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changes

Fences Losing Rustic Charm

By Margie Snowden North

When American pioneers settled the prairies and plains, wood for fence posts was usually scarce, if not nonexistent. They sometimes solved this dilemma by planting thorny shrubs such as Osage orange, which grew thick enough to fence in animals.

It was this thorned shrub that inspired the invention of barbed wire by Joseph Glidden, an Illinois inventor, in 1873.

Glidden first demonstrated his unorthodox idea of fencing ranges with this new-fangled, treacherous-looking wire in the Texas Panhandle. Along with his sales agent, H. B. Sanborn, he bought a large tract of land, comprising some 143 sections, in Potter and Randall Counties.

He enclosed this land with his unlikely invention at a cost of \$39,000, using cedar posts procured mainly from Palo Duro Canyon.

Stapled to the posts were four rows of this barbed and twisted wire that would quickly prove indispensable to farmers and ranchers nationwide.

The demonstration fence measured 120 miles, and was without doubt a huge success.

It wasn't until a decade later that barbed wire fences with hand-cut posts began making their appearance in Oklahoma Territory.

Because wells and windmills had made their appearance in the meantime, it was now possible to isolate herds anywhere on the range where there was an adequate water supply.

Other advantages soon became obvious. With enclosed pastures, settlers found they could upgrade the quality of their cattle by placing certain types of bulls with particular kinds of cows.

Barbed wire reduced the number of men needed to patrol cattle or to keep out neighboring brands. Strays were seldom a problem.

Glidden's invention had caught on like wildfire by the 80s, and today, more than a century later, literally thousands upon thousands of miles of fences have sectioned off pastures, separated farms and ranches, or enclosed roadways.

When my interest in fences began a few years ago, I would find myself riding along studying the posts, watching them express themselves. Each one has a story to tell, a personality trait inherent, a marked *distingue'*, a presence.

Some of them are particularly outspoken, freely voicing opinions to passersby, some deep in conversation with the post nearby. Others are tired, sagging a little, ready and willing to bow out and make room for the new generation.

A few of them are withdrawn, thinkers. Some are frazzled and hassled, but hanging in there with little more than raw determination and sheer intestinal fortitude.

Not surprisingly, others are somewhat bitter. They have done their duty, have sacrificed a lifetime — now many will be tossed into the scrap heap or bulldozed ruthlessly and buried. Some will burn.

On our ranch we have both old and new fences. The old will one day be replaced, just as they are all across Oklahoma. The exchange will be out of expediency and practicality, not due to a lack of hospitality.

They've served us well. We're grateful, but progress is logical and necessary, if sometimes cold, and the lack of finances is all that stands between our seasoned fences and their replacements.

The old fences can't last much longer. Even today, if we are to see the ones with personality, we usually must turn off the super highways and take to the side roads. It's well worth the effort.

Take your camera! Take your time! Listen to the fence posts speak! ■

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Many of today's fences, while totally utilitarian, lack the rustic charm and character of those of yesteryear.

One day all the old fence posts — sometimes gnarled, usually bent or otherwise flawed, but always distinctive — will be replaced by modern, straight, stark, sterile ones. It will be a sad day.