughters of your rancher friends who might be sitting on the sidelines,” according to Cooper.

Roundups at the Empire and Rail X were legendary. Some of the great wagon bosses were Dick Jimenez, Blain Lewis, Nacho Garcia and Fred Barnett to mention just a few. Two chuck wagons and two cooks would set up at the old stock pens in Sonoita, along with two straw bosses and 30 cowboys - all working together. The branding was done at the ranch, but everything else was done during the drive - cutting, sorting, classifying.

The cows and calves were driven down together and then, still out in the open, the calves were cut off from the mothers. “This is difficult to do, because the calves would run over you, the cows would run over you. You had to be a horse buff, I’ll tell you,” Cooper recalls. At the last big shipment they had, the crew was there for an entire week shipping 75 carloads out of Sonoita. They would load up a train every day and it would make the delivery to Nogales, then return and pick up as many cars as were ready and make the trip again. Over a thousand head were shipped on that legendary final drive. Traces of the old railroad are still visible just south of the Sonoita Crossroads behind the Steak Out Restaurant.

After Frank’s death, sons Bob and Frank, Jr. (Pancho) controlled the operation. The ranch was sold to Gulf American in 1960 and then resold to Anamax in 1976. It is now managed by the Bureau of Land Management in partnership with the Empire Ranch Foundation as part of the new Las Cienegas Conservation Area. John and Mac Donaldson run the cattle leases.