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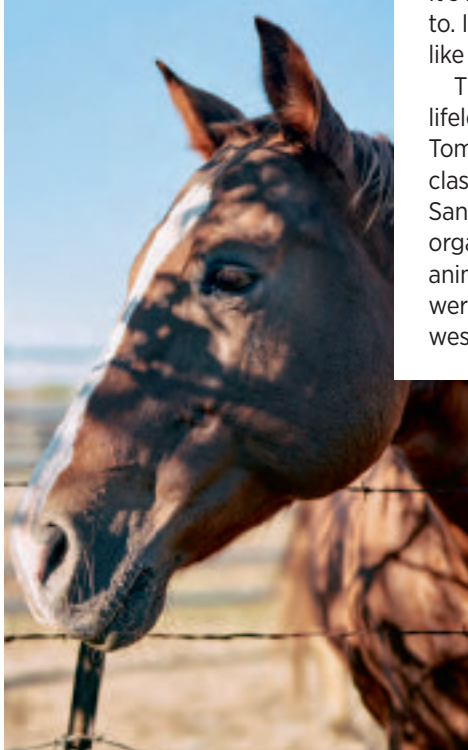


GREENER PASTURES

IN TEXAS, BEEF IS BIG BUSINESS. SO WHEN A FOURTH-GENERATION CATTLE FARMER AND HIS WIFE TURNED THEIR FARM INTO A VEGAN SANCTUARY, IT WAS A SURPRISE TO EVERYONE. **VERONICA MEEWES** VISITS ROWDY GIRL SANCTUARY, OUTSIDE AUSTIN, TO MEET THE UNLIKELY ACTIVISTS

PHOTOGRAPHS: NICK SIMONITE





The drive to Waelder, Texas, looks like any other route leading out of Austin: urban sprawl quickly turns to rolling ranch land, with acres of grassy pasture stretching out toward the sun-kissed horizon. Majestic longhorns and herds of mottled Angus cattle graze against a peaceful pastoral landscape fit for a Texas postcard.

I turn down a long dirt road and roll over a cattle guard into the 146-acre (59-hectare) ranch owned by Tommy Sonnen and Renee King-Sonnen. At first glance, this land – with its tractors, barns and farm animals – might seem like any other working ranch. But look closer: there aren't any brands, prods or milking machines here. That's because this isn't another livestock farm: it's a vegan sanctuary, home to about 140 cows, horses, donkeys, goats and other animals who have been saved from a grim fate. Smack-dab in beef country, this sanctuary is a marvel.

"We rescue animals bound for slaughter because it's happening every second of the day," says Renee. "If ever there were pioneers in this movement, it's us. It's not like we have a whole lot of people to look up to. It's a lot of sheer grit and determination. It's kinda like the Wild West out here."

Though she may speak with the conviction of a lifelong animal-rights crusader, Renee and husband Tommy don't necessarily fit the profile of your classic vegan activists. Until they started Rowdy Girl Sanctuary and the Rancher Advocacy Program – an organisation that helps farmers transition away from animal agriculture, the first of its kind in Texas – they were both meat eaters. Renee was a country and western musician who had come up performing at ➤



rodeos dressed in leather boots and belts; Tommy was a fourth-generation cattle farmer to whom veganism was an alien concept. When they met, Renee was focused on her music career and had little interest in helping out on Tommy's ranch – until one day, when he asked if she would care for an orphaned calf. Renee fell in love with the bouncy baby and the strong relationship she formed with the calf ended up changing her life. Renee named her Rowdy Girl.

"She became my reason for getting up in the morning," says Renee. "I would look forward to getting up early and going out at night to take care of this little calf. But when I was finished feeding her, I had to go back to being a good rancher's wife. I had to go back to being loyal to the tradition and the culture of cattle ranching as it is, which is normalised violence."

"I'VE ALWAYS HAD AN OPEN MIND AND I NEVER LIKED DROPPING MY COWS OFF AT THE SALE BARN... NOW I DON'T HAVE TO"

She spent weeks watching mama cows follow behind trailers transporting their calves to the sale barn. She was horrified; she describes "getting down on my knees, begging [the cows] to forgive me".

But it was a documentary by social psychologist Dr Melanie Joy on carnism, the belief that we are conditioned to eat animals, that gave Renee the final nudge. On Halloween in 2014, she decided to become vegan and never looked back.

But there was still the matter of Tommy's farm. Motivated by Renee's daily crying spells, Tommy decided to get out of the cattle business. His plan was to sell his cows; Renee begged him not to. Lost and looking for a community to turn to, she found some vegan groups on Facebook and started a page called Vegan Journal of a Cattle

Above: Tommy Sonnen and Renee King-Sonnen, who embraced veganism in the mid-2010s



Rancher's Wife. After quickly gaining thousands of followers, she decided to start up an Indiegogo to raise the money to buy the cows from Tommy herself. To his surprise, she raised the \$36,000 (£30,000) needed in just a few months and saved the remaining cows from certain slaughter. Renee's newfound community of passionate animal lovers now had Tommy's attention.

"When all these vegans started coming around, I'd listen to them," says Tommy. "I've always considered myself to have an open mind and I never liked dropping my cows off at the sale barn... now I don't have to." In 2015, he also decided to adopt a vegan lifestyle, and soon after he joined Renee as co-founder of the non-profit Rowdy Girl Sanctuary. ➤



SWEET SANCTUARIES

5 MORE ANIMAL HAVENS NEAR AUSTIN

Austin Farm Sanctuary

The Austin Farm Sanctuary started in 2016 in founders Chris and Angela's South Austin house. By 2018, they relocated to Cedar Creek to accommodate even more animals: goats, pigs, sheep, cows, chickens, ducks, donkeys, dogs, cats and a tortoise. They offer in-person or virtual tours. austinfarmsanctuary.org

Central Texas Pig Rescue

This swine-rescue operation stretches over seven different "pig neighbourhoods", plus donkey and goat grazing meadows. You can sign up for a volunteer day or arrange a private tour, and keep an eye on their website for upcoming events. centraltexaspigs.org



SARA Farm Sanctuary

SARA (Society for Animal Rescue & Adoption) was founded in 1996 and is now one of the largest shelters in the world, with no fewer than 650 animals under its care at all times, from alpacas to rabbits and dogs to cows. Sign up online to volunteer at the San Antonio area property – or you could opt to foster or adopt a dog or cat. sarasanctuary.org

Austin Wildlife Rescue Rehabilitation Center

Austin Wildlife Rescue has been taking care of Central Texas wildlife for the last 35 years, rehabilitating and releasing orphaned, injured and sick wildlife. They're also usually in need of volunteers to clean dishes and cages, feed animals, do laundry, and more. austinwildliferescue.org

Happy Hooves Farm & Rescue

This small farm, located just 30 miles (48km) east of San Antonio in La Vernia, rescues farm animals who have been facing abuse and neglect. They also regularly hold fun fundraising events, so follow them on social media for up-to-date info. happy-hooves-farm-rescue.business.site



INSET PHOTO: SARA THROOP PHOTOGRAPHY



“THE RANCHER ADVOCACY PROGRAM IS ALL ABOUT INSPIRING, MOTIVATING AND ENCOURAGING FARMERS AND RANCHERS TO BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN DO IT DIFFERENTLY”

After saving so many animals on their own land, they wanted to be able to empower and support other enlightened ranchers to do the same. So, in 2017, they founded Rowdy Girl's sister organisation, the Rancher Advocacy Program.

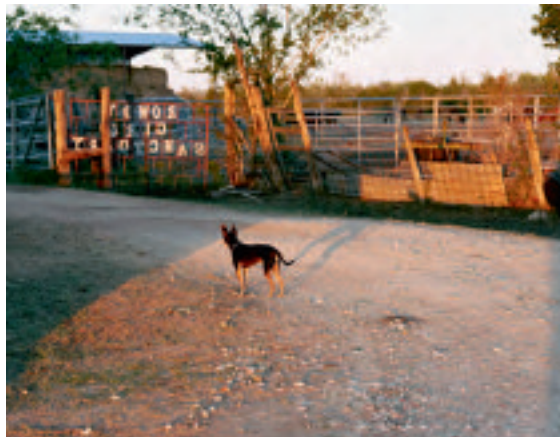
"RAP is all about inspiring, motivating and encouraging farmers and ranchers to believe that they can do it differently," says Renee. Right now, she's helping turn a massive Arkansas cattle ranch and chicken farm into an exotic mushroom growth operation; another farm, located three hours' north-east in Huntsville, Texas, has relinquished all their animals to Rowdy Girl, and owners Cynthia and Richard Traylor are researching ways to transition their ranch.

There are plenty of ways animal farmers can use their land and resources effectively. Chicken barns provide the perfect structure to create the controlled environment needed to grow oyster mushrooms, which make a nutritious meat replacement in a plant-based diet. Building vertical farms – where plants can grow indoors year-round with controlled light, temperature and water – is another great option.

"We've also been trying to help cattle ranchers capture carbon on their land," says Renee. "That's a growing market, so if we can crack that code, we can rewild the planet and bring back natural grasses so that cows can naturally graze instead of being fed hay."

By far the most challenging piece of the puzzle is finding funding to support these types of transitions. In Texas, the meat industry is king: it's the state's most profitable commodity, bringing in over \$12 billion a year. There's more cattle in Texas than there are people in 43 other states.

Left & below: "Cow moma" Renee with some of the animals on the ranch – and her tattoo



But Renee is hoping to show everyone the value of investing in ethical farming. She's on the board of directors for the Agriculture Fairness Alliance, a vegan lobbying group working to change the local legal system so that subsidies are fairly diverted to farmers who want to transition to a plant-based farm, rather than used to incentivise more meat and dairy production.

"People change their hearts all the time, but it's just not normalised yet because there's no money for it," Renee says with frustration. "We often have animals surrendered by cattle ranchers who are still cattle ranching. They're just having feelings for a few animals and they don't want to send those animals to slaughter, but what are they going to do instead?"

As the sun starts its descent, it bathes the sanctuary in golden light, casting a sheen upon the cows' velveteen hides. Horses and donkeys comfortably mill among the herd. Renee and Tommy point out all the cows by name – Stella, Magic, Dee Dee, Rinkley, Jeddo, Cinnamon, Sweetheart – and note their relation to one another.

I have the pleasure of meeting the renowned Rowdy Girl, a silky Black Angus with a white tuft on the crown of her head. As if on cue, she lets out an uproarious bellow, proving that she is no less rowdy at age 13.

"These animals are here with us, not for us," says Renee, surrounded by her bovine babies. "They're here to teach us who they are, not for us to eat their bodies. And if we don't stop, we're not going to have a planet."

■ rowdygirlsanctuary.org

✖ Fly to Austin