

John Donaldson: A Generation of the Empire By Marion Hyland

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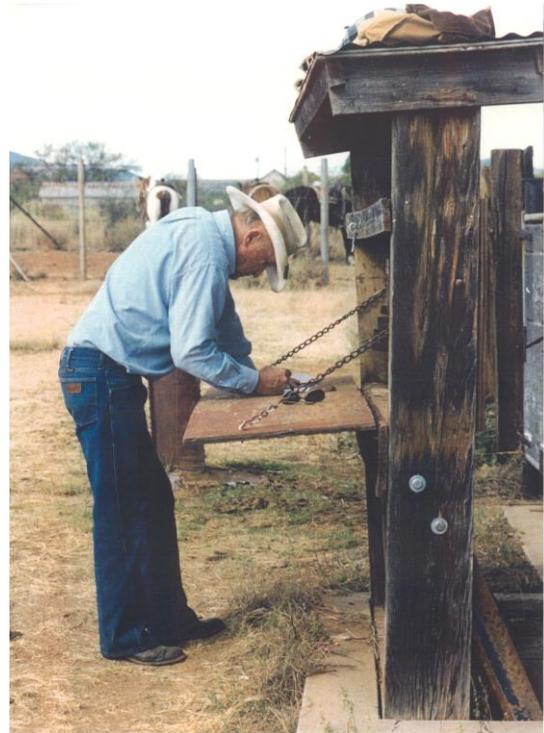
John Donaldson, Easterner by birth, knew what he wanted to be from the get go. From a family of doctors, engineers, and entrepreneurs, John's childhood reading and picture-gazing primed him for a life as a cowboy. His grandmother who read to him and his brother from Boy Ranchers and the X Bar X Boys fueled the fire, but only after his mother convinced John that he really could not be an Indian.

John was introduced to horses at six years of age when he began riding lessons taught by White Russian cavalry officers. (To this very day he claims that "My soul is at rest when I am sitting on a horse.") John always figured that his life would one day be on the back of a horse. And, as he grew into adolescence he could not see himself commuting to New York City every day. While sitting in school, his only thought was "get the hell to the west". At age fourteen, John went to a ranch school for boys in Tucson, The Arizona Desert School, where each boy had his own horse. That was his first experience west of the Hudson River and it clinched the vision.

After one semester of college in the east, John came to University of Arizona which was climatically favorable to his history of respiratory problems. He played on the polo team. After his freshman year at the U. of A., John worked on a Montana dude and cattle ranch and developed more real life experience working with cattle and horses. Then came WW II. John enlisted in the Horse Cavalry, but horses were being phased out. He then volunteered for the Air Force Glider Pilot School. When that turned out to be a "a disaster due to administrative disorganization", he opted for officers candidate school from which he graduated. He was assigned to a heavy bombing group in England, serving three and one-half years.

In 1961, John sold part of the Tortuga and bought the love of his life, the Diamond Bar Ranch in the Black Range north of Silver City, New Mexico, that extended from the Continental Divide to the East Fork of the Gila River. For a variety of reasons, The Diamond Bar, which John owned and operated from 1963 until 1972, was never really a good ranching operation. The situation came to a head when the ranch went into a national wilderness area. With little opportunity for further development, John sold the Diamond Bar, keeping the deeded land and selling the grazing permit. He later sold the deeded land to the National Forest Service.

Through the years John acquired experience and knowledge. He fed cattle in commercial feed lots, ran cattle on summer grass in Montana and developed a personal style and philosophy for breeding and



John Donaldson at the scales weighing calves, 1993.

range management. He reminisces about learning from Mexican cowboys for whom he has great respect. "They grew up from childhood on the range and understood how to work cattle in big open country and how to use cattle psychology. Many of our western ranching customs were inherited from the Mexican vaqueros."



Mac Donaldson, Tom McCoy, Fernando Leon, John Donaldson, and Juan Telles, at Empire Ranch Stone Corral, 1993.

Despite John's successes, he found himself with a lingering sense of loss over the Diamond Bar. At this low ebb, his vast experience led Anamax Mining Company to consult him. Anamax had purchased the Empire Ranch from Gulf America, a development company. Gulf America had intended the land for a huge housing development. Anamax wanted to use the water from the ranch to mine copper in the Helvetia area. In 1975, Anamax asked John to take a look at the ranch and advise them what to do with the land. They entered into a joint ranching venture.

John started stocking the ranch with his cattle and continued to manage the ranch for \$15,000 a year. After two years Anamax decided they did not want

a joint venture and leased the Empire Ranch to John, maintaining a year and a half kickoff clause. When Anamax decided to sell the ranch because they abandoned the idea of developing the Helvetia mine, they made a three-way land exchange that included the Bureau of Land Management, a British land company, and Anamax. The BLM has continued to honor the Donaldson lease to this day.

Now, after twenty-six years of symbiosis with the Empire Ranch, John reflects, emotionally at times, about his feelings when he first looked at the vast resources. He saw it immediately as "a unique property, inviting creativity to synthesize all aspects of ranching as a profitable business while improving the resource base." His plans, though not traditional, have not wavered. He decided to ranch as individual entities the three ecosystems: the Sonoita prairie, the mountainous terrain, and the Sacaton deltas along Cienega Creek. He also introduced the Brahma cross breed cattle to the Empire. As good water metabolizers with sweat glands through their vast skins, they adapt well to this climate. In 1995, the Empire Ranch became a Limited Liability Corporation, providing shares for his son, Mac, and their attorney, John McDonald. These two men were very instrumental in working to get a bill passed in Congress in 2000 making the federal lands of the Empire-Cienega a National Conservation Area and preserving grazing as a continued use of the land.



John and Mac Donaldson gathering cattle for Fall Roundup under the magnificent Santa Rita Mountains, Fall 1992.



Billie Donaldson, John Donaldson, Juan Tellez, Fernando Leon and Tom McCoy, Whetstone Mountains in the background, Fall 1993.

John Donaldson's interaction with the land is on a creative level, respectful of the uncontrollable facets of nature. He enjoys the challenge of applying his love for horses, grasses, and genetics to sustain well being for all while trying to make a profit. While he confides "The land talks to me", he also adds, "Ranching keeps you humble. You realize you are not in control of the earth."

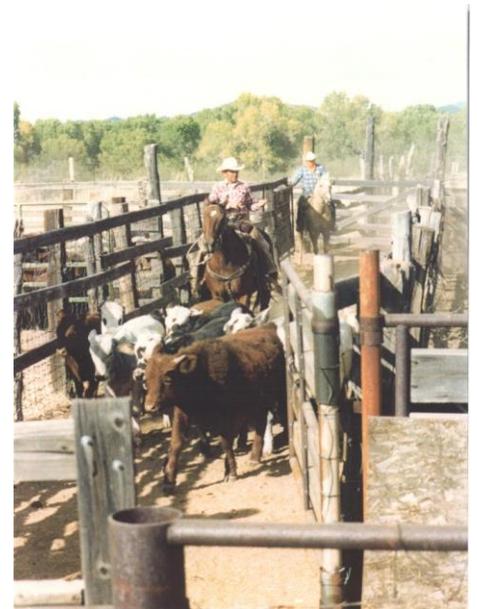
Now, John is flanked by other Donaldsons, as individualistic as he. His son, Mac, studied range management at the University of Arizona and has a background in horse breeding, corporate cattle management, and ranch

management. Merging his skills with those of his father, Mac rotates the cattle seasonally in a one herd concept. They work the large, often nervous, and quick moving Brahma cross-breeds mostly from horseback.

Also helping is his grandson, Sam, a rodeo bronc rider and recent student of range management at Texas Christian University. Although Sam is working for Henry Amado at his ranch in Patagonia, he also makes time for the family ranching business on the Empire. John's pride comes through when he talks about Sam's natural command of the unteachable skills of handling horses and cattle. He talks of the slow way of being with cattle and horses to keep them calm and the intuition that can pay off in all kinds of unpredictable situations. John jokingly says on hiring cowboys, "Cut out vocal cords, take spurs and rope away, give him a foundered horse. If he can work cattle then I might hire him."

The Donaldson men are complex and multi-faceted. In addition to their love for the land, they all share artistic talent, using media ranging from charcoal and watercolor to ceramics. As one observes the closely resembling features of the three generations of ranching Donaldsons, John's words regarding the future hang in the air:

"Ranching on the fragile lands west of the 100th meridian may be coming to an end because much of that land has so much more value for uses other than cattle ranching." One can only believe that if genetics play as much of a part in humans as in animals, this Donaldson family will find the adaptability to contribute to a life that suits them very well according to one of their patriarch's favorite quotes:



Juan Tellez and Fernando Leon bringing cattle to scales to be weighed, Fall 1993.

AS A MAN'S DESIRE IS, SO IS HIS DESTINY

For as his desire is, so is his will;

as his will is, so is his deed;

and as his deed is, so is his reward,

whether good or bad.

(From the "Upanishads")