

A RANGE of Possibility

Cattle ranching and oil pumping mix it up on the plains of southeastern New Mexico.
STORY AND PHOTOS BY TIM KELLER

Giles Lee has lived at the Swamp Angel Ranch, in Lea County, since he was two. That was in 1925. His father, Dick Lee, was an open-range cattleman out of Midland and Seminole, Texas, who first cowboied across the New Mexico Territory line in 1898, when he came to the Hat Ranch at nearby Monument Springs. By the time Dick died, in 1940, his outfit, the Scharbauer Cattle Company, had deeded the Swamp Angel Ranch to his family.

At 90, Lee goes out three times a week in his heavy-duty Chevy Silverado pickup to feed his 200 cows spread across 23 square miles—23 sections—of the Swamp Angel Ranch. Asked what will happen to the ranch when he's no longer tending it, he seems caught by surprise. "I haven't started looking that far ahead yet." After a pause he adds, "I'm thinking I'll make 100." >>



Artist Brian Norwood installed *The Trail Ahead* north of Jal in 2000. The cowboy hat is 20 feet high; the horse is 21 feet long. The entire steel sculpture is 400 feet long and is a popular tourist attraction.



Hank Marshall painted *The Roping Partners* in March 1965, depicting Giles Lee and his roping horse. The framed oil painting hangs over the fireplace in Lee's living room. Inset: Lee at 90, his age when this story was written; he is now 91. The former rodeo champion says he hasn't entered any roping events since he was 80.



Driving south from my Ratón home, at the northern edge of New Mexico's eastern plain, the land unwinds in panoramas of grasslands extending to the horizons. The color and height of the grasses vary with the amount of rain they've had, or not had. With the failure of homesteading nearly a century ago, the land returned to supporting animals that graze across vast expanses for precious little grass.

Reaching Lea County, in the southeast corner of the state, the land changes. Grass is sparse, and punctuated by yucca and ocotillo. Encroaching mesquite crosses the state line from West Texas. Since the discovery of oil at Maljamar in 1926, Lea County's most prolific crop has been oil and natural gas. The sign at the county line boasts, "Welcome to Lea County—The EnergyPlex."

And yet, Lea County has produced more rodeo world champions—11—than any other place in the U.S. I asked novelist Max Evans about the juxtaposition of oil wells and rodeo champions; the author of *The Rounders* and *The Hi Lo Country* grew up in Lea County. "Isolated, strange country sometimes breeds unusual people," he replied.

He meant it as a compliment, to both the land and the people.

Lea County has two fine museums devoted to its history—this in a county with a population density of 15 people per square mile; 90 percent of the county's 65,000 souls live in Hobbs and Lovington, the sites of the museums.

The Western Heritage Museum and Lea County Cowboy Hall of Fame share an imposing modern building constructed of white rock on the Lovington Highway in Hobbs, a city in transition "from crude to culture," with a newly modernized downtown district, landscaped parkways, and amenities such as an art center, a symphony, and a distinguished lecture series. Low-slung, Hobbs directs its growth outward rather than upward—nothing taller than an oil derrick, says one resident. The museum's exhibits are as polished and professionally designed as any you'll find in Denver or Fort Worth. Much of the museum is devoted to the history of Lea County, with its boom-and-bust agricultural cycles and its boom-and-boom energy production.

Jim Harris runs the Lea County Museum, in Lovington, a conservative farm and ranch community built around a tree-shaded courthouse square. In one of the thousand weekly columns the former English professor has contributed to the Hobbs and Lovington newspapers over the past 20 years, Harris characterized Lea County as "a land whose residents learn to love it, once they have reconciled themselves to its toughness and once they have adjusted to its flatness, its mesquite and caliche fields." Many residents trace their close-knit families back for generations in Lea County. "I like the sense of space here," one resident says. "It's not claustrophobic. It feels expansive." Harris has been in Lea County since 1974. The museum he runs couldn't be more different from the one in Hobbs.

Occupying 11 buildings on Lovington's town square, including

the entire 1918 Commercial Hotel building, the Lea County Museum's doors open on living history: You're in the past. Many of the hotel's rooms are devoted to individual pioneering families, each filled with one family's iconic objects—a saddle, a bassinet, a desk—and generously illustrated with big enlargements of family photographs. The old dark wood floors and high ceilings are redolent of the building's days as a bustling hotel, the downtown pride of Lovington. Visiting the hotel's lobby, it becomes clear that the museum reflects both its building and its director. Harris likes nothing better than to explore the reaches of Lea County and put himself back in time. He has a gift for imagining himself on a ranch or in a fledgling community during its heyday.

A hundred years ago, Lea County filled with ambitious new communities. McDonald had two weekly newspapers, a cotton gin, and a half-dozen other businesses. Antelope had a real estate office, dance hall, barbershop, and three general stores. Plainview had a hotel, skating rink, dance hall, and newspaper. Knowles had a tennis club, theater, and two banks. Each had a school and post office, as did other communities—Prairieview, Enterprise, Gladiola, Hillburn, Midway, Mitchell, Ranger Lake, Scott, Soldier Hill, King, Caprock, and Warren.

They're all gone. What's left outside of Lovington and Hobbs are Eunice, Jal, Monument, and Maljamar in the oil fields, and Tatum and Crossroads farther north in the farmlands and ranchlands. Only Eunice, Jal, and Tatum have more than a single store. The communities were established to serve farmers and settlers. When the railroads reached a West that had been cleared of buffalo, an insatiable market for beef was created. Big Texas cattle outfits proliferated. It's hard to imagine running out of room in Texas, but the ranches expanded right into the neighboring New Mexico Territory. By the mid-1880s, when former buffalo hunter George Causey was importing the area's first windmill, much of the nearly three million acres that would become Lea County was claimed by five big outfits—the JAL Ranch, the Hat Ranch, the Mallet/High Lonesome, the Four Lakes Ranch, and the San Simon.

The open range provided free grazing that was also mostly free of water. Lea County has 4,393 square miles of land but only 1.1 square mile of surface water. Cattle walked 12 miles or more between small watering holes. To contain the cattle, the ranches constructed drift fences up to 40 miles long. After homesteaders applied political pressure that resulted in the removal of the drift fences in 1902, a big norther in February 1903 drove the cattle back to Texas. It was legal to fence along a road, so the ranchers convinced the county to build roads. Then a wet year in 1905 brought a rush of new homesteaders filing claims on small tracts. The open range was over.

But drought cycles are forever; the wet year didn't last. Homesteaders, smaller ranches, and whole communities were driven off by historic droughts—from 1918 to 1923, the 1930s, the 1950s, the 1960s, now. >>

But for those who can afford it, center-pivot irrigation has transformed ranching by eliminating drought cycles. I remember flying from Austin to Los Angeles in the 1970s, looking down over this land and wondering what in the world all those green circles were. One product of those big grass circles has been dairy farming. Although Lea County range cattle outnumber its dairy cows four to one, milk production tops livestock receipts.

However, the transformative crop has been energy—oil and natural gas. Our appetite for oil exceeds even our appetite for beef. The entire region stretching far into Texas—the Permian Basin—once sat beneath a sea that left unimaginably vast oil and gas deposits. Since the mid-1930s, when the nation began to recover from the worst effects of the Great Depression, Lea County oil and gas wells have spread relentlessly and now outnumber the range cattle that wander among them. The Permian Basin appears likely to supply abundant energy resources for decades to come.

But the cattle are still there, as they have been since the five big outfits spread out over New Mexico's open range in the 1880s. Jim Harris takes me 15 miles southwest from Lovington to visit Giles Lee. The first taxes here were collected on "Swamp" in 1889, when it was part of the Hat Ranch. Early-morning mist over a water hole apparently led to the name Swamp Angel Ranch. The adobe ranch house was built in 1906.

Lee leads us into an immaculate and attractive air-conditioned living room where 1960s oil paintings by Hank Marshall bookend the large space: Over the fireplace, Giles kneels beside his roping horse, Rueben; at the far end, the three Lee daughters are dramatically framed before a windmill looming under a stormy sky. Giles and his wife, Joie, married 66 years ago; for 65 of those years they've lived right here, in what's been Giles's home since 1925.

Giles's deep, resonant voice masks his 90 years, but his walk gives it away. He's stooped, and apologetic about it. "My doctor gave me three choices for my back pain. He could operate, but he wouldn't. I could find someone who would. Or I could buy a recliner." He smiles and says, "I like the recliner real well."

I ask the nature of his injury. "Oh, all my wrecks have been from horses," he says. He catalogs the injuries—neck, wrists, ribs, back. A framed photo shows his horse crashing, four legs thrashing at the sky, a calf tautly roped to him and Giles's white shirt barely visible, pinned under the saddle. It's marked, "Cheyenne Wyoming 1990."

"Cheyenne's my favorite rodeo," he allows, "but I haven't entered any team ropings since I was 80."

His roping arena is out back, and it's famous in these parts. Built in the 1950s, complete with night lighting, for more than two decades it hosted the Lea County Team Roping Championship, now commemorated by a simple monument that lists "the 13 original ropers," Giles's neighboring Lea County cowboys and

ranchers, some of them national rodeo legends: G.H. "Tow-head" Bingham, Dale "Tuffy" Cooper, Bob Eidson, Red E.M. Finger, Clyde Fort, R.F. Fort, R.P. Fort, Troy Fort, Bob James, Buck Jones, Tom Pearson, Tom Price. Giles Lee made 13. He was a founder, in 1942, of the rodeo club at what is now New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. He served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, returned to college, and then became a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association competitor in 1947. College, the Army, and rodeoing account for the only time he's spent away from Swamp Angel.

In the 1980s, he began an innovative, ongoing program of crossbreeding Hereford cattle. He's proud of his cattle and insists on driving us out to see them. "We'll take my truck," he says. "I've got these steel-belted truck tires. You couldn't get them for a long time, but they're the only thing that'll hold up against these caliche roads. They'll tear up your tires."

Winding down the two-track toward a distant windmill, the rough path consists of white rocks with knife-like edges. It's June and there's been no rain. "When we get rain, it's late July through August," Giles says. "August rain makes winter grass. I'm making it last. I'm running 10 cows per section."

At the windmill he blasts a siren, and calves come from near and far, expecting Giles to activate the feeder on the back of the truck. Jim's been out with Giles before and remarks, "These cows have a close relationship with this truck." These are Red Angus, looking fat and happy; Black Angus graze on the other side of the ranch. Blue grama grass is interspersed with some tobosa grass, but most of the interspersing is now done by mesquite that threatens to take over. "When I was young," Giles says, "I don't remember mesquite. It's all come in over the last 50 years."

The oil pump jacks have been here since he was a boy. Although his and Joie's home is an oasis, I've seen no sign of wealth. Don't they get royalties for the oil and gas pumped from the ranch? "Oh no," he answers, "the State of New Mexico owns all of the mineral rights. It's mostly that way throughout the county."

Driving later down the Buckeye road, I come to the Swamp Angel Ranch boundary and find big warning signs posted by ConocoPhillips. "NOTICE: POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS CONCENTRATIONS OF HYDROGEN SULFIDE OR CARBON DIOXIDE MAY BE PRESENT FOR THE NEXT FOUR MILES." Before driving through, I remind myself that Giles Lee has lived among these wells all his life, and he's robust, for a 91-year-old. I drive on through.

That evening I sit on a hillside 20 miles west of the Swamp Angel Ranch, above Maljamar, where Lea County oil was first discovered. President Obama's helicopter brought him to Maljamar for a 2012 speech promoting domestic energy production. As night falls, I count the gas flares burning over wells every minute of every day. They stretch to the horizon, tall enough to be seen from ten miles away.

Outside Eunice the next morning, I gawk at the three-year-old URENCO nuclear enrichment facility, bigger than anything in Lea County except Hobbs and maybe Lovington. With the potential to produce sufficient fuel at Eunice to supply 10 percent of U.S. electrical needs, the British company is the newest big employer in Lea County. The county unemployment rate has been hovering around 4 percent. "That's the percentage that don't want to work," says Jim Harris. "Anybody that wants a job here can get one."

I meet 28-year-old Jonathan White at a Pennzoil quick-lube station in Hobbs, where I'm in line for an oil change before the drive home to Ratón. He's driving a newer model of the same truck Giles Lee drives. The patch on his shirt indicates that Jonathan works for Pason, a Calgary-based company that runs the computer systems that run the oil fields.

"I tried college three times," White says, "but everybody kept telling me to go to work in the oil fields. I worked for an oil company for six years. Every time the Pason guys would come around, they saw that I'd kept the computers going without them." Pason recruited him two years ago. The oil fields run two 12-hour shifts nonstop. Jonathan's on call 24/7, servicing 19 wells between Hobbs and

Artesia. He carries fifteen thousand pounds of computer equipment in the unmarked company vehicle. The suspension on the big truck has been replaced twice in his two years.

"They said, 'You can't wear out that suspension.' I said, 'Come with me for a day or two, I'll show you.' They said, 'Don't go down those roads.' I said, 'Those roads are where the oil rigs are. My orders are down those roads.'"

I stick to the paved roads as I head north through the county, pointed toward home, at the other end of the state. With Lea County's average annual precipitation less than 16 inches, I'm amused to see so many yellow highway signs that say, "WATCH FOR WATER." I've taken them as signs of excessive optimism, or perhaps Christian faith. Imagine my surprise when I find the drainage ditches and many fields flooded from a thunderstorm that went through last night. It's like that all the way from Lovington north to Roy, 250 miles and a lot of happy faces along the way. But Hobbs and the rest of southern Lea County missed it. No one there is surprised. Giles Lee went out to feed his cows the next day. He's not expecting rain until August.

It'll carry him through the winter. ❖

Tim Keller is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8. For a "Road Trip" guide to southeastern NM, go to bit.ly/plains-truth.



Lea County sprawls across the southeastern corner of the state, hugging West Texas. The discovery of oil in the late 1920s changed the landscape and the economy, though cattle ranching and cowboy traditions remain strong.