Cows and calves encircle Johnny Hill’s ranch pickup, waiting to be fed on a droughty September morning in the Texas Panhandle. The 70-year-old cowboy manages a cow-calf operation south of the small town of Hedley. The sound of bawling cattle has been Hill’s background music for the better part of 50 years. His cowboy career began when he, a local 20-year-old farm kid at the time, drove onto a division of the RO Ranch some 20 miles from Hedley and asked for a job. Looking back, he recalls how little he knew about ranching.

“I learned pretty much everything I know working there,” Hill says. “When you’re 20 years old, you think you know everything in the world. And I found out pretty quick I didn’t know much. But I had the pleasure of working with some really good, old-time cowboys. Those guys might not say anything, but you could just watch them and figure out they knew what they were doing.”

Hill’s teachable attitude and skills in observation paved the way for him to become a top hand for the RO—he even earned the Top Hand award at the prestigious Texas Ranch Roundup ranch rodeo in 1984. And just as he admits to being poorly versed in the vocation of cowboying as a young man, little did he know that he had joined a ranch with a history more colorful than a majority of Texas cattle outfits.

As one of the oldest ranches in the Texas Panhandle, the RO was established by Alfred Rowe in 1878. The Englishman had recently immigrated to the United States and began buying South Texas Longhorns during the Great Trail Drive era. Within 25 years, Rowe increased the size of his ranch to nearly 300,000 acres in four counties, improved the market for beef in the area, and was instrumental in establishing two bustling communities. In 1912, shocking news about the sinking of the RMS Titanic luxury steamship hit close to home in the Texas Panhandle, as cowboys and locals learned that Rowe had died in the icy Atlantic waters 400 miles off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada.

Despite the tragic loss, the RO brand continued into the next century, operating from revenues drawn solely from cattle and other agricultural endeavors. The horseback outfit was respected for its savvy cowboys and handy horses, although it did not carry the same name recognition as other Texas ranches such as the Pitchfork, RA Brown, Swenson, Tongue River or Waggoner. Nevertheless, the RO crew bested those famous outfits in the first ranch rodeo ever held, winning the 1981 Texas Ranch Roundup in Wichita Falls, Texas.

But more important than winning competitions, Hill treasures the work, camaraderie and day-to-day experiences provided by the RO for so many years. It all started with Alfred Rowe, an adventurous young man fascinated with the cowboy life, at the time on the cusp of defining the American West.
Alfred Rowe was one of seven children of a prosperous English merchant who traded in South America. Consequently, Rowe was born in Peru in 1853. At age 23 he attended the Royal Agriculture College in Gloucestershire, England. Upon graduation, he traveled to Colorado in 1878 to learn more about the cattle business, then settled in Donley County, Texas. At first he camped in a dugout on Glenwood Creek, about 10 miles northeast of Clarendon, the county seat.

In an interview with Vera Back for the McLean News, Rowe's son, Colonel Harry Rowe, said, "When he found the land he wanted to buy near Old Clarendon, he secured a loan from the family business and paid it off through the years." The article also noted, "His first herd consisted of Longhorns trailed up from South Texas. Charles Goodnight helped Rowe choose his first cattle; and the first foreman on the new ranch was Green McCullum, one of Goodnight's men, lent to Rowe as a favor."

Rowe registered the RO brand and was soon joined by his younger brothers, Vincent and Bernard. They sent mature steers north to markets in Kansas, held on to breeding stock, and began buying land in Donley, Collingsworth, Gray and Wheeler counties. According to the book, "Donley County History," their holdings soon reached approximately 300,000 acres and 12,000 to 20,000 cows. The Clarendon News in 1882 reported that, "Alfred and Bernard Rowe started a herd of 1,400 head of very fine beeves for Dodge City. They have now shipped about 3,500 head this season which will net them over $100,000."

Around the turn of the century, the Rowe brothers dissolved their partnership, leaving Alfred as the sole owner of the RO Ranch. By that time, two railroad lines passed near the ranch. To the north, the Southern Kansas and Panhandle R.R., later named the Santa Fe, came from Kansas and through the Texas Panhandle town of Miami. To the south, the Fort Worth and Denver City R.R. connected Fort Worth and Clarendon.

BRITISH CATTLE BARON

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To help modernize shipping cattle for the RO and area cattle producers, Rowe convinced railroad commissioner William P. McLean to put a switch in the tracks several miles from headquarters, according to the McLean-Alanreed Area Museum. Rowe laid out the townsites around the McLean Depot, and by 1904 the new town, named McLean, featured a post office, three general stores, a bank, a lumber yard and a newspaper, according to the Texas State Historical Association.

Rowe had a hand in the start of another Panhandle town. He donated land for a townsite southeast of the RO headquarters, and it was named Rowe in his honor. Established in 1890 as a shipping point for the Fort Worth and Denver City R.R., it grew to include a church, a bank, several stores, a newspaper and a gin by the early 1900s. However, by 1907 townsfolk had begun relocating their community a couple miles to the southeast, and that was the launch of what is now the town of Hedley.

Rowe loved to travel and was known to always carry a black satchel, even while horseback, ready to catch a train on a whim and be gone for months sometimes. Although labeled eccentric by some, he was known to be personable and sincere. According to Harry Rowe's account, "Alfred won the affection and respect of all, cowboy and stockman alike. The Plains people liked his willingness to work and his enjoyment of living. He had dignity, a sense of responsibility, business principles and a genuine interest in the community."

In 1901, Rowe married Constance Ethel Kingsley in England and brought her to the Texas Panhandle. They raised three of four children on the ranch (the first one, a girl, died as an infant). In 1910, Rowe and his family moved permanently to England, but he traveled to his Texas ranch twice a year.

In April of 1912, he boarded the RMS Titanic in Southampton, England, for the internationally hyped, "unsinkable" ship's maiden voyage to New York City. One might assume he was returning to the Rowe Ranch for spring works. When the Titanic struck an iceberg on the night of April 14, Rowe, a strong swimmer, refused to board a lifeboat until others were saved, according to the Texas State Historical Association. He was one of approximately 1,500 of the 2,220 passengers who died. His body was pulled from the water and transported to his family in England. According to legend, his body was found on an iceberg, with his black satchel still clutched in his hand and his watch ticking. Five months after his death, his fifth child, Alfred Rowe, Jr., was born.
The RO continued to operate for five years after Rowe’s death, although his family sold off portions of the land. Rowe had already downsized it from the nearly 300,000 acres it once spanned. In 1917, Constance Rowe sold the remaining 72,000 acres to William J. Lewis, who had previously worked as a cowboy on the RO.

Raised in Maryland, Lewis’s father moved his family to the Texas Panhandle when he became a partner on the Half Circle K Ranch in 1886. As a teenager, Lewis worked on the ranch and a year later hired on at the nearby RO. Rowe took a liking to the young cowboy, and soon he was given the responsibility of shipping RO cattle to Kansas City, according to the Texas State Historical Society.

Lewis was still in his 20s when he struck out on his own, buying and selling cattle throughout Kansas, New Mexico and the Panhandle. Later, he leased other ranches in Texas and New Mexico, including the Bell Ranch. In 1910 he bought 43,000 acres of the Shoe Bar Ranch. Buying the RO had been a dream of his youth.

Once he secured ownership of the RO for more than $500,000 (with a down payment of $350,000), Lewis continued to run cattle on his Shoe Bar, purchased the Shoe Nail, and leased ranches such as the Milliron and Word. For decades he ran cattle throughout the Panhandle and West Texas. His son, William, Jr., grew to become a savvy cow man himself, recalls his nephew, Bob Boston.

“We can’t pay you, but we can furnish you tobacco and groceries and give you a place to live. And if we ever make it through this, we’ll be able to pay your back wages.”

Lewis’ operation, which included the RO and other ranches, either deeded or leased, came to be known as Lewis Ranches. In 1960, Lewis died at the age of 89. Shockingly, his son died a year later from a rare blood disease. That left Lewis, Jr’s widow, Vera, and his three sisters in ownership of Lewis Ranches.

Hill began working for the ranch 11 years later.

“It was a straight-up cow operation when I started there,” Hill says. “There wasn’t any outside income, and they held it together by sheer will power and smarts.

“We were a young crew. But there was a lot of talent there, and everybody just got along. On a lot of ranches, people don’t get along. But they did on the RO.”

Hill adds that good camaraderie and teamwork was a key to the Lewis Ranches winning the Texas Ranch Roundup in 1981. The ranch repeated the feat in 1983, and Hill was named Top Hand at the event in 1994.

Despite the ranch rodeo accolades, the RO was approaching its demise at the time. Vera died in 1981, and through the years Lewis Ranches began to be divided up among the heirs. A multitude of factors—from estate taxes to market realities to differing management priorities led to a gradual dispersal of Lewis Ranches, including the RO. In 2014, the last parcel of the RO was sold.

Today, Hill works for another cow-calf operation several miles from the original RO headquarters. Although he would point out the differences, Hill shares important similarities with Rowe and Lewis: young men without a ranching background who learned to cowboy on the job and found a lifelong passion.

“For some reason, being a cowboy is what I wanted to do,” Hill says. “My dad wanted me to be a dentist, but I just couldn’t see being in the office all day every day. I’m pretty well satisfied with what I’ve learned and who I learned it from and what I can do. I’m 70 years old and I get to do what I want to do every day around here.”

It’s not an uncommon storyline for many ranchers and cowboys. But it’s a credit to men like Alfred Rowe who paved the way for generations of cowboys and ranchers.

Special thanks to the McLean-Alamreed Area Museum for historical facts and images in this article.
Charles Goodnight, founder of the JA ranch in Palo Duro Canyon, was a man of enormous courage, vision, strength, integrity, intelligence, and endurance; a trailblazer, explorer, fighter, entrepreneur, innovator, amateur naturalist, and observer of all things within his field of vision. We know about him because J. Evetts Haley captured his extraordinary life in a biography that appeared in 1936 and has never gone out of print.

Several years ago, in an essay that ran in Ranch Record, I pointed out that three generations of writers, artists, and musicians have drawn inspiration and story material from the example of Charles Goodnight. As Elmer Kelton put it, “A lot of us owe some royalties to the Goodnight estate.” That long list included me, John Graves, Elmer Kelton, Benjamin Capps, Red Steagall, Baxter Black, Larry McMurtry…and Andy Wilkinson.

Andy had a special connection to the man and the legacy: Goodnight was his great-great Uncle Charlie. Andy grew up listening to stories told by his mother and grandmother and played on a buffalo-skin rug the Old Man had given the family. In 1994, he published a book-and-CD combination called Charlie Goodnight: His Life In Poetry and Songs. It was, and still is, an extraordinary piece of work.
HISTORY, POETRY, AND SONG

Haley looked at Goodnight through the lens of prose history, while McMurry, Kelton, and Capps chose the medium of historical fiction. Wilkinson took a very different approach: fifteen original poems and fourteen songs that followed Goodnight from his youth, riding a horse from Illinois to Texas, to his old age, sitting on a porch and thundering about the poor quality of town coffee.

Andy did extensive research on Goodnight, mining Haley's biography and other sources and adding his own family's stories to the mix. What's in the songs you could teach as Texas history, but he was also reaching for truth behind the historical facts. It was a daring choice of media, poems instead of prose, songs instead of journal articles. In Goodnight's time, the Panhandle-Plains wasn't particularly fluent in poetry. We occupy a land of big horizons and straight lines and our language tends to follow the geography. Goodnight personified that principle: his language was straight, blunt, unsuable, and prone to storms. You could make a similar point about our music—country-western, bluegrass, hymns, and folksongs. They tend to be simple and direct, not musically complex. Many of our tunes can be played with three basic chords. Andy's melodies retain that simplicity but incorporate minor chords and variations that add depth without intentional obscurity.

His songs send young guitar players back to their chord books to figure out what he's doing, and what he's doing is musically exciting. If Goodnight ever wrote or read a poem, played an instrument, or sang a song, I haven't seen a record of it, and a sentence from one of Andy's songs confirms it: "He's not a singer, couldn't carry a tune/In his saddlebags or pocketbook." ("Song For Molly, Mary Ann"). He wasn't a poet or a musician, yet Andy chose to tell his story through songs and poetry. We don't know what the Old Man might have thought of the album, but I thought it was brilliant. His songs send young guitar players back to their chord books to figure out what he's doing, and what he's doing is musically exciting.

Andy's songs and poems don't just rhyme, they are built of sentences that deliver emotional content that speaks to every age about danger and courage, the vastness of the prairie, and the power of the wind. Other subjects touch the heart: "White Women's Clothes" captures the wrenching story of Cynthia Ann Parker better than anything I have read or heard. 'A Woman's Life' expresses an obvious but often-overlooked fact of life on the prairie: it was a lonely place for a woman, listening to the never-ending moan of the wind and talking to chickens in the yard.

PERFORMANCE

Andy managed to draw some very talented musicians into these recording sessions, most or all of them from the Lubbock area: Alan Munde on banjo; Joe Carr on mandolin; Joe Stephenson on fiddle; Kerry Ford on harmonica; Andy on guitar; and Lloyd Maines on guitar, bass, dobro, and any other instrument they needed.

Singing talent included Buck Ramsey and Andy, as well as Lubbock's amazing Maines family: Lloyd, Donnie, Kenny, Brian, La Tronda, and Lloyd's teenage daughter, Natalie, who later became the lead singer with the Dixie Chicks (now known as The Chicks). Her rendering of "White Women's Clothes" is unforgettable.

Almost 30 years after I first heard the Goodnight album, I still consider it a masterpiece of Texas music and literature. It's so good, in so many ways, it leaves me thinking, "Let's just turn out the lights, lock the doors, and go home. There's nothing left to say." Coming from one author to another, that is high praise.

It also causes me to wonder...do school kids in Lubbock and Abernathy and Amarillo and Perryton even know it exists?

Those of us who grew up on the Llano Estacado have a tendency to define "culture" and "literature" as things that happened somewhere else, far from cow lots and cotton gins. It's a kind of regional inferiority complex and I've struggled with it myself. It arises, in part, from the absence or near-absence of regional literature and music in our schools, which serve as definers and conduits of cultural material.

I hope that at some point in their school careers, our kids will encounter Andy's songs and poetry, because they're more than local history. Andy finds the universal in the particular, a whole galaxy in a raindrop, the story of all mankind in the lives of Goodnight, his wife, his cowboys, displaced Comanches, and poor, tragic Cynthia Ann Parker.

A whole galaxy in a raindrop. That's the kind of thing you'd expect to find in Real Art. »