I t’s no exaggeration that the King Ranch is the birthplace of modern ranching. Captain Richard King carved hundreds of thousands of acres out of the Wild Horse Desert to set a standard of ranching in the American West. Scale, to be sure, is the first innovation he made. In 1853, American agriculture was relegated to plantation-type operations. King Americanized the Spanish hacienda style and scope of ranching. He connected the immensity of his ranch with the burgeoning expansion of the United States. First to the Eastern coasts, then during the Civil War, and finally with the advent of cattle drives to railheads inching their way West.

Each successive generation advanced the ranch in its own way. Whether it be navigating through three ruling governments (Mexico, Republic of Texas, and the United States), expanding the footprint internationally, dominating the Thoroughbred racing and cutting horse worlds, or diversifying into farming, hunting, energy, brand marketing, cattle feeding, and merchandising, the ranch has never rested on its many laurels.

King Ranch, naturally, has attracted and raised photographers looking to document the South Texas legend. In the following pages, the King Ranch unfolds through the lens of these creatives. From early days of unknown photographers traveling the ranges with their primitive gear to noted professional photographers to family members waiting for daylight, all have captured indelible imagery from America’s foremost ranch.

The ranching business remains a vital component of today’s King Ranch operations and is an ongoing, living link with the legendary past of Captain Richard King’s domain. Comprised of 1,500 plus seedstock cows, 20,000 plus commercial cows, stocker cattle operations, and a 16,000-head feedyard, King Ranch has been called “The Birthplace of American Ranching,” because South Texas was the first place where the Hispanic traditions of Vaquero culture were combined with the business sense and ingenuity of European farmers. King Ranch is a vertically-integrated cattle enterprise that continues to thrive as a vanguard of the cattle business on the 825,000 acres of its home ranches in South Texas, and more operations throughout in California, Florida, and Texas.
Captain Richard King founded King Ranch in 1853 and his vision has made the operation a resounding success for almost 170 years.

Alice Gertrudis King married Robert Justus Kleberg in 1886. Their descendants continue to preserve the legacy that King Ranch has become.

Robert Justus Kleberg, Sr., (bottom row, far right) was a founding member of the Executive Committee of the Cattle Raisers Association, later known as the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. Some of the other ranches represented in this photo are the 6666, Pitchfork, Turkey Track, XIT, and JA.

Caesar Kleberg was instrumental in developing the King Ranch Horse program, as well as formulating the wildlife management practices on King Ranch that have been replicated throughout the world.

King Ranch developed the dipping vat to combat the Texas Fever tick. This is one of many innovations from King Ranch that has benefited the cattle industry.

Las Kineños called the Running W brand el viborita, or the “little snake.” | PHOTO BY TOM URBAN
OLD SORREL was the foundation sire for King Ranch and one of the foundation sires of the American Quarter Horse breed. OLD SORREL was bred by neighboring rancher George Clegg and purchased by Caesar and Bob Kleberg as a weanling. Every horse on King Ranch is still descended from OLD SORREL.

At one time the Caesar Pens were the largest livestock loading point on the Missouri Pacific Railroad Line. The Pens covered 7½ acres and could handle 3,000 head of cattle at a time. King Ranch donated the Caesar Pens to the National Ranching Heritage Center in the 1980s. More cattle were loaded from these pens than anywhere in the world from 1935 to 1945 and it was said that King Ranch “fed the beef to the American troops during WWII.”

Bob Kleberg, a third generation family member, is examining young colts with Dr. J.K. Northway, King Ranch Veterinarian. These two men were instrumental in founding the American Quarter Horse Association.

Assault won the Triple Crown in 1946. He is the only horse from Texas and the seventh horse in history to accomplish this feat. He is being held by Helen K. Groves in the Winner’s Circle, a fourth generation King Ranch family member.

Fourth generation King Ranch Family member, Dick Kleberg, Jr., cutting cattle on the Laureles Division on King Ranch. Dick was one of the top breeders of American Quarter Horses and is in the AQHA Hall of Fame.

Fifth generation King Ranch family member, Tio Kleberg, is shown competing on PEPPYS TAQUITO in a National Cutting Horse Association competition. Tio managed King Ranch ranching and farming from when his father died in 1979 until he was promoted to a director in 1998.

Buster Welch was the horse trainer for King Ranch from 1974 until 1988. He rode AGHA and NCHA Hall of Fame stallions MR SAN PEPPY, PEPPY SAN BADGER, and DRY DOC in cutting competitions from coast-to-coast, as well as in the NCHA World, Derby, and Futurity competitions.

The original Kineños, or “King’s People,” traveled from their northern Mexico home of Cruillas in 1854 with a promise from Captain Richard King of a home and livelihood on his Ranch. Some of the Kineños fifth, sixth, and seventh generation descendants continue to work for King Ranch today with the same sense of loyalty, pride, mutual respect, and admiration of their ancestors.
King Ranch sire, THE BOON, cutting a King Ranch Texas Longhorn in PEPPY SAN BADGER's cutting pen. THE BOON is an eighth-generation descendent of OLD SORREL, the foundation sire of all King Ranch Quarter Horses. Sixth-generation King Ranch family member and former Horse Division Manager, James Clement III, is horseback. THE BOON is offered to the public through 6666 Ranch stallion services. | PHOTO BY RAHM CARRINGTON

Captain Richard King’s descendants have been pioneers in wildlife management. They created visionary farming and ranching techniques and have managed the land to be productive while conserving and nurturing vital habitat for wild game — orchestrating a harmonious balance between wild game and domestic livestock on the ranch. In addition to being one of the birthplaces of Texas ranching, King Ranch, comprising 770,000 acres of pristine wildlife habitat, also boasts the distinction of being the birthplace of Texas game conservation. | PHOTO BY VIRGINIA SILGUERO

LeeRoy Montalvo, Horse Division Manager and a seventh generation Kínñño descendant, is shown prowling through Santa Gertrudis cattle aboard King Ranch sire CORONEL DEL RANCHO. “Coronel” won the 2021 American Quarter Horse Versatility Ranch Horse World Championship. He is the first bred and owned King Ranch World Champion in King Ranch’s history. CORONEL DEL RANCHO breeds mares on King Ranch, as well as being offered to the public through 6666 Ranch stallion services. | PHOTO BY BULL ÁLVAREZ

James Clement III, a sixth generation King Ranch family member, strips calves on King Ranch sire EL REY HIDAS at the Telefón Pens on the Laureles Division of King Ranch. EL REY HIDAS is an eighth-generation descendent of OLD SORREL, and is offered to the public through 6666 Ranch stallion services. | PHOTO BY BEE SILVA