

Texas Living People & Places®



Big Texas Ranch

Sky and
land go on
and on at
H.E. Sproul
Ranch.

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Children of the Strings

GRAND PRAIRIE

What's in Bloom

LUBBOCK

Wedding Dress Designer

AUSTIN

Artists in Glass

WACO

Saving the Family Ranch

Kerith and Tony Timmons embraced ecotourism to help preserve their land.

By **Karen Lingo**, photography **Meg McKinney**



Kerith Timmons divides her time between a law office in El Paso and the ranch she and husband Tony have built into a model for ecotourism.

Striding toward the lodge at H.E. Sproul Ranch to check on guest rooms, Kerith Timmons looks as slender and vulnerable as the young stalk rising from a century plant when it's ready to flower. Yet she's as resilient as the scrub that thrives in the hardscrabble West Texas desert.

Faced with a mountain of taxes and legal issues when she inherited part of the land amassed by her great-grandfather, Kerith did what any sensible young lady would do—she became an attorney. Then, armed with her law degree and a vision, she and her husband, Tony, set about saving the family ranch. In the process, the young couple introduced ecotourism to the area and created a place where others come to experience a unique slice of Texas heritage.

Rabbits and Mountain Lions A soft-spoken woman who favors jeans and boots, Kerith grew up on the ranch. “I was raised here by my grandparents,” she says. “My great-grandfather left seven heirs. One was my grandfather, and I inherited my part of the ranch from him.”

It took a six-year effort to legally separate Kerith's land from that of the rest of the family. “There were also state taxes, inheritance taxes, and skipped-generation taxes to pay,” Tony explains. “Based on all the taxes, we shouldn't even have the ranch. The government pretty much knew that they were going to get it, unless we could pull a rabbit out of a hat.”

Kerith and Tony's magic sprang from a shared love for the hauntingly beautiful West Texas land. “Kerith was 22 and I was 28 when we married and started taking over the operation of the ranch,” Tony recalls. “It was a wonderful opportunity, but it forced us to think about the challenges we were facing if we decided to keep the ranch going. The first thing Kerith did was go on and become an estate attorney.”

Another step was to open the ranch to guided hunting. Kerith's great-grandfather and grandfather were both well-known hunters. “And I've hunted since I was a kid,” Tony points out. Wildlife on the ranch includes antelope, aoudad sheep, dove, javelina, mountain lion, mule deer, quail, and turkey. “We offer more free-range opportunities than any other operation in the area,” Tony says. “Hunting is just an extension of what we do. It allowed us financially to expand into what we are now.”

Introducing Ecotourism Joining the hunters are bird watchers looking for black hawks, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, and golden eagles. Families come for the two-hour Jeep tours that climb into the high country of the ranch and bounce across dry streambeds that cut through the valleys. They hope to spot aoudad sheep or mountain lions, but most settle for rock squirrels and a landscape so lovely that it takes your breath away. “The property itself is what really sets us apart from the rest of Texas,” Kerith says.

As interest in the ranch grew, so did the guest facilities, which include a six-suite lodge, cabin, and an eight-room hotel in Fort Davis. Guests stay in rustic comfort with touches of luxury such as a pool and hot tub, satellite TV, and a fitness center. Instead of mass horseback rides, there are Jeep tours, trap and skeet, fishing, birding, and just doing nothing. At night you can sit around a fire pit and gaze up at all the stars in the universe. “Why create another cookie-cutter guest ranch when we can offer one that's as unique as the country it's in?” Tony asks.

Tony did most of the renovation and construction of the buildings himself. “I worked 15 and 16 hours most days,” he recalls. “We poured everything we made back into the operation. You either have to believe in your vision and what you're doing, or you get out.”

Keeping the Legacy After checking rooms for guests who will arrive later in the day, Kerith loads her luggage for a trip to El Paso, where she practices law three days a week. Driving out, she stops to say good-bye to Tony, who is mending a stretch of fence.

Watching them, Sterling Allen says, “These two kids work harder than anybody I've ever seen.” A former farrier, Sterling gives driving tours of the ranch.

“Hummingbird—I call Kerith that because she's such a busy little thing—inherited this land from her grandfather...” he begins. So the story, and a West Texas legend, continues. ●

LEFT: The original Sproul ranch included about 30 sections of 640 acres each. The part Kerith and Tony Timmons operate stretches for miles. BELOW: The pool area opens to the wide sky and spare landscape of West Texas. RIGHT: Kerith and Tony expanded their ranching operation to include ecotourism. BOTTOM: Suites in the lodge offer rustic Western decor with touches of luxury.



Stay Awhile

Guest accommodations at H.E. Sproul Ranch include a lodge with six suites and a private cabin. Kerith and Tony also own and operate the eight-room Harvard Hotel in nearby Fort Davis.

For more information about the ranch and lodging, visit www.sproul-ranch.com, or call (432) 426-2500.

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