



Military Roots & Ranching Boots

Beacon Hill Ranch has been built on the drive to remain true to one's roots — Hereford cattle and military service.

by *Brooke Taylor*

Beacon Hill Ranch, Langley, Okla., has been passed down from one generation to the next since 1909. Though the names have changed through the years from John and Gertrude Millikan to Floyd and Wilma Sloan to Richard and Susan Gebhart and, now, to sisters Erica (Matt) Boyer and Roxane (Eric) Mock, there are two constants that have remained.

What came first, ranching heritage or military service? For Erica and Roxane, there is no punchline to this spin on a classic chicken-and-egg schoolyard inquiry. The truth is cattle and service are both equal parts of their family DNA.

“My earliest memory is my dad walking through the backdoor in his uniform and black, shiny boots,” Erica shares of living on post at 4 years old. “The



Sisters Erica and Roxane uphold the U.S. Air Force mentality of pursuing tasks — either in the air or on the ranch — with excellence and integrity.

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vivid memories of facing east toward the flag at 4:30 p.m. and placing your hand above your heart while listening to Taps are ingrained in me forever.”

Military roots

Erica was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in the same U.S. Army hospital where her late father, a retired U.S. Army colonel, was born. After 14 years of active service, Erica and Roxane’s father, Richard Gebhart, transitioned from active duty to the reserves, where he served an additional 13 years. These years allowed the Gebhart family to transition seamlessly from army boots to ranch boots as they focused on their purebred Hereford cattle.

“Most people in the military don’t ever realize we’re sisters,” says Roxane, who joined the same squadron as her sister. “We grew up working long hours, sometimes not doing the most fun chores, and it easily transitioned into a solid working professional relationship.”

Erica and Roxane mentioned that many recruiters say it is easy to recruit kids from rural America because they already understand the Air Force core values of “integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do.”

Following in the footsteps of her father and grandfather, who was also a U.S. Army colonel, Erica enlisted in the Air National Guard at 17 — a decision which required special permission from her parents.

During the first 18 years of her now 22 years of service, Erica served the 138th Fighter Wing as force support as a traditional guardsman — one weekend a month, two weeks a year — while working full-time as a surgical nurse.

“Our unit does the pot of stuff no one else wants to do. From food service to mortuary and from human resources to setting up a ‘tent city,’ we do all the behind-the-scenes work to get people and multi-million-dollar planes around the world,” Erica says. She now serves as a full-time guardsman.

Roxane, who was born in Colorado Springs, where her parents were then stationed, joined the Air National Guard after her first semester at Oklahoma State University, where she obtained a bachelor of science in animal science with an emphasis in agricultural economics.

“My college was paid for primarily through livestock scholarships, but I joined because I wanted to join,” Roxane says. “Growing up in a military family is a lot like growing up in a ranching family — it’s part of your identity. Military service is just who we are as a family.”

Together, the Gebhart sisters have deployments to Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, West Virginia,

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Wisconsin and Germany under their belts.

Like her sister, Roxane served as a traditional guardsman while pursuing a Juris Doctorate at the University of Tulsa. In 2019, after deploying to Hawaii for six weeks to work as part of a team building a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) center for Girl Scouts, Roxane transitioned from her career as an attorney to a full-time guardsman.

“A full-time career with the Air National Guard allows me to focus on my growing family and invest more time with our ranching operation,” Roxane says.

In January, Erica welcomed her third child, Perry Elizabeth, a bright surprise after her husband, Matt’s, cancer diagnosis and no-evidence-of-disease victory. Three months later, Roxane welcomed her first child, Harlan Richard, alongside her husband, Ethan. While seven years apart as sisters, the two are honored to raise the next generation of ranchers, and possibly service members, together on the ranch where they fell in love with agriculture.

“We assume they’ll join,” Erica shares. “Gus [Erica’s son] wants to be an ‘army man’ like his pepaw, and I’m adjusting my expectations that he’s going to join the Army and not the Air Force.”

The Boyer and Mock families set a precedent of lack of pressure or expectation but acknowledge that the rich family ranching heritage and military history make both ranching and service a good fit.

Ranching boots

Nestled into a quiet corner of northeast Oklahoma, Beacon Hill Ranch is raising a multi-generation

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Born in a U.S. Army hospital in Frankfurt, Germany, Erica Boyer joined the Air National Guard at 17 years old. She does not remember a time when the military was not a part of her life.



The land and the cattle have been handed down from one generation to the next with each generation refining the herd and adding their own mark.

Hereford herd built on a foundation from the original herd of Erica and Roxane's maternal great-grandparents.

"I married a man who I knew would honor the cattle and honor my grandparents," shares Susan Gebhart, fourth-generation rancher emeritus.

The land and cattle are the common denominator in a collaborative, multi-generational effort and commitment toward sustainability.

After Richard's passing in 2015, the Beacon Hill Ranch family reevaluated ranch goals and established a strategic plan moving forward, which included infrastructure changes, new bulls and jumping into custom beef.

This plan began the ranch's journey of marketing custom-fed, custom-bred, dry-aged beef. With a goal of selling one steer per month and 15 to 20 per year in 2016 outside the established family-and-friends customer base, Beacon Hill focused on slow and steady growth supported by its herd of Hereford cows with split spring- and fall-calving seasons.



Erica and Matt's children Gus and McKenzie take part in the daily management of the ranch alongside their parents.

The face-to-face interaction with consumers has allowed the operation to share where those individuals' food is coming from.

"Selling direct is a great opportunity to establish rapport with our community. With each new customer comes a new set of questions about ranching practices and understanding of terms," shares Matt Boyer, rancher, agricultural instructor and FFA advisor. "It's beef with a side of advocacy."

Rarely do customers inquire about Beacon Hill Ranch beef without making a purchase or joining the waiting list.

"We want everyone to have a great beef-eating experience," Erica says. "With direct sales you become acutely aware of the consumer experience because we're involved every step of the way. Every decision we make is based on the end product."

For ranchers providing direct-to-consumer sales, processor relationships are essential to ensuring the quality of a consumer's dinner.

"We pick up our beef from the same processor as our customers, which means the processor is essentially an extension of our brand." Erica says. "You eat what our family eats. It's exactly what I'm feeding to our children."

Although Beacon Hill Ranch will explore options to expand, it will continue to stay a small market. The Boyer and Mock families manage off-ranch careers, are raising five children and maintain high standards for their herd.

"We're not putting our resources — land, water, livestock — under stress in order to expand our operation," Roxane says. "It's all about being good stewards of our cattle and land to produce quality beef."

Beacon Hill Ranch is theirs from start-to-finish. Simply, it is not about the size of the operation; it is about the family. **HW**



Like many farm and ranch outfits, Beacon Hill Ranch is a collaborative effort. Pictured (l to r) are Ethan and Roxane Mock, Susan Gebhart, McKenzie, Gus, Erica and Matt Boyer.